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## "God Made Me Thisaway": Mary Wilkins Freeman, Flannery O'Connor, and Religiosity as Challenge to Heteronormativity

Anna M. Worm  
*Grand Valley State University*

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"God Made Me Thisaway": Mary Wilkins Freeman, Flannery O'Connor, and Religiosity as Challenge  
to Heteronormativity

Anna M. Worm

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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“GOD MADE ME THISAWAY”: MARY WILKINS FREEMAN, FLANNERY O'CONNOR, AND  
RELIGIOSITY AS CHALLENGE TO HETERONORMATIVITY

**Abstract**

The fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Flannery O'Connor, especially Freeman's "A New England Nun" and "The Balsam Fir" and O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "Good Country People," expose and challenge heteronormativity. Consideration of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, as well as religious themes demonstrates the way their works offer an avenue of challenge for characters struggling with societal forces that push them towards an unwanted or unfulfilling heterosexuality. Although Freeman's works suggest that a satisfactory life outside heterosexual norms is unrealistic, with community alienation the price for resistance, she envisions religion a valuable tool in such resistances. O'Connor's texts explore the problems and possibilities of living in a heteronormative society and suggest divine grace as an avenue to transcendence of these harms. Neither believes in an easy solution to the struggles of finding fulfillment in the face of heteronormativity, but each considers resistance valuable.

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## I. Introduction

Although pairing Mary Wilkins Freeman and Flannery O'Connor for analysis may seem unintuitive, given that they lived and wrote within consecutive centuries, the two share many surface biographic similarities, including breaking from traditional models of heterosexual life. Mary Wilkins Freeman lived with her mother for a long time after her father died, before turning to Mary Wales, with whom she lived “like a spouse...entirely satisfied” (Elrod 230, 231). She eventually formed an unhappy marriage with Dr. Charles Freeman late in life. O'Connor, too, returned home to live with her mother after college, although O'Connor's return was prompted by illness. O'Connor never married, dying of lupus before reaching the advanced age at which Freeman married, but her sexuality is the subject of fairly lively curiosity, as she remained committed to celibacy and as an adult never “actively pursued” romantic or sexual relationships, either heterosexual or homosexual (Cash 31). Although Donald Hall, in his overview of queer theories, notes that biographic readings can limit and constrain critical exploration (126), the biographic connection in the challenges Freeman's and O'Connor's lives make to societal norms of heterosexuality and marriage is productive in that it suggests similarities between the two authors, as well as an initial impetus towards considering their texts as open to queer readings. Their works, upon examination of the multiplicity of sexuality contained therein, yield further and more significant connections.

Queer theory, explains Hall, abrasively examines the “normal” and the oppressive as well as disruptions and changes to them, exploring internal and external sexuality and identities. Above all, queer theory is indeterminate, refusing simple, clear solutions. In “doing” queer theory, and specifically in queering literary texts, he explains that one should turn to texts that “touch on the sexual and more broadly on the notion of the oppressive nature of the 'normal,’” those which spur provocative questions but refuse easy or clear answers (116), as well as those which refuse binaries, especially those of desire (165). While it can be difficult to queer a text which only vaguely mentions or alludes to sexuality, such

analysis is possible, Hall argues (116), and queer critical texts should instigate or contribute to a “queer dialogue on sexuality and desire” while avoiding simple closure (166). From this perspective of examining sexuality and desire, probing disruptions of the normal, and refusing easy closure, I present the texts of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Flannery O'Connor for queering.

The works of Freeman and O'Connor share constant explorations of the intricacies of human existence, recurring themes of female sexuality, and constant challenges to the norms of their societies. Women's lives are a recurring theme of both authors' works, and each been rigorously examined, occasionally condemned, and largely celebrated by feminist critics. However, little attention has been paid to the themes of sexuality in their works, as their characters struggle against strictures of the normal and try to find self, truth, and happiness in worlds where there are no simple, clear answers.

Furthermore, both O'Connor and Freeman are known for the religiosity of their texts, and this religiosity is inseparable from their presentations of sexuality and their challenges to norms. Approaching their texts from a queer perspective reveals many places in which the religious themes and allusions in their works offer support to characters struggling with societal forces that push them towards an unwanted or unfulfilling heterosexuality. Examining these two authors who share many thematic and biographic similarities but who write from different periods of American history reveals that despite differences in the way their stories incorporate religiosity and address the intricacies of sexuality and the restrictions of heterosexual norms, there are key similarities in the way each considers the harms of a society that demands heterosexuality and each imagines divine grace as an means to challenge these norms and their harms.

In analyzing the resistances the texts of Freeman and O'Connor present, I draw on the concepts of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality as ways to identify and expose the pressures of heterosexuality operating within these texts. *Heteronormativity* refers to the deeply pervasive cultural assumption of and pressure to heterosexuality for people as their normal, essential nature. Michael

Warner is generally credited with establishing the term in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, explaining the concept as the belief that “humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous” (xxiii). Maria do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan, and Antke Engel emphasize the role of hegemony and group consensus in heteronormativity: heterosexuality is the “normal” not because of submission to a dominating force but because participants in society agree to and reproduce this social order. Heteronormativity continues as a constraining, limiting presence because society allows it to do so, largely unquestioned, unremarked upon, and even unnoticed. Additionally, Adrienne Rich's concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” presents a similar understanding of the pressures and constraints of heterosexual norms, but emphasizes a more oppressive power structure than the hegemony of Warner's heteronormativity (Varela, Dhawan, and Engel, 3). Rich emphasizes the “covert socializations and the overt forces which have channeled women into marriage and heterosexual romance” (363). Both terms are of use in examining the work of Freeman and O'Connor, as their texts expose the extent to which the characters in them struggle with social expectations of heterosexuality, with pressure acting sometimes as a more internalized sense of a normative social order, and other times as a more direct force toward heterosexuality and marriage.

As Rich explores compulsory heterosexuality, she also claims all women as participants in a lesbian continuum, and many other scholars explore women's intimate relationships throughout history, including Lillian Faderman, Leila Rupp, and Emma Donoghue. However, while the works of these scholars add valuable insight to my readings, they focus primarily on the relationships between women, and, in the works of Freeman and O'Connor, it is difficult and constrictive to limit analysis of women's sexualities to strictly lesbian or “protolesbian” (Kent 2) conceptions. In her analysis of challenges to heteromaterial sexuality in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Katherine Kent draws a distinction in her use of *protolesbian* and *queer*, where for the first she feels justified in making assumptions about their sexualities as relative to their being, and the second she identifies as “as existing “outside the



realm of bourgeois, heteronormative reproduction and its correlative ideology of gender roles” (2).

Generally, she finds that *queer* offers a broader and more transhistoric word that is “simultaneously oppositional and nonspecific” (2), a description that correlates with Hall's insistence on indeterminacy.

I employ *queer* in this sense, echoing Hall and Kent, to claim characters who may not lend themselves to lesbian readings as nonetheless resistant to social expectations of heterosexuality.

Freeman and O'Connor negotiate these themes of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality in their works, but through the religiosity of their texts nuance their presentations of these harms and explore alternative paths. In my first chapter, “Mary Wilkins Freeman: Satisfaction Outside Heteronormative Society,” I examine the role of heteronormativity in two of Freeman's spinsters, Louisa of “A New England Nun” and Martha of “The Balsam Fir.” Benjamin Kahan's argument in favor of celibate desire as a valid form of queer identity offers a new way to view Louisa's preference against marriage. Although Freeman's use of biblical allusions affirms Louisa's decision to break off her engagement, other religious references suggest her solitude is a source of isolation from her community. However, Heather Love's explanations of the loneliness inherent to the spinster's life due to societal judgment offer an alternative reading: Louisa makes the best choices possible for her circumstances, and the inevitable isolation is the fault of the community and a price she is willing to pay. Martha, however, finds the solitude that Louisa loves too lonely to bear, and longs to find community and fulfillment among other women. A Christmas encounter fills her with religious revelation, and she invites her female friend to come live with her, solving her loneliness by turning to another woman for comfort and companionship. Taken together, the stories suggest that although Freeman considers a fully satisfactory and complete life outside the norms of heterosexuality unrealistic, with community alienation the price for such resistance, she values such lives and envisions religion as a method of resistance and potential spur to happiness for these individuals.

My second chapter, “Flannery O'Connor: Transcending the Harms of Heteronormativity,” focuses more on potential routes to rise above the limitations of heteronormativity through supportive spaces and divine grace, as well as on the harms compulsory heterosexuality works in the lives of those who cannot escape it. Penelope Eckert's explanation of the “heterosexual market” in which young girls learn to move through heterosexual relationships offers a way to conceptualize the presence of heteronormativity in the lives of the child of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and Hulga of “Good Country People.” The child encounters the heterosexual market through her cousins, although she finds it and them repulsive, and she is partially removed from the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality due to her supportive home environment, in which her mother cultivates a woman-centered life. Through a series of occasions in which the child connects her fascination with an intersex person at a fair to the highest mysteries of her religious beliefs, she finds a source of divine grace to support her in resisting the heteronormativity of society outside her home. Although Hulga of “Good Country People” is older than the child, she too engages with pressures to join the heterosexual market, and finds compulsory heterosexuality restrictive, but she lacks the support and affirmation the child finds. Her attempts at resistance to compulsory heterosexuality bear little fruit, but in trying to comply and participate in the heterosexual market, Hulga finds the greatest harms of all, as she is stripped of both her wooden leg literally and her agency symbolically. The similarities between the child and Hulga suggest that the two can be read as analogues, but the validation the child finds suggests she has the potential to avoid the harms that befall Hulga, who remains trapped in compulsory heterosexuality. Together, O'Connor's texts explore the problems and possibilities of living with non-heterosexual desires in a heteronormative society and suggest divine grace as an avenue to transcendence of these harms.

Overall, both texts present a recurring pattern of personal religious revelation as a way to transcend the harms and constraints of a heteronormative society, whatever O'Connor's beliefs

regarding the morality of sexualities beyond heterosexual norms and Freeman's doubts about the realism of finding happiness in a heteronormative society. Neither's explanations of divine grace offer a straightforward solution to the struggles of finding fulfillment in the face of heteronormativity, but each considers the possibility desirable.

## II. Mary Wilkins Freeman: Satisfaction Outside Heteronormative Society

“I want to just live with you,” said Lucy. “I don't like men.”

“Girls are apt to feel that way,” said her mother, “but you'd come to feel different after a while. It's the way people were meant to do; to be married and given in marriage. You know what it says in the Bible. And then you would be sure to have somebody to take care of you as long as you live.” (Freeman, 223)

The pressure to marriage Mrs. Greenleaf articulates in this selection from “Arethusa,” along with themes of resistance to marriage and rejection of heterosexuality as a necessary part of life, are present throughout both the fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman and her life. Freeman spent her first thirty years living with her family before spending another nearly twenty with her close friend Mary Wales, in an almost-spousal relationship that “entirely satisfied” her (Elrod 230). Eventually, however, Freeman married Dr. Charles Freeman after a protracted engagement, though this marriage did not enrich Freeman's life as much as her female relationships did, and Leah Blatt Glasser claims in her examination of Freeman's life and texts that, contrary to the assertions of other scholars, there is no evidence to support the claim that even the early years of this marriage were happy (174). While single, Freeman supported herself through her writing, which gave her a certain amount of autonomy, though she struggled to be completely accepted socially due to her independence and spinsterhood. Glasser suggests that Freeman's writing became, to an extent, a way to express her “confusion and rage” over this contrast between her own doubts about the benefits of heterosexuality and marriage in her life and the messages she received from magazines and other influences about the importance of these institutions (53). This battle for autonomy and financial stability against social pressure to marry appears as an explicit or implicit tension in many of her works, so much so that Glasser claims they “focus almost entirely on women's struggles and concerns, their intricate forms of repression and rebellion” (xiv). Indeed, Freeman's women push against their social situations with “the subversive

power and too often the frustrated power” of women dismissed as marginal (Gardner 451), moving homes into barns and beds into churches, demanding their needs be met. Many of Freeman's women strive for autonomy and fulfillment in their lives and relationships; all face limitations and tensions particular to their status as women.

### **Heteronormativity and the Spinster**

A primary pressure on the women in Freeman's stories is the pressure to marry and have a family. Michael Warner identifies this heterosexual social order, engrained into social ideas of normality, as “heteronormativity” (xiii), and Maria do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan, and Antke Engel highlight the hegemonic power emphasized in the term *heteronormativity*, as compared to Adrienne Rich's use of *compulsory heterosexuality* to describe the social pressure to follow a heterosexual narrative of marriage. Varela, Dhawan, and Engel believe *heteronormativity* more completely emphasizes how this social order derives its power and legitimacy from consensus of the people rather than direct domination (3). Freeman's works display the harmful effects of pressures to conform to heterosexual norms, but this pressure is rarely direct, primarily established through characters' own understandings of and expectations for what a “normal” life “ought” to consist of. *Heteronormativity* emphasizes the complicity of participants like Lucy Greenleaf's mother in the opening passage from Freeman's “Arethusa,” as well as the harm participants like Lucy herself experience through their acquiescence to the normal, rather than through any direct repression or oppression. Lucy's mother articulates clearly and directly the circumstances facing Freeman's women: socially, religiously, and economically, it makes the most sense for women to marry, she claims. Lucy is not entirely persuaded by her mother's explicit presentation of these social norms, but as she grows to appreciate and depend on the man courting her, she begins to surrender to these norms. Despite the fact that in the end of “Arethusa” Freeman claims Lucy “fill[s] her place as wife and mother well to all appearances” (228), the text maintains a sense of melancholy regarding her life and doubt about both

her happiness and her fitness as wife and mother. Lucy frequently finds herself needing to escape her family to visit wildflowers, which serve as her “refuge” and “fair rhyme to her halting verse of life” (229), and the narration's claim that “she seemed happy” (228) leaves the reader to wonder if this happiness is merely superficial. In the end, Lucy's participation in this social order prevents her from flourishing. These pressures and consequences of heteronormativity appear throughout Freeman's works. “Queering” her texts through examining how Freeman's characters wrestle with and are hurt by heteronormativity exposes the extent to which both they and she question and challenge the social order of heterosexual marriage.

One particular recurring figure in Freeman's texts is the spinster, who provides an opportunity for queering Freeman's texts from their perspective of female resistance to heterosexuality, although most scholars focus their attention to Freeman's spinsters on their autonomy. In her examination of spinsterhood as a sort of “protolesbian identity” (16), Kathryn Kent describes white spinsters of the later part of the nineteenth century as a challenge not only to “proper' femininity” but also to “proper' female (hetero)sexuality” (24). Their unmarried status, whether chosen or not, offers a challenge to cultural standards for female behavior and stands out against the norms of a society that considers marriage and a corresponding duty to husband, family, and children both women's responsibility and their “birthright” (Tritt 37). Many scholars recognize these resistant themes in Freeman's works, highlighting the ways her women challenge the conventions of the day. Gardner notes that in two collections of Freeman's works, *A Humble Romance* and *A New England Nun*, just under half of the main characters are spinsters who “attain some fulfillment other than marriage” (460), and Mary Reichardt notes that the theme of Freeman's works that most resonates with much of her modern audience is her “exploration of the material and emotional consequences for a woman of marrying or of remaining single,” and she calls Freeman “honest and daring, even radical” in her presentation of women's lives (7). Freeman's spinsters are complex, each reacting differently to a world that limits their

possibilities for fulfilling lives. Considering this range of experiences Freeman's unmarried women face, Glasser contrasts the solitude of Louisa in "A New England Nun" with the death of Lily in "Old Woman Magoun" as two extremes of spinsters' reactions to a world where satisfaction can be defined and measured only in "standard, patriarchal, heterosexual terms" (58), claiming that Freeman's other spinster stories explore alternatives to these two extremes, especially the option of bonding with other women (60). Some scholars do examine the undertones of queer sexuality in Freeman's stories, although this attention is rare and generally restricted to consideration of what Susan Koppelman calls Freeman's two "lesbian stories" (43), "Two Friends" and "The Long Arm." Not all of this attention is laudatory; Laura Behling claims "The Long Arm" "indicts lesbian sexuality" through implications of scientific "unnaturalness" (77). Apart from the few explorations of these stories, however, critics restrict their examination of the resistance Freeman's spinsters pose to societal norms to their challenges to standards of femininity, neglecting their challenges to standards of heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity not only affects Freeman's characters, however; its reaches also extend to Freeman scholarship. Rich notes that, "either implicitly or explicitly," society generally reads heterosexuality as the default sexual preference of women (633), and this assumption minimizes and limits female sexuality (637). Even the critics who celebrate the resistance of Freeman's characters to marriage as a choice against gendered restrictions often fall into these assumptions, holding marriage and heterosexuality as an ideal overshadowed by patriarchal oppression. Discussions of sexuality in Freeman scholarship often subtly suggest that apart from heterosexual relationships, especially those that culminate in marriage, there is no sexuality, such as when Mann asserts that most of the "sexual undercurrents" in Freeman's stories involve "a character's unconscious fear of sexuality" (44). Many of the moments which Mann and others dismiss as instances of "fear" or "lack" of sexuality could be read instead as presentations of alternate sexualities, and Freeman's stories in which they occur as subtle explorations of life outside heterosexuality. Freeman's works call for a more careful, nuanced

consideration of sexuality and sexualities than exists in the current body of scholarship. Expectations and conventions of marriage limit Freeman's characters not only because of the restrictions placed on their autonomy and freedom, but also because of the restrictions heteronormativity places on their sexualities.

### **Christian Subversiveness and Freeman**

One powerful and subversive force for resistance in Freeman's work is religion. Protestant Christianity was a strong presence in Mary Wilkins Freeman's life and in the society of nineteenth century New England. Both her parents were orthodox Congregationalists (Glasser 3), and she was raised in the Randolph Congregational Church (4), although as an adult Freeman was skeptical about religion, “never actually rejecting the church, but, unlike many of her contemporary New England fiction writers—never entirely at home in it either” (Elrod 230). Nevertheless, religion remained a constant interest in her life (Elrod 230) and a consistent theme throughout her works. Many of Freeman's characters are involved in their churches or have personal spiritual practices, and her plots include a professed non-believer's return to services (“Life Everlastin”), competing Sunday choir sopranos (“A Village Singer”), and the influence of a minister's opinion on literature (“A Poetess”). Religious practices, including Christian doctrine and the Bible, Ann-Janine Morey notes, are “an ordinary part of ordinary life” for Freeman's characters (752). These references to religion provided a financial usefulness for Freeman's texts, since their inclusion made her works agreeable to her religiously-engaged audience and therefore more likely to turn a profit. Freeman was not solely, or even primarily motivated by monetary concerns in her employment of religious allusion and emphasizes this in a letter to a friend: “Today I have written a little tale, concluding with a neat allusion to the church, for the Congregationalist. I wouldn't write these if I did not like the money...But it does not seem to me just right to write things of that sort on purpose to get money, and to please an editor”



(Glasser 43). Instead, the religiosity of Freeman's texts serves a higher, more subversive purpose, and the ordinariness of her allusions can be deceptive.

Religious practices and references are powerful tools in Freeman's texts; narrators and characters directly and subtly call upon and reference God and the Bible as justification for their actions, placing a divine endorsement upon their choices and aligning their positions with those of the Almighty. However, there has been a widespread neglect of the role of Freeman's religiosity in her rebellions; for example, regarding "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Brian White points out that most critics "have ignored the religious underpinnings of the revolt and the biblical tools used to besiege and, at last, to topple the walls of the patriarchal fortress" (81). Because of their pervasive presence and key associations with resistance to norms in Freeman's texts, consideration of these religious references extends and nuances the queer reading of Freeman's works.

Two key Freeman works in which religiosity interacts with characters negotiating their resistance to heteronormativity are "A New England Nun" and "The Balsam Fir." In "A New England Nun," Louisa Ellis faces the return of her fiancé after his fourteen-year adventure seeking his fortune in Australia, during which interval she has learned how much she loves her solitude. Louisa can be read as subtly disruptive to assumptions of heteronormativity because, despite her engagement, she does not appear to feel attraction to her fiancé and envisions marriage as a life goal only because of social pressures. While her fiancé was away, Louisa had come to love the solitude and autonomy of her pseudo-spinster life and is loath to give it up. Freeman uses biblical allusions to affirm Louisa's ultimate choice of her quotidian life over her marriage, but her references to Esau and Catholicism complicate the final evaluation of Louisa, emphasizing the limits of Louisa's satisfaction as a single woman in a heteronormative world. "The Balsam Fir" offers a different exploration of alternatives to marriage and heterosexuality, as Martha Elder, who has lived unhappily as a spinster since her lone admirer married her sister, finds the solution to her loneliness in the companionship of another woman.

Martha's choice to invite her friend into her home is prompted by a vision of transfiguration and is followed by a sudden revelation about the goodness of God. Although the almost implausibly happy conclusion of "The Balsam Fir," coupled with Freeman's reservations about Louisa, suggest that Freeman does not believe complete fulfillment and joy are realistic possibilities for women who challenge a heteronormative society, her biblical allusions and use of divine grace in these texts suggest that she finds endeavors to do so both valid and valuable.

### **"A New England Nun": Sacrifice for Satisfaction**

The sexuality and celibacy of Louisa are key points in interpretations of "A New England Nun," yet critics generally reveal heteronormative assumptions in their discussions of these themes. These scholars generally fall into two camps, either considering Louisa's retreat from her engagement evidence of her inability to interact successfully as a person or considering the story a celebration of her autonomy at the unfortunate but necessary expense of her sexuality. David Hirsch, one of the foundational proponents of the perspective that Louisa's choice is improper, argues that the story is "almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis" (125) and that in rejecting Joe Dagget, Louisa rejects life itself, paying in fear and anxiety for "unqualified repression of sexual impulses" (135). Joseph Csicsila carries this thread into the end of the twentieth century with his article titled "Louisa Ellis and the Unpardonable Sin: Alienation from the Community of Human Experience as Theme in Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'A New England Nun'." Csicsila argues that Louisa ultimately becomes one of many who "tragically sell their birthright of a full life," calling her decision not to marry Joe a "refusal to participate within the community of human experience" and rooted in "deep spiritual and psychological malady" (12). The key point in Hirsch's and Csicsila's arguments is Louisa's decision to break her engagement and continue life as a single woman, and their arguments rest on the assumption that [heterosexual] marriage is necessary for embracing a fulfilling life.

Even critics who respond positively to Louisa's choices still assume a suppressed heterosexuality for Louisa. Among these critics is Marjorie Pryse, who claims that when one considers Louisa “without bias against solitary women,” she “becomes heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent” (289) for the “alternate pattern of living” she presents for artistically inclined women, but claims her actions in favor of sensibility and autonomy “sacrifice heterosexual fulfillment” (290). Pryse's reading of Louisa's choice as “sacrifice” neglects Louisa's evident non-desire for heterosexual satisfaction even as she affirms Louisa's decisions rather than condemning them as Hirsch and Csicsilla do. Even Glasser's defense of the spinster falls into this pattern of understanding “A New England Nun” as “a story about spinsterhood and the suppression of sexuality” (32) when she considers Louisa's stock of distilled oils symbolic of a “stored up though ultimately unrealized and useless sexuality” (36). Despite the contrast of these readings of the value of Louisa's actions with Hirsch's and Csicsilla's, both veins of thought similarly conclude that Louisa is missing something in life—be it necessary or merely nice—by choosing herself and solitude over marriage. These assumptions unnecessarily constrain Louisa's sexuality, restricting her to a heterosexual interpretation.

### **Louisa Ellis and Celibate Desire**

An alternative to these restrictive readings of Louisa's sexuality is to interpret her celibacy as a valid manifestation of queer sexuality. In an analysis of Marianne Moore's later poetry, Benjamin Kahan explores the idea of *celibacy* as “a sexuality...an identity” (509), interpreting the word as “unmarried” in addition to the more standard “abstinent” (510) in order to construct a broader and more inclusive understanding of non-heterosexual identities and practices. Celibacy, with its lack of distinction between someone who is single and someone who abstains from sexual acts, is “entirely potential” when encountered in characters, Kahan argues, and can be read as “accommodating multiple identities” (515). In this sense it often serves as a “deflecting shield” for homosexuality (516), opening up texts and characters to be read as gay or lesbian. However, Kahan's understanding of celibacy as a

sexuality and identity opens a multiplicity of potential readings of celibate characters as queer and still “imped[ing] the discourse and reality of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity” (523). In this way, celibacy can be read as a complete and valid sexuality rather than merely as a point of missing or absent sexuality. By “framing desire outside lack” and claiming celibacy as “another valuable identity and practice” (523), Kahan's version of celibacy supports Louisa's desire for a life without marriage as a valid kind of queer existence no matter whether there is any evidence for or against any kind of sexual partnership. Through Kahan's lens, Louisa's choice of celibacy becomes a valid fulfillment of her own desire rather than a failure or sacrifice of heterosexuality. Louisa becomes queer in her own right, as her desires and choice to break her engagement challenge the heteronormativity of her society.

Several references to the love and romance surrounding Louisa and Joe's relationship highlight the differences between Louisa's sexuality and the heterosexual desires her society considers normal. The text, comparing romantic attraction to wind song, informs the audience that before and during their engagement, Joe was definitely attracted to Louisa:

“The old wind of romance whistled as loud and sweet as ever in [Joe's] ears. All the song which he had been wont to hear in them was Louisa; he had for a long time a loyal belief that he heard it still, but finally it seemed to him that although the winds sang always that one song, it had another name.” (Freeman 44)

Romance blows “loud and sweet” for Joe, indicating the continued strength of his feelings for first Louisa and then Lily Dryer. Despite the shift in his attraction, his feelings remain strong. Louisa, however, is portrayed as not having felt attraction on this level of intensity; for her, “the wind had never more than murmured” (44). The relative silence of the wind of romance for Louisa suggests that she has not experienced the same attraction to Joe as he did her; moreover, the wind “never” having “more than murmured” raises the possibility that perhaps Louisa has never been attracted to anyone. From

these clues, it is possible to read Louisa's struggle to accept her impending marriage to Joe not as a fear of masculinity or as merely a desire for autonomy, as so many critics do, but instead as a struggle to identify her desires and to align her life with them. Kahan's understanding of celibacy affirms Louisa's sexuality without framing her as deficient.

Louisa has never actively desired marriage; rather, it has always been simply a given in her life, a common-sense expectation of how her future will proceed. While Joe has been gone, she has “patiently and unquestioningly” waited for him, but this gentle acquiescence has nothing to do with Joe and everything to do with her understanding of marriage as a social imperative. Louisa considers marriage the “natural drift of girlhood,” a “reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life” (Freeman 43). Louisa never appears to have an intrinsic desire for marriage; rather, she accepts it as natural and necessary simply because those around her identify it as such. Louisa's mother is one of the strongest influences for heteronormativity in Louisa's life, and to her Louisa “had listened with a calm docility” (43). Indeed, Louisa ultimately accepts her engagement at the advice of her mother, who “had talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself” (43). Like Lucy of “Arethusa,” Louisa agrees to engagement out of acquiescence to the entrenched social order, not because of outright force. For Louisa, marriage is an expectation rather than a good in itself, and her opinion of marriage as a “probable desire” suggests that she does not actually find it desirable but rather supposes intellectually that it must be, from the influence of her mother and those she observes around her. Louisa had wanted to be married only because her mother and community expected it and because she could not envision a viable alternative.

Louisa's femininity offers further disruptions of heteronormativity; her femininity seems to nearly preclude her from heterosexuality through the extent to which masculinity distresses her. Louisa is presented as almost excessively feminine, and her extraordinary adherence to gender expectations is one of the defining characteristics of her life. Louisa's attention to her sewing tools, to her needle,

thread, scissors, and thimble, offer one example: Louisa cannot “remember that ever in her life she had mislaid one of these little feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality” (Freeman 39). Her preferred tools are explicitly referred to as marks of femininity, but for Louisa, these are not simply external practices; her sewing kit is a central part of herself, as are her gender identity and performance. However, the very refinement and perfection of Louisa's femininity seems to preclude her from heterosexual engagement. When she thinks of her future marriage, and particularly as she contemplates her neatly ordered bureau drawers, Louisa has “visions, so startling that she half repudiated them as indelicate, of coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter, of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony” (45). In the recesses and private areas of Louisa's carefully ordered and structured feminine life, masculinity and men are disruptive, and she rejects them as undesirable.

