‘Nothing New Under the Sun’:
Ecclesiastes and the Twentieth-Century-US-Literary Imagination

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Ecclesiastes and the Twentieth-Century-US-Literary Imagination

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Abstract

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‘Nothing New Under the Sun’: Ecclesiastes and the Twentieth-Century-US-Literary Imagination

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This dissertation examines the influence of Ecclesiastes on the fiction of prominent US authors including Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Ernest Hemingway. While critics from J. Hillis Miller to Carol J. Singley have addressed Ecclesiastes’ presence in these texts, this project argues that Ecclesiastes provided a nearly inevitable allusive choice for turn-of-the-twentieth-century US writers. The biblical book anticipates scientific and philosophical developments of the era and shares foundational modern ideas on nature’s indifference, the value of a realistic presentation of life, and a concern over life’s meaninglessness. The project requires scholars to rethink the role of religious allusion in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts by unearthing a comprehensive religious engagement in a literary period often thought antithetical to religion.
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Chapter One | ‘Another Generation Cometh’: The Modern Appeal of Ecclesiastes

Few ideas have influenced thinking in the United States more than Christianity. It follows that few texts have been more influential in US literature than the Christian Bible. In his *In The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of the King James Bible*, Harold Bloom calls the King James Bible a primary influence on US literature:

“the KJB became a basic source of American Literature: Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson are its children, and so are William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Cormac McCarthy” (23). Still, it comes as at least something of a surprise that three of the Modern Library’s 100 best novels of the twentieth century take their titles from a single biblical book. Quotations from Ecclesiastes provide the title for Henry James’ 1904 *The Golden Bowl* (12:6), Edith Wharton’s 1905 *The House of Mirth* (7:4), and Ernest Hemingway’s 1926 *The Sun Also Rises* (1:5). Hemingway also considered several Ecclesiastes’ quotations as possible titles for his other novel included on the 100-best list, *A Farewell to Arms*. As evidenced by these four novels on the Modern Library’s best list, the approximately 5,000-word Ecclesiastes – which follows its main character Qoheleth through his autonomous journey challenging traditional wisdom, advocating eating and drinking well in a loving community, and trying to make sense of his perception that “all is vanity” (1:2) – significantly contributed to the twentieth-century US literary imagination.
Beyond these well-known novels by James, Wharton, and Hemingway, Ecclesiastes’ prevalence in the United States extends to the naturalism of Stephen Crane, Ellen Glasgow, and Jack London. Crane’s 1894 “The Men in the Storm,” his 1897 “The Open Boat,” and Glasgow’s 1898 *Phases of an Inferior Planet* make use of Ecclesiastes to express their views on nature’s indifference, and London’s character Captain Wolf Larsen quotes Ecclesiastes extensively in London’s 1904 novel *The Sea-Wolf*. African American writers Jean Toomer and Ann Petry also draw attention to Ecclesiastes in their works by quoting verses from the book: Toomer’s narrator does so in the final paragraph of his 1923 *Cane*, and in Petry’s 1953 *The Narrows*, her character Cesar the Walking Man chalks Ecclesiastes 1:10 onto the sidewalk.

While I focus on the fiction identified in the preceding two paragraphs, the twentieth-century literary investment in Ecclesiastes extends to several poets, novelists, and storywriters whom I do not consider in depth. In Theodore Dreiser’s 1911 novel *Jennie Gerhardt*, Lester Cane reflects on life’s “uselessness […] which [he claims] has been best expressed by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes” (192). Sherwood Anderson’s 1919 story “Sophistication” shares Ecclesiastes’ concern that everyone “must live and die in uncertainty” (234). T. S. Eliot borrowed phrases, themes, and rhythms from Ecclesiastes in at least four of his major poems: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), *The Waste Land* (1922), “Ash Wednesday” (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1934). Louis Untermeyer takes on the persona of Ecclesiastes’ speaker in his 1928 poem “Koheleth.” And, in what could serve as a thesis statement for Ecclesiastes’ modern popularity,
Thomas Wolfe’s posthumous 1940 novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* offers Ecclesiastes this especially high praise:

of all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man’s life upon this earth — and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound. (732-3)

Prominent nineteenth-century US-literary voices also have ties to Ecclesiastes. Herman Melville’s 1851 *Moby Dick* calls Ecclesiastes “the truest of all books” (424). And while Walt Whitman and Mark Twain rarely quoted from the book, twenty-first-century critics have described their works of in terms of Ecclesiastes. David Haven Blake’s essay “Whitman’s Ecclesiastes: The 1860 ‘Leaves of Grass’ Cluster” describes sections of “Leaves of Grass” as “reminiscent of the Book of Ecclesiastes, […] a record of Whitman’s struggles with time, doubt, vanity, and the nature of the universe” (613). James H. Smylie’s essay “The Preacher: Mark Twain and Slaying Christians” argues that Twain’s “eclectic style sounds much like the preacher of Ecclesiastes” (485).

Ecclesiastes’ influence on Melville, Whitman, and Twain suggests that these writers in turn – as they did for so much in US culture – set the stage for Ecclesiastes’ popularity in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Acknowledging these Ecclesiastes’ parallels in the mid-nineteenth century rightly discourages claiming Ecclesiastes as *only* influencing late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing. Beginning with its title, Eric Christianson’s Ecclesiastes commentary *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* suggests that Ecclesiastes’ influence spans through the centuries and that it has captivated readers since its composition sometime between 450 and 180 BCE. Andrew Marvell’s seventeenth-century poem “To His Coy Mistress,” for example, shares Ecclesiastes’ interest in seizing the day: “though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run” (lines 45-6). And Percy Shelley’s 1818 “Sonnet” concludes by echoing Ecclesiastes’ sense of life’s futility: the speaker describes a friend as “a Spirit who strove / For truth, and like the Preacher found it not” (lines 13-
4). Still, as evidenced by the Modern Library list and the more than twenty late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century US writers referenced in my first three paragraphs, something specifically attracted artists of this period to Ecclesiastes. The sheer volume of repeated uses of Ecclesiastes during this period encourages exploring why so many US writers so often referenced this one biblical book. I argue in this project that these writers find in Ecclesiastes a specifically modern philosophical worldview compatible with the spirit of the times, and that, among other goals, they recommend this philosophy to their readers.

**Basic Tenets and Ecclesiastes’ Unorthodoxy**

Because my project considers multiple interpreters of Ecclesiastes and because these literary interpreters held various interpretations, this introduction cannot offer a conclusive interpretation of Ecclesiastes, but presents some of the main concerns the book addresses. Stuart Weeks begins his monograph *Ecclesiastes and Skepticism* with a similar warning: “There are as many interpretations of Ecclesiastes as there are interpreters—perhaps more, indeed, since some interpreters have changed their minds” (1). Even more to the point, J. L. Crenshaw, in his Ecclesiastes commentary, claims, “Research into the book also shows that it reflects the interpreter’s world view. That is why, I think, opinions vary so widely with regard to such basic matters as Qohelