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Southern Dependence and Getting Free:
Daddy, Maids, Jesus, and Survival in the Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Arts in The Department of English

by

Gwynne Roper Bennett

B. A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1966

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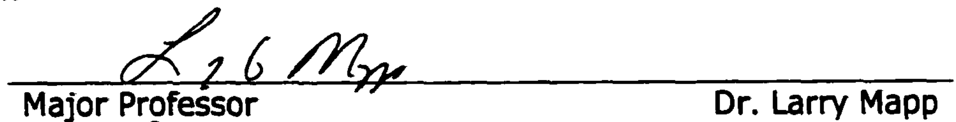

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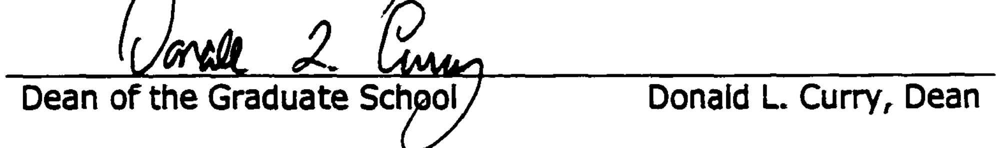

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Abstract

Southern Dependence and Getting Free: Daddy, Maids, Jesus, and Survival in the Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist

by Gwynne Roper Bennett

Steeped in the old southern traditions, the post-WWII up-scale South simmers in the unspoken rules of racial prejudice, a Christ-haunted faith, powerful and powerless parenting, and the desperate search for self-worth. Using humor, often dark, and ironic wit Ellen Gilchrist cunningly describes and critiques this society in her fiction. Shades of Faulkner appear in the dysfunctional families, of O'Connor in her use of shock and dark humor, and of Welty in the well-developed characters whom readers feel they know or have known. But the personal thumbprint Gilchrist places on her fiction is unique; Gilchrist has found an almost whimsical way to satirize these old southern "rules," putting them under a comedic microscope as she lures her readers into a realization that many, particularly those which are imprinted on the subconscious, are not only ridiculous but also are often devastating to those who live under them. Gilchrist's characters reveal the truth about those served and those who serve, an obtrusive yet invasive God, parental love gone awry, and the emptiness of a life without purpose. Her fiction focuses on the patriarch as the heart of the dysfunctional family, and the matriarch's relationship with the black

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maid as the stage for a particularly southern form of polite racism. Her characters reflect a selfish relationship with God as they struggle to find comfort and to survive in this crazy, messed-up world. The characters who do survive and prevail do so because they find a way to create value and meaning in their otherwise vacuous lives, a discovery shared with their creator, Ellen Gilchrist.

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who have supported me, believed in me, put up with me, and stayed in my life during this entire process, especially Frank who not only proposed this venture but also chastized me at the first sign of procrastination.

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My thanks to Ms. Gilchrist , not only for her bounty of thought-provoking fiction, but also for permitting me to include her letter and for alerting me about her latest interview with Jon Parrish Peede of *Millsaps Magazine*.

Thanks also to Dr. Robert Bray who graciously agreed to be my second reader at the ninth hour; Judy and Darlene for taking care of many tasks when I found getting to campus impossible; Cheryl Hitchcock and her family and Katrina Haley and her technology crew for being there when the computer gremlins tried to sabotage my project; my students for being my cheerleaders; and my dogs who have endured fewer rides, less brushing, sporadic pedicures, and many long hours sleeping around my computer.

And thank you, Jesus, for letting this whole thing be over.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used with page numbers when quoting from primary sources by the author. Complete citations are in the Works Cited.

DD	*In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*
A	*The Annunciation*
VJ	*Victory Over Japan*
DL	*Drunk with Love*
FS	*Falling Through Space*
AP	*The Anna Papers*
LWP	*Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*
CCE	*I Cannot Get You Close Enough*
NJ	*Net of Jewels*
AM	*Age of Miracles*
R	*Rhoda: A Life in Stories*
SC	*Sarah Conley*
FA	*Flights of Angels*
C	*The Cabal and Other Stories*

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Chapter I

Introduction

Ellen Gilchrist does more than write good stories about the moneyed and powerful inhabitants living in the Post World War II South. In her fiction Gilchrist critiques this upper middle class society by capturing the very essence of its mores and its inhabitants, particularly the way they reflect the old southern "codes" in how they parent their children, worship their God, relate to their "help," and seek and find self-worth. Shades of Faulkner appear in Gilchrist's patriarchal families, of O'Connor in Gilchrist's use of shock and dark humor, and of Welty in Gilchrist's sense of place and in her well-developed characters. However, Gilchrist remains unique among her contemporaries not only in the particular group she chooses to critique, but also in the almost whimsical way she chooses to satirize these old southern "rules," most of them unwritten. With a comedic microscope, Gilchrist lures her audience into the realization that many of these traditional codes, particularly those imprinted on the subconscious, are not only ridiculous, but often devastate the lives of those who try to live by them. Her fiction creates a narrative within a narrative, revealing a darker side of this upper-crust, privileged South and its inhabitants. This powerful undercurrent in Gilchrist's fiction is the focus of this discussion--a discussion revolving around race, religion, parenting,

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and work in the South.

Scholarly criticism regarding Gilchrist's fiction is minimal. Although several critics have chosen to analyze various aspects of Gilchrist's fiction, only one book, Margaret Donavan Bauer's *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist,* has been dedicated to a serious analysis of Gilchrist. In *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist,* Bauer focuses on the organic story cycle found in all Gilchrist's fiction as well as on the way her characters evolve as they reappear in her fiction. Using the two major American writers, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, Bauer argues that Gilchrist has "transformed" both the patriarchal short story tradition and the patriarchal literary tradition in American literature and links her to two other major American writers who have subverted the patriarchy, Katherine Anne Porter and Kate Chopin. Bauer also claims that Gilchrist has transformed the writing of Porter and Chopin by equipping her female characters with the means to reject the oppression directed at girls and women. Bauer discusses several recurring social themes in Gilchrist's fiction, among them Gilchrist's "criticism of southern aristocracy and the caste system still operating within the contemporary South" (3); her depiction of the restrictions for females in the Post World war II era as well as the consequences of those restrictions (2); and her view of the role of religion, particularly the Catholic Church, in those restrictions (62). These themes all have links to my project since

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they, too, open a discussion on the "other" narrative found in Gilchrist's fiction.

Other critics have opened the door for a discussion of a social agenda in Gilchrist's fiction. Robert Bain claims that with irony and understatement Gilchrist presents a sympathetic, albeit biting, satirization of the old rich and their "outlandish doings" as well as a "telling criticism of conventional religion and southern attitudes" (172, 174). Jean Thompson and Anita Miller Garner agree that Gilchrist's fiction is "the successful capturing of a social milieu" (101). These two critics describe Gilchrist's fiction as "a type of social commentary" with particular emphasis on the effects of "place" and the "past" on her characters (105). Reviewing *The Annunciation*, Rosellen Brown contends Gilchrist uses "her unique voice as a bitter and unforgiving spy among the rich of New Orleans" as she "describes again, effectively, the codes of the class system, and of the religious system as it is distorted by privilege" (53). Brown labels Gilchrist's irony "contemptuous, never sympathetic [. . .] witty but uncompassionate" and Gilchrist as "a writer with a vendetta" (53). However, in a review of Gilchrist's third novel *Net of Jewels,* Susan Larson refers to "Gilchrist's lovingly rendered South, where it seems that almost everyone is related and there's always a party going on, somewhere, if we could just find it" (E:6). Larson does admit, however, that "from her first short story "Rich," there has

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been a dark side to Gilchrist's writing" (E:6).

J. Randal Woodland, in "New People in the Old Museum of New Orleans," describes earlier literature which has focused on New Orleans and the Garden District Tradition, a tradition usually featuring insiders writing about the "manners and mores" in more domestic settings and perpetuating the "perception of upper-class society as different and a bit precious" (196). Woodland asserts that of the three recent writers who have "scrutinized and revised" the Garden District or Uptown New Orleans literary tradition--Gilchrist, Shelia Bosworth, and Nancy Lemann--Gilchrist has a unique perspective (196). Her perspective, contends Woodland, comes from protagonists who, though southern, "inhabit the margins of this New Orleans society" and who, along with Gilchrist, find this upper-class society shallow and themselves "in conflict with the symbols and the tokens of the entrenched societal traditions" (196-7). My discussion reveals that Gilchrist's fiction exposes society's attachment to inherited codes and traditions that perpetuate a particular type of racism; unrealistic and distorted expectations about marriage and parenthood; and empty, vacuous lives centered on privilege and wealth. Thulani Davis contends that Gilchrist, through her "sharp ear" for the sound of gossip and her use of "the narrator's constant urge to sidetrack," uses the clichés which form "many a northerner's view of the eccentricity of southerners" to

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disclose "not only the shallowness of such devotion to antiquity and ritual, but also the low regard southerners themselves now have for the old Southern baloney" (Davis 10-13). In this world, however, Gilchrist reveals that not all southerners think this "antiquity and ritual" is "baloney."

Gilchrist's characters do reflect the way the South and those old southern codes continue to haunt each generation, affecting behavior as well as expectations. In "A Talented Short Story writer Takes on the Novel," reviewer Jonathan Yardley defines Gilchrist's characters as "the bored, purposeless, self-indulgent, and self-absorbed rich" as Gilchrist with "merciless candor [. . .] discloses the emptiness behind their glitter." Contemporary Lee Smith applauds Gilchrist's characters, contending that they are presented "in a way that resembles life, oddly, more than it resembles fiction" (Bain 171). Writing for *Western Humanities Review,* William Peden asserts that Gilchrist herself is "frank, camp, and as contemporary as tomorrow," and that her female characters make Lady Chatterly and Scarlet O'Hara look "like choir girls" (270). Prefacing his recent interview with Gilchrist in *Millsaps Magazine,* Jon Parrish Peede depicts Gilchrist's characters as "the loudest [. . .] the most theatrical, the flashiest, and they are undoubtedly having the most fun" of all the characters on the bookshelf, as they fight for independence from "patriarchal customs and the perceived

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emotional bankruptcy of affluent Southern society" (8). Margaret Jones Bolsterli writes that Gilchrist "goes a step further than the canonical Southern women writers" in her portrayal of "the experience of Southern women [. . .] because she is willing to go deeper into personality, to shine a light into the dark corners of women's souls to expose the preoccupations that get in the way of their achieving wholeness and coherence" (7). Bolsterli adds, "[Gilchrist] writes about the problems of the female sphere without denying the pleasures of it" (7). Gilchrist's female characters do not lack the spunk to question these codes even if they are often unsuccessful in their attempts to escape them. Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry write that "most critics praise Gilchrist's characters for their ability to fight against their stifling straitlaced environment," even though some have labeled them "feisty, bratty Southern belles" and "redheaded hellions" (365). Beverly Lowry, the critic who labeled Gilchrist's characters redheaded hellions, writes that Gilchrist's central character with all her "eccentricities and passion," is usually out on a limb, not clinging, but "perched there, commenting on the view, trying to think of a way down that will neither scare small children not tear the lace from her French underwear" (18). This spunk is the driving force for Gilchrist's females as they seek autonomy and self-worth.

This discussion examines the "other" narrative found in

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Gilchrist's fiction, the narrative that makes a social statement about race, religion, parenting, and creative work. As a product of the environment she is targeting, Gilchrist is able to reveal the truth as she entertains. Greg Johnson in *The Georgia Review* places Gilchrist among "today's best women writers who tend to be master ironists rather than shrill polemicists or unhappy complainers" (288). Even so, in her first novel *The Annunciation*, Thompson notes, Gilchrist targets "the Junior League women, the politically corrupt men, materialism of the rankest sort, 'good' schools, worried children, class consciousness, racism, and sterility"; the main character in *The Annunciation* takes on the Roman Catholic church, exposing the dark side of adoption and the havoc caused by strict adherence to the old inherited rules of the South (107). In *The Annunciation,* the author's intentions are more apparent than in her later work. Frances Taliaferro in *Harpers* labels Gilchrist's first novel "a cheerful hodgepodge of the social and psychological fashions of the past three decades" (76), while Charles Stubblefield adds this book to the list of "books that celebrate the triumph of human will and spirit over the forces that would shackle it or pervert it" (109). These forces may be found in the church and in the family as each institution tries to adhere to the codes of the past. A prime example of Gilchrist's rendering of this exploitation can be found in the words and actions of the young doctor who has examined Amanda and

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listened to her story of her childhood pregnancy and her lost child:

> Every stupid and pointless thing in the outworn gothic mores of the Deep South was in the garbled story she was telling him. [. . .] Goddamn their crazy outworn, used-up terror and the ignorance and hypocrisy and fear. [. . .] She'll probably never conceive again. [. . .] Not to mention the really unforgivable part. How long before she starts seeing that baby in every one-year-old on the streets, in every two-year-old, in every three year old? [. . .] When I am sheriff of the world I will bomb Rome off the face of the earth. I will watch the Vatican go sailing up to God in a million pieces. He stuck the needle into his arm and felt the rapture spread across his body until it filled the room. Then he poured himself a drink and called a woman in Boston he liked to talk to when he was high. (*A* 41, 42)

The church, southern denial, forced adoption, and methods of coping are all under Gilchrist's microscope. In her first collection of short stories *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, Gilchrist defines this world of unrealistic expectations, denial, and racial prejudice centered around money, maids, private schools, and country clubs as well as the blasé characters who inhabit this world. These characters epitomize the codes, expectations, prejudices, and

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lifestyles which are the crux of Gilchrist's work.

In her latest book *The Cabal and Other Stories*, "The Cabal" lacks some of the passion found in Gilchrist's earlier fiction even though the "help" is still serving; comfort is still being sought through casual sex, prescription drugs, and material possessions; parenting is still questionable; and the search for meaningful work continues. However, like Margaret Donovan Bauer, I have found that the earlier novels and short stories provide better support for my discussion.

Gilchrist is not the only contemporary southern author who has addressed the issues of race, religion, parenting, and work, but Gilchrist is unique in that she places these issues in the upper-middle class in the South rather than the lower or middle class. My project is to examine these issues in Gilchrist's fiction: race through three black maid/white lady relationships--Lavertis and Amanda in *The Annunciation*; Traceleen and Crystal in numerous short story collections,and Klane and Rhoda in *Net of Jewels;* religion through the characters' deal-making with Jesus and their superficial faith; parenting through the powerful father and the powerless mother; and creative work as the transcending force which brings purpose, meaning, and understanding to their lives. Gilchrist uses the patriarch to focus on the dysfunctional family, the relationship of the black maids and the white matriarch to reveal a particularly

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southern form of racism, a skewed relationship with God to spotlight the lack of real faith among the blessed and the spoiled, and creative work as the way to survive in this "messed- up" world. Gilchrist makes certain that her fiction shares information about good music, great books, scientific facts, and philosophy, and that she relates a good story. She also shares a social agenda. Gilchrist's "thumbprint" is on her work.

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Chapter II

Race

Throughout her fiction Ellen Gilchrist tells intriguing stories of growing up and growing older in the privileged South, a world revolving around the country club, Daddy's rules, and indispensable maids. Most of Gilchrist's stories, which are set from the early 1940's to the present, include these maids, black women who find their way into the homes of wealthy white women, often as gifts from mothers-in-law to guarantee that their sons' shirts get ironed (FA 90). The most prominent black maid/white lady relationships in Gilchrist's fiction are Lavertis and Amanda in *The Annunciation*; Traceleen and Crystal in numerous collections including *Victory Over Japan, Drunk With Love, Flights of Angels,* and *The Cabal and Other Stories*; and Klane and Rhoda in *Net of Jewels*. Through these stories racial prejudice is revealed, but it is a uniquely southern racial prejudice filtered through love, laughter, and loyalty.

In "Ellen Gilchrist's and Clifton Taulbert's Portrayals of Glen Allan" in *Notes on Mississippi Writers,* the author compares and contrasts Ellen Gilchrist's and Clifton Taulbert's portrayals of the life of the blacks and of the whites in Glen Allan, Mississippi. Declaring that the differences in the portayals come as much from differences in the economic and social experiences of the two authors as from differences in race, the author surmises that both describe "the

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good days that never were" (Anderson 64). Gilchrist's whites are wealthy, viewing education as a "given" and work as necessary only to make one feel more worthy and creative. Taulbert's whites are viewed as spoiled and powerful only because they control the money. "Gilchrist's blacks are household help who have "time to dance, to tell stories, or cook special foods," while Taulbert's blacks do "backbreaking work [. . .] always working hard, nuturing family members, and helping neighbors" (Anderson 62). Black mothers did and do leave their own families to go to the homes of white people to clean, cook, and care for the children as well as the adults in these white households. Black women left and leave their own homes and laundry to clean the homes and wash the clothes for white women who have never considered that this is work they might ever have to do. Explaining her portrayals of blacks, Gilchrist provides this quote from Lawrence Durrell at the beginning of one of her short story collections:

> Not that anything I wrote about them [the blacks] is untrue, far from it. Yet when I wrote, the full facts were not at my disposal. The picture I drew was a provisional one, like the picture of a lost civilization deduced from a few fragmented vases . . . . (Anderson 64)

Mary A. McCay places Gilchrist's fiction "in a romantic tradition that allows her free rein both to create a world in which her

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characters can flourish and and to criticize the real world in which they survive. She writes, "Gilchrist is also a realist who sees the flaws of the modern South, especially of the decadent city of New Orleans, with a very clear sense of what is wrong with that world" (McCay 3). In the three relationships discussed in this chapter, the feisty white Southern Belles often do rise above their "stifling straightlaced environment" and fight beyond the boundaries (Weaks 365). In this fight, their compassionate black maids cheer for them, support them, and serve them. Through their words and their actions these black women tell the "other" story with clarity and grace, a story many in the South may try to gloss over, but one that needs to be told.

Susie Mee, editor of Downhome: An Anthology of Southern Women Writers, includes in the introduction a quote from author Alice Walker about these problematic racial relationships, "the ambivalence, the closeness, the precarious balance of power in intimate, day-to-day interaction" (3). Walker's mother worked for forty years in the houses of white women:

> [She] was convinced that she did not exist compared to "them." She subordinated her soul to theirs and became a faithful and timid supporter of the "Beautiful White People." Once she asked me, in a moment of vicarious pride and despair, if I didn't think that "they" were "jest

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naturally smarter, prettier, and better." (Mee 3)

Maids are present in Gilchrist's short stories from her first published work, the short story collection *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams.* In "Rich," a story set in the early 1970's, Gilchrist writes, "The Wilson's were rich in maids" (*DD* 13). Maids who take care of their children every day leaving their own children with relatives or at home watching television all day (*DD* 13). In "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," the maid has fried the chicken and made the dinner that Lelia is trying to get on the table "so Will wouldn't know she hadn't done anything all day but play tennis" (*DD* 30). Alisha Terrebone, the aging Louisiana beauty in "There's a Garden of Eden," has had three husbands, writes Gilchrist, but "no matter how many husbands Alisha has she always keeps the same old maid" (*DD* 38).

This black/white relationship includes the care of other family members, particularly the children. The third section of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams,* "Perils of the Nile," includes "Revenge," the story of a ten-year-old hot-tempered little red headed Rhoda. Rhoda shouts "You goddamn niggers" at her brother and cousins when they refuse to allow her to participate in the pole vaulting/broad jump practice, despite the patient efforts of Calvin, the black man who does the cooking, and Grannie to comfort her with pound cake (*DD* 112). In this story Gilchrist introduces the character Baby Doll,

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Rhoda's grandmother's black housekeeper "who was a wonderful dancer":

> In the mornings I followed her around while she dusted, begging for dancing lessons. She was a big woman, as tall as a man, and gave off a rich smell, an unforgettable incense, a combination of Evening in Paris and the sweet perfume of the cabins. [. . .] I would put on a stack of heavy, scratched records on the record player, and Baby Doll and I would dance through the parlors to the music of Glenn Miller or Guy Lombardo or Tommy Dorsey. [. . .] Baby Doll thought I was a genius. (*DD* 115-16)

In this same section, however, Gilchrist's character Rhoda is a sixth grader who loses her "long-awaited birthday ring, her heirloom, her precious heirloom pearl solitaire ring that she was not under any circumstances supposed to wear" (*DD* 131). Rhoda considers the option of pretending it was stolen by Del Rio, the black woman from Mississippi who came to live with them when Rhoda's baby brother was born and who is "always lecturing Rhoda about not drinking out of the water bottle and threatening to sic a big dog on her if she didn't stop teasing the baby," deciding that "It would serve Del Rio right to go to jail for stealing" (*DD* 134). In "Traveler" LeLe goes to spend the summer with her cousin Baby Gwen Barksdale who has just lost her mother, and meets Sirena, "the middle-aged black

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woman who turned out to be the only person in charge of us in any way" (*DD* 142). Gilchrist's story includes the vivid description of Sirena bathing Baby Gwen as LeLe watches: "Sirena was running her great black hand up and down baby Gwen's white leg, soaping her with a terry-cloth wash rag. [. . .] Sirena's dark hand was thick and strong moving along Baby Gwen's flawless skin" (*DD* 142). In these stories, and throughout her work, Gilchrist uses her own filtered memories, many of which are found in *Falling Through Space: The Author's Journals,* to introduce her readers to these relationships between black women and the white families for whom they worked.

Ellen Gilchrist's first novel, *The Annunciation,* introduces the first strong white lady/black maid relationship. Following her father's death in World War II, Gilchrist's protagonist, four-year old Amanda McCamrey, has come with her mother to live at Esperanza, the home of her paternal great-grandmother and grandmother. Here, Amanda grows up among the people "who taught Amanda everything she would always know" (*A* 6). These people included not only three generations of women and her cousin Guy, but also the black people of Esperanza: Baby Doll, the housekeeper; Nailor, the cook; Gert, Overflow, Sarah, June, and Sam "who clapped and laughed when Amanda danced or threw fits"; old Ditty who told fortunes and made conjures; and Man who had been given "his

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house and living forever" because he stood by Amanda's grandfather when Mr. DuBose, the crazy man, "came gunning for him" (*A* 8). When Amanda and her older cousin Guy, "the only white children for ten miles down either road," become inseparable, the narrator confides, "Everyone on Esperanza watched it but only the black people knew what they were watching. Only the black people knew what it meant" (*A* 12). The ramifications of Amanda's ensuing pregnancy by her cousin Guy follow her for the rest of her life, but so do her memories of her life on Esperanza.

When Amanda marries into the world of the New Orleans gentry, she begins to see the ugly side of the racism of those who have the power and wealth to keep the status quo. In retrospect, Amanda realizes that the pervasive racial prejudice in this society, as well as the empty lives of its inhabitants, should have been obvious to her before she married Malcolm. The narrator describes a dinner/cocktail party that Amanda attends with Malcolm:

> She could never remember when her vision cleared, when she began to see past the designer gowns to the women who couldn't even comb their own hair. "Darling, she's never combed her own hair. I swear it. Well, she has those Mexicans, you know. She has three or four. They're just like slaves."
>
> "She told her brother she was pregnant and he said,

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> Good, he'd go on safari and bring her back a little Negro."
>
> "The Puerto Ricans are pretty good, if you can find one that's devout. Oh, fix up that room in the basement. They'll live anywhere. Of course, Hondurans are also nice." (*A* 67-68)

At this point in the novel, Gilchrist introduces Lavertis, "a beautiful Creole who has come with her husband to New Orleans," who becomes not only Amanda's maid but also Amanda's ally throughout her marriage to Malcolm Ashe (*A* 79). Robert Bain, in a critical discussion of Gilchrist's work, labels Lavertis as "the truth teller." (Bain 173). Malcolm's mother brings Lavertis to Amanda's new house on her first day to help unpack, saying, "I'll give her to you if you like." Lavertis needs a job doing housework so that she can get home early to be with her children, but the senior Mrs. Ashe explains that she finds Lavertis "too uppity" for her own household (*A* 79). The narrator describes housework in New Orleans as "wearing a white uniform, washing a white lady's underwear, standing all morning ironing linen sheets and Brooks Brothers shirts and white table cloths" (*A* 79). The relationship between Amanda and Lavertis becomes much more: "Amanda kept her. Or the other way around. Amanda and Lavertis loved each other from the start" (*A* 79). On that first day they decide that Lavertis will ride home in

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the front seat "down St. Charles Avenue looking straight ahead, getting used to being new people in the old museum of New Orleans, Louisiana" (*A* 81).

The relationship remains close. Lavertis takes care of the household and Amanda drinks. When Amanda has hangovers, "pretending they were colds of sinus or flu," Lavertis is there with the chocolate milk or iced tea, listening to the explanation (*A* 82). Few of Gilchrist's descriptions are as adept at explaining how these relationships really worked as the one describing Amanda's and Lavertis's afternoons: "By noon they would be together in the library watching *As the World Turns.* Lavertis would be ironing, Amanda lying on the couch beginning to feel better, comforted by the sound of the steam rising from Lavertis's tireless iron (*A* 82). When Amanda stops drinking, declaring, "I'm tired of throwing alcohol into it [her body] [. . .] so that I'll be as dumb as all the rest of you," Lavertis suggests the foreign language classes at Tulane; she also shares Amanda's excitement when Amanda is selected to translate the poems of Helene of Aurillac, Helene Renoir (1713-1734) launching a career for Amanda (*A* 88). The death of Amanda's grandmother and the inheritance of one-half of Esperanza allows Amanda to finally have, in the words of author Virginia Woolf, "a room of her own" (*A* 6). Empowered by financial security and an intense desire to create something valuable through her work,

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Amanda finds a life outside this New Orleans community, but not until she has made a bold statement for this time and place: she dances with the bride at Lavertis's wedding in the Saint Thomas Street project, writes a story about mixed marriages for the French Quarter paper, and leaves her husband for a writer's life in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

In her second collection of short stories *Victory Over Japan*, Gilchrist introduces the character Traceleen as "Miss Crystal's" black maid. Through the stories in the section "Crystal," told by this delightful character Traceleen, Gilchrist gives readers a very personal look at life inside an upper middle-class, albeit dysfunctional, southern family. Always loyal to Miss Crystal, Traceleen boasts with her refreshingly innocent voice, "I was right there for everything that happened" making it possible for her to air the dirty laundry in a way that reveals "both" stories (*VJ* 207).

In the story "Miss Crystal's Maid Name Traceleen, She's Talking, She's Telling Everything She Knows," Traceleen recalls how she came to be Miss Crystal's maid:

> I remember when Miss Crystal first came to New Orleans as a bride. It was her second time around. There was this call from Mrs. Weiss, senior, and she say, Traceleen, Mr. Manny has taken himself a bride and I would like you to go around and see if you can be the maid. She has a

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> boy she's bringing with her. She's going to need some help. (*VJ* 216)

Crystal agrees to let Traceleen be her maid, but she also makes Traceleen promise that she will get "some education part time and let her pay for it because she doesn't believe in people being maids" (*VJ* 216). This statement is humorous but also insightful because it reflects Crystal's unselfish, well-meaning demeanor as well as her unconscious admission that she has no idea how to carry out the functions of wife or mother without a maid. And despite the fact that Traceleen, described as Gilchrist's "most admirable character, a woman with wit, sense, and insight," feels a bond with her "Miss Crystal," Traceleen is still a maid down to the traditional uniform which makes her status clear to everyone (Bain 176).

Traceleen's perspective of the trip to Memphis for Miss Crystal's brother-in-law's wedding, where his bride's "daddy was said to be the richest man in Memphis" and where the "Weisses were real excited [. . .] and ready to show off what nice people they were," is enlightening (*VJ* 207). Traceleen understands the primary reason she is asked to come along: "I was there to nurse the baby, Crystal Anne, age three" (*VJ* 207). She describes the activities:

> Me and Crystal Anne sort of moving from one [hospitality room] to the other, picking up compliments on her hair,

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> getting cokes, watching TV. I was getting sixty dollars a day for being there. I would have done it free. (*VJ* 209)

Traceleen's station at the wedding is made clear in the story even as Traceleen is declaring, "I had on my black gabardine uniform with a white lace apron and Crystal Anne's in white with lace hairbows. We should have had our picture taken (*VJ* 211-212). At the reception attended by Traceleen, she explains, "I'm sitting by Crystal Anne feeding her. The bride had insisted Crystal Anne come to everything" (*VJ* 213). And when Crystal continues her ostentatious flirtation with Owen, the brother-in-law's former Harvard roommate, in his hotel room, Traceleen judges not but simply explains, "They've got this late night station playing dixieland and I'm in there to put a better look on it" (*VJ* 213). When Manny, Crystal's less-than-pleased husband, comes for Crystal demanding that she come to their room, Crystal refuses: "I'm staying here. Go get me a drink if you haven't got anything to do." Traceleen reports that "he drag her all the way out into the hall and to the top of the stairs and they start yelling at each other" (*VJ* 215). After her fall down the stairs Crystal is hospitalized and Traceleen laments, "They don't put lawyers in jail for nothing they do. [. . .] And there she is, Miss Crystal, that has been as good to me as my own sister. Lying on that bed" (*VJ* 214-15).

In "Traceleen's Telling a Story Called 'A Bad Year,'" Traceleen

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describes how much Crystal loved Mr. Alter, a poet and friend who has committed suicide: "Miss Crystal, she just adore him. She'd even take care of Crystal Anne just to show off to him what a good mother she was" (*VJ* 224). Traceleen provides this insight into the two women and their relationship and why Traceleen remains with "Miss Crystal":

> I love Miss Crystal. You know I do. I've told you that before. They're some people in the world, seem like they're just meant to be more trouble and cause more goodness too.Someone's got to love and care for them. Got to study them, so we see how things are made to happen. (*VJ* 231)

Traceleen is protective. In "Traceleen's Diary," being married to Manny Weiss does not keep Crystal from having a steady boyfriend, a fact that Traceleen not only never questions but also defends. For all Crystal's outrageous behavior Traceleen has an answer: "That's how spoiled Miss Crystal is. She thinks she can do anything she wants to" (*VJ* 238). Traceleen describes her "Miss Crystal": "Miss Crystal, she's like a diamond all these different sides to her. Turn her one way you see one thing, turn her another you see something else" (*VJ* 242).

Traceleen is also "appreciative" of Crystal's generosity. In "Traceleen, She's Still Talking," Traceleen, while trying to explain the

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relationship between Crystal and Crystal's brother "Mr. Phelan," tells about the day Crystal got so mad that she took the jaguar claw necklace Phelan had given to her:

> [. . .] just tore it off her neck, chain and all, and gave it to me. I put it away with the other stuff she gives me, newspaper clippings from when we get our name in the paper for having parties, silver spoons that get caught in the disposal, her old wedding ring. (*VJ* 250)

Traceleen's appreciative words describe Crystal's so-called generosity. In this society neither the maid nor the southern matriarch questions what is so blatantly obvious to readers: Traceleen is invisible in this society.

In this same story, Traceleen accompanies Crystal, Crystal Anne, and Crystal's cousin Harry on a trip to Texas to deliver Phelan's new Mercedes Benz to him. With Traceleen's husband Mark's blessing, they leave with the Mercedes, the lunch Traceleen has prepared, and almost two hundred dollars worth of whiskey. Traceleen's job description is to take care of Crystal Anne, but her job becomes much more. Upon their arrival at the ranch, Phelan cannot believe what he sees: "Holy Christ, Crystal. You let the nigger maid drive my car" (*VJ* 261). This trip becomes even more of a disaster for Phelan as Crystal finally becomes so enraged at the entire hunting farce that she finishes off the car by using it to free

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the trapped animals, makes it to the airport with Traceleen and Crystal Anne in tow, and once on the plane declares, "We're going home in triumph, Traceleen. What a trip. I could never have followed my conscience today if you hadn't been there to help, you know that, don't you?" Traceleen accepts the compliment thinking, "I knew it was the truth. Nobody can get anything done all by theirself. That's not the way the world is set up" (*VJ* 275).