This menace of masculinity to her ordered life is made specific in her fiancé. Joe Dagget appears a threatening figure, although not in a violent or intentional way. Instead, by virtue of his gender and self he poses a threat to Louisa's life and lifestyle. When he visits, “he seemed to fill up the whole room” (40), and Louisa's canary begins to panic when he enters, “flutter[ing] wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Dagget came into the room” (40). Given canaries' frequent historical use as warnings of approaching danger and death in mines, the canary's distress perhaps warns Louisa and the reader of Joe's danger to Louisa and her happiness through his “honest masculine rudeness” (45). In Joe's visits, Louisa receives a taste for the “endless litter” of life that she envisions as her married future when Joe leaves the room in disorder. After he examines the books on her coffee table, he replaces them in a different order, causing Louisa to give “a deprecating smile” and rearrange them to her preferred order (Freeman 41). When Joe leaves, he trips and accidentally upsets Louisa's workbasket, spilling her sewing tools across the floor and—given the

symbolism of the tools as Louisa's personality and gender performance—leaving her sense of self in disarray. Louisa tells him to leave the threads and notions where they lie, with a “mild stiffness” due to her being “a little disturbed” (42). It is only in Joe's absence that Louisa can recover herself, and she bends to sweep from the carpet the dust he has tracked in, trying to remove his presence from her sanctuary while feeling “much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have after the exit of the bear” (42). Through his masculine nature, Joe Dagget disturbs and destroys Louisa's home and self, despite his best intentions. The problem lies not with Joe Dagget himself, but with Louisa's engagement and the prospect of her married future generally. Joe is representative of the contamination and disorder forced heterosexuality in the form of marriage would impose on Louisa's life, given her preferences against it.

### **Self-Fulfillment in a Single Life**

In “A New England Nun,” Louisa's solitude is presented as valuable rather than detrimental; alone, she enjoys the small pleasures in life and cultivates artistry in her hobbies. Louisa's solitary, almost-spinster life during her engagement to Joe Dagget has been “full of a pleasant peace,” according to the text (Freeman 43). In accord with this peace, the details and activities of Louisa's life are full of joy and things she loves. The best example of this is her meals: at tea, Louisa sets the table “as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self” (Freeman 39), and uses china every day. Louisa treats herself as important, as someone worth nice things in life. She fulfills her own needs abundantly; her dinner is “a glass dish of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce” (40). Lettuce itself is something Louisa is “very fond of” (40). Her dinners are large and feature foods she enjoys, and, despite her “delicate pecking way” of eating, she eats “quite heartily,” consuming a “considerable bulk of the food” (40). Louisa does quite well for herself, and her meals—and life—satisfy both her needs and her pleasures.

Outside of the activities necessary for daily life, Louisa's time is spent in pleasurable pursuits; she is not worthless, tragic, or wasted. Her joys, in keeping with her sewing-tool personality, are stereotypically feminine, but that does not diminish their value: "Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it" (Freeman 43). In fact, Louisa delights in her sewing so much that "she would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again" (43). Louisa's sewing is a creative act she takes pleasure in, Freeman emphasizes:

Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of genuine triumph at the sight of the window-panes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity. (45)

Pryse argues that these acts, elevating useful housekeeping practices to an art form, are "freedom to express herself" for Louisa (291), and even in her use of china every day she "achieves artistic perfection," enriching her daily life (292). Invested as she is in the activities of daily living, Louisa elevates her quotidian existence to an artistic triumph in which she finds happiness and contentment. She may never "be fruitful and multiply" (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Gen. 1:28), but she imitates her creator in the beauty and order she produces.

Freeman intensifies her affirmation of Louisa's singleness through biblical allusions. Over the years that Joe has been gone, Louisa's "feet had turned onto a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side" (Freeman 43). Whether or not she marries Joe, Louisa will always have a preference for solitude, and her course in life will be most peaceful if she is allowed to travel that path without trying to accommodate a second person where there is no room. The straight



and narrow nature of her path recalls Matthew 7:14, wherein “straight is the path and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life.” Additionally, this “straight” path Louisa turns onto recalls the “straight paths” Hebrews 2:13 directs Christians to, as well as those to which the Lord promises to guide his people in Proverbs 3:6. Taken together, these biblical references suggest the rightness of Louisa's course in life; her path of solitude does not set her apart from humanity in unpardonable sin, as Csicsila implies, but may rather be the path to the Kingdom and eternal joy. Freeman subtly suggests that in Louisa's putting off of the idea of marriage by “placing it so far in the future that it was almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life” (Freeman 43), she has been giving the direction of her life over to divine control and the will of God. Joe's coming back from Australia threatens the peace and spiritual satisfaction Louisa's path has carried her to.

Marriage would harm Louisa's life in concrete ways, and Joe's sudden return home threatens to drastically affect her life, which has up to this point, especially the last seven years, been spent alone in “pleasant peace” (Freeman 43). Her first reaction to his arrival is “consternation,” Joe not having notified her of his return in any way (43), despite his appearance heralding a rapid change of lifestyle in her immediate future. In addition to the “coarse masculine presence” (45) that will now enter her life, Louisa will be forced leave her home because Joe must continue take care of his mother in the Dagget residence. This causes Louisa to spend each day feeling as though she is “looking her last upon the faces of dear friends” in her belongings (43), on the brink of separation from her beloved home, artistry, and solitary life. Moving in with Joe's mother promises to put an end to her happy artistic pastimes of crafting scented essences and sewing. With the extra work of taking care of his mother, “there would be no time for her to distil for the mere pleasure of it,” and under the older Mrs. Dagget's scrutinizing eye there will be “small chance of such foolish comfort” as sewing for “mere delight” (44). Thinking about the move brings Louisa “anticipation of disorder and confusion in lieu of sweet peace and harmony” (46), for Louisa's life is better and happier on her own, and marrying Joe would mar her

creative and serene existence. Marriage—to Joe specifically, but also more generally—presents a harm to Louisa, and for her mother, society, or Freeman's readership to insist upon it as a requirement for a fulfilling life disregards the extent to which it would destroy Louisa's future.

As Louisa breaks her engagement to Joe during the resolution of “A New England Nun,” she secures her continued serenity. During the years of their engagement, Louisa assumed Joe's return from Australia and their subsequent wedding as “the inevitable conclusion of things” (Freeman 43), but as he returns, her feelings begin to change. As she realizes how committed she is to her solitary contentment, the only reason Louisa continues to remain engaged is her consideration for Joe's feelings, out of respect for his dedication to her: “Joe Dagget had been fond of her and working for her all these years. It was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove untrue and break his heart” (46). Joe, however, sticks by her out of the same loyalty, despite forming a new attraction that would preserve his heart against any sorrow caused by her breaking of their engagement. When she finally discovers this information one night, Louisa chooses against the heteronormative narrative she has been taught by her mother, against “the natural drift of girlhood” (43) and finds a way to choose herself and her happiness while preserving Joe's as well. As Louisa takes an evening walk, she overhears a conversation between Joe and Lily Dryer, which leaves her with the distinct awareness that the two are in love, despite the steadfast conviction by both Joe and Lily that Joe must marry Louisa. “Honor's honor an' right's right,” Lily says (48). Sensing a way to ensure both the happiness of all parties, Louisa diplomatically turns down Joe the next day. She claims to him that “she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change” (49), saving face for both of them with this explanation. Having taken action to ensure her happiness, Louisa feels rightly safe and secure. Even after merely hearing Joe and Lily's conversation, without taking any action at all, Louisa feels “fairly steeped in peace” (Freeman 46), and after actually breaking the engagement, Louisa feels “like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession” (49). The canary, who is frequently

identified with Louisa's interior self (Tritt, Csiscila, and Hirsch, among others), now “might turn itself into a peaceful yellow ball night after night, and have no need to wake up and flutter with wild terror against its bars” (49). Louisa's choice ensures a happier, more peaceful life for herself.

### **Cages, Confines, and Isolation from Community**

Although Freeman holds Louisa's choice not to marry as a valid and positive choice of those available to her, “A New England Nun” resists a reading that holds this choice as unequivocally happy, insisting on complication and nuance. Regarding these ambiguities, Elizabeth Meese argues that the “undecidability” of Freeman's texts and their resistance to a clear determination of their meaning is a strategic move born of Freeman's understanding of sexual politics (22). She argues that Freeman herself refuses to judge either her characters or their decisions (26), requiring readers to decide the final interpretation (27), thereby both preserving the relevance of her texts through time and “retreat[ing] from her own feminist moment” (38). I agree Freeman's work does resist closure, but not because she retreats from her convictions; rather, she acknowledges the complexity of the struggles her characters face. In her reading of Willa Cather's life and texts, Heather Love argues that it is tempting to “fantasize...happier endings” for the “lonely and thwarted lives” of Cather's characters (*Feeling Backward* 87). The same is tempting with Louisa; however, Louisa's association with the caged canary raises troubling implications about her freedom, and closing allusions to the biblical Esau and to Catholic nuns further complicate matters. As a part of a reclamation of the spinster figure through consideration of Sarah Orne Jewett's characters and relationships, Love argues that a primary reference for understanding spinsters must be the “context of social exclusion and denigration” they face (“Gyn/Apology” 310). She reads Jewett's women as “often independent, self-reliant, idiosyncratic, and admirable” but also sometimes “abject, bereft, isolated, and self-deluded,” (312), descriptions which hold true for Freeman's characters as well. Moreover, Love claims, “there is an ineradicable loneliness in the figure of the spinster” that arises from “standing outside of things rather than in the midst of

them” (329). This combination of admiration and isolation is present in “A New England Nun,” as Louisa escapes the confines of her engagement but remains at least somewhat estranged from those around her.

Many of the habits that form and protect Louisa's identity and happiness as a single woman also create a distance between her community and herself. Although there are numerous occasions that suggest Louisa maintains a polite level of interaction with the people around her, such as when they discuss her dog (Freeman 46, two occasions) and when she had occasion to hear praise about Lily Dryer (47), the neighbors also talk about Louisa when she is not there. They “whispered...amongst themselves” about Louisa's habit of using china every day instead of common crockery, suggesting that Louisa thinks she is “richer or better bred” than they are (40). Although Louisa gets along with the neighbors well enough, distance remains between them, resulting from Louisa's methods of self-care. Furthermore, despite her artistic interest in seams and distilling, these pleasures are solitary, created both alone and for herself only. Louisa's eccentric practices are things that keep her happy and safe but also ensure she is often alone and viewed as strange by the community.

Symbolic representation of Louisa's isolation comes the form of her animals: Caesar the dog and the caged canary. Although the canary, previously identified with Louisa's interior self, attains lasting peace at the end of the text, he remains caged, as does Louisa, shut off from the fullness of freedom and isolated from her community. In addition to the canary, Csicsila connects Louisa's self with Freeman's depiction of Louisa's chained dog Caesar, calling the description “pregnant with Freeman's masked commentary” (8) and claiming Freeman refers both to Caesar and Louisa when she says “Caesar was a veritable hermit of a dog. For the greater part of his life he had dwelt in his secluded hut, shut out from the society of his kind” (Freeman 45). Although he is wrong in the lengths to which he takes these claims about Louisa's isolation, ultimately determining that Louisa's reason for breaking up with Joe is “her refusal to participate within the community of human experience” (12),

Louisa is indeed cut off from people and her community. However, this is a side-effect of her protection of her interests, not the cause; her isolation stems from her rejection of heterosexual norms valued by her society. While there are repercussions to Louisa's choices, namely her distance from the rest of the community, she appears to face two competing and somewhat mutually exclusive goods: connection to the community or staying true to her desire and need to remain unmarried.

Although Louisa does remain caged in her spinsterhood, isolated somewhat from her community and from deep relationships with the people around her, she succeeds in protecting her peace and serenity. Daniel argues that these enclosures Freeman's women place themselves within, both literally in the forms of homes and properties with fences and figuratively in images such as Louisa's bird cage, are "places of their *own* choosing" (70, emphasis original), and Louisa's final decision is to define "a place in which she finds her own fulfillment...recreating her own place in her own home that she is quietly confident is best for her" (71). Additionally, Freeman describes Louisa's future as days "strung together like pearls in a rosary" (49), and in Janice Daniel's discussion of enclosure, this rosary becomes yet another tranquil cage, "not confining, as many readers interpret; rather, *she* is in control and at peace with herself...in her place of harmony, order, and autonomy" (Daniel 72). Louisa's life is a choice, and she chooses to build herself a life that she finds most fulfilling, a life of singleness, of domesticity raised to an art form, of china every day. Despite her isolation, Louisa's cages and enclosures preserve her agency, self-knowledge, and ability to choose her own life in the face of social pressure.

### **The Complications of Esau and Catholicism**

The final paragraph of "A New England Nun" includes several final religious references that support this complicated reading of Louisa's choice to live alone as beneficial but not without consequences. The first is an allusion to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, in which Esau surrenders his birthright as the elder son to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of stew. As Louisa begins to realize her

life is hers now, the narrator remarks, “If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself” (Freeman 49). Although Thomas Maik considers this a moment when the narrator expresses an opinion on the unnaturalness of Louisa’s choice, that “by choosing the life she has chosen Louisa has surrendered her birthright to *life* itself” (66, emphasis original), and Csicsila insists that “this passage unequivocally denounces Louisa's decision to remain alienated from the universal throb” through “her relinquishment of the profound and spiritually affirming birthright that is Joe and Lily's gain” (11), these readings do not fully consider the complexity of the allusions.

The references identify Louisa's birthright as marriage and heterosexuality, limiting her sexuality and restricting her to only one option for a meaningful life. Michael Tritt traces more thoroughly the connection of the pottage and birthright with the story of Jacob and Esau, ultimately finding that while “highlighting gender-specific conceptions of birthright and consequent lifestyle decisions” (39), the allusion “resists closure” (34). Tritt argues that the connection between Esau and Louisa contains an “ironic dissonance” (34), given the association of each with an emphasized and even “exaggerated” performance of their respective gender roles, a dissonance that is matched by their wildly differing birthrights as members of separate genders (36). As a first-born son, Esau's birthright is one of status, authority, and power within the family, while Louisa's position as a New England woman means her birthright is “her privilege/duty/right to devote herself to her husband, children, and family” (Tritt 37). This tension between the vastly different expectations and privileges accorded to Esau and Louisa, coupled with the “if” of Freeman's narration, might suggest that Freeman casts doubt on whether marriage is Louisa's “true birthright” (Tritt 39) and whether perhaps Louisa instead has a right to the same respect and happiness someone comfortable in a more conventionally acceptable lifestyle would find (38). In this sense, Freeman's inclusion of this allusion questions the heteronormativity and

restrictive gender roles of both her society and of Maik's and Csicsila's assumptions. However, allusions to Esau cannot be read as wholly positive, Tritt cautions; Esau's association later in the Bible with Issac's descents who turn against God leads to a lack of a definitive, unproblematic reading of this allusion (38). The questions raised by Louisa's association with Esau lend weight to the argument that Louisa has made a choice that is empowering and yet potentially harmful; however, the proliferation of previous biblical allusions to the sanctity of Louisa's narrow path make it difficult to read these allusions to Esau as a condemnation of Louisa's decision. The dissonance Tritt notes may align Esau's bitter regret with Louisa's peaceful isolation from her community, highlighting the struggles and costs of Louisa's attempts to come to terms with her own "birthright." Louisa's choice is not ideal, but given her circumstances in a heteronormative society, it is an valid means of satisfying her needs.

While Freeman's allusion to Esau creates complicated implications for Louisa's choice, even more significant are Freeman's allusions to nuns, which simultaneously emphasize and question the validity of Louisa's vocation as spinster. Freeman bookends the tale with references to women religious, titling her work "A New England Nun" and closing with the line "Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun" (Freeman 49). Freeman's use of these references would have been influenced by the religious-political climate of the time, and American anti-Catholicism revived in the nineteenth century (Griffin 3). During this time, stories about nuns who had either escaped from convents or were being held captive there were hugely popular in America, "some of the bestselling works of the age" (Verhoeven 132). Popular literature presented Catholic convents as prisons (Verhoeven 132) where women's femininity was obliterated as the Church forcibly kept the nuns apart from "the comforts of domesticity" and even friendship (137), while stories circulated about the rampant and perverse sex acts taking place in convents and monasteries (Frink 245). In his examination of anti-Catholicism in the United States and France, Timothy Verhoeven suggests the nun scandals of the nineteenth century were motivated in part by American struggles to adapt to a changing

culture and were compounded in the latter half of the century by a staggering increase in enrollment in Catholic female religious congregations (144). Sandra Frink explains that the changing roles of wives and mothers produced anxiety in the middle class, leading to intense instruction on the proper role of sex and marriage: neither sexual excess nor celibacy presented moral rightness (244). Catholicism threatened these family values by presenting “unnatural gender roles” and “sexually deviant 'families'” in the convents, since nuns “rejected the proper role of women by refusing to marry and have children” (225). In this sense, Freeman's contemporary Catherine Beecher, a vociferous critic of Catholicism, claimed the Catholic Church offered a higher status for women than Protestant churches, providing girls with more autonomy and responsibilities than either their own churches or the wider American society (Verhoeven 146). Freeman would have been aware of both the prevalence of anti-Catholicism and the association of nuns with alternate though “deviant” vocations.

Thus, through her association of Louisa with Catholic nuns, Freeman seems to affirm Louisa's choice of solitude as a genuine vocation but positions her outside of acceptable society. When Susan Griffin briefly applies her analysis of anti-Catholic sentiment in nineteenth century fiction to “A New England Nun,” she notes that while blatant anti-Catholicism in literature was dying down by the 1891 publication of *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, its presence remained, and she argues the title of “A New England Nun” positions the text as “a story informed by Protestant conceptions of Catholicism” (207) such as the anti-Catholic sentiments discussed above. However, Griffin ultimately concludes that “A New England Nun” connects with “Victorian critiques of religious sisterhoods as refusals of life and its duties in favor of sterility and self-absorption” (208) and claims Louisa's “sexuality manifests itself in childish greediness for sweets” (209). In doing so, Griffin falls into the same pattern as other critics who dismiss Louisa's sexuality as only deficient, ignoring the complexity of Freeman's work and the multitude of textual references that demand a more nuanced reading of Louisa's sexuality. In spite of her final reading of the text, many of Griffin's other points highlight



Freeman's use of Catholicism as one more way to communicate the complexity of Louisa's circumstances as a spinster. Freeman removes Louisa from the most damaging aspects of the convent story by calling her an "uncloistered nun" (Freeman 49), and her home is presented as a pleasing location of harmony rather than the "sexualized realm of sadism" depicted in many convent captivity stories, a contrast Griffin claims "refuses the sensationalism" of earlier anti-Catholic works while still participating in their legacy (208). When Griffin calls Louisa's choice of celibacy an "alternative, if lesser, vocation" (209), she acknowledges Freeman's positioning of celibacy as a valid, acceptable choice for Louisa. However, Freeman does not position Louisa's vocation as lesser than marriage; rather, she acknowledges the repercussions that such a vocation would bring. In addition to Louisa's "uncloistered" status removing her from the community of the convent, Freeman distances Louisa from the Protestantism of her community through her association of Louisa with Catholicism, emphasizing once again Louisa's consequences: isolation.

All in all, Freeman's presentation of Louisa insists on the complexity of human existence. There is no simple, unqualified resolution for Louisa; there is a sense of loss in her "placid narrowness" even amidst her "thankfulness" (Freeman 49), albeit not the loss of heterosexual marriage that Hirsch and Pryse believe. Louisa's choice against heterosexual marriage is affirmed though Freeman's use of biblical allusions, although other religious references complicate and nuance this presentation of Louisa, emphasizing her distance from the community around her. Csicsila frames this alienation wrongly; the distance arises from Louisa's inability to participate fully in society on their [heteronormative] terms without sacrificing her own desire and autonomy. Louisa's alienation is not a fault; rather it is the price she pays for attempting to fulfill her desires.

### **"The Balsam Fir" and the Joy of the Lesbian Continuum**

Where Freeman's presentation of Louisa is carefully nuanced and addresses the repercussions of bravery against heteronormativity, her depiction of Martha in "The Balsam Fir" appears to show fewer

compunctions. While she originally presents Martha as facing and struggling with the limitations of being single in a heteronormative society, Martha ultimately finds transcendent joy in female companionship, although her resistance to heteronormativity is less nuanced and treated with less complexity than Louisa's. As a spinster who excels in the art of daily living, Martha exhibits many of the characteristics visible in Louisa, yet her distaste for her circumstances emphasizes the potential for loneliness in Louisa's chosen lifestyle. In the end, however, Martha makes peace with her life and discovers radiant joy as she invites her friend Abby into her home, challenging the idea that heterosexual marriage presents a primary path to fulfilling companionship.

Rich's description of what she calls the “lesbian continuum” offers one method for interpreting Martha's turning to Abby as loaded with queer meaning. Rich offers the lesbian continuum as a wide range of woman-identified experience “between and among women” that spans the homosocial and the homosexual as an alternative to compulsory compliance with heteronormativity. Rich argues that these relationships yield strength, energy, and power (657) and “through sharing of joy...make life endurable for each other” (650, 656). Although Rich's concept is primarily intended to expose lesbian existence across a multiplicity of women's relationships throughout history, her ideas still provide a useful point for thinking about this relationship, especially in a time and place where female sexuality was taboo, heterosexual or otherwise. If conceptualized more in terms of an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality—and one of many such alternatives—than strictly in terms of lesbian existence, Rich's argument in favor of a continuum encompassing a wide range of woman-identified relationships helps reveal Martha and Abby's relationship as powerful and meaningful beyond the merely practical or charitable.

In this vein, scholars have noted the strong “sensual quality of women's relationships” in Freeman's writing (Glasser 154), but few have explored the extent to which these relationships represent a challenge to heteronormative limits on women's sexuality through constraints of marriage

and spinsterhood. Glasser argues that in the majority of Freeman's works, her characters ultimately form heterosexual connections as a part of Freeman's consent to portray "acceptable standards of behavior for women" (155), but "The Balsam Fir" stands starkly against this pattern. Martha turns to another person of her own gender to find fulfillment, satisfaction, and joy. Although the relatively less complex ending to "The Balsam Fir" suggests that perhaps Freeman considers this alternative to heterosexual compliance less realistic than the repercussions of Louisa's choice, Martha finds in her religious experience a way to satisfaction and joy by turning to another woman.

Religion plays a large role in the conclusion to "The Balsam Fir," but other allusions to Christianity abound, including Martha Elder's name. Her first name recalls the biblical Martha, who is "cumbered about with much serving" while her sister sits at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:40). Martha of "The Balsam Fir" shares a similar attention to external appearances in the picture of immaculate housekeeping she offers to her neighbors, and she lacks the interior peace and comfort Martha's sister finds in listening to the word of Jesus. Additionally, although claiming to love the God and believe in the Christian religion, Martha has never joined "professed religion and united with the church" (231). She remains apart, perhaps in further companionship with the biblical Martha. Furthermore, Martha's last name, Elder, also speaks to her relationship with religion, connecting her with the elders of the church, who offer guidance and carry a sense of authority. Though she is a woman and distanced from the church, Martha becomes her own interpreter of religious truth throughout the story as she struggles with her loneliness and longings.

### **Loneliness of the Spinster**

Martha's queerness is hidden beneath a veneer of perfectly contented spinsterhood. Like Louisa, Martha is a spinster who fulfills her role perfectly, although, also like Louisa, her femininity itself seems to set her apart from the marrying women around her. Martha is conspicuous for her femininity, in her graceful deportment and immaculate housekeeping: "She moved and spoke with a quiet grace,"

the text notes (Freeman 230), adding later that she “never frayed the hems of her gowns, nor rubbed her elbows; no mortal had ever seen a speck of grime upon Martha Elder or her raiment” (231). In fact, Martha's housekeeping and deportment are so refined and perfect that her neighbors circulate “a story that Martha once wore a white dress all of one summer, keeping it immaculate without washing” (231). All in all, Martha appears the very picture of “elderly maiden peace and pure serenity” (232). Like Louisa, however, Martha's femininity is almost so perfect that it is unfeminine insofar as society often assumes heterosexuality as a part of femininity. The narrator suggests that “there may have been something about the very fineness of her femininity and its perfection which made it repellant” (231), a statement borne out by Martha's lack of suitors. Growing up, Martha “had been a very pretty girl, much prettier than her younger sister” who had attracted “admirers by the score,” and yet Martha seems to have attracted no one; none of the men about her expressed any interest “until the man who married her sister came” (231). The community largely writes off Martha's solitude as predestination to spinsterhood. Everyone assumes that Martha “did not want to marry” and that she is “cut out for an old maid” by nature (231), because she fulfills this role so well. Although Martha's sister's husband, the one man who had pursued her, remarks on the oddity of Martha's solitude, “for she's pretty,” Martha's sister claims, “Martha's an old maid if I ever saw one” (232). The only person who does not view Martha as obviously an old maid is the man who was temporarily in love with her; to everyone else, it seems abundantly clear both that she is the epitome of the old maid and that she is perfectly happy in her role. Martha appears to accept her position as a spinster gracefully: “Nobody had ever heard this tall, fair, gentle woman utter one word of complaint,” and people agree that she is “perfectly contented” (230). From the outside, Martha seems as suited to a life of solitude and domesticity as Louisa.

However, the people are wrong, and Martha's life is empty of the joy Louisa takes in her quiet pseudo-spinsterhood. Martha is profoundly unhappy in her loneliness and resents her life. Although her neighbors assume Martha is “perfectly contented and happy,” in fact “she had her closets of passionate

solitude to which they did not penetrate” (Freeman 230). Martha's “passionate solitude” is not the calm delight Louisa takes in her daily routines; rather, currents of fury mark her life. Where Louisa's solitude is rich in comfort, the very purity and spotlessness of Martha's life are a facade for her “sordid” living conditions (237). Martha subsists primarily on vegetables and eggs (231), the products of her garden and chickens, in contrast to Louisa's sugared currants and little cakes. Other frustrations plague Martha; for instance, her windows lack blinds, and having green blinds “had always been the dream of Martha's life” and she “waxed fairly rebellious” when the sun pours into her home (230). The lack of blinds is only one of many things that evoke “a strong, though unexpressed, spirit of rebellion against the smallness of her dole of the good things of life” (230). Martha's externally observable peace is deceptive: her calm and graceful exterior houses a “fierce tension of her nerves” and “a revolt” (232). While Louisa, like her canary in his cage, is content to live enclosed and protected by her spinster role, the tracks of Martha's life, although “apparently those of peace,” are “in reality those of a caged panther,” even literally: Martha paces so much and so heavily that she must replace a section of carpet that she has worn a track into (232). Moreover, Martha has lived “alone for years” like Louisa has (230), and yet, unlike Louisa, she is “sick and tired of livin’” and has been “for some time” (234). Even more than “the smallness of her dole,” solitude is Martha's greatest complaint; she asks rhetorically, “What is Christmas to a woman all alone in the world?” (234) and believes her life, as one such woman all alone, is “the loneliest thing in all creation” (233). Where daily living bring Louisa joy and contentment, it breeds anger and resentment in Martha, who recognizes the limits of her happiness and who desires more joy than her life allows her.

There was a time when heterosexual marriage may have fulfilled Martha's longings for companionship, while alleviating her economic hardships. Martha had a male suitor once, and indeed his voice “ever after made her music of life; he looked at her with an expression which became photographed, as if by some law of love instead of light, on her heart” (Freeman 231). This relationship

did not continue out of a sense of duty, as did Louisa and Joe's, but out of love, and “everybody thought” the two would be married (231). However, Martha's sister grew jealous of Martha's suitor's attention and “won him away by her strong pull upon the earthy part of him” (231). Unlike Joe, who stays true to Louisa even after the winds of romance begin to speak a new name, this man “had really given her reason to blame him” (231), for he married Martha's sister. Seeing his attraction to her sister, Martha “yielded at once with her pride so exquisite that it seemed like meekness” and became “encased in an armor of womanly pride as impenetrable as a coat of mail; it was proof against everything except the arrows of agony of her own secret longings” (231). Although Martha's gentle manners lead her to calmly surrender her lover to her sister, the loss pains her. Over time, the pain of this relationship seems to have lessened and Martha finds she needs more out of life than her spinster existence.

At present Martha articulates her loneliness not as longing for her lost suitor but as longing for other relationships, particularly with women. She resents living as “a woman without children, or any other women to think about, livin' with her” (233), emphasizing her need for human connection, but especially for female connection. Even in the privacy of her own inner speech, Martha does not attribute her loneliness to a lack of a husband or male lover; her two longings are for motherhood and female companionship. Furthermore, when Martha finally reveals the extent of her loneliness to a female friend, the text highlights the gender of her confidante: “it was at last to another woman to whom she unbosomed herself” (232). Although her friend Abby is a safe person to whom to vent, due to her deafness, and a sympathetic one due to her own loneliness, it is interesting that Freeman emphasizes Abby's gender over these traits and highlights the way in which Martha seeks companionship outside of heterosexual norms.