An interesting aside in one of Traceleen's adventures while at Mr. Phelan's ranch concerns the character Jack. Traceleen is describing the tour of the ranch that is really a hunting preserve which guarantees a kill for rich weekend warriors:

> Jack was driving. He's this black man Mr. Phelan took off to college with him when he was young. Call himself a chauffeur but he ain't no better than a slave. "Jack was the first black man to go to Ole Miss,' Mr. Phelan was saying. 'He was there a long time before James Meredith, weren't you, Jack? Jack was a KA, lived in the house with me. We even had a pin made. Jack, you still got your KA pin? I want you to show it to Traceleen when we get back.' Jack didn't say a word, just grinning from ear to ear. (*VJ* 265)

The character Traceleen cannot see the analogy between Jack's station in life and her own even though she recognizes that Jack

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has been Phelan's "boy" since childhood, even going with him to college, not as a fellow student, but as Phelan's chauffeur and houseboy. In allowing Traceleen to tell the story, Gilchrist tells two stories: One story entertains as the other story reveals the real dilemma facing a society peopled by those steeped in being served and of those steeped in serving. Each needs the other, but without a major change in perspective, hence a new paradigm, change is impossible for either in a society that has known no other way of life, a society where the expectations of everyone involved are being met.

In "The Big Cleanup," a story in Gilchrist's most recent collection *The Cabal and Other Stories,* Crystal and Traceleen are closer than ever, sharing memories and new adventures as they grow old together. Gilchrist reveals how the changes in society have made differences. Traceleen, writing in her diary, explains some of these changes which may seem subtle, but to Traceleen appear major. Describing a meal she and Crystal have prepared together for Manny's cousin, Traceleen writes in her diary:

> I used to refuse to eat at the table with my employers and often still do, but if it is late and I have stayed to help with dinner, they convinced me it makes them nervous to have me pretend to be a servant after all these years. I was raised to be a servant down in

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Boutte and so it took us all some adjusting [. . .] (*C* 266).

In this delightfully funny story, Traceleen and Crystal continue their yoga classes; visit a day spa where they soak in hot tubs, get a massage, a pedicure, a manicure, and have their hair styled after deciding that they both can use a touch-up and that Crystal still had the money her mother had sent her for Christmas; plan the wedding for Traceleen's niece Andria; and shop at the thirty-percent off sale at Victoria's Secret to "see what they can find to wake up the men" (*C* 271). In this case they do mean their husbands, even Crystal. Describing their purchases--both bought bright red underwear not on sale plus Traceleen's green lace panties and brassiere and Crystal's fluffy white panties "that looked like a chicken but I didn't tell her that,"-- Traceleen admits, "I think we have turned into Philistines. We were not doing all of this for our husbands" (*C* 271).

Traceleen's and Crystal's relationship has been a favorite with Gilchrist's readers. Describing Traceleen, Robert Bain writes, "Similar to Faulkner's Dilsey,Traceleen tells of Miss Crystal's shenanigans with wonder and sympathy for the plight of the rich white woman" (175). He adds, "Gilchrist artfully satirizes the outlandish doings of the rich in the bemused and compassionate voice of Traceleen" (175). In a 1986 interview with Kay Bonetti, Gilchrist uses a Nietzsche quote to explain her creation of the

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character Traceleen: "The greatest creativity is the least resentment." Continuing her explanation, Gilchrist says that Traceleen has "no resentment. She loves and she serves. Black people have turned a position of servitude into a beautiful thing" (Interview with Bonetti). Gilchrist's answer is reflected in Traceleen's thoughts in the short story "Traceleen at Dawn." As Traceleen is trying to make her husband Mark understand why she worries so much about Crystal, she ponders her reasons:

> Ever since the first day I went to work for her I have loved Miss Crystal as if she was my sister or my child. I have spread out my love around her like a net and I catch whatever I have to catch. This is my decision and the job I have picked out for myself and if Wentriss wants to call me a slave that is because she does not know what she is talking about. Miss Crystal always pays me back. She would go to battle for me. We know these things. We are not as dumb as we seem. (*DL* 216)

Following the creation of the relationship between Amanda and Lavertis in *The Annunciation,* Gilchrist has created a relationship between Crystal and Traceleen that is disarmingly innocent, yet even more revealing as she continues her satirization of a world she has witnessed firsthand.

In *Net of Jewels,* Gilchrist introduces her third close black

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maid/white lady relationship. She prepares her main character Rhoda for the relationship by allowing her to begin to see life outside her protected little world. Rhoda, just arriving that summer to her new home in Dunleith after finishing her freshman year at Vanderbilt, tries to imagine what it must be like for her new-found friend from Massachusetts, Patricia Morgan, to live in this "sleepy little Alabama town" (*NJ* 48):

> Where everybody went to church and sent money to Africa to save the heathen but took it for granted that the black people of Dunleith couldn't read. A few of them could read. My father's cousin Martha Ann taught her servants to read so they wouldn't make mistakes giving medicine to her children. (*NJ* 48)

Rhoda is becoming aware of the frightening aspects of racism that have eluded her until now. With her new best friend Charles William, she not only has her first experience with Klan members, but also is introduced to devoted civil rights workers. Gilchrist's protagonist asserts that her only knowledge of the Klan thus far has been what she had learned from *Gone With The Wind.* Rhoda had believed that the Klan was there "to keep black men from raping me. I didn't even know about the hangings" (*NJ* 39). Later, her encounter with the civil rights movement and Derry Waters changes and empowers Rhoda, but that power is extinguished and

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her conscience numbed once she returns to her family's home and those long summer nights in 1959 when the extended family--uncles, aunts and cousins--and her parents' friends gather on the big front porch to drink scotch and discuss the "most divisive thing that had happened in the United States since the Civil War" (*NJ* 233). Rhoda's father reminds everyone of what everyone fears: "Now the niggers will be all over us, [. . .] They'll take us over. They'll mongrelize the races" (*NJ* 233). Rhoda knows at this point that she can no longer believe everything her father says. Charles William, her liberal new best friend, has intoduced her to Richard Wright's *Native Son,* and Rhoda's entire world has come into question:

> It made me see the black people around me with different eyes. No matter what they said or how obsequious they pretended to be, they cared. It mattered to them what we thought of them just as it would have mattered to me. The thought cut me like a sword. The thought pierced my heart. (*NJ* 234)

Nineteen year old Rhoda, back home so "Daddy's lawyers can get me a divorce," admits that she keeps *Native Son,* a book of poetry by Langston Hughes, and *One Arm and Other Stories* by Tennessee Williams hidden, along with her journals, in "that little cherry bedside table" along with "all the secrets my culture meant to keep

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from me, everything they feared and wanted me to fear" (*NJ* 234).

Maids, however, remain a fact of life for this well-known Gilchrist character. The day Rhoda meets Patricia Morgan, Patricia questions whether or not she will be back at the pool tomorrow. Rhoda responds:

> "If it doesn't rain. If nothin' happens." She laughed out loud. She had made a joke in black dialect. If nothin' happens. It was what the maids said when they left the white houses in the evenings. It was a phrase that struck terror in the white women's hearts. It meant, maybe I'll be back tomorrow to clean your house and nurse your children and iron your clothes, and maybe I won't. (*NJ* 47)

When Rhoda returns to Daddy's house with her two young sons, Daddy hires two more maids. Rhoda admits, "I certainly never imagined taking care of them [my children] myself. [. . .] somebody else would have to keep them amused and fed. Babies bored me to death (*NJ* 57). When Charles William begs Rhoda to accompany him and Irise, his girlfriend, on a trip to Montgomery, Alabama, assuring her, "You haven't got anything else to do," Rhoda realizes, "He is right. All I did all day was watch the maids take care of the babies and go shopping and walk into the kitchen to see what time it was" (*NJ* 237). On this trip Rhoda meets civil rights worker Derry Waters,

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and this meeting almost makes a difference in her life. Returning to her parents' home, Rhoda tries to speak to Fannin, the cook, of this new friend and the cause to which Derry has dedicated her life. Fannin's reaction speaks volumes:

> "That's big trouble everywhere now." Fannin's face closed up like a fist. Her eyes would not meet mine. She turned her eyes away. She did not trust me, and with good cause. I did not know whose side I was on. I was too powerless to have a side or to be trusted to say what I meant. "Lots of folks are going to get hurt." (*NJ* 269)

Fannin's reaction shows not only a lack of trust but also her low expectations for change in her life. Rhoda is powerless to change anything except her marriage status and maybe her weight, and to do either she needs Daddy to arrange the divorce and Mother to arrange to get diet pills. Walking back into that house she realizes that she is back into their power: "Daddy had the money power but she [her mother] had the maid power. She had the power to make me take care of the children. He had the power to make me rich or poor. What did I have? Well, I had the bookstore" (*NJ* 271). The character Rhoda finds reading to be her salvation throughout her life. This is one of many similarities shared by the author and her character Rhoda.

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Rhoda's power, or lack thereof, is questioned later in the novel when Rhoda attempts to find justice for her own maid, Klane Marengo. Deciding that life with young husband Malcolm is better than having her parents tell her what to do, Rhoda accepts Malcolm's terms for trying to stay together, and they leave her parents' home in Dunleith, Alabama, for Alexandria, Louisiana--Malcolm, Rhoda, their two young sons--in the new station wagon her Daddy buys for them that morning. Already Rhoda is thinking about who is going to take care of those babies, and she wastes no time:

> Of course, by the time I had been there forty-eight hours I had found Klane Marengo and for forty dollars a week she was going to come at breakfast and stay until supper and take my boring work off my hands. Daddy had put two thousand dollars into a checking account for me to use for emergencies. The way I figured it, at forty dollars a week I could keep the wolf of motherhood from my door for at least six months. If that wasn't an emergency, I didn't know what one was. (*NJ* 27)

The character Klane becomes an ally to Rhoda even as she admonishes Rhoda for her drinking and her lack of interest in spending time with her children. When Rhoda's youngest son Jimmy becomes ill, Klane recognizes the symptoms of encephalitis and

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insists that Rhoda see a doctor immediately, sits at the hospital calming Rhoda and caring for Jimmy, and later sees that Jimmy is cared for at home. Klane's own two children have been sent to the country to live with their grandmother for the summer. "There's work for them up there hoeing cotton," explains Klane (*NJ* 292). When Klane is accused of murdering her cousin Delmonico who has been living with her, Rhoda promises Klane that she will be found innocent, that the accident will be explained, and that her lawyers can save Klane, but Rhoda does not want to face reality. When she asks her husband Malcolm, "Don't you care about Klane?" a disinterested Malcolm explains, "Not particularly. I've seen nigger murders before" (*NJ* 305). A friend who has asked his company lawyer to handle the matter tells Rhoda not to worry: "No one minds if the blacks kill each other. [. . .] We'll get your maid back. Don't worry about it" (*NJ* 309). Out of jail but facing a trial in three months, Klane returns to her job. The narrator describes the scene through Rhoda's eyes:

> Klane sipped her coffee, then set her cup down into its saucer and was still. Her hands lay in a streak of sunlight. I met her eyes again; the pain was still there, so deep and old and frazzled there was no way to untangle it (*NJ* 311).

Rhoda's perception proves to be right. Even Daddy cannot fix this.

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Rhoda returns to try to change things. After all, she has promised Klane, "Over my dead body will they put you in jail " (*NJ* 314). But Klane, the one who loves Rhoda's children and who loves her, ends her own life before the system sends her to be "penned up," her biggest fear (*NJ* 314). By this time, Rhoda has already returned to her parents' home and Daddy's power and Mother's maids. Growing up is once again delayed, and life goes on as usual for this Gilchrist heroine.

Gilchrist's description of her own childhood filled with black playmates and black adults who loved her, leave no doubt that the love she remembers is real. But when Gilchrist writes fiction based on this society, it is apparent that the author "instinctively knew"--her own words from a 1984 interview for *Postscripts*--that segregation was inherently wrong. In her 1992 interview with Wendy Smith, Gilchrist says that long before she "took part as an adult in the struggle to bring racial justice to the South," she knew "there were a lot of things wrong with the privileged life her parents accepted as their birthright" (46-47). Discussing her formative years Gilchrist adds, "I didn't have the words racism' and sexism', but I was fighting them all my life, because I was fighting to be free" (46-47).

Ellen Gilchrist's fiction is an amusing and sometimes shocking look into the South's upper-middle class society during and following

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World War II and continuing into the present. Whether intentionally or subconsciously, Gilchrist stirs the social consciousness of readers through her black characters who seem to unknowingly divulge the "other" story about racism through their stories.

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Chapter III

Religion

Throughout her fiction, Gilchrist focuses her satiric spotlight on the religious faith of the upper-crust in Southern society, often contrasting this "pale" faith with the deep abiding faith of characters such as Traceleen, Crystal's black maid. For these spoiled children of Gilchrist's Deep South, God is present in their lives from birth, his stories incorporated into their everyday life. However, God's presence in their lives does not change their behavior or bring them peace. Instead, God's presence in their lives produces a cloud of lingering guilt that seems to overshadow their lives.

Southern writer Flannery O'Connor describes the South's preoccupation with religion as "Christ-haunted," explaining:

> By and large people in the South still conceive of humanity in theological terms. While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner who isn't convinced of it is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" (Ketchin xi).

In *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction,* author Susan Ketchin defines the religious tradition which dominates the South as one of "strict adherence to biblical teachings and private morality, the notion of a real and active

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presence of God and Satan in the world, the belief in a factual existence of heaven and hell, and an emphasis on preaching the gospel and saving souls' (xii). This tradition is backed up by strong Calvinistic doctrines such as Divine Will, salvation through grace, and the depravity of man as well as individual free will (xii). Ketchin asserts that the Bible stories heard throughout their lives have become so interwoven into the daily lives of southerners that "they inform the world view of all, believers and nonbelievers alike" (xii). Ketchin's book features twelve southern writers who express how "the supreme tension between his or her religious and artistic visions" has influenced their work (xix). Although not all the writers represented in Ketchin's *The Christ-Haunted Landscape* believe in organized religion, they all express a personal belief in God. Although Southern writer Ellen Gilchrist, a proclaimed atheist, is not among the twelve writers represented, Gilchrist is among those southern writers whose work has been influenced by this Christ-haunted South Ketchin describes.

Susan Wood, writing about Ellen Gilchrist's first published collection of short stories *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams,* declares that the stories are "about the stratagems, both admirable and not so, by which we survive our lives" (4). A major part of these stratagems involves the way Gilchrist's characters, both major and minor, deal with the role of religion in their lives. With acute insight

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into the unique perception of children, especially adolescents, as well as their parents and the elderly, Gilchrist portrays this straight-laced society's relationship with God with the same "amused ironic distance" she uses in her "aphoristic" character portrayals (Allen 486).

In her first collection, Gilchrist's stories reveal God's place in the daily lives of her characters. In "Rich," when Tom Wilson shoots "his own little illegitimate dyslexic daughter" and, even more shocking, his "$3,000 Labrador retriever sired by Super Chief out of Prestidigitation," and then takes his own life, not only can no one imagine why such "bad luck" has happened to his sweet wife Letty, but also "no one believed that much bad luck could get together between the fifteenth week after Pentecost and the third week in Advent" (*DD* 23). Planning to don a nun's habit and rob the "neighborhood bar in uptown New Orleans," in "The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar," Nora Jane "crossed herself and prayed for divine intervention" (*DD* 52). In "1957, A Romance," Rhoda's father turns to God for help when his daughter, who "always believed her own stories as soon as she told them," pleads for his help in aborting her third pregnancy since her husband Malcolm got her pregnant on purpose so she would not leave him:

> He put his head down and conferred with his maker.
>
> Well, Sir, he said, I've spoiled her rotten. There's no

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> getting around that. But she's mine and I'm sticking by her. [. . .] You get us out of this one and I'll buy you a stained-glass window with nobody's name on it, or a new roof for the vestry if you'd rather. (*DD* 82).

In "Indignities," Melissa, at home with all the guests who had come home with them following her mother's dinner party at Antoine's where her mother "took off her clothes in front of twenty-six invited guests" [. . .] letting everyone look at the place her breasts used to be," remembers how frightened she was as a child that Clarence Josephy would get to be her father (*DD* 103). She remembers going to mass praying "he wouldn't move in with us and have breakfast with us every day," buying a crucifix, and getting up "to forty-six Hail Mary's a day by the time my father came home from Australia and the crisis passed" (*DD* 103). As a child, Rhoda reflects this Christ-haunted faith. In "Perils of the Nile" Rhoda, realizing that the pearl ring her Grandmother has sent for her birthday is lost, decides that even though "she didn't want anything to do with God and Jesus and dead people and people nailed up on crosses or eaten by lions or tortured by Romans," she "might as well pray" (*R* 73). Deciding that the closet is the "best place" to "do some praying," Rhoda begins: "Well, Jesus, [. . .] You know I have to get that ring back. So if you get it back to me I promise I'll start believing in you" (*R* 73). Enumerating many promises to Jesus, Rhoda now waits for Jesus--

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whom she pictures "on a hill surrounded by his sheep"--to think over the "deal" as she tries "to get in a more prayerful position" in her closet (*R* 74). "It was up to Jesus now," decides Rhoda as she got up "in a reverent manner and left the closet with her hands still folded heading outside to "shoot some baskets with Dudley [her brother] until time for supper" (*R* 74). In the final story in In *The Land of Dreamy Dreams* "Summer, an Elegy," Shelby and Matille, two children together all summer who find themselves exploring their sexuality, are arguing about whether or not God can see them through the tin roof on the old playhouse: "'God can see everywhere,'" Shelby insisted. "'He can see everything in the whole world'" (*DD* 166). Tired of arguing, Matille says, "I don't care, [. . .] I don't like God anyway. If God's so good why did he let Uncle Robert die. And why did he make alligators and snakes and send my daddy off to fight the Japs. If God's so good why'd he let the Jews kill his little boy" (*DD* 166). Gilchrist's first collection establishes the role of God in this society. Her first novel *The Annunciation,* however, takes a more serious stand against religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church.

Robert Bain in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South* writes that Gilchrist's novel T*he Annunciation*, is a "telling criticism of conventional religion" (174). The protagonist Amanda McCamey lashes out at the church and its role in keeping people weak and

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powerless. After her father's death in World War II, four-year-old Amanda McCamey and her mother come to live in a large extended family at Esperanza, her grandparents' Mississippi Delta plantation. Her cousin Guy is eight-years-old, and since he is the only other child, he and Amanda become inseparable. Gilchrist revisits her theme of the sexual exploration in children and adolescence. Abruptly, at twelve Guy stops "touching" Amanda: "I want God to let me be good at baseball, Sissy. I want to be on the football team next year. If I do this he isn't going to let me" (*A* 12). When the baby, a little girl, is born, the nuns at the home for unwed mothers assure Amanda that by their taking the baby she has "made a barren woman happy. [. . .] God knows what he's doing" (*A* 20). When Guy visits Amanda at the school in Virginia, she asks, "How did this happen to us?" Guy tells Amanda, "It happened because we did things we weren't supposed to do. I ask God all the time to forgive us" (*A* 32). He adds, "After I went to Oxford I stayed on my knees for two days begging God to forgive us and I promised him I would never touch you again" (*A* 35). Amanda responds, "There isn't any God" (*A* 35).

No longer able to endure the horrible cramps she has been having since the birth of her baby, Amanda goes to see a young doctor near the campus. Amanda is trying to tell her story to the doctor of her pregnancy at fourteen, her beloved cousin Guy's role

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in fathering this child, and the nuns' taking the baby away so that Amanda "could be a girl again" (*A* 20):

> The young doctor laced his fingers together, trying to look unconcerned. Every stupid and pointless thing in the outworn gothic mores of the Deep South was in the garbled story she was telling him. [. . .] Goddamn their crazy outworn used-up terror and ignorance and hypocrisy and fear. [. . .] When I am the sheriff of the world I will bomb Rome off the face of the earth. I will watch the Vatican go sailing up to God in a million pieces. (*A* 39-42)

The chapter ends as the young doctor turns to his own source of comfort: "He [the young doctor] stuck the needle into his arm and felt the rapture spread across his body until it filled the room. Then he poured himself a drink and called a woman in Boston he liked to talk to when he was high" (*A* 42). Gilchrist's conclusions, whether the end of a novel, a story, or a chapter, are unexpected and often startling or shocking, but they are always an insightful look at another piece of the puzzle. Here the piece of the puzzle is the huge price paid by the victims of this society's code of denial and repression, a code upheld by church doctrine. Later, living in New Orleans as Malcolm's wife, Amanda realizes that she can no longer participate in this society's subtle racism, shallow values, and

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restrictive codes of behavior so she tells Malcolm she will no longer attend their parties: "When we're sitting down at the tables like good little lawyers and wiflets, I always think Jesus will come and nail us all to the chairs and punish us" (*A* 90-1). After Amanda's move to Fayetteville, Arkansas, she goes to meet an old college friend Garth. Discussing Garth's Jesuit friend, Amanda tells Garth that she has "no tolerance for stupidity. For goddamn religions." (*A* 177). Garth tries to explain, "There are weak people in the world. They need religion. They need something to believe in" (*A* 177). Amanda retorts, "The hell they do. They need someone to teach them to be strong. They need someone to tell them the truth" (*A* 177). In Arkansas working on translating the poems which have become her work, Amanda reads, "I would as soon worship the donkey / as a God so powerless he allowed / his own subjects to torture him to death" (*A* 197). Yet, Amanda thanks God that she has her work since Will, her young lover and soon to be father of her child" is away working so that he will not need her money (*A* 251). Amanda denounces the need for religion and God, yet she prays to God. This novel resonates with the ambivalence of the place of God in the lives of Gilchrist's characters.

Critics Jeanie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner, while they agree with some critics that what Gilchrist takes from the New Testament in *The Annunciation* "is quite revealing," warn readers

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against trying to draw too much from the similarities between the biblical annunciation and Gilchrist's novel, since "the main character's hardline stand against organized Christianity, and the Roman Catholic church in particular, makes the possibility of the author's intention to render a strict biblical reference or allegory highly unlikely" (110). Thompson and Garner also defend the main character's blasphemy of the Lord's Prayer by explaining it as Amanda's reaching out "toward self-respect, forgiveness, and love" (113). However, by substituting herself for Christ in the prayer, Amanda, like many of Gilchrist's characters, exposes her premise that the world revolves around her, not God. Pregnant, Amanda lies in her bed thinking about the baby, her first lost child, and her own future:

> This is my body which is not broken by you. This is my flesh and blood. [. . .] This is my baby, this is my body which is not broken by anything, this is my flesh and blood, this is me. [. . .] Every day is holy. [. . .] My will be done, goddammit. My will be done. (*A* 325)

At the end of the novel the main character Amanda, unaware that Will has died in a car accident on his way home to them, falls asleep dreaming of her new chance with her son and her daughter:

> My will be done, she said as she moved into her sleep. My life on my own terms, my daughter, my son. My life

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> leading to my lands forever and ever and ever, hallowed be my name, goddammit, my kingdom come, my will be done, amen, so be it, Amanda. (*A* 353)

Gilchrist creates characters, often self-centered products of the privileged upper-middle class, who have a skewed view of religion. In this first novel by Gilchrist, organized religion is just one of the issues on the author's agenda, but here Gilchrist's treatment of religion is more blatantly critical than in her later work where the subject is often treated more satirically and more humorously. *The Annunciation* is a serious commentary on the way society uses religion to justify harming even its most innocent.

The perspective of children and adolescents continues to be a primary focus for Gilchrist. Coping with her younger sister's newly-found religious fervor and her persistence in trying to convert Aurora, adolescent Aurora Harris writes in her journal, "Now we are in Fayetteville, Arkansas, fighting madness, low IQ's, and Christians." She adds," Dad and I are fighting them. Mom and Jocelyn have joined up" (*FA* 238). At the end of "Witness to the Crucifixion," a story revolving around Aurora's tirades against Jocelyn and Christianity, Gilchrist's protagonist does concede that Christianity is a "civilizing force in the midst of chaos," and "some people have to have the Pope or the Methodist church" (*FA* 248). Filtering her stories through adolescent naiveté and childhood

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innocence, Gilchrist portrays southern Christianity at its best and its worst. In "The Stucco House" seven-and-a-half-year-old Teddy gets on his knees at the Episcopal church and asks God not to let his momma divorce his step-father Eric:

> If God didn't answer, then he would pretend he was his grandfather and threaten God. Okay, you son-of-a-bitch, he would say, his little head down on his chest, kneeling at the prayer rail. If she divorces Eric, I won't leave anyway. I'll stay here with him and we can be bachelors." (*AM* 117)

Other stories told from the perspective of children are equally effective in showing how this "Christ-haunted" faith works. The title story in Gilchrist's short story collection *Victory over Japan* features a third-grade Rhoda as the protagonist. From her tree house, Rhoda watches her "saintly" mother apply "liquid hose" on her legs as she waits "for the Episcopal minister to come by for a drink" (*VJ* 8). Rhoda decides that since her father has been overseas, the minister has been "coming by a lot." With pride young Rhoda decides, "That was just like my mother. To be best friends with the minister" (*VJ* 8). The second story in this collection "Music," involves a fourteen-year-old Rhoda whose father has "dragged" her off to Clay County, Kentucky, "to make her stop smoking and acting like a movie star" (*VJ* 17). In this story Rhoda feels "betrayed by her

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mother's pale Episcopalianism," denies the existence of God, lament's the fact that the drive to Clay County is through "God's country and these people take things like children smoking cigarettes seriously," and hopes her father, who has just caught her smoking, goes to hell forever (*VJ* 18, 20, 28, 33). "Music" pits the religion of the rich and powerful against the religion of the "real folks" with whom Rhoda's father leaves Rhoda while he goes to Knoxville "to do some business" (*VJ* 35). Left among the Bible and the religious pamphlets that Maud, described by Rhoda as "an old white trash country woman," and Joe Samples have all over their trailer's guest bedroom, Rhoda is "embarrassed to read anything as tacky as these pamphlets" (*VJ* 35). Her father leaves Rhoda money and hurries to get to Knoxville where his business is Valerie, his lover.

Guilt over his affair with Valerie brings Rhoda's father to turn to his Christ-haunted prayer, a prayer that is an admission that he is not in control of his life. As Dudley feels "the sweet hot guilt rise up in his face, he pleads, 'I'm sorry, Jesus, [. . .]. I know it's wrong and I know we're doing wrong. So go on and punish me if you have to but just let me make it there and back before you start in on me'" (*VJ* 36). Later, after Rhoda has lied to get the jeep to drive herself back to Joe's and Maud's but instead has driven into town to look for cigarettes, her father is at the trailer waiting for her to return:

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> Dudley was pacing up and down talking to Jesus. I know I had it coming, he was saying. I know goddamn well I had it coming. But not her. Where in the hell is she? You get her back here in one piece and I'll call Valerie and break it off. I won't see Valerie ever again as long as I live. *But you've got to get me back my little girl. Goddamn, you get me back my girl.* (*VJ* 48)

Distraught over Rhoda, Dudley turns to Jesus to make a deal. Like most Gilchrist characters, Dudley reaches for God only when times are desperate and then only in privacy. He is a believer, but in a God who is ready to make a deal, a God ready to settle a score, a God who can be bought.

In "The Lower Garden District Free Gravity Mule Blight or Rhoda, a Fable," divorced and in her early twenties, Rhoda sings as she dresses--choosing a red sweater because "They love red"-- to seduce the black insurance agent who has believed her story about losing her diamond that she has pawned: "Jesus loves the little children, she was singing. All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious, precious, precious" (*VJ* 68). Her song, a religious song from her childhood, has no religious meaning for Rhoda in this context, but the song is implanted in her memory along with all the other childhood memories of Bible stories and familial interpretations of God and life. Reared in New Orleans

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without the wealth and privilege of most of Gilchrist's characters, even the free-spirited character Nora Jane recalls her early religious training as she ignores her fear of bridges and goes to help a mother and a carload of terrified kids during an earthquake: "Oh, shit. Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. [. . .] Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of death . . ." (*VJ* 197).

Not all of Gilchrist's characters are Christ-haunted. Gilchrist's recurring character Traceleen, Crystal Manning's black maid, is genuinely religious, and Traceleen's faith pervades every aspect of her life, from her forgiving and nurturing devotion for her "Miss Crystal" to her explanations for why things happen the way they do in the world. In "Traceleen's Telling a Story Called 'A Bad Year,'" Traceleen provides firsthand perception, as well as Crystal's, of one of the many dilemmas in Crystal's life. When King, Crystal's teenage son, is missing for the second time, Traceleen describes the scene at home as the family searched bars and communes, placed ads in the newspaper, bribed King's friends and waited: "[. . .] Mr. Phelan [Crystal's wild older brother] prayed every day on his knees in the den and anyone that felt like it could join him. I joined in when I could" (*VJ* 232). Then, without judgement, Traceleen adds, " [. . .] Miss Crystal wasn't having anything to do with praying. All that bullshit's what got us where are she said" (*VJ* 232).

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"A Summer in Maine," the third novella in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough,* a story told from the perspective of all the primary characters involved in that summer escape to Maine, includes Traceleen's explanation of the wild love affairs and all the other craziness surrounding this vacation. Comparing deer mating in the fall, when "they leave their place of safety and run all over the forest putting themselves in danger" to the events of that summer in Maine, Traceleen explains, "That is Nature having its way with us and why we have invented religion and civilization to calm us down" (*CCE* 228). Watching Crystal and Manny fighting, Traceleen appears to be growing less tolerant of some of Crystal's antics as she asks, "What am I doing in this Godless place? (*CCE* 326) She goes to find Andria "to make sure my niece is still on the right track and hasn't been caught up in this disease of never loving a thing but ourselves" (*CCE* 327). Observing all the beauty in nature, Traceleen ponders: "How wonderful the sunlight and the plants and all the things that God has made to grow but all we do is talk and fight" (*CCE* 327). Searching for Crystal's daughter Crystal Anne who is missing after she has overheard her parents arguing, a worried Traceleen wonders what has happened in this world:

> Is there something we have lost sight of, some secret of being happy, or has it always been this way? So it was in the oldest times told of in the Bible, brother against

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> brother, men wanting many wives, prodigal sons and so forth. But you never read of little girls running away because their fathers yelled at their mothers for having an IUD. Still, I guess that could come under the heading of spilling your seed on a woman's stomach. (*CCE* 329)

Traceleen returns home after that summer to her husband Mark, grateful because "after all those love affairs of the summer I had forgotten what I had at home, an abiding goodness of my own" (*CCE* 376). As always, Traceleen remains the most refreshingly moral, down-to-earth character in Gilchrist's work. The contrast of Traceleen's faith with the faith portrayed by those spoiled, rich, white people provides a powerful statement about God in this southern society.