### **Transfiguration of Desire through Divine Grace**

After she unburdens her feelings to Abby, Martha experiences a religiously-coded awakening that spurs her to turn Abby as balm for her loneliness. As she finishes speaking, Martha notices her

balsam fir tree is in danger of being cut down for a Christmas tree and rushes out into her yard to protect it. As she stands beside the tree, she remembers her past experiences of life and joy, particularly how “the man who had married her sister had said something to her beside this tree,” along with “her old dreams and hopes of youth...like old friends” (Freeman 235). Martha thinks fondly on these desires from her younger days; their memory does not spur feelings of loss or regret. Instead, her memories prepare Martha for a sort of divine revelation. The next morning, Martha goes to the window and sees the tree she defended, left “transfigured, wonderful” by the ice and snow, which give it “the glitter of precious stones” (236). The word *transfigured* recalls the biblical transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, in which he becomes cloaked in light and his true nature is revealed to the apostles (Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9). A similar transformation takes place for Martha, of her desires and her sense of self, as she looks out at the balsam fir and recognizes the true nature of her loneliness as well as of the solution close at hand. “Martha's face changed,” Freeman writes, and Martha turns to Abby to ask her to live with her for the winter (236). Martha receives Abby's acceptance of her offer “with the eagerness of one who grasps at a treasure” (236). This treasure that Martha grasps at is the opportunity for companionship with the other woman, an alleviation of their loneliness. Martha's old hopes and dreams of the man who had left her for her sister, dreams she has let go and moved past, are changed and transfigured into a new life in relationship with Abby, finding joy and companionship with each other.

In turning to Abby, Martha appears to find religious hope in her decision, and it seems her life will be much more joyful with her companion. As Abby leaves the room to prepare breakfast, Martha remains by the window, looking at the “glorified fir-balsam” (Freeman 237), which continues to recall the transfigured Christ in its magnificence. As she looks out the window, she has a vision of her old self standing there, just as she had recalled her old hopes and dreams the night before: “All at once it seemed to her that she saw herself, as she was in her youth, under it” (237). This association creates a

link between her life now and her life then. As Martha looks, however, she gains a fuller appreciation of this transfiguration and a new understanding of her present life:

The conviction of her inalienable birthright of the happiness of life was upon her. She also seemed to see all the joys which she had possessed or longed for in the radius of its radiance; its boughs seemed overladen with fulfillment and promise, and a truth came to her for the great Christmas present of her life. She became sure that whatever happiness God gives He never retakes, and moreover, that He holds ready the food for all longing, that one cannot exist without the other. (237)

Martha's life has been full of unhappiness, disappointment, and alienation, but in this moment she begins to believe once more that happiness can still be hers. Freeman presents this not simply as a gift or privilege, but as an “inalienable birthright,” something that she deserves and which is rightly hers. Martha's—and, by extension, Louisa's and all women's—birthright is not heterosexual marriage and duty to husband but joy. Martha has always wanted “one Christmas and one Christmas tree” (234), and this Christmas she receives “the great Christmas present of her life” (237), the gift of a divine truth and understanding. Martha comes to know that there still is the potential for happiness in her life and soothing of her longings.

The connection of these longings with the fir-balsam recalls her old lover, the man who married her sister, but the fact that Martha's look at the tree spurs her to invite Abby into her home suggests that the “fulfillment and promise” of these longings may rest in Martha's companionship with Abby and the joy-sharing Rich describes as part of the lesbian continuum. Indeed, Abby has replaced the man who married Martha's sister in her dreams. As Martha turns from the window and her vision to help Abby with breakfast, she exclaims, “Whatever I've wanted I'm going to have” (Freeman 237). Martha's joy is complete with the addition of Abby to her household, the fulfillment of all her desires. Furthermore, the vexations of Martha's life no longer overwhelm her, and as she turns back to the kitchen, she is “almost



blinded to all the sordid conditions of her daily life” (237). Rich claims that women together “make life endurable for each other” (656), and life with Abby enriches both women and elevates their conditions to something more gratifying and satisfactory. If this is “the food for all longing” that God “holds ready” (Freeman 237), “The Balsam Fir” seems to suggest that Martha has chosen the better part; her relationship holds suggests a way for her to find the peace and happiness Louisa finds in her single life, and the story offers one more divinely sanctioned alternative to [heterosexual] marriage in Freeman's canon.

### **Inconclusive Closure**

Martha and Abby's relationship is left indeterminate, without a clear or simple answer as to its nature, but Freeman's writing of them raises provocative questions. Although it may be easy to read Martha's reach out towards Abby as an act of charity or a fulfillment of her complaint about not having children, Abby reciprocates Martha's attention and protectiveness: she comes to retrieve Martha when Martha lingers too long outside in the snow (236), it is her knitting money which will pay for their flour and sugar (236), and she is the one who turns to make breakfast in celebration (237). Additionally, Freeman's oeuvre includes multiple instances of women living together, women such as Sarah and Abby of “The Two Friends” or Maria and Phoebe of “The Long Arm,” who are frequently read as queer or lesbian. Also of note is the name of the woman she turns to; Martha's friend Abby shares a name with one of the women in “Two Friends” as well as a character in Freeman's novel *The Portion of Labor* whom Glasser reads as one partner in a relationship laden with “potential lesbianism” (189). These elements are not sufficient to claim for Martha a protolesbian identity (Kent 2), but such claims are unnecessary. Importantly, Martha turns to Abby as a close companion who will bring joy and make life more bearable. Together, they resist the cultural pressure that other Freeman characters articulate of heterosexual marriage as the primary mode of life for people to live and find comfort. .

In contrast to most of Freeman's other works; "The Balsam Fir" ends with hardly any complication of Martha's happiness. She is "almost blinded to all the sordid conditions of her daily life," Freeman notes (237), but leaves any recognition of the complications and future struggles of Martha's life off the page, unsaid. The ice will melt on the balsam fir, Abby's sister may miss her contribution to household expenses through her knitting money and ask her to come home, and perhaps Martha's rosy outlook on life and her hope for full happiness will fade. However, Freeman leaves these possibilities unaddressed. Mary Reichardt claims this sudden shift in Martha's worldview is "perhaps too rapid to be believable," although she considers it "appropriate to the tale's Christmas theme" and suggests that "divine grace may have been instrumental in producing the life-changing experience that has occurred" (84). Freeman's use of divine intervention appears to affirm Martha's choices and present them as righteous and fulfilling; however, the incredible nature of the tale and lack of repercussions, when contrasted with the rest of Freeman's work, leave the ending inconclusive. While Martha's story may present an idealized way to deal with the restrictions of freedom and joy posed by a heteronormative society, Freeman seems to argue, there is no simple or clear avenue to complete satisfaction of all longings.

### **Conclusions**

Louisa and Martha offer two examples of Freeman characters who negotiate their own desires and needs in a heteronormative society. Louisa and Martha each find different means of gratification in their lives, based on their separate circumstances and desires. Martha finds ecstatic joy while Louisa finds a peaceful and serene isolation, yet each experiences some degree of fulfillment, in contrast to their lives before. Elrod argues that Freeman, in marrying Dr. Charles Freeman despite her satisfaction with Mary Wales, "seems to have internalized her culture's judgments (which she repeatedly explored in her fiction) against women who did not marry" (231). Whether Freeman judges Louisa and Martha or not, she seems unconvinced that complete gratification is possible for them in the face of

heteronormativity. Instead, she considers loneliness an acceptable price for her spinsters' freedom, and although she imagines a world in which religion may lead toward a more free life, she does not consider this vision realistic.

### III. Flannery O'Connor: Transcending the Harms of Heteronormativity

“[Flannery O'Connor's] baleful humor, her black comedy, her puncturing of pretension, and her affection for freaks makes us feel she's one of us; for if homosexuals aren't freaks in this world, what are they?” Andrew Holleran asks in his review of Brad Gooch's recent biography of O'Connor for the *Gay and Lesbian Review* (33). Holleran received much criticism for his article in later editions of the *Review*, especially given O'Connor's comments against homosexuality. O'Connor vocally expressed agreement with the official position of her church against such matters, and Gooch reports that after an acquaintance wrote O'Connor about a “lesbian subtext” in her “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O'Connor wrote back, “As for lesbianism I regard that as any other form of uncleanness” (319). Despite these proclamations, O'Connor's texts do engage with themes of sexuality, disrupting heterosexual norms as they do so, and to constrain readings of O'Connor to the meanings she claims to have written into her texts—and to avoid those she rejects—is limiting, and in fact, Marshall Bruce Gentry claims that O'Connor's “best art” is those pieces in which her “emotions caused her works to overflow their containers, cracking the molds intended to control and shape them” (“Gender Dialogue” 71). These subjects outside the boundaries of O'Connor's intentions—and even and especially those she disavows completely—are rich places for study, and her texts require consideration of the recurring presence of sexuality within.

#### **Spiritual Truths and Feminist Themes**

O'Connor is known for her Catholicism and stated anagogical purposes of her fiction, but often these interact with other themes present in her texts, such as those of gender and sexuality. Margaret Baur notes this heavy focus on O'Connor's religiosity when she identifies critics' “tendency to pigeon-hole O'Connor as a Catholic and a Southern writer, but she elaborates that these readings thrust the characters and texts “out of the realm of sexuality” (56). These themes of sexuality and religiosity need not be at odds, and they often interact in O'Connor's works: Theresa Caruso notes that the spiritual

truths revealed to women in O'Connor's fiction often differ from those her male characters receive, and are occasionally neither theological nor clearly connected to the religious purposes O'Connor claims ("Introduction" 2). The themes of sexuality and gender in O'Connor are affected by her religious content, and the spiritual truths of her texts are nuanced by her powerful themes of sexuality. One reason for negotiations of sexuality in her texts despite her focus on theology is her commitment to realism: Caruso argues that O'Connor's "unfailing ability to see and to accurately record the world around her" makes the women she writes about "more concrete than the religious beliefs through which her vision filters" ("Introduction" 4), and this means her characters exist in and of the world and engage with its struggles. Because of this, many scholars successfully read feminist traces into her texts, such as those works in Caruso's collection of essays, *"On the Subject of the Feminist Business": Re-reading Flannery O'Connor*. These works often engage with the gendered implications of O'Connor's texts, but rarely address the way her texts challenge norms of sexuality. Christina Beiber Lake does address the sexuality pervasive in O'Connor's works as she explores O'Connor's challenge to the positioning of women as sexual objects rather than agents, but she often assumes heterosexuality for O'Connor's characters rather than engage with the multiplicity of sexuality in these texts. There is potential for even more consideration of sexuality when reading O'Connor's works from a queer lens, especially when elements of religion are included.

### **Compulsory Heterosexuality, the Heterosexual Market, and Women-Centered Spaces**

One means of engaging with O'Connor's presentation of and resistance against sexual norms is through pursuit of the presence of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality in O'Connor's texts, as well as of the ways her characters resist and transcend these pressures. Adrienne Rich emphasizes the socializations and direct pressures that force women into heterosexual relationships and marriage as the purpose of their lives (636). The world of O'Connor's stories is structured heterosexually, based in desire and heterosexual relationships as the fulfillment of female sexuality.

These structures suggest Penelope Eckert's explanation of the "heterosexual market." In her examination of the language patterns of adolescent girls, Eckert identifies the heterosexual market as a "normatively heterosexual" social order in which young girls become "commodities" (190). Girls become entities in an order of desire, defined not by their accomplishments but by their ability to engage with the trappings of femininity, such as "nail polish, lip gloss, hairstyle, clothing, and new walks," as well as their ability to move through heterosexual relationships (190). This social order of desire and commodification of women limits and constrains female sexuality.

Rich presents an alternative to these limitations and constraints through the concept of women-identified existence. Woman-centered lives, argues Rich, may yield "a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power" (657) that empowers them to rise above the restrictions of a society that tells women they only have value and fulfillment in heterosexual relationships. Luce Irigaray identifies a similar function of women-centered spaces to envision a future beyond that dictated by heterosexual engagement and gender roles, as women "keep themselves apart from men" in spaces in which they "learn to defend their desire and forge for themselves a social status that compels recognition" before rejoining a world that continually devalues them as anything other than objects of male desire (33). These framings of women-centered spaces present one form of empowerment in the face of heteronormativity, and although Rich presents compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence as opposing entities, suggesting a binary constraint on desire, the idea of women-centered spaces are still valuable for the way in which they conceptualize power and resistance to compulsory heterosexuality through community. While this framing of female empowerment and its traces in O'Connor support the interpretations of Caruso, Baur, Lake, and others, the defense of desire, the multiplicity of sexualities, and the protection from heterosexual harms of women-centered spaces present in O'Connor's texts point to a breakdown of heteronormativity and resistance to compulsory heterosexuality often left unexplored by O'Connor scholarship.

Two O'Connor works which feature female protagonists and which address female sexuality are “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and “Good Country People.” In each of these stories, the protagonist finds the heterosexual norms society presents her with distasteful and undesirable, and she dreams of alternatives and more freedom. “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” addresses the growth of an unnamed adolescent girl—one of O'Connor's few Catholic protagonists—whose visiting cousins' preoccupation with boys irritates her and who finds solace and fascination in the recounted tale of a carnival performer who is “a man and a woman both” (O'Connor 206). In “Good Country People,” Hulga Hopewell, a nihilist academic, goes on her first date only to discover she has underestimated the harm a heteronormative society presents her with. The unnamed child protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and Hulga of “Good Country People” present almost mirror selves in their similar personalities and in their shared desire to break from the heteronormativity surrounding them, and the strong presence of religion in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is mirrored in “Good Country People” by the recurring presence of Hulga's atheism. However, their differing circumstances and structures of support mean that while the child finds love and acceptance in the women-centered spaces of her home and in her experience of Catholicism, Hulga, with her lack of caring community and nihilistic worldview, has no support for her violation of heterosexual norms and experiences loss at the hands of a symbolic manifestation of compulsory heterosexuality. Although O'Connor may have claimed not to engage with these themes, the way her characters struggle against the strictures of heteronormativity with only the child poised to survive her tale unscathed, suggests divine grace as a way to transcend the limits of a heteronormative society and find wholeness and support.

#### **“A Temple of the Holy Ghost”: “This is the Way He Wanted Me to Be”**

The child of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” grapples with and ultimately transcends the restrictions of heteronormativity. Although the scholars who engage with “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” do often acknowledge the themes of sexuality in the work, they rarely explore it far enough.