Some of Gilchrist's elderly white characters are also devout and believe in a God who is compassionate and forgiving. One of those characters is Miss Louise in "Bare Ruined Choirs, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang," who faces her death with no fear:

> Miss Louise was not afraid to die. She believed her maker was watching over her. She did not believe it was his fault that she had lost half her sight and hearing and now was losing her ability to even get up and walk across a room. He was a fallible God who was doing all he could to help her. (*C* 219)

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Also, there is eighty year old Miss Anastasia Provine, the heroine in Gilchrist's short story "Ocean Springs," who, without mentioning religion, epitomizes what Christianity purports to be. Gilchrist creates a character who promotes all that humankind needs to know about peace, love, and hope and the philosophy of " all the web of being in which we live," (*FA* 254). Dubbed "academic and ultra-liberal" by the narrator, a retired Miss Anastasia believes in "setting an example of superior behavior twenty-four hours a day" by performing good deeds, striving for the preservation of the safe civilization our forebears created for us "where the weak and the strong serve each other," and realizing "the sacred beauty of the human body and also its resilience and power to forget and heal" (*FA* 259, 254, 252, 261). These strong beliefs lead Miss Anastasia into tutoring, running the school lunch program where she insists that the children use good manners, lending books to anyone who will read, and walking everywhere even in the rain (*FA* 250). These beliefs also lead Miss Anastasia to forgive and try to help her rapist, burying the evil with the hundreds of daffodils she and her Latin club plant all over her yard. An interesting character who seems to embody the teachings of Christ, Miss Anastasia delivers the message that with intelligence and understanding there can be goodness and mercy in this world regardless of whether one takes a religious stand.

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As a personal believer in the connectedness of all the universe, Gilchrist delivers in "Ocean Springs" a character and a story more "Godly" than those characters who are simply "Christ-haunted." Burdened by fear and guilt from their life-long lessons of a punitive God and immersed in a culture based on denial and repression, most of Gilchrist's characters feel little emotional bond with their God and are helpless to endure under his code; alcohol, prescription drugs, and promiscuous sex become their temporary sources of comfort.

In "Winter," the first of three novellas in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough,* Gilchrist's Anna Hand, writer and cousin of Rhoda Manning, sees the connectedness of man with the universe and understands that life is "messy." Saying that she is going back to New York to live instead of going home "to live among my kin," Anna explains that as the oldest child she cannot bear to watch her family suffer: "I do not mind suffering in my own life. I believe life is supposed to be tragic, why else would we need whiskey or need God?" (*CCE* 85-86).

Calling Gilchrist's fiction "a wry, appraising eye on her spoilt America," Alison Fell supports the argument that Gilchrist is doing more with her fiction than just telling a good story (29). Critic Charles Stubblefield asserts that Gilchrist's stories reveal a southern society where little has changed in "the institutions,

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myths, and traditions which the family and the land perpetuate--hang[ing] like shadows over the lives of these people [. . .] all the victims [. . .] of the society they inherit and of the society they blindly support" (107-08). Her characters rarely allow guilt and fear to change or stop their behavior, choosing instead to believe that a deal can be made with God, such as buying new stained-glass windows for the church, becoming faithful to one's wife, or beginning to believe in Jesus. In return, Jesus is asked to keep a child from harm and safe-guard property or wealth or secrets.

The God portrayed in Gilchrist's fiction is punitive, writes the author in a 1992 article comparing and contrasting the Glen Allan, Mississippi, of Ellen Gilchrist's writing to that of Clifton Taulbert's Glen Allan in his work *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (60). The God described by Taulbert is more apt to "intervene favorably in the lives of his followers" while the God described by Gilchrist is more likely to punish, "taking the lives of friends and relatives and punishing people for their sins" (60). In a 1997 dissertation *Southern Families and their Daughters: the Self and the System in Selected Texts by Grau, Gilchrist, Welty, Spencer, and Douglas,* Jo K. Galle quotes from Gilchrist's *Net of Jewels* as the character Rhoda describes her Scottish forebears: "They get what they want because they believe they are supposed to have it. They believe in God as long as he is on their side. If he wavers, they fire the

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preacher (*NJ* 20, Galle 98).

Galle asserts that throughout her fiction Gilchrist shows "that the failure of women to reach autonomy must be shared by culture, family, and individuals who work together to maintain the ties that bind" (126). One of those "ties that bind" is the religion of this particular realm of the privileged South; Gilchrist's fiction resounds with the repercussions of a belief in a punishing, deal-making God on the lives of her characters as well as the role religion plays in perpetuating a patriarchal society. From the beginning of her writing career, Gilchrist points a finger at the hypocrisy of this Christ-haunted South. Her fiction confronts not only established religious traditions but also contemporary issues such as racial equality, abortion, adoption, parenting, care for the elderly as well as the abuse of prescription drugs, the desire to be thin at any cost, and the lax divorce laws. Rarely does one find a writer who can make one laugh, even at oneself, as one is provoked into an objective look at the absurdity of a society that refuses to question inherited codes which dictate not only how its members behave toward each other but also how its members conduct their personal relationship with God.

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Chapter IV

Parenting

Rarely does one find a particular group placed under such scrutiny as those well heeled, well-meaning southern parents in the fiction of author Ellen Gilchrist. Defined by fathers, more often "Daddies," who promote dependency in their children, particularly daughters, and mothers who promote the southern tradition described by Galle as the beautiful, flirtatious, but chaste "Southern Belle" and the proper, sexless, and self sacrificing"Southern lady" (92), these southern families revolve around power, wealth, good bloodlines, and the preservation of the southern traditions held dear by a society that sees privilege as its birthright.

Gilchrist has several characters who return to Daddy when things do not go their way; however, none provide a more vivid example of the father/daughter relationship than Rhoda Manning. In "1957, A Romance," Rhoda, now married and the mother of two small sons, decides that she cannot bear the thought of another child so "she had come home to the one person who had never let her down," her daddy (*DD* 81). After hearing her pleas for his help in arranging an abortion, her daddy assures Rhoda, "It's all right, Honey. I'm going to take care of it" (*DD* 83). Dudley, the good, all-powerful daddy, then makes the arrangements for the abortion and boards an airplane with Rhoda despite his overwhelming fear of

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flying. After the abortion, Dudley sits by her bed all night and "whenever she woke up he was there beside her and nothing could harm her ever as long as he lived" (*DD* 92).

Later, deciding again that she is divorcing her husband Malcolm, Rhoda returns to Daddy. Her friend Charles William is appalled when Rhoda's father walks into the room with divorce papers and child custody papers and assures Rhoda that she does not need to read them. When Charles William questions why she is signing the papers without reading them, Rhoda's explains, "Who wants to read legal papers? They're so boring. That's what lawyers are for, isn't it, Daddy? Later, she tells him: "My daddy knows what he is doing [. . .]. He's the one who takes care of us, Charles William" (*NJ* 264). Rhoda's thoughts about her father reveal a pattern Rhoda has followed and will follow throughout her life:

> I looked up at him. He was smiling at me. He loved me. He had given me this beautiful room and let me buy new carpet and drapes and all the new furniture I wanted. He loved me and he had his important lawyers get me a divorce and I didn't even have to go to court. (*NJ* 264)

Margaret Donovan Bauer writes that it is less than surprising that Rhoda chooses her father to go to for help since "Rhoda knows who has the power in her society" (Bauer 44). Through Rhoda's thoughts Gilchrist sums up this father/daughter relationship: "I was back in

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my father's house. I was my daddy's indulged and happy little girl. All I had to do from now to the end of time was eat from the bowl he held" (*NJ* 265). The price Rhoda pays for this relationship is that, despite her continual yearning for independence and freedom, Rhoda is never able to imagine life without "Daddy."

Introduced in Gilchrist's *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* as a feisty little redhead in "Revenge," Rhoda is "headstrong and passionate" (*NJ* 192). As "the only girl in a house full of cousins [. . .] dumped on my grandmother right in the middle of a world war," Rhoda fights to join the boys at the Broad Jump Pit where they are training for the Olympics (*R* 3). Her father, who is in Europe fighting the "forces of evil," writes to assure the boys that the war will soon be over and "the Olympic torch would again be brought down from its mountain" so they should start training now. Her father's letter that ends with "tips for proper eating and admonished Dudley [Rhoda's brother] to take care of me [Rhoda] as I was my father's own dear sweet little girl," also foreshadows the role Rhoda's father will play throughout her life (*R* 4). Despite her tantrums, her foul language, and name-calling, Rhoda never gets permission to jump with the boys. Her grandmother tells her to "be a sweet girl" and offers to take her to play with a friend's little girl Miss Ann Wentzel. Rhoda's temper is apparent when she says that she hates Miss Ann Wentzel who "is fat and calls me a Yankee" and screams, "She's a

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goddamned nigger German spy" (*R* 5,6). Rhoda's grandmother assures Rhoda that all she will have from playing with those boys would be "a lot of ugly muscles," and Miss Onnie Maud, her grandmother's friend adds, "Then you'd have those big old ugly arms like Weegie Toler," a swimmer, whose "arms got so big no one would take her to a dance, much less marry her" (*R* 13,11). Rhoda wins in the end, and her character's struggle for independence is literally launched. In "Revenge" Gilchrist introduces the major conflicts which Rhoda will face throughout her life: a doting, overbearing father and influential women in her life who support the patriarchy and accept its double standards (Bauer 43).

In her dissertation "Southern Families and their Daughters: The Self and the System in Selected Texts by Grau, Gilchrist, Welty, Spencer, and Douglas," Jo K. Galle asserts that Gilchrist's work provides evidence that when women fail to reach autonomy, the failure is shared by the culture, the family, and the individuals themselves (Galle 126). Galle discusses the importance of the relationship of husband and wife and the role this relationship plays in parenting. Galle calls this relationship, with its "distinct and fixed" roles for both husband and wife, "the central dynamic in the family system and "the primary emotional force" to which the children respond (Galle 92,91). Choosing Gilchrist's *Net of Jewels* and its protagonist Rhoda Manning, Galle examines the ways these

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definitive parental roles affect children, particularly daughters. As wife and mother, Ariane not only teaches her daughter how to run a happy and orderly family, but also instructs Rhoda to "try to act like a lady" and 'let people love you" (*NJ* 73-74). In Rhoda's words, her mother "programmed me to breed with her kind of man. He had to be six feet tall and a good dancer. Nothing else would do." (*NJ* 80) Galle points to Rhoda's mother's obvious disinterest in her daughter's intellectual achievements and an all-consuming interest in her daughter's appearance, especially her weight, and popularity as most damaging to Rhoda. As an adult Rhoda's life revolves around taking diet pills, seeking approval, and searching for a man "like Daddy" to love her.

Net of Jewels focuses primarily on the father Dudley's role in the lives of his children, especially his daughter's life. A preface to the novel narrated by the character Rhoda Manning explains that if this novel about "setting forth to to break the bonds he tied me with" is going to be understood, readers must first understand her daddy (*NJ* 3). She explains, "I was cathected by a narcissist. That's how my shrinks put it and it means, my daddy is a vain and beautiful man who thinks of his children as extensions of his personality. Our entire lives were supposed to be lights to shine upon his stage. We were supposed to make him look good" (*NJ* 3). Rhoda's character provides an insightful look at a daughter who has

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"so much potential for independence and even fulfillment," yet fails to reach either (Galle 83). Bringing the traditions of his childhood into his role as father, Dudley expects his children to obey and respect him, and he expects to provide for them--houses, cars,nannies--and to continue this "care" well into their adult lives. Along with this "care," however, comes Dudley's power and control based on his belief that it is his place and his right to "run their lives" (Galle 88). Her first summer vacation from college and in a new town, Rhoda wrecks after taking Dexedrine, drinking wine and brandy, and driving too fast on a rain-slick road, killing the only surviving son of her new friends Max and Patricia Morgan. Rhoda's father assures her that it is not her fault, but Rhoda knows "the con is on"; her father will use Rhoda's feelings of guilt and her vulnerability to direct her life. She explains, "For now, I let Daddy con me and tell me not to worry and buy me a baby blue Chevrolet with leather seats and put six times too much money in a bank account for me and send me down to Tuscaloosa to join the Crimson Tide" (*NJ* 73). He is bringing her closer to home, away from that "goddamn liberal place" Vanderbilt, to Tuscaloosa, "Where we can keep an eye on you and you can know some folks that are our kind of people" (*NJ* 16,69). As an adult, Rhoda is annoyed and indignant at her father's control, but she needs and desires his power and his wealth to "fix" the things that go wrong in her life.

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This desire for independence, coupled with Rhoda's desire to be taken care of and protected, represents the "double-bind" facing many females, past and present, in actuality and on the printed page.

Throughout *Net of Jewels,* Gilchrist focuses on the effects of a society intent on reproducing its past; *Rhoda* and her siblings are victims of the patriarchal values held sacred by this privileged society, values that espouse control and power by the father and submissiveness by the mother. Rhoda desperately wants to have her father's power and strength and is horrified that she is expected to fall into the role she sees as her mother's: a powerless role, except for "maid power," full of mundane chores, afternoon bridge, constant entertaining, and babies (*NJ* 271). In this important third novel, Gilchrist provides a realistic and troubling look at the effects of this rigid parenting as a child develops into adulthood and illustrates how an intelligent, talented, and strong child can become a dependent, unfocused, and purposeless adult. A discussion comparing and contrasting the Glen Allan, Mississippi, of Clifton Taulbert's *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* with the Glen Allan portrayed in Ellen Gilchrist's work provides insight into this southern parenting. While Taulbert and Gilchrist agree that children should be protected from the "harsher realities of life", they have different ideas about what that protection entails. For Taulbert, this

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protection involves teaching children how to survive in a segregated society and disciplining them; however, for Gilchrist, this protection means shielding children from life's realities, allowing them to become spoiled and disrespectful, and using rules more often to teach gender roles than to promote good behavior (Anderson 60). Gilchrist's Rhoda best illustrates this premise.

Calling Rhoda's character "a throwback to those glittering flapper belles of Zelda Fitzgerald's day, whose evanescence would flicker briefly before vanishing under the stricter codes of ladyhood and marriage," author Susie Mee claims that Rhoda fights harder than most to free herself from these "rules" (63). Rhoda "flickers" longer than most female characters, but in the end "Daddy" wins. Rhoda remains at the end of the novel "entangled in the harmful and limiting caretaking net of her Southern patriarchal family" (Galle 126).

In "Ellen Gilchrist's Rhoda: Managing the Fiction," Tonya Stremlau Johnson, focusing on Rhoda's obsession with her physical appearance and the importance of "looking the part" in this southern society, agrees that although Rhoda tries to push the boundaries, she never pushes "so far that she cannot return to the comforting, if restraining, bounds of "'good' southern society" (87). This comfort and restraint in this good southern society are most often associated with "Daddy." In a review of *Net of Jewels, Susan*

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Larson defends Rhoda, claiming that "Rhoda's life in this book is pretty much that of a young southern woman of the '50s. She does what her father tells her to do" (E8). Larson calls this "imprisonment" Gilchrist's "darkest vision yet": "Try as she might, Rhoda cannot break free, though her moments of wild action give her a terrifying sense of possibility. But home she goes again and again because her father 'took dominion everywhere'" (Larson E8).

Another revealing father/daughter relationship is described in Gilchrist's short story "Battle." Battle, the aging father, has passed his "bright, smart, powerful, ambitious, self-centered, spoiled, beautiful, cunning, and selfish" genes to his children (*FA* 180). Ifigenia, Battle's only daughter, calling her parents out of guilt, responds to hearing her father's voice on the phone: "My first love, she warned herself. The one who set the standards that have ruined my life. The alpha male. Beware, beware, beware. Snake charmer. Egomaniac, narcissist, king" (*FA* 184). Once Ifigenia realizes that there is no way to ignore her mother's plea to come help her care for Battle, Ifigenia cancels her trip to Italy and plans her trip to Jackson, Mississippi, her parent's home. Thinking about her change in plans for this medical crisis, Ifigenia tells the ticket agent, "Me flying to fly to Jackson is a medical crisis. It takes a year off my life to spend the night there" (*FA* 185). In their first conversation after Ifigenia arrives, Battle admits that he is proud of

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his daughter, adding, "I never thought I would be. You were the last one I ever thought would amount to anything, but there you are, with a nice husband and the boys aren't bad [. . .]." As Ifigenia reaches for her bags, she kisses her father on his head, and "heaved a sigh and began to roll the stone up the hill. [. . .] Up the hill down which my self esteem has rolled like a heavy ball " (*FA* 187). Later, while walking in the park with her best friend Ifigenia thinks about her father:

> I never had to want for a thing, Ifigenia was thinking. That old man made sure I had everything the world had to offer. And he kept me safe. I never feared a thing in the world. I knew he would protect me with his life, so I was free to be as stupid as I wanted to be, to stay a child forever. Then I married a rich man because I have a rich daddy and a rich education . (*FA* 190)

All these thoughts make her feel guilty and helpless to change the fact that Battle is old. As she hugs her male friend goodbye and drives away, Ifigenia reminds herself to be grateful because she has "been protected by wonderful men all her life" (*FA* 191). After her father's death, Ifigenia imagines her father talking to Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, admitting that he had made some terrible mistakes. "You can say that again," Saint Peter answers. "Loving the boys more than you did your daughter was the first

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mistake. She was your image, your most perfect creation, and you did not recognize what you had made" (*FA* 196). Imagining her father beginning to cry, Ifigenia reminds herself that her "first and truest love, my darling, crazy, funny, beautiful daddy" is dead (*FA* 197). Gilchrist uses this character, Ifigenia, to again explain this "double-bind"--the desire to be cared for versus the desire to be independent-- as well as to show that the age of the father nor the daughter lessens the "ties that bind."