O'Connor claims the point of the story is "resignation to suffering" (925), and the vast majority of critics who engage with "Temple" either expound upon this angle or explore similar theological interpretations, incorporating the text's themes of adolescent liminality and sexual exploration into these conclusions. For example, Richard Sykes proclaims, "this is a story about God and sex," yet he ultimately concludes with O'Connor that the story tracks the transformation of "adolescent confusion into the salvific suffering" seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (89). Richard Giannone and Susan Allen also acknowledge the presence of sexuality as a theme but interpret it as a natural part of adolescence and coming of age. Allen argues the child learns to face her "coming womanhood" (84) by moving "from spiritual childhood into the world of adult Christianity" (83). Giannone is one of the few to acknowledge the child's apparent dismissal of boys as undesirable, yet he claims that by the end of the text, the child has learned that sin, not men, are to be spurned, and that God is "the good man" in her life (81). This interpretation limits the child's sexuality, denying her the possibility of other desires. Lake comes closest to adequately addressing the themes of gender, desire, and sexuality in the text when she explains that the child's world is dominated by a binary construction of female sexual identity as recipient of desire, concluding that by subordinating gender categories to the broader realization of the body as temple of the Holy Ghost, the child is able to achieve a new definition of womanhood as "greater than what can be constituted by gender differences and the category of sexual desire" (133). Lake's analysis, however, is confined to a few paragraphs in a larger chapter, and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" deserves greater consideration of both its interrogation of heteronormativity and the way the child's exploration of sexuality is influenced by her experience of Catholicism.

### **Avoiding the Heterosexual Market**

The child experiences the heterosexual market second-hand through her cousins, and rejects both it and them as moronic and worthy of scorn. When the child's cousins Susan and Joann visit for the weekend, they are actively engaged in this market and center all their activities on the male



population. Had they not been sent to an all-girls Catholic school, the text informs us, “they wouldn’t have done anything but think about boys” (O’Connor 197), and when the girls come to visit, they immediately change out of their school uniforms into “red skirts and loud blouses” accessorized with lipstick and high heels, in which they stride around the house, “always passing the long mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs” as they hope the child’s mother can provide some boys for entertainment (O’Connor 197). In their presentation of those activities Eckert identifies as valuable for the heterosexual market, the cousins display for the child what normal heterosexual activity can look like. However, the child derides her cousins for this fixation, calling them “practically morons” and claiming “all their sentences began, ‘You know this boy I know well one time he...’” (O’Connor 197). In fact, she expresses thankfulness that “they were only second cousins and she couldn’t have inherited any of their stupidity” (197). The child does not take her cousins for role models; rather, she considers them worthy of scorn for the way they engage with societal norms she rejects.

The child does not only reject the heterosexual market her cousins engage in, with its commodification of women, she also seems to spurn all heterosexual relations in general as undesirable. Lake claims that the child’s rejection of her cousins and the heterosexual market is based on a need to save face to her cousins, arguing that “she has not yet entered their world of lipstick and boys, so she will make them believe she does not care to” (134), yet even in the solitude of her daydreams the child has no interest in engaging with boys. Although she imagines herself the recipient of male attention, she refuses to entertain dreams of its fulfillment. As she daydreams, she pretends that she and some boys she knows had fought in World War II together, during which she saved their lives five times, causing them both to argue over who is going to marry her: “Wendell said I am going to marry that kid and the other said oh no you ain’t I am” (O’Connor 200). However, the child’s imagined response to this is to shut them both down and threaten legal action if they persist, saying “Neither of you is because I will court marshall you all before you can bat an eye” (201, sic). Although the child

appears curious about the prospect of attracting heterosexual men, she wants nothing to do with them in an actual relationship, even in her dreams.

### **Women-Centered Spaces of Support**

The child's struggle with narratives of heterosexual engagement and relationships is nurtured by her supportive, women-centered home environment, which provides her safety and encourages her growth as a person with her own, not-heterosexual desires. The child's mother's life appears to be what Rich would consider a woman-identified existence. Rich notes that some aspects of this lifestyle include living with women as "allies, life companions, and community" (657), and the mother's immediate community and the group with whom she primarily interacts is formed of women—the cook, Miss Kirby, and her daughter. Throughout the story, even at a family dinner, O'Connor never mentions the child's mother's husband or the child's father, which, coupled with the fact that the mother takes in boarders, leads to the reasonable conclusion that she is a single mother, perhaps through widowhood or by never having been married in the first place. The mother offers her child an example of an intelligent woman fully engaged with emotional realities and is reportedly "made of the same stuff as Sister Perpetua" (O'Connor 199), the cousins' convent teacher, who as a nun has actively chosen to remove herself from the heterosexual market. Together these women offer the child examples of women living lives of their choosing, apart from the limitations and restrictions of heterosexual desire she sees in her cousins.

Furthermore, the child's mother is supportive of her daughter and encourages her to develop into her best self, whatever form that takes. Allen notes that the child just "wants to be loved," and, in contrast to other O'Connor protagonists, especially Hulga, "the protagonist of 'Temple' has a mother who does love her, who accepts her as she is" (85). The mother never pressures her daughter to act as Susan and Joann do, and even to a degree joins her daughter's disgust with them, calling the girls "pretty silly" (O'Connor 199) and privately confessing to the child that "those girls are going to drive

me crazy” because “they're awful” (199). Rather than pressure her daughter to follow their example, the mother supports her child's development in kindness and intelligence. She models compassion, stepping in to stop her daughter from teasing their boarder's boyfriend because it will “embarrass” the woman (199). She also respects the daughter’s thoughts and contributions, providing her daughter with assurance that she is valuable. The mother acknowledges her daughter’s intellect and sympathy by laughing “in a guarded way” when the child makes jokes at the dinner table (198) and by giving her “an appreciative look” when she offers a solution to the headache the cousins are causing (200). The child's mother supports her growth rather than diminishing her value as a person or enforcing heterosexual norms, thereby increasing the child's chances to develop as a person moderately unscarred by the harms and limitations of heteronormativity.

### **Religious Affirmations through Divine Grace**

An even bigger source of power and support in the child's life is her religion, and the doctrines and practices of Catholicism become a primary catalyst for her growth away from the restrictions of heteronormativity. For the child, Catholicism is a part of her everyday world—her cousins attend a convent school, and she and her family attend a Benediction service when they bring the cousins back to school after their visit. Saints and the early Christian martyrs of Rome feature in the child's daydreams. The child says nightly prayers of her own accord, “usually perfunctory,” but sometimes she is “moved to fervor” when contemplating the life of Christ or listening to music, among other times (O'Connor 205). In these examples, Catholicism figures not only as an external reality of her world, as structured by her mother and those around her, but as something she herself actively engages in. Additionally, while often appearing neutral, the presence of Catholicism in the child's life is sometimes a positive force, something that influences her life for good. For instance, when her cousins report that Sister Perpetua instructed them to repel the advances of young men by shouting “Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!” the child stops rolling on the floor in laughter, “with a blank face,” not

finding any humor in the idea as her cousins do (199). When her mother likewise takes the conversation seriously, the child begins to turn the idea over in her head, thinking to herself, “I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and the concept pleases her, “as if somebody had given her a gift” (199). Being a Temple of the Holy Ghost means that she is important. As the night progresses, the child applies this idea to others, growing in her awareness of, compassion for, and respect of the humanity of her fellow people, as she thinks of the boarder she was teasing earlier and reflects, “and she's a Temple of the Holy Ghost too” (200). Religion is a real presence in the child's life; in her Catholicism, the child grows as a person and finds meaning in her self and in the selves of others.

When her cousins go to the fair and come back with stories of a person who was “a man and a woman both” (O'Connor 206), the child fixates on the religious aspects of this story and finds companionship and affirmation in her differences from her heterosexual cousins. Susan and Joann report that the person said to the audience, “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way” (206). Although the person is referred to as “the freak” throughout O'Connor's text, their words carry a message that the person's being is divinely sanctioned; that God does not condemn them for themselves, and furthermore, that neither should the carnival attendees. The child fixates on this message of divine affirmation, and when she lies in bed imagining the scene, this is the part she embellishes, adding to their words:

God done this to me and I praise him....Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know? ...If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen. (207)

The child's additions move the focus from freakishness to the body as a work of divine creation, housing the spirit of God and inherently a holy place. Furthermore, she creates a second-person

address, as the person calls out to their audience—specifically the child—as a temple, too, a concept more solemn and holy than laughter. As she thinks about the holiness and divine rightness of the intersex body, one who breaks from the binary understanding of gender her society promulgates, she is able to see herself, too, as a divine and holy creation.

The child remains fascinated by the person from the fair, and when she attends a liturgical service the next day, she associates the person with the body of Christ in adoration, further emphasizing the righteousness of her sexual difference through this association. At the Benediction service, the child continues to contemplate the person her cousins saw at the carnival and becomes convinced not simply of her value as a human being, but of her value because of, rather than in spite of, her queerness. At the Benediction service with the nuns, the congregation venerates the Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ. While praying, however, the child connects the Eucharistic Host they are venerating with the person in the side show. The child eventually begins to cease her daydreaming and focus, but rather than losing herself in the Way of the Cross as she does often, the child begins to meditate on the person from the sideshow, who in her vision once more repeats their message of divine affirmation:

Her mind began to quiet and get empty, but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, “I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be.” (O’Connor 209)

At height of the celebration of the mystery of God-made-flesh in the aspect of bread, the child’s attention is on the person from the fair, merging them with the holy liturgy taking place. In doing so, she creates an identification of the Eucharist, the incarnate body of Christ, with the intersex body of the so-called “freak.” In the Incarnation, Christians believe Christ embodies a dual nature: fully divine yet fully human, united in one complete being. Furthermore, in the Eucharist, through the mystery of transubstantiation, Catholics believe that what appears to be bread is the actual body of Christ. The

child connects these divine mysteries with that of the person, whose description as “a man and a woman both” (206) points to the resolution of both natures in one whole and complete person. In her linking, the child elevates a person the text calls “freak” to the level of the central and most holy mysteries of Catholicism. The child’s attention in viewing the intersex body as a part of the Incarnation mystery represents the merging and transcendence of a duality—a theme that dominates the latter part of the story and becomes the point of change and freedom for the child. As fully God and fully human, Christ lives in both worlds, unifying the two and reconciling them to each other. With only one head, the intersex person is one being, whole and unified. While the side show person is called “freak,” the Eucharist is considered sacred, an opposition the child’s meditation during Benediction destroys. In reconciling what is considered freak with that which is holy, the child is opened to the divine revelation that she, with all the ways she may be considered freak, is good and holy, although she risks much less in her transgressions of desire and gender roles than the “freak” does in their body. The child’s vision during Benediction, coupled with the sermon she imagines from the person, affirms for herself that she is not a deviant freak, she is holy and sacred, a “temple of the holy ghost,” just as the carnival person is, just as Joann and Susan are, despite the cousins’ adherence to social gender and sexual norms and the child’s violation of them.

One of the sisters confirms the child’s divine revelation as she leaves the service and serves as one of several “guiding figures” (Seel 215) for the child as she embarks on life with her new-found divine sanctions. As the child leaves the convent, “the big nun,” perhaps Sister Perpetua herself, “swoops down on her mischievously” and hugs her before “holding her off and looking at her with little periwinkle eyes” (O’Connor 209). This nun of Mount St. Scholastica convent school, already the wise bearer of “a gift” to the child in her affirmation of the body as “Temple of the Holy Ghost” (199), seems to recognize the transformation in the child, whose “freakishness” has been validated by her experience of the Eucharist and the phrase “This is the way He wanted me to be” (209). The nun

becomes united with the person of the fair, and moreover, with the Virgin Mary, who Catholics traditionally have held as a paragon of womanhood, together forming a community of support. The color blue symbolically unites these characters: Cynthia Seel connects the nun's "periwinkle eyes" with the blue dress of the intersex person (215), which in turn Claire Kahane links with the Virgin Mary, who is frequently depicted in blue (249). All three have something to offer the child in their example. First, the intersex person, in their proclamation of God's control and intentionality over their body, extends this sense of righteousness and holiness of self despite difference from societal norms to the child. Sister Perpetua serves as a second bearer of wisdom, despite Daniel Walden and Jane Salvia's interpretation of her embrace as representative of the child's inability "to resist the embrace of the Church" (233); the nun provides the original idea that the child's body is holy, as well as one example of women living among women, intentionally and consciously rejecting life as an object of heterosexual desire. Mary, often heralded as the ultimate model of Catholic womanhood, is doctrinally professed to be ever-virgin, despite her marriage to Saint Joseph, and so she is removed from the sphere of heterosexual desire. Mary offers the child a third role model and option for agency apart from male partnership, a potential Seel identifies in Mary's position as an "agent female" when she argues that in Mary's freedom from male partnership she wields both masculine and feminine potential and power (212). The intersex person, Sister Perpetua, and Mary join the child's mother as wisdom bearers, examples of freedom from heteronormativity, and a support system to guide her to more freedom in life she sees her cousins have.

### **"Good Country People" and the Harms of Heteronormativity**

In contrast to the way the child of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" transcends heteronormative pressures, Hulga of "Good Country People" struggles to survive in a world where there are no alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality. Hulga finds that without any support, both trying to resist heteronormativity and trying to comply with it end in harm to her. The critical scholarship largely

agrees with O'Connor that the story should be read as an admonishment of Hulga and Hulga alone. O'Connor believes that Hulga "is spiritually as well as physically crippled" (qtd. in Chew 22), but consideration of the way heteronormativity restrains and limits Hulga should spur a more empathetic reading. However, when most scholars engage with this work, they address what they consider Hulga's spiritual failings rather than consider her struggles to lead a fulfilling life in the face of societal forces that refuse to let her. For instance, Kate Oliver claims that Hulga's weak heart is not merely physical; it keeps her from emotionally engaging with others (234). She connects the canvas of Hulga's wooden leg to the canvas of book bindings as she suggests that through Hulga, O'Connor demonstrates that philosophy is an empty and soulless expression of human spirituality (235). In contrast, Baur points out that critics ignore the consequences of Mrs. Hopewell's lack of attention to her daughter's needs, and scholars should find Hulga more sympathetic because of the absence of love and acceptance in her life (41). Moreover, Baur argues that Hulga exists as "an individual character, rather than as an O'Connor *type* (the proud intellectual)," and ought to be read on these terms (41). When Hulga is treated as an individual person and read as more than symbolic of some spiritual moral that O'Connor intends to impart, the text offers richer and more meaning potential for interpretation.

When critics do address Hulga's sexuality, their work most often troublingly implies that Hulga's lack of interest in sex or men points to a failure of her humanity, recalling Michael Warner's explanation that culturally, "humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous" (xxiii). For example, Sheldon Currie, in a discussion of *Wise Blood*, claims that "like Hulga in 'Good Country People' [Hazel Motes] had no interest in sex for itself," asserting that Hulga has become her leg, wooden and unfeeling (138). In calling Hulga "the mechanical thing encrusted on the living" (138), Currie thereby suggests that Hulga's disinterest in sex is a sign of her inhumanity. Additionally, although Kathleen Feeley does not directly mention Hulga's sexuality in her examination of the story, her words are loaded with connotations of deviant sexuality as she calls the key concept of the story the idea of "comic



perversion,” argues that Hulga's renaming of herself represents “a comic perversion of God's practice,” and claims that both Hulga and the Bible salesman “have perverted their true selves” (23). Hulga deserves to retain her humanity even if she rejects the structure and narrative of heterosexuality as undesirable to her. Whatever her faults of pride or arrogance, Hulga is a person struggling in a society pressuring her to conform to norms she does not want to participate in, and she does so without support, meeting harm no matter how she chooses to act.

### **Hulga and the Pressures of Heteronormativity**

Hulga experiences the pressures of heteronormativity particularly through her mother. Hulga's mother is a primary force for heteronormativity in Hulga's life, as she bemoans Hulga's disinterest and lack of participation in the heterosexual market and refuses to take pride in Hulga's other achievements. Despite Oliver's insistence that Mrs. Hopewell “genuinely seems to love” Hulga and is a “caring and concerned mother, although smug, narrow-minded, ignorant, and overly optimistic about life” (234), Mrs. Hopewell gives Hulga little to no affirmation. Mrs. Hopewell does not treat her daughter as an adult; she thinks of her “as a child” (O'Connor 263), despite Hulga's age and education. Moreover, and more harmfully, she also rejects Hulga's life as acceptable, considering her “a poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good time” (266, emphasis original). Mrs. Hopewell's expectations for her daughter's heterosexuality are unmet; Hulga does not dance, either in a strictly literal sense or in a broader sense of engagement with a male partner. In this matter, her mother regards her as abnormal, which is still somewhat kinder than Mrs. Hopewell's judgment of Hulga's clothing choices, which she considers “idiotic” and proof that Hulga is “still a child” (268). In addressing her concerns about Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell is unable to speak kindly or even usefully, falling back on judgmental language or, as when she suggests to Hulga that “a smile never hurt anyone” (268), cliché advice that does not in the least address Hulga's particular situation and needs (Collins 184). Even Hulga's accomplishments do not garner respect from Mrs. Hopewell; Mrs. Hopewell does not

recognize Hulga's achievement with her PhD, merely considering it “nice for girls to go to school to have a good time” (O'Connor 268). Mrs. Hopewell's opinion that it is “nice” and fun for girls to go to school emphasizes education as an option for entertainment and recreation rather than intellectual engagement with the world, and as such, she cannot grasp Hulga's aptitude and taste for it. When Mrs. Hopewell does acknowledge Hulga's academic accomplishments, she measures them in terms of herself and her own position in society. Although she would be willing to tell people “My daughter is a nurse” or “My daughter is a school teacher,” Mrs. Hopewell only grudgingly allows that, were it true, she could tell people “My daughter is a chemical engineer,” and she finds it impossible to boast of Hulga with the proclamation, “My daughter is a philosopher” (268). She cannot take pride in Hulga even selfishly, for her own aggrandizement, and Hulga has no support as the child does, no circle of women to homosocially encourage her development.

In particular, Mrs. Hopewell is a force for compulsory heterosexuality through her championing of the Freeman girls as examples of proper heterosexuality. Although Hulga is older than the child of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” her mother's belief that she is still a child, coupled with the examples of the teenage Freeman girls, means that the heterosexual market likewise retains a presence in her life, although like the child, Hulga considers it repulsive. Mrs. Hopewell always tells people that the Freeman daughters are “two of the finest girls she knew, and that Mrs. Freeman was a *lady*” (O'Connor 264, emphasis original). Although Mrs. Hopewell's excessive praise of Mrs. Freeman's daughters is explicitly tied to class and her assertions that they are not “trash” (264), through the emphasis on gender in the word “*lady*,” these women are held up by Mrs. Hopewell not just as models of class deportment, but of gender roles. Both Freeman daughters are young and heterosexually engaged: “Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant” (263-264). Carramae, at half Hulga's age, fulfills the narrative of heterosexual attraction, marriage, and children that Hulga has never participated in, and every day Mrs.

Freeman delivers a full report of Carramae's pregnancy. Even Glynese with her “many admirers” is poised to fulfill this role, and Mrs. Freeman talks gleefully about how a young man “popped [Glynese's] neck” in the back of a car the other night and asked her to marry him (273). Glynese and Carramae provide a direct contrast to Hulga's unmarried and suitor-less state. If the hired help can be ladies, Mrs. Hopewell seems to wonder, why can't her daughter? Hulga, for her part, is scornful of the Freeman sisters, rejecting them as role models. She calls them “Glycerin and Caramel” (263), turning them into consumable edible goods of little substance rather than full human beings, and Caroline Collins interprets this naming as an implication that for Hulga “the traditional role of women involves a sticky, syrupy sweetness repulsive to her” (183). Hulga rejects Glynese and Carramae as unsubstantial and unhealthy versions of femininity whose lives are far from her preferred regions of the intellect. Hulga's mother presents the heterosexual market as the only way for Hulga to have worth, by attracting and entering relationships with a man, despite Hulga's other achievements and preferences.

Beyond rejecting the narrative of compulsory heterosexuality her mother champions, Hulga explicitly is not interested in men. She does not like “nice young men” and instead has a tendency to look at them “as if she could smell their stupidity” (O'Connor 268). Moreover, when she does go on a picnic with the Bible salesman, O'Connor emphasizes that Hulga is not sexually interested in men, either. When the Bible salesman kisses her randomly as they walk, although it does give her “that extra surge of adrenalin” (278), Hulga is not sexually aroused and takes satisfaction in the fact:

The power went at once to the brain...Her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement and with pity...She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control...Some people would enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. (278)

Hulga remains unchanged by her first sexual encounter. Hulga's pleasure at her lack of reaction to the kiss suggests that perhaps Hulga has been aware that she is not interested in heterosexuality and that this encounter serves to confirm for her the veracity of her feelings. Despite her mother's wishes that she conform, that she engage in "normal good times" (266), Hulga is pleased because she realizes she has missed nothing; everything is exactly as she suspected it would be. Hulga knows herself and her desires best. In further demonstration of her preferences, when Hulga believes the salesman "looked as if he wanted to kiss her again," she takes care to "walk on before he had the chance" (278).

Furthermore, Hulga's comparison of kissing to drain water suggests that Hulga believes everyone who enjoys kissing and sex has somehow been duped into thinking this was desirable, a direct challenge to heteronormativity, which insists that heterosexual activity is a natural desire of everyone. Despite the pressures of her mother, as representative of social forces for compulsory heterosexuality, Hulga's desires and sexuality resist these narrow limitations.

### **Reactionary Resistance to Heteronormativity**

Because society, especially Hulga's mother, pins her value on heterosexuality, Hulga must construct for herself another source of self-affirmation and value. Hulga is alone and hurting, and the pride that O'Connor and scholars who engage with her anagogical messages condemn Hulga for is actual "a mask for her insecurity," Baur argues (50). Although the child of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" finds alternative sources of support in her mother and especially in her religion, neither Mrs. Hopewell nor Hulga's experience of Christianity offers any such potential. Although Oliver notes that "religion would have provided Joy-Hulga with spiritual and emotional support" (236), this is presently impossible because she experiences Christianity as a superficial and insincere practice. For Hulga's mother, religion is "a matter of taste" (O'Connor 270) and nothing more, a means of social capital. Even the Bible salesman appeals to social appearances when he tells Mrs. Hopewell, "The word of God ought to be in the parlor" (270). Although Mrs. Hopewell has already told him—though it is a lie—that

she keeps her Bible by her bedside, the Bible salesman plays to her sense of social presentation in suggesting that the Bible is better off on display in a public area of the home, rather than in a private area, despite potential for greater use in the bedroom rather than the rarely used parlor. Hulga recognizes this superficial engagement with religion in her mother and those around her. As the Bible salesman begins to run away with her wooden leg, she yells at him, “You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another” (283), displaying her generally low opinion of religious people. Hulga's experience of religion has been as a hypocritical social force that serves only as window dressing and little else. For this reason, when Manley Pointer tells Hulga, “I guess God takes care of you,” she responds, “I don't believe in God” (277). She has no reason to believe God takes care of her, because in her experience no one does; Hulga must take care of herself, and God is a prop used to build up one's social self. Perhaps religious belief could have been a source of security in her own wholeness and an affirmation of her value despite her differences from those heterosexual models around her, as Oliver suggests; as it is, however, religion as portrayed in “Good Country People” would not help Hulga at all. Hulga must look elsewhere to find value for herself.

Since she does not find validation in the ideologies her community presents her with, Hulga turns to her own ideological system, fostered by her education, in which she has value. Hulga believes in Nothing, that everything is pointless, and that everyone is damned. In response to the Bible salesman's questions about her faith and salvation, asking whether she is “saved” or not, Hulga proclaims, “In my economy...I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God” (O'Connor 278). Hulga's economy is a reverse of that she encounters daily, one of multitudes of “Christians” claiming to be honoring their God but rejecting her as a fellow human being worthy of respect. Later, Hulga explains her life philosophy more fully and seriously, telling the salesman, “We are all damned, but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation” (280). For Hulga, this is salvation because if everyone is damned, then she is no

worse than anyone else; furthermore, if no one has any knowledge of their damnation, then to be one of the few to see without the blindfold is to be set apart, to be saved, to be superior. In this sense, Hulga is successful and powerful, rather than an ineffective failure, as her mother would have her believe.

However, Hulga's entire worldview is set up as a reaction against the attitudes she encounters in her daily life. Even her philosophical studies are built around negatives, a reaction to the lack of goodness she finds in her life. When Mrs. Hopewell picks up one of Hulga's books and opens it, she finds an underlined passage about “the strictly scientific approach to nothing,” which claims “We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing” (269). Hulga studies Nothing and is deeply interested in Nothing, because she is constantly told she *is* nothing, according to her mother's and societal standards. Her expression is described as one of someone “whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face” (O'Connor 264). Hulga has been cast as outsider and as aberrant in her position as academic, as single, and as undesired so long that her continual anger at this treatment has consumed all other visible emotions, and she has taken what steps she can to protect herself and her sense of worth. However, because her life philosophies are based in Nothing and are constructed as responses to the empty religiosity she sees about her, Hulga's nihilism does nothing to offer her validation in her resistance to societal norms. Hulga's action is reactionary, unable to break free of the limitations she faces.

Another way Hulga tries to create a sense of her own identity apart from the restrictive perspectives of her mother is by changing her name, rejecting her mother's limitations. Mrs. Hopewell named her daughter Joy and insists that this is “really” what she ought to be called, calling it “the beautiful name” (O'Connor 266), but Hulga rejects the simple happiness of her mother's naming and everything her mother represents. Hulga insists on her own agency and self-identification, changing her name to Hulga “as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home” (266). In changing her name, Hulga is able to at least nominally distance herself from her mother's expectations and impositions.

Mrs. Hopewell believes that Hulga “had thought and thought until she hit upon the ugliest name in any language” (266), and to an extent this is true: “she had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound,” the narrator tells us, confirming that Hulga's initial reason for choosing the name was the distaste her mother would find in it. Later, however, Hulga finds another reason for choosing “Hulga”: “she had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called” (267). In addition to naming herself something to displease her mother, Hulga chooses a name that signifies what she wants. Perhaps she must stay in the furnace of her home, ugly and sweating, but to have a very goddess at her call would be to have power. Additionally, as Hulga becomes aligned with the Vulcan, calling a female deity to herself, she once again subtly suggests her own queerness, taking on the position of a male god desiring and commanding a female one. Furthermore, to Mrs. Hopewell, the name “Hulga” evokes “the broad blank hull of a battleship” (266), which correctly identifies Hulga's renaming as an act of war on her circumstances. The name is both Hulga's defense and salvo against the tiny confined life of nothingness she is forced into. Despite these acts of resistance, however, Hulga remains trapped at home with the name as her “highest creative act” (267), a mark of how little real change she is able to effect in her life. Despite having some connection to her own sense of self in the association with the Vulcan, Hulga's choice of name is not about who she *is*, rather, she renames herself to distance herself from who she is *not*. Once again, Hulga's actions are reactionary, and she finds no true agency or self-affirmation to validate herself against the harms of heteronormativity and against the heterosexual market which tells her she has no value without heterosexual engagement.

### **Compliance with the Heterosexual Market**

Knowing how ineffective her resistance to heteronormativity is, Hulga attempts to comply with social pressures to heterosexuality, but here she encounters even more harm and loses her agency. In spite of her struggles to be herself, Hulga knows many things would be easier for her if she did act as

her mother wants her to, so when the opportunity presents itself, via the Bible salesman, she attempts to participate in the heterosexual market. The salesman, who calls himself Manley Pointer, presents the embodiment of heterosexual masculinity; Gentry calls his name “one of the most phallic names in fiction” (*Religion* 114). Furthermore, O'Connor later reveals that his suitcase houses not only bibles but also a package of condoms and a set of playing cards “with an obscene picture on the back” (O'Connor 282). When Hulga meets him by the road, the salesman begins to engage with her as though he is attracted to her, leading her to believe this is an opportunity to try out the heterosexuality her mother wants for her. The salesman appears interested in her: he opens conversation with a joke and then falls into “little nervous giggles,” gets “very red in the face,” and looks at her with a “gaze of complete admiration” (275), acting like a child with a crush. He continues to seem attracted to her as he calls Hulga “real sweet” (275) and tells her “I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door” (276). He shows interest rather than disgust in her name, and demonstrates attraction to her appearance, telling her “I like girls that wear glasses” (276). This is a complete change from how Mrs. Hopewell views Hulga. The novelty of being treated as someone attractive and desirable spurs Hulga to seize the opportunity to try to merge her life with what she is constantly told she is lacking, and when he asks if they can go on a picnic together the next day, Hulga decides to try out the heterosexual market.