Anna Hand, also cousin of Gilchrist's Rhoda, differs in many ways from most of Gilchrist's protagonists. Blessed with a mother "who would deliver the latest in typewriters and typewriter tables to the room of her eldest child just because the child's teacher had said the child could write," Anna comes early to believe in her creative intellect; in contrast, her cousin Rhoda's mother reacts to Rhoda's excitement over winning the freshman writing award at Vanderbilt by proclaiming Rhoda fat and telling her they will get diet pills tomorrow (*AP* 184) (*NJ* 21). Anna is also able to leave the "care" of her father to live her own life. She is able to see her father as he is, yet she is able to move past his faults to gain control of her own life and, eventually, her own death. Anna admits that she and her father fight all the time, so she has come back home not only to be nearer family and "feel out the source" of love, but also because "I have to make peace with Daddy" (*AP* 41). Her sister Helen, Anna's

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co-literary executor, going through Anna's papers, finds something Anna has written about her father:

> He doesn't know how to love. He probes and pushes and demands and extracts and extracts and extracts and is never pleased or satisfied. He has harmed us all by being so powerful and demanding. (*AP* 214)

Yet, Anna is able to see past his power and his demands; she can see him as he is and love him and let him love her. Holding a box of those gold coins that he keeps selling her, Anna explains:

> That glorious old man [. . .]. My God, I love him. Every man I ever loved is just a replay of those emotions. I remember every word he's ever said to me. Indelible, never to be erased. [. . .] Whatever goes on between that old man and me is the real thing. (*AP* 136)

From the beginning Anna is determined to be in control of her life. At fourteen, she asserts her independence by announcing that she is leaving the nuns and the starched and pleated uniform and demanding that she be allowed to attend public school. The narrator adds, "Her parents caved in," and the "Little Mother Superior" is now presumed "lost to the church" (*AP* 25). While telling the nuns goodbye and thanking them "for the education they had given her," Anna "very gently" kisses Mother Elizabeth's hand and and tells her, "You should not have the girls kneel in the gravel

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at the Feast of Saint Mary." She continues, "It is not a good thing to do and hurt my knees so much and Helen [Anna's sister] cut hers. I do not believe that Jesus wanted children to cut their knees [. . .] (*AP* 26). The oldest of six children, Anna continually tries to "free" her brothers and sisters as well, whether from the "prison" in Prisoner's Base as children or from the "habits and ideas and fears, closed and open doors and spidery corners" of their lives as adults (*AP* 23, 24). She is successful in freeing Helen, her sister and a mother of five who has described her life as one in which she is "forever and forever called upon to sacrifice and suffer," by making Helen her literary executor, responsible for her papers (*AP* 235). This work becomes a catalyst for Helen's self-discovery. Anna is also successful in bringing her brother Daniel's "lost child" back to the family.

Anna's "wild, barbarous family, [with] their passions, rivalries, obsessions" consumes her energy and her time when she returns to Charlotte, but finally on Christmas Eve she gives up. Anna decides to "be happy with them. Eat their food, drink their Goddamn eggnog, love them, love them, love them (*AP* 88). Anna is acutely aware that these "people" share with her not only a common up-bringing but also her DNA. In spite of her brother's initial protests, her fascination with "a child who carries my DNA in every cell in her body" sends Anna to Oklahoma to find Olivia, her brother Daniel's

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daughter from a brief marriage to a young Indian girl. Excited by "a whole new set of genetic materials mixed with ours," Anna, childless, believes "here is a child for me, this one could be mine and I am doing nothing about it" (*AP* 44). Strangely, this child has already found Anna by recognizing the last name on one of Anna's books. Meeting her, Anna finds that Olivia is the one of all her nieces and nephews who is most like Anna: her brains, her ambition, and her quest for independence.

When Anna realizes that she is going to die, she chooses what Anna calls "one big terror" over "a lot of little terrors" (*AP* 149). Her decision not to die "in a bed in a hospital" had been made years before she finds her cancer. Her decision to stay in control of her life--"to know what is going on and who I am"--is also her decision to stay in control of her death: "On a cold November morning," Anna "stuck the [cyanide] pill in her mouth and walked on and off the pier" (*DL* 236) (*AP* 9). Answering critics who contend that Anna's suicide was her fear or avoidance of pain, Bauer contends, "Anna did not live at the mercy of society; nor should she have died in its care" (Bauer 135). Unlike her cousin Rhoda who uses Daddy's power and control to "fix" things in her life so remains "Daddy's little girl," Anna moves past the power and control of her father, choosing to just love him. Throughout Anna's life she sees herself "as a fortunate person with a charmed life, blessed and indulged,

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lucky to have lived in a good place in the best of times" (AP 30). Her miscarriages, her divorce, the car accident that took her poet husband, and now her cancer never changed her view of her life.

Gilchrist's fiction strikes out at the effects of this family system on the males as well. Rhoda remarks that "girls were supposed to look like children," because "southern men were so mother-ridden they had to believe they were kissing little girls to get excited" (*NJ* 80). She also describes how her daddy "beat" her brothers in order to gain their respect and obedience, just as "his code and his culture had been beat into him" (*NJ* 74). These sons grow up in the shadow of all-powerful fathers who continue to see them as children whom they can control regardless of their ages or circumstances and mothers who program them to marry "girls" who are like their own mothers: pretty, thin women from "good" upper-class families who are devoted to this society's customs and "rules." In "A Sordid Tale, or, Traceleen Continues Talking," Crystal's black maid Traceleen, describing Crystal's brother Phelan Manning, expounds on the effect of this elitist parenting on male children:

> He [Phelan] is what Crystal's parents made of him and he was brought up to live someplace that no longer exists in the world. He was brought up to ride horses and carry guns and look down on everybody and treat women like slaves, except for the time when he's

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> reminding them of their fathers to get them in his power. (*FA* 134).

In her discussion comparing Gilchrist's Crystal Manning and Katherine Anne Porter's Sophia Jane in the Miranda stories, Bauer contends that, despite the differences in the time period in which they were born, both characters have had marriages that "do not fulfill their romantic expectations,"and sons who at some point run away from them (Bauer 96). Bauer writes, "Consequently, Sophia Jane and Crystal both spoil these sons to keep them home and thereby make certain that the next generation of men will be as demanding and thus as disappointing to their wives as the mothers' own husbands have been" (Bauer 96).

On a visit to the chemical dependency ward in the hospital to see her nephew James, Anna decides that James's drug problems stem from having "been forced to admit he was not a god" (AP 84):

> The Hand men were raised to believe they were gods, expected to behave as if they were, expected to get it up and keep it up every day of their lives no matter what happened or who it inconvenienced or how much alcohol they had to consume to fuel it. (*AP* 84)

Deciding that this pattern was "coming to a stop" in this generation, Anna realizes that she "didn't know how to act when a man was vulnerable of in need" (*AP* 84) This code for men has been believed

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by the women as well. Later, Anna calls her cousin LeLe in California to tell her that she thinks she has the "answer to why we love them [men]" (*AP* 86):

> It's because they're babies and women are programmed to love silly, selfish egomaniacs. The wilder they are the better we like them. The more they drink the more we want to take care of them. And they know it. Down deep they know we don't want them to be good. We want them ready to kill at a moment's notice. Civilization is too new to be useful yet. (*AP* 86)

During their conversation, Anna stops to add, "It's that old daddy, LeLe. Those old daddies. That's who we love" (*AP* 86). When Anna's father is told about Anna's suicide he cries. Calling to give Olivia the news about Anna, Jessie says, "Granddaddy had to go to bed. He never goes to bed. No one ever saw him cry unless he wanted something he couldn't have" (*AP* 161). At Anna's funeral, as her father counts his children and grandchildren sitting in the rows, he realizes that "the first one was gone, the very first one, the one who had resembled his own mother, his very first baby girl" (*AP* 198). Looking at Olivia's face, "he thought of Anna's cheeks, Anna's eyes, his mother's hair, his mother's eyes" (*AP* 199).

Once in New York after seeing a performance of *Lear,* Anna tells her lover, the married red-haired baby doctor, "I am like

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Cordelia," [. . .]. "In my family I am the one that tells the truth. My father secretly likes it, I think" (*AP* 31). Anna and her father may fight, but Anna knows she has won his respect and the right to live her life. Rhoda's father never sees her as anything but his little girl, and Rhoda, albeit kicking and screaming, lives up to his expectations. Standing beside him, Rhoda admits, "He was so beautiful, so perfect, so powerful and impossible and brave. Nothing I would ever do would make him love me" (*NJ* 17). Both fathers love their daughters; they are just following the rules for good, southern Daddies.

Ellen Gilchrist chose quotes from Carl Gustav Jung and Philip Larkin as epigraphs for her short story collection *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*. Larkin's two lines from "This May Be Verse" seem to summarize the parenting depicted in Ellen Gilchrist's fiction: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad, / They may not mean to but they do" (*CCE*). The Gilchrist characters who survive and prevail are few. Rhoda is still imprisoned by her past, but Anna Hand is proof that one can create one's own "crazy dazzling" life and live according to one's own terms (NJ 4).

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Chapter V

Work

The protagonists in Ellen Gilchrist's fiction are courageous, even outrageous, in their attempts to prevail in a society where the "old" rules of the privileged South still apply. Hampered by this society's rigid codes of behavior, particularly codes based on gender, Gilchrist's characters who do reach autonomy do so because they are able to move beyond parental and societal expectations and approval; her characters who fail to reach autonomy do so because they have ingested the codes delivered to them throughout their lives by parents who had the best of intentions and by a society that clings to the patriarchal codes of the past. In Gilchrist's first collection of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, the author introduces the people, the lifestyle, and the dilemmas which become the material for much of her work. In this first collection she tells her stories, some of her darkest and most memorable, all the while cleverly revealing the emptiness of one's life when one is unable to move beyond the money, the maids, the country club, and Daddy. Creative, valuable work, not Daddy's wealth and power, becomes the source of purpose, self-worth, independence, and freedom for the Gilchrist characters who prevail.

Gilchrist's Anna Hand exemplifies a character who is able from

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the beginning of her life to live on her own terms, while Rhoda Manning, Anna's cousin, exemplifies a character who is unable to escape her parents' and society's codes well into adulthood. Even though her family moves to Indiana for part of Rhoda's childhood, Rhoda continues to live under the code of southern society within her family and to spend her summers in the Delta at her grandparent's plantation. Despite her intelligence and her determination, Rhoda listens to and believes the "messages" about who she is and what her role in life is be; these "messages" determine Rhoda's beliefs about her appearance, her relationships, her marriage, and her right to seek her lifetime dream. In "Revenge," a bright, active, strong-willed eight-year-old Rhoda courageously strips to her underpants and seizes the opportunity to prove that she can conquer The Broad Jump Pit, proving to herself and the boys that they had been wrong in forcing her to stand back all summer and watch "like a girl." In "Music," as a fourteen year old, "a holy and terrible age," Rhoda, is still pursuing her own agenda with a vengeance (*R* 112). She threatens more than once to kill her mother, takes up smoking, binges on chocolate chip cookies and homemade chocolate milkshakes, loses her virginity, and continues to believe in her dream that one day she will be a famous author and that old boyfriends will see her books and weep because the famous author, Rhoda, will never belong to them

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(*R* 112).

The dream of being a writer is real for Rhoda. As a teenager she writes for the local newspaper, and at the end of her freshman year at Vanderbilt, she wins the freshman writing award. Yet this dream is never validated by her parents who have different expectations for their only daughter. During a visit with Rhoda's grandmother, her father's response to her grandmother's assertion that Rhoda "needs to settle down" and "she's such a scatterbrain," is to defend Rhoda: "Sister'll be all right," Daddy decreed. "She'll marry a nice boy one day and have some babies. She's still wet behind the ears" (*NJ* 13). Rhoda's father's primary expectation for his only daughter is clear: Rhoda will marry well and produce his heirs. Rhoda's mother's foremost expectation for her daughter is also clear. Responding to Rhoda's news that she has won the freshman writing award, Rhoda's mother ignores Rhoda's excitement only noticing Rhoda's appearance: "My goodness, honey," she said. "You've gained so much weight. I thought you were on the swimming team. [. . .] We'll take you to the doctor tomorrow and get some new pills. We'll go in the morning. Well, come on in and see the house. Isn't it beautiful? Don't you like it?" (*NJ* 21) Arianne responds only to the fact that Rhoda has "gained so much weight," not to Rhoda's intellectual achievement or to Rhoda's excitement (*NJ* 21.) Later that day, Arianne is still talking about

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Rhoda'a weight: "I don't want you to be fat. You've never been fat" (*NJ* 23). Finally, "full of rage, incomprehension, and despair," Rhoda tells her mother to leave her alone: "And I'm not going to the doctor. I'm not fat. There's nothing wrong with me" (*NJ* 23). Rhoda's mother knows this society's standard for physical beauty, and she knows that, as Rhoda's mother, she must "encourage" Rhoda to meet that standard.

Six weeks later, Rhoda decides that the move from Franklin, Kentucky, is not so bad after all. Describing her new life as "rich and spoiled and pampered and charming," Rhoda says, "Anything I wanted I could have. All I had to do was stay on my diet and 'be nice to people' and get acquainted with north Alabama" (*NJ* 30). Rhoda's new acquaintance Patricia Morgan is one of the adults in Rhoda's life who sees and acknowledges Rhoda's potential. She assures Rhoda that she should not apologize for telling her about the writing award asking, "Who told you not to be proud of your accomplishments?" (*NJ* 46) Rhoda quickly responds, "Well, they mostly want me to stop being fat. It embarrasses them if I'm fat" (*NJ* 46). Amazed, Patricia asks, "Who told you you were fat? Why are you listening to such a thing?" (*NJ* 46). Even though she is protesting loudly, Rhoda is not only listening, but she is also believing the messages her parents are dutifully sending. Tonya Stemlau Johnson agrees that one of Rhoda's obstacles to reaching

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her full potential as a healthy, happy adult is Rhoda's life-long obsession with weight and dieting, her struggle to conform to society's image of physical beauty, and her belief that her appearance defines who she is (87,95). When Rhoda leaves Vanderbilt and reluctantly enters the University of Alabama, she finds her "muse power" and writes the winning skit for her sorority: "I was their whole new thing, their writer, a girl who was smart and reasonably pretty" (*NJ* 78). Away from Charles William, her new friend and the first friend "who knew what I was talking about," Rhoda is "deeply tragically bored" (*NJ* 78). She yearns to belong "somewhere in laboratories full of men and women looking through microscopes . . . I belonged somewhere where people talked of poetry and didn't have to have things explained to them" (*NJ* 95). Rhoda feels this boredom often in her life as she tries to "figure out" how to please her boyfriend, how to please her husband, how to please her father, and how to make people like her. She seems unaware that she may "figure out" how to please herself. Finding a smart boyfriend who can appreciate her intelligence never occurs to Rhoda. She keeps searching for the man she had been "programmed" by her mother to find: "He had to be six feet tall and a good dancer" (*NJ* 80). Lying on her bed waiting for "some old law student" who is coming to take her to dinner, Rhoda is aware that she is playing the game: "He was dark and tall and cold. He never

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smiled. He wanted me to act like a lady. He wanted me to be beautiful and thin. Sophisticated and aloof, quiet and soft and perfect. He was my father. He had come to get my mother" (*NJ* 101). She justifies going out with him by saying that she "might need the experience for something I write" and that she has a new suit she wants to wear, but Rhoda will marry someone who fits her description of this law student and soon (*NJ* 107).