As Hulga prepares for the picnic, she begins to fantasize about the encounter, dreaming of a way to participate in the heterosexual market while preserving her agency. In imagining how the picnic will go, Hulga envisions the expedition as a seduction, one in which both she and the Bible salesman get what they want: she will conform to heterosexual norms by coupling with and being desired by a man, but she will not give up any of her intellectual identity or superiority. Since it is a seduction, she remains in control, actively manipulating his desire:

She imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she



imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful. (O'Connor 276)

In this daydream, Hulga is the agent, choosing the paths and destination for their walk, easily manipulating the salesman, and then, because this is Hulga's ideal situation, engaging intellectually with him and converting him to her own religion of nothing rather than the other way around. The salesman himself takes on the feminine positioning as object here: the one manipulated, the one with the inferior mind, the one who must wrestle with shame. In Hulga's idealized future, her encounter with the salesman is a way to engage with the standards and expectations of her without losing power. To become romantically and sexually involved with the Bible salesman through her own volition and power seems to be a way for Hulga to rise above the divergent options of reaction or submission, and she does what she can to make this dream a reality. Despite her lack of experience in the rites and tools of the heterosexual market, Hulga tries to do things correctly, but her inexperience means her preparations are rather lacking in conventionality. She breaks from her habit of ancient skirts and faded sweatshirts to wear slacks, but her shirt is dirty, and although she remembers "as an afterthought" that women often wear perfume, she doesn't have any and so dabs "some Vapex on the collar" of her shirt (277). In spite of all her planning, she also neglects the whole premise for her outing: "she didn't take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic" (276). Hulga's intentions are on target, but her execution of them is somewhat strange, foreshadowing the ultimate failure of her attempts to participate in the heterosexual market without surrendering her self.

As their picnic continues in a hayloft, Hulga begins to surrender to the Bible salesman and the heterosexual market she has previously rejected, and in doing so she begins to increasingly lose her

agency and sense of self. As Hulga and the salesman kiss, her “glasses got in his way,” and so “he took them off of her and slipped them into his pocket” (O'Connor 279), removing one of the symbols of her intellectualism and an aspect of her that he had previously expressed attraction to. Moreover, his placement of her glasses in his pocket demonstrates an ownership that he is taking over Hulga's property and over her self, appropriating them to his possession and desires. Hulga remains unaware of these new developments: “she didn't realize he had taken her glasses” (280), and perhaps had she known, she would not have let him. This action seems to imply that in order to fit with the heterosexual norms she longs to, Hulga must either willingly or unwillingly surrender her intellectual identity, which is her point of pride and her distinction.

As events in the hayloft continue, Hulga begins to fall into the fantasy that heterosexuality and the heterosexual market may actually be satisfying for her. When the salesman removes her prosthetic leg, the scene is loaded with sexual undercurrents, and at first, Hulga seems to be enjoying herself. The salesman asks her to “prove” she loves him by requesting she show him where her leg joins on. This act is highly intimate, since Hulga treats her leg as “someone else would his soul” (281). Additionally, David Havird describes her leg as a phallic object (24), and when Hulga allows the salesman to remove the leg, she feels as if she is “surrendering to him completely” (281). At this moment, Hulga begins to imagine that she can join Glynese and Carramae as successful navigators of heterosexual desire, planning a future with him and “thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again” (281). However, in surrendering her leg, Hulga also surrenders her mobility and “without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him” (282). When Pointer packs the leg into his suitcase and makes off down the hayloft ladder with it, Hulga is bereft. The leg has been one of her means of resisting her mother's ideas of proper behavior, by using it to walk around the house making an “ugly sounding” and “awful noise” that her mother hates (267). In addition to the loss of mobility losing her leg represents, Hulga has lost part of her ability to rebel even

ineffectively against the restrictive ideals of her mother. The salesman leaves Hulga in the hayloft worse than she began; she is as different as ever, but she has made herself vulnerable, been humiliated, and lost the tools of even her ineffective rebellions. She is without glasses, without leg, without intellectual comfort and distance, and without her carefully guarded soul. Hulga's resistance to compulsory heterosexuality leaves her feeling isolated and without value, but her attempts to conform result in the loss of her agency and her self.

Ultimately, Hulga's experiences trying to succeed on the heterosexual market and the loss of agency she suffers there may point to gendered restraints on female sexuality as object of desire, as Eckert notes, and "Good Country People" may fairly be read as indicting the restriction of female sexuality to object of desire. However, Hulga experiences rejection and harm not merely because she refuses to surrender her agency in a heterosexual relationship, but moreover because heterosexual relationships generally are not something she desires. Hulga experiences loss and pain regardless of whether she attempts to resist or comply with the social pressure to heterosexuality. In her feminist reading of O'Connor, Natalie Wilson concludes that the suffering of O'Connor's characters at the patriarchal social order does not necessarily mean that she believes they must be punished, rather that her commitment to realism involves showing "the confining and warping aspects of patriarchy" (99). Similarly, Hulga's devastation at the end of "Good Country People" may be indicative not of O'Connor's criticism of or disgust for Hulga's resistance to compulsory heterosexuality; instead, she presents the harms a heteronormative society inflicts on those who refuse to comply. "Good Country People" presents the limitations on the sexuality of women who do not fulfill heterosexual norms and who dare to challenge them.

### **Reading the Child and Hulga together: Potential for Future Power**

Although Hulga meets a harsh fate in "Good Country People," O'Connor presents an alternative to the harms of heteronormativity that Hulga faces, through the religious affirmation of the child of "A

Temple of the Holy Ghost.” The child, who has grown up supported and loved in a women-centered space and who experiences divine grace, may use these forms of validation to resist compulsory heterosexuality with less harm than Hulga. The child and Hulga are mirrors to each other, sharing personality traits beyond their rejections of the heterosexual market. Hulga's destruction presents only one potential outcome of these traits coupled with resistance to heteronormativity, however; with the combination of differences in the child's circumstances and her youthful point in life, there is the possibility that she will escape the drastic harms Hulga experiences.

One key point of similarity between Hulga and the child, demonstrating their connection, is the child's intellectual obsession, mirrored and fulfilled in Hulga's doctoral degree. Knowledge and smartness are of utmost importance to the child, and, as Sykes notes, “her own point of pride is that she is smarter than everybody” (95). When she is scolded for her “ugly” manners around company, the child remarks that even if God *did* strike her deaf and dumb as the cook suggests he ought to in punishment, she would “still be smarter than some” (O'Connor 203), referring potentially to her cousins, the neighbor boys, Miss Kirby, or any of the more than half a dozen people the child scornfully derides over the course of the story. Even her plans for the future are constructed around knowledge and learning, for although she considers a wide range of occupations, allowing her imagination to include professions generally associated with men, the child decides “she would have to be much more than just a doctor or an engineer” (204). She finally concludes that she must become a saint “because that was the one occupation that included everything you could know” (204). The child demonstrates her preference for intellectual engagement and fulfillment over courtesy, social expectations, and—given that sainthood is conferred only upon the dead, making it an unsuitable occupation for a grown, live person—even logic. It is reasonable to guess that, sainthood out of the question for the immediate future, the child could discover university life, as Hulga does.

Hulga presents the fulfillment, at least academically, of the child's intellectual potential. "Highly educated" (O'Connor 236) and holding "a number of degrees" (280), including a PhD, Hulga has "gone through" school, according to her mother (268). She is obsessed with matters of the mind; intellectual engagement is her primary pastime. Hulga spends all day "on her neck in a deep chair, reading," although she makes clear that were she not possessed of a weak heart, she would be teaching in a university, "far from these red hills and good country people...lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (268). Like the child, Hulga considers herself intellectually superior to everyone around her and spends most of her time alone, engaged in reading and thinking. When she does speak, it is often to make some obscure comment referencing a philosopher, to the complete confusion of those around her (268). One could easily imagine the child of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" delighting in Hulga's displays of her superior education and knowledge at the expense of her companions.

In addition to their shared intellectual priorities, as well as their similarities in rejecting the heterosexual market and its participants, both Hulga and the child share a tendency towards rude behavior. The child's ugliness often manifests as a lack of manners: her mother perpetually reprimands her for being impolite and rude to others. She laughs so hard at her own jokes at the expense of others that she nearly chokes at dinner (O'Connor 197) and falls out of her chair under the table, where she lies "heaving" as she attempts to get over her convulsive laughter (198). Her mother tells her she will be sent from the table if she doesn't "stop this foolishness" (198), scolding her for teasing and embarrassing their boarder, Miss Kirby (199). Later, when the child becomes angered by the ignorance of some visiting boys, she stomps her foot and yells insults, calling one of them "You big dumb ox!" (202), muttering later, "those stupid idiots" (203). The cook points out this tendency towards rudeness as a pattern of the child's life when she asks the child shortly after, "Howcome you be so ugly sometimes?" (203). The child consistently demonstrates that she is the center of her own attention, and the feelings of others and the rules of politeness hold little interest for her. Hulga displays similarly

“ugly” behavior, although she is much more intentional in her rudeness. Hulga “actively works at being ugly and rude,” Martha Chew claims (21). Hulga looks and acts ugly, deliberately playing into her mother's perceptions of her as “bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (O'Connor 268). Her expressions are “glum,” and when pressed into conversation, her remarks are “ugly” (265). Hulga stands “with her arms folded” while preparing breakfast (266), creating a physical barrier between herself and those sharing the room with her. Both Hulga and the child, in addition to their rejection of the heterosexual market and their preference for intellectual company, share a similar refusal to deal politely with a world that refuses them value.

Despite their similarities, the child's liminal stage of growth as she prepares to enter the world of adolescence and adulthood is key to her potential to avoid Hulga's tragic fate. The child is pliable and able to change, about to either embark on a path towards becoming Hulga or towards one of greater freedom and fulfillment. The child is twelve, described as having “fat cheeks” and braces that “glared like tin” (O'Connor 198), and is clearly physically on the youthful side of puberty. Her understanding of the world and her relationship to it is still developing as well; for example, she remains naive about actual sexual matters. She tells her cousins she saw a rabbit give birth by spitting its young “out of its mouth” (207), and when they tell her they saw at the fair a person who “was a man and a woman both,” she thinks they mean “it had two heads” (206). Because the child still has room for development and her understandings of the world are not completely formed, she has the opportunity to grow beyond Hulga's stifled cage and restrictions to reactionary blindness as necessary for survival; instead, there is hope for the child to transcend the limiting expectations society has for Hulga and herself and to become a fuller, more complete version of herself. The child is also liminal spiritually; Walden and Salvia note that she is of confirmation age, preparing to enter Catholic adulthood as well as grow into social and sexual forms of maturity (230). The support the child finds in her mother, Sister Perpetua, and her experience at Benediction come at a key moment in her development in her sense of her

personhood and the development of her knowledge of her value, leaving her poised to become a more complete, fulfilled adult who is not quite as bound and restricted by compulsory heterosexuality as Hulga is.

The closing image of a blood-red sun setting in the sky clinches the child's revelation and situates her firmly on the path to a freer and more empowered future. As the child looks out the window, she sees the sun in "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood" (O'Connor 209). The sun-as-Eucharist presents an image that connects both physical, earthly reality and spiritual mystery, while also reiterating the connection to the Incarnational duality of Catholic doctrine. Although Sykes prioritizes the Incarnational aspect, considering the blood indicative of the child's "fuller knowledge of the price of her decision to do God's will" (90), Kahane calls the sun "a vision of [the child's] own bleeding body, more specifically, the blood of menstruation" (290), and a signal of the child's reconciliation with her own womanhood, putting the emphasis on the child's move towards adulthood. Seel concurs with this reading, seeing the sun as menses and so representational of the female body, affirmed as divine temple through the Eucharist. Instead of menstruation generally, and in light of the coming-of-age themes of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the blood-red sun may be read specifically as symbolic of menarche, signaling for the child a traditional initiation into adolescence and future adulthood. However, with her supportive mother and community, and especially because of her experience extrapolating from the sideshow sermon to the divinely ordered innate value of all people—even and perhaps especially those who transgress the gender and sexual binary—the child is prepared to be a much more free human being than Hulga. As the bleeding host-sun sets, it "left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (209), heralding an "alternate route" (Walden and Salvia 234) of hope for the child to take away from the harms heteronormativity imposes on Hulga.

### **Conclusions**

The similarities between these texts make them prime to be read side-by-side, as two examinations of women trying to live their lives against heteronormative forces. Both the child and Hulga reject the heteronormativity around them, but while the child finds support and affirmation in the women of her life, her imagining of the person from the fair, and her religious mysteries, Hulga can find no effective alternative to the harms of either complying with or rejecting the heterosexual market. Whatever O'Connor's sexuality or her views on the morality of heterosexuality, she explores in these texts the possibilities and problems of living in a world where society offers heterosexuality as the only avenue to fulfillment. In her worldview and in many of her texts, divine grace is the necessary path to wholeness, and the same is true of her texts once queered. The child experiences the closest conclusion to a "happy ending" that O'Connor's stories come, suggesting that perhaps Hulga need not be damned at all; it is society which has failed her. O'Connor does not promise happiness or satisfaction in divine grace, but her texts express a longing, a resistance, and perhaps a hope for transcendence of the harms of compulsory heterosexuality.



#### **IV. Conclusions**

Taken together, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Flannery O'Connor are two authors who explore themes of survival in hostile, heteronormative worlds, and both come up with religiously based ways of coping. Although neither presents divine grace as a blanket solution and both question the morality and realism of a satisfactory and gratifying life beyond heterosexual norms, each explores resistance to these norms as valuable and validating for their characters. O'Connor and Freeman begin to establish a potential pattern of religion as resistance tool against heteronormativity, an affirmation of the queerness of their characters' lives despite the restrictions of a heteronormative society and an affirmation which stretches across their separate historical eras and disparate personal spiritual beliefs. Adrienne Rich uses her concept of the lesbian continuum to trace lesbian existence across history, through differing times, spaces, and relationships as she connects Sappho, romantic friendships, Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods, Emily Dickinson and Zora Neale Hurston (651), including both women who, had the identity been available to them, might have identified as lesbians and those who might not have. To claim Freeman's and O'Connor's characters as lesbian is too constraining, and moreover, the historical context for each of these authors is widely different, although each incorporates themes of pressure to heterosexuality in their works. However, as Rich's lesbian continuum may be used to unite women's power and resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, so too there may be a unity between Freeman and O'Connor as each imagines how divine grace may influence their characters' lives and struggles and as each challenges the different forms heteronormativity takes in their own times and places.

Other women authors throughout American literary history offer grounds for further exploration of this religiously expressed resistance to heteronormativity, authors whose works contain both elements of religious themes as well as of sexuality. For example, Kathryn Kent explores the queerness of Harriet Beecher Stowe's spinsters, while Ann-Janine Morey emphasizes the pervasive Christian piety

of Stowe's texts. Both Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay offer examples of more religiously skeptical authors, like Freeman, who still employ traces of religiosity in their works and whose texts can be read through a lesbian or queer lens. Examining these interactions of sexuality and religion are important because both heteronormativity and religion are pervasive elements of American culture. Engaging the resistant themes in literature can, as Theresa Caruso claims in the opening to her collection of feminist perspectives on O'Connor, "challenge us to look deeper, to reread and re-adjust to new perspectives in an effort to construct our own strategies of resistance" ("Introduction" 6). If religion can be transformed and pitted against heteronormativity, powerful change may be possible, even if only on a personal level.

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