From the beginning of their relationship, Rhoda is aware that Malcolm Martin is "a boy as vain and cold and unloving as my father" (*NJ* 137). She is also aware that she is falling for someone who is not intellectually her equal, who doesn't have the "slightest idea" who she is, and someone she would never "know" (*NJ* 158,174). Passion consumes Rhoda and Rhoda surmises that this passion and Michael's dead Aunt Gayle--who has just waved goodbye to them and driven away with her suitor and now is dead from a car accident--"ended any debate I may have had about education or art or going to the big world" (*NJ* 181). Her parents, distracted by "their new life in Dunleith with their seven hundred admiring friends coming over to get drunk on the porch every night," allow her to go to summer school at Emory: "I got to do what I wanted that summer, while my Daddy made the money and my momma spent it [. . .]" (*NJ* 183). Within the first two weeks in Atlanta, Rhoda and Malcolm are married. Rhoda has forgotten that she "didn't want to

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belong to anyone" and that she "had no desire to run a house or be a wife or live forever with a man" (*NJ* 95). Having fallen for her society's romantic notion that marriage is "happily ever after," Rhoda tells herself, "Now I will never be alone, never be afraid, never be sad again" (*NJ* 190). She is unaware that she has also set in motion a lifelong pattern of dependency on "Daddy." As soon as Rhoda's father finds that "he and Malcolm's mother had a common ancestor on my paternal grandmother's side," he arranges for the parents to meet in Atlanta where "everyone sat around and drank their drinks and Daddy told them what was going to happen" (*NJ* 192). Rhoda listens and watches: "They had done it again. They had taken my life away from me" (*NJ* 193).

Two years and two babies later, Rhoda calls home saying she is leaving Malcolm because all he does is get her pregnant: "Come on home," Daddy told me. "We'll take care of you. Leave the little bastard" (*NJ* 229). Now home and surrounded by the "suffocating cloying love" of her parents and her two "wild demanding little boys," Rhoda realizes that once again she is bored: "I was bored to death, that was all. Deeply, dangerously, tragically bored" (*NJ* 230). When Charles William suggests that she go with him and his girlfriend Irise to visit his cousin in Montgomery, he reminds Rhoda, "You haven't got anything else to do." She knows it is true: "All I did all day was watch the maids take care of the babies and go

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shopping and walk into the kitchen to see what time it was" (*NJ* 237). Briefly, this trip rekindles her vision of who she is and what she wants her life to be. Energized by the presence of Charles William and a book of poetry, Rhoda is in awe meeting Charles William's cousin, civil-rights activist Derry Waters: "the first truly grown woman I had ever known, a full and complete woman who was free to act" (*NJ* 248). Rhoda is amazed that such a strong woman would take an interest in her. When Derry tells Rhoda that she hears she is a writer, Rhoda answers, "That was a long time ago. I'm nothing. All I do is take care of my children" (*NJ* 244). Then, describing her life to Derry, Rhoda mentions her cheerleading, writing the school play, the moving, changing colleges, adding, "So that is that. [. . .] So now I'm home. I live with my parents and they give me everything I want and they take care of my children" (*NJ* 246). Derry presses Rhoda for an explanation for her comment "so that is that," and Rhoda is surprised that this intelligent adult is actually listening to her. Rhoda's low self-esteem is apparent in her thoughts:

> I had no idea that there was something in myself that could call up an answering love in such a creature. I thought of myself as a half-baked, not dry behind the ears, slightly overweight, pretty much ruined forever person. I could hide in books and I could pretend to love

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> myself but it was a chimera in which I did not believe" (*NJ* 248).

The confident little eight-year-old in "Revenge" has become a distraught young woman. Later that evening Derry assures Rhoda that the twenties are hard years for everyone and tells her, "Work is the main thing, Rhoda, if you find something worth doing, something that adds to the good of the whole. It's how you define yourself, how you create your meaning" (*NJ* 254). Derry encourages Rhoda to begin "creating a meaningful identity" by "finding a worthwhile occupation", writes Jo K. Galle, but Rhoda represents the southern woman torn between cultural expectations and society's approval and her desire to find her own power and self-worth (Galle 114). Rhoda's belief that she will find power and self-worth has been tainted; she no longer has the confidence that she can take charge of her own destiny. Despite being so impressed with Derry Waters, Rhoda pushes aside Derry's advice as she wonders if the young lawyer she has just met will think she is attractive enough--more importantly thin enough--to merit his attention. Galle's point that Arianne, Rhoda's mother, would have been proud of Rhoda for her behavior is true since Rhoda has learned from her mother the "meaningful identity" on which she should focus--and it is not meaningful work (114). Rhoda is struggling now and will continue to struggle well into her fifties with

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the role she is to "play" in her life.

"Love of My Life," a story in *Rhoda: A Life in Stories,* finds Rhoda separated, with two small children and still searching for validation: "I don't know what I want but I know how to get it. If I am beautiful, the thing I want will show up" (*R* 203). Later, twenty-seven-year-old Rhoda worries that time is running out and that she will "die from the deep dissatisfaction of my life":

> I had meant to be a writer, every moment of my life, since I was five or six years old, had counted myself a writer, [. . .]. But that was all consumed now, consumed in the men and the babies and this terrible wealth my father had acquired and let us waste in any way we chose. (*R* 223)

The last paragraph of the story reveals that Rhoda leaves her married lover, marries a Jewish lawyer "who should have known better," moves to Fayetteville, Arkansas, and is saved by work: "The work I had abandoned when the fire that made my sons consumed me" (*R* 226). Even so, Rhoda tires of "this thing she had wanted so much"; tires of "acting like she was poor, [. . .] never getting dressed up in nice clothes, [. . .] small, poor restaurants" (*R* 271). Checking her mail on the last day she is in Fayetteville, Arkansas, Rhoda discovers that she has sold a poem and a story, and she is elated. In the middle of the night, on her way back to her

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husband and son in New Orleans, she calls and meets a former lover telling him, "My work is being published everywhere. It terrifies me and I love it. I don't know what I'm doing. I have to go home and see what's wrong with Teddy [her son]. I have to mend my marriage. No one can live two lives at once" (*R* 278). Again, a Gilchrist character is experiencing the dilemma which faces many creative women, the idea that they must choose. Discussing Rhoda's double bind in "Revenge," Margaret Jones Bolsterli writes that Rhoda'a first bind is being kept from doing something because she is a girl and the second is the lure the woman's world has for girls (8): Rhoda wants to wear that dress and be in the wedding *and* she wants to jump with the boys. Bolsterli compares women's choices in this society to the choice of figs in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar:* "To choose one means to give up the other" (Bolsterli 8). In the stories "Paris" and "A Wedding in Jackson," Rhoda does seem to have "escaped the massive tentacles" of her family (*R* 382). Finally self-supporting, "no longer in boyfriend jail," and "a journalist and writer of novels," a divorced, fifty-eight year old Rhoda decides to "Live and learn and mellow. Drive as fast as you can and try not to get a ticket" (*R* 373, 379, 402). While in Paris visiting a young man who is her friend and a writer himself, Rhoda decides that "most people in the world are doing the best they can with whatever knowledge they have managed to attain or been fed by

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whatever myths they were raised under"(*R* 387). Rhoda continues well into her fifties to allow her parents' and society's codes to diminish her self-esteem thus thwarting her development as a productive, happy adult. Nearing sixty, perhaps Rhoda has found a way to prevail, but her struggle takes longer and has more false starts than most of Gilchrist's heroines.

Those heroines who do prevail, such as Anna Hand, do so because they are able to "get down to work," a plan that also worked for the author (*Postscripts* 1984). "Anna, Part I," the final story in Gilchrist's third short story collection *Drunk with Love,* introduces Anna Hand, a heroine who is described in the first paragraph as having made a life-changing decision: "It was a big day for Anna Hand. It was the day she decided to give up being a fool and go back to being a writer. She called her editor" (*DL* 220). Anna tells her editor, "I want a contract. I can't stand it anymore. I'm going back to work" (*DL* 220). When Anna sits down to write she decides to tell "the story of the married man," the redheaded baby doctor who is her lover, but she wonders, "How to ring the truth out of the story, absolve the sadness, transmute it, turn it into art?" (*DL* 223) This act of creating is the work that brings Anna understanding, strength, and the power to live her life on her own terms; for Anna, the power to live life on her own terms begins in childhood.

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Many of Gilchrist's characters are unable to see the restraints imposed by an inherited set of rules which guide their lives, or if they do realize the restraints, are unable to risk losing the approval of the family as well as the power and protection the family, particularly the father, provides for them. Rhoda, Anna's cousin, is an example of the latter even though Rhoda often appears unaware that many of her choices are driven by the same restraints she struggles to overcome: appearance, marriage, maids, and money. Anna and Rhoda grow up in southern upper-middle class families who adhere to same codes of behavior, yet, even as a child, Anna is able to move beyond these boundaries. One difference in the way these two characters perceive themselves and approach life may be in the way their intellect is validated. Both Anna's and Rhoda's mothers respond to their daughters' interest in and gift for writing and creating, but in very different ways. Anna remembers her "great beginning" with "such a wonderful mother. A mother who would deliver the latest in typewriters and typewriter tables to the room of her oldest child just because the child's teacher said she could write" (*AP* 184). Rhoda's experience is quite different. Rhoda's mother responds to Rhoda's arrival from college and to Rhoda's excitement over winning Vanderbilt's freshman writing contest by noticing only that Rhoda has gained weight; she has no response to Rhoda's news,and Rhoda is left angry and confused (*NJ* 21).

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When Anna is fourteen she demands that she be allowed to leave the private Catholic school and go to a public school where there "are other things I need to know" (*AP* 26). Having "a sense of herself as someone special, someone who could possess visions and make them manifest," Anna, at fourteen, knows who she is and what she wants for her life.

There are other differences between Rhoda's and Anna's upbringing. Anna grows up in a large southern family, but, unlike Rhoda whose family is constantly moving, Anna lives in the house on Shannon Street in Charlotte, North Carolina, "twelve months a year, year after year (*AP* 23). As a child, Anna does not "watch like a girl"; instead, she plays Prisoner's Base with her cousins and the neighborhood kids, outruns Phela, climbs trees, and skates backwards faster than Helen can skate forward (*AP* 23, 216, 237). Describing her mother as "a typical indulgent southern lady," Anna loves and respects her mother but is certain that she does not want to be like her mother who does the same thing every day, "Like a snail going in a circle" (*AP* 26-7). Rhoda sees her mother as powerless against her daughter's rages and her husband's power, believing her father's description of her mother: "Don't pay any attention to her. She's too weak and silly to be involved in the real work of the world [. . .]" (*NJ* 192). A major difference is that Anna's father does not indulge Anna. Helen explains that their father "is a

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communist where his family is concerned. From each according to his needs. So naturally Anna never got a cent or a car" (*AP* 221). Rhoda's father indulges Rhoda with cars, money, and maids. However, like Rhoda's, Anna's father is cold and demanding. Anna's notes include perceptions about her father: "He doesn't know how to love. [. . .] is never pleased or satisfied" and has "harmed us all by being so powerful and demanding" (*AP* 214). While Rhoda struggles to escape her father's power, she also clings to that power to "fix" the many things that go wrong in her life. Inversely, Anna is able to to transcend her father's power, love him, and maintain her own independence. Margaret Donovan Bauer sees Anna as "an evolution of Rhoda" (Bauer 133). Bauer explains that Anna does not run home to Daddy because she does not need his approval (Bauer 134). According to Helen, Anna's later anger at her father developed because he expects Anna to "show up to lecture and refuse to be paid" at the colleges and schools attended by anyone in the family saying he would reimburse her, but he never does (*AP* 221). Now home, Anna says she came "to make peace with Daddy" (*AP* 41).

During her lifetime, Anna has young lovers; a failed marriage; several miscarriages; painful surgeries to correct whatever is keeping her from carrying a child; the tragic death of her second husband, her poet; a loving and long-term relationship with her red-

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haired baby doctor; and now, cancer. Yet, "from the time she was a small child until her death, she thought of herself as a fortunate person with a charmed life, blessed and indulged, lucky to have lived in a good place in the best of times" (*AP* 30). Anna's attitude about life sustains her, and never once does she say she is bored.

After her many miscarriages and then her divorce, Anna returns home and finishes college. Later, she returns to be near her family and to write, something she has neglected because she has been so distracted by love. Back in Charlotte, as Anna watches her family go about their daily lives, she is again convinced that she is not normal:

> I'm the one that crawled through caves carrying scaffolding to paint the caves. Crawling through openings so small no modern man could squeeze through one, carrying oil lamps and pigments and scaffolding, for God's sake. I'm in that group whether I like it or not and can't do this other normal thing. (*AP* 82)

Anna has another compelling reason to return to her family: she is determined to find her brother Daniel's "lost" daughter Olivia. Driven by this need to find this child who belongs not just to Daniel but to all of us, Anna decides that this child may be "a child for me" (*NJ* 44). In a letter to Olivia, this newly-found niece whom she sees as being most like herself with her determination and will, Anna writes, "Live

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a long and happy life. Create if you can and always wonder and always laugh. Don't be afraid to love or to cry" (*AP* 160). Anna never believes that her work is more important than love and children; she does believe that her work "makes sense" of her life. Anna explains: "My work. How I define myself in the madness of this world" (*DL* 238). This is in the third of three letters written to Olivia before Anna slips a cyanide tablet under her tongue, walks off the pier into the ocean, and ends her life. Anna makes the decision to end her life rather than become dependent on others not from despair, but from her free will, a free will that has guided most of her life. Bauer suggests that Anna is chooses suicide based on the "pre-Christian views" found in "ancient Greek literature and philosophy" which see suicide as valid choice for a person suffering from "painful disease" (Bauer 138). Remembering one of her most daring and romantic escapades, Anna writes "I have not missed much. Thank God for that. I was here. I was definitely here and all the time I was here I played" (*AP* 225). Reading this after Anna's death, Helen is reminded that Anna's creative work and her freedom are linked--one allows the other to exist.

Working in Anna's apartment surrounded by Anna's papers and all of Anna's things, Helen begins to sift through the pieces of paper that reveal the essence Anna: her love of the ocean, her determination to live every minute of her life, the children she

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"adopted" because they needed her, and how deeply the men in her life had loved her. By making Helen her literary executor, Anna provides her sister with creative and valuable work freeing her from the rules and expectations that have steered her life. Helen is transformed by Anna's words, words which reveal a passion for life and a sense of freedom Helen has never imagined. Helen finds her voice and her personal vision, first through Anna's work and then through her own (McDonnell 191). When Mike Carmichael, the poet Anna has designated to help Helen, kisses Helen and takes her to bed, Helen decides that she deserves this day: "All I do is work, work, work, and worry, worry, worry" (*AP* 256). Helen reaches outside her stale and proper marriage, grasping for the joy and passion which seemed lost to her forever: "I am so fortunate, Helen thought. I'm beginning to be as lucky as Anna" (*AP* 261). Phelan, their cousin and a prime example of the privileged southern male, recognizes and marvels over Helen's transformation. He reports, "Well, I'll be goddamned, Anna, you should have lived to see this. We finally got Helen to leave the yard" (*AP* 265).

Bolsterli in her essay "Ellen Gilchrist's Characters and the Southern Woman's Experience: Rhoda Manning's Double Bind and Anna Hand's Creativity" states that Gilchrist goes further than the canonical southern writers Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers in defining and validating the southern woman's

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experience (7). She contends that Gilchrist's writing validates the experience of women "because she is willing to go deeper into personality, to shine a light into the dark corners of women's souls to expose the preoccupations that get in the way of their achieving wholeness and coherence" (7). The Gilchrist heroines who do prevail do so by "accepting the validity of their experience and transforming it into art" (Bolsterli 9). In her first novel *The Annunciation,* Gilchrist introduces protagonist Amanda McCay whose journey toward self-worth and personal freedom provides the venue for the author's harsh look into this restrictive society, the misguided love of family, and the perilous Catholic church. In his review of *The Annunciation*, Charles Stubblefield writes that although the novel says no to the Church, the family as "the cornerstone of American life," and the Institutions of old New Orleans, it says yes to "the liberal mind, to the scholarly habit of thought and work [. . .] and to individual personal freedom" (109). Perhaps the most scathing and obvious attack on this particular society, *The Annunciation* is also romantic and often humorous as Amanda takes on the old city of New Orleans and enters the world of poets and philosophers of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Here she finds a young lover, becomes pregnant, and finally arrives at self-realization. Frances Taliaferro, in his review for Harper's, writes, "Yay Amanda! we cry as she sheds her lazy old ways and gets

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down to work: our heroine will no longer be exploited by those who would turn her into a Southern fiction and deprive her of her child, her brains, and her spunk" (76). In her latest novel *Sarah Conley*, Gilchrist's protagonist Sarah is not born into this world of wealth and privilege, but she grows up as part of this society. Sarah is like Anna because "what Sarah was most exquisitely in the world was a survivor" (*SC* 34). And like most of Gilchrist's heroines, Sarah dreams as a child of living in a world of poets and writers and being a part of that world. Like all of Gilchrist's heroines, Sarah Conley's life is not all work; Sarah has lovers and husbands and friends. She does have one child who is awarded to his father and stepmother after a five year court battle and her son's expressed wish to live with them. Sarah uses this crisis as the catalyst to write a novel, is nominated for a National Book Award, and that wins a job for her on the *Boston Globe*, and then at *Time* magazine. Returning to her office after smoking her "one afternoon cigarette" and trying to determine how she had failed as a wife and a mother, " Sarah decides, "There was pride and happiness in work and she was good at what she did. [. . .] In a finite world of mostly selfishness and fear, it was high on the scale of things a man or woman could be proud of doing" (*SC* 119). Later, in Paris on leave from her job with *Time*, Sarah meets her agent Freddy to discuss the screenplay she has been asked to write. She realizes, "There was work to do and Sarah would do it

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and Freddy would sell it and somewhere values would be created in a space that had been empty. Which is what art is [. . .]" (*SC* 129). Only when Sarah realizes how deeply she loves Jack, her son's father, and how desperately she wants him in her life does she question the importance of her work: "This profession, avocation, that had been the earth and sky to her since she was thirteen years old, which had always seemed the highest thing a person could aspire to do, seemed like some second-rate job" (*SC* 146). Jack struggles to comprehend as Sarah tries to explain her writing, but Sarah knows, "No one can understand unless they do it, unless they are driven and talented enough to do it, blessed. [. . .] It is possession, magic, excitement, hope, fear" (*SC* 146). By the end of the novel, Sarah has found a way to have the man she loves as well as her work which sustains her. She makes plans to return to Nashville and to her grandparent's home place where she will be near Jack as she writes her novel, a novel which will help her to make sense of her life.

"The Cabal," Gilchrist's novella in her latest publication *The Cabal and Other Stories,* revisits Gilchrist's message that motherhood is the highest calling. It also reiterates that it is through creative work that one begins to understand one's life and one's choices.

Falling Through Space: The Author's Journals reflects the author's perception of the value of work, particularly in the third

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section entitled "Work," but the theme of creating, allowing one's imagination to lead one, and the catharsis that creative work can produce in one's life is found throughout all Gilchrist's genres: "My work helps me live my life. It tells me who I am" (*FS* 34). Reviewing some of her papers, her "repressed papers" as she calls these bits and pieces of scribbled insights, observations, thoughts, and ideas, Gilchrist addresses psychoanalysis:

> [. . .] I think I am funnier and wiser and more balanced because of it. I like myself more and trust myself more. Of course, I may be that way because I got older. Or maybe it's because I've gotten up every day for eight years and done my work and I am still doing it. Maybe my work healed me of the small amount of civilizing I was exposed to. Guilt is too high a price to pay for civilization. There's got to be a better way" (*FS* 90-91).

Perhaps it is Gilchrist's description of Arkansas that captures the essence of creating and its link to freedom for Gilchrist: "Arkansas, a place where men are still free, in the old sense of the word, meaning some of them at least still create and live out their own destinies" (*FS* 147). This is the quest Gilchrist has for her characters. The cards are on the table in her fiction as Gilchrist celebrates the journey through this "short and sweet" life as she continues to pass on "good ideas" to her audiences, which is, after all, the "high

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mission of art" (Interview with Bonetti).

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Chapter VI

Conclusion

In a 1986 interview with Kay Bonetti, Ellen Gilchrist quotes Beth Jones, a "wonderful" woman from Jackson, Mississippi: "As long as all the cards are on the table, you can deal with them. When they are under the table, trouble begins." Gilchrist says she believes that this is true in a marriage, in a friendship, and in a culture (Interview with Bonetti). The southern society Gilchrist targets in her fiction does not have all its cards on the table. Southern denial flourishes in this upper-middle class society that seems determined to cling to its past, a past where Daddy is more powerful than God and Momma believes the maid is a birthright. Gilchrist looks not only at the cards on the table, but also the cards under the table; this look provides an undercurrent in her fiction that reveals the "other" story. In this "other" narrative, Gilchrist exposes the relationship of the white southern woman and her black southern maid as unique not only because the relationship is usually quite close but also because both accept without question that one is to be served and that one is to serve. Her fiction depicts a society whose inhabitants are immersed in religious jargon and biblical stories from childhood, yet most appear to lack any understanding of faith or any interest in God's place in their lives. In this society where Daddy has so much power, there seems to be

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little need for God. Yet, religion plays a large role in fostering this patriarchal society's code of rigid restrictions, particularly for females. Derived from society's code of behavior, parental expectations are entrenched in "old southern rules," particularly those concerning gender roles. The harm inflicted by these rigid expectations is apparent throughout Gilchrist's fiction. Her other narrative reveals how the constant criticism, the manipulation, and failure to have one's intellect validated can destroy self-worth, and how this destruction of self-esteem accompanied by parents' overindulgence can lead to a life of dependency and purposelessness.

In a 1984 interview for *Postscripts,* Ellen Gilchrist talks candidly about why she writes. She begins saying that her "job in the world is to pass on good ideas that other people have given me." When asked if she feels her work has a moral message, Gilchrist begins, "I can't conceive of anybody bothering to write anything that [. . .]" but stops in mid-sentence to add, "No, I can write to amuse." Describing a serious piece of her work, Gilchrist concedes that she is "opinionated" and that she is selling those opinions when she writes; however, she contends that this is an unconscious act for her, not a "conscious" one. In a 1986 interview, Kay Bonetti questions Gilchrist about the value of literature. Gilchrist says that "the high mission of art is "the way we pass on our best ideas, the

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way we learn things."

A 1988 symposium organized by Furman University included two panel discussions which were published in the December 1988 issue of *Furman Studies*. Both panel discussions featured women writers Ellen Gilchrist, Josephine Humphreys, Gloria Naylor, and Louise Shivers. The first discussion focused on the question "Do you think of yourself as a woman writer?" and the second on "The place of women writers in the literary tradition." During the first discussion, moderator Willard Pate asks Mrs. Shivers if, as a woman, she might be "trying to send a message about--a women's place in society [. . .] and the difference now from then?" Shivers agrees that she probably is because she was raised that way--"The woman steps back. You give the man the biggest piece of meat and you wait until he eats"--, and that perhaps she is "writing through those problems" (6). When Pate asks if anyone else on the panel has comments about this, Gilchrist declares that "Nobody ever told me that women were supposed to take a back seat to anybody," and that she "didn't ever perceive it as being between men and women" (6). A later question, addressed specifically to Mrs. Shivers, concerned a comment she had made earlier that day about "the tender trap for most Southern girls was being daddy's little girl or something to that effect. That it was a trap that was very difficult to get out of" (7). Shivers, who had no sisters and eight brothers, says

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that the protectiveness of her brothers and her father "kept me a victim longer [. . .] somewhere in there I had just gotten that message from the time I was born--'keep quiet and be sweet and they'll love you better'" (7). Gilchrist responds to Shiver's answer by saying, "It's just another word for Oedipus complex, if you say all that." The female repeating the relationship she had with her daddy and the male repeating the one he had with his mama. She adds, "And it's not bad. It's just how the human mind works. [. . .] (7).

Although most of Gilchrist's comments during this panel discussion are a denial of having grown up under the influence of the strict code of conduct for males and females, her fiction reflects that whether she was influenced or not, she is acutely aware of these rules and the way these rules can shape lives. When approached about a possible interview for my project, Gilchrist graciously agreed to a phone interview until she read my projected questions that focused on a social agenda in her fiction. She was vehement in her denial of having any agenda in her fiction, and withdrew her offer for an interview. She did, however, give permission to use her letter as part of my project:

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September 13, 2000

Dear Gwynne,

I can't answer your questions because they don't have anything to do with my intentions when I wrote my stories and novels. I was just always trying to tell a good story, which includes conflict and love. The parents and children in my stories love each other and want to protect each other. Because they live in different generations their ideas about how a person is safe are different.

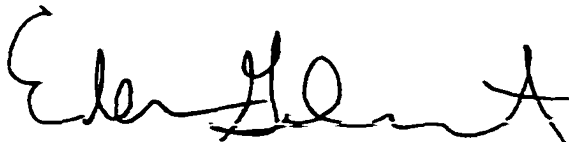
The black people and white people in my work are as close to real people as I can make them. I was not critisizing anything. I was just trying to show it is and how it happens. None of my female characters need to escape. They are all so strong you would have to beat and starve them to make them do anything they didn't want to do to begin with. This is true of both the black and white women. They were never prisoners of anything from the beginning. When she was four years old Rhoda had already declared that she was free of constraints and kept on proving it.

My work as a writer is to make up some good stories and make them seem as true and real as possible. I am not a (God forbid) a sociologist and I am not touting any political agendas. If I was consciously trying to do anything it was to keep in mind how wonderful and funny our lives are, here in this vast, rich, blessed place we call the United States, with our constant food supply.

Good luck with your work. You can use this letter if you use it in its entirety.

I don't want to talk about this further. It is bad for a writer to try to figure out what something meant. That wasn't the impulse that created this body of work.

With all good wishes,

Ellen Gilchrist 

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Yet, her words in her fiction speak volumes. In "Revenge," Rhoda is denied access to the Broad Jump Pit because she is a girl and is warned by her grandmother's friend that if she develops "ugly arm muscles," she might be unattractive to men (*R* 13,19). As an older Rhoda, her character sends the message that to break free from the expectations for southern "ladies," one must have more than a desire for excitement and a thin body, two things on which Rhoda spends most of her energy. Characters such as Amanda McCamey and Anna Hand send the message that breaking free requires discipline, a strong self-worth, and valuable work. Responding to Humphreys' suggestion that while writing often it does feel "as if the book is writing itself or your character is taking over" even though "it's obviously the creation of your imagination," Gilchrist explains, "Once you get past all the inhibitions and fears and problems and questions--you just write. It feels like memory, which means you thought it up very fast and you are just remembering the parts" (Pate 13).

Explaining the difficulty she faced writing *Net of Jewels,* partly because it lacks humor, Gilchrist admits that this novel is "a little piece of history":

> [. . .] a portrait of a time and place that is going to be, for young women reading it, like me reading Jane Austen, because young women really can't comprehend

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> a world where if you got pregnant you had to have the baby; the only way you could get out of it was by putting your life in danger. I hope that I have recreated the intensity of the desperation of somebody who is pregnant and doesn't want to have a baby. (Interview with Wendy Smith)

Smith writes that as Gilchrist has "captured the slow, tentative transformation of a spoiled self-absorbed young woman who begins to learn there is a world outside her family," she introduces moral issues to Rhoda such as the civil rights movement. During this interview with Smith, Gilchrist shares that as an adult she took part in this movement because she had realized "long before that there were a lot of things wrong with the privileged life her parents had accepted as their birthright." As a young girl, says Gilchrist, "I didn't have the words 'racism' and 'sexism', but I was fighting against them all my life, because I was fighting to be free" (Interview with Smith). Explaining to Smith why she had stopped writing when she had her first baby, Gilchrist reveals one of the inherited codes for southern women: "I was raised in a world in which you didn't have ambitions after you had children; the moment you had a baby in your arms, the ambitions were transferred to your child." In her late thirties, Gilchrist realized that she had "long-suppressed feelings" about the writing she had given up. Her return to writing led her to

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Fayetteville, Arkansas, and to her first publication *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (Interview with Smith). The Smith interview provides a deeper look into the author's motivation and intent as she writes fiction, fiction which addresses the issues of this society's caste system, race relations, gender roles, suppressed creativity, and the role of the church in patriarchal oppression.

In a 1995 interview with Macon College professors Martha Wilson and Gwendolyn Sell, Gilchrist defends the fact that many of her characters are searching for personal freedom by speaking out about her personal belief in freedom for men, women, and children, claiming "I don't even have dogs tied up in the yard" (160). She contends that there is still a form of slavery for many women in our country, a fact Gilchrist finds "difficult to imagine" since she has always successfully insisted on being free:

> You know, they have to please their mother, their daddy, their in-laws, their husbands. And they call that being unselfish.They call that being unselfish, and then they go down to the church and the preacher tells them they did good, and they get these little rewards and they hope their children are going to turn out all right. Maybe they'll reward them, but they don't have any freedom. I could never imagine anyone that wouldn't rise out of bed every morning and fight to be free. That's

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> my Irish blood. I work as an individualist, my style, my life. (Interview with Wilson and Sell 160)

This determination of the author to be free to choose her own path, and the anger at a society, particularly the church, that keeps women "in their place," as well as the women who allow themselves to be "enslaved" by an inherited code of conduct, are clearly ongoing themes in Gilchrist's fiction. She "shocks" readers into seeing the truth behind behaviors and beliefs that have been held sacred: the truth about those who are "enslaved" by outworn codes, and the possibilities for those who search and find freedom. This is her story within the story.

Jon Peede's comments leading up to his recent interview of Gilchrist provide the most accurate description of Gilchrist as a writer. Describing Gilchrist's "explosive female characters who fight for independence from unfaithful husbands, patriarchal customs, and the perceived emotional bankruptcy of affluent Southern society," Peede adds "the fruit does not fall far from the tree" (11). He writes that Gilchrist resembles her characters in that she "is apt to force open the doors of polite society" as she passionately speaks her mind, a mind Peede describes as "truly free and liberated" (8).

This "truly free and liberated" mind takes readers behind the scenes of the up-scale, privileged South as her characters

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unknowingly provide the truth about those served and those who serve, an unobtrusive yet invasive God, parental love gone awry, and the emptiness of life without purpose. Ellen Gilchrist's fiction is rich in areas worthy of exploration: the link between Gilchrist's fiction and her poetry, the influence of the literature of ancient Greece on her fiction, and the influence of the writers and poets to which she refers in her work are among these. Tonya Stremlau Johnson, in her essay about Rhoda's struggles to be free, targets the desire to alter one's body to fit society's image of beauty, a theme prevalent throughout Gilchrist's fiction and one that could be explored further.

Gilchrist writes on many levels. To understand and appreciate her work for the sheer fun of an hilarious story is possible; however, if one truly understands and appreciates her work, her insight into the "other" story brings out truths that are often unrecognized by the people who strive to uphold them, and, if recognized, prove almost impossible to leave behind.

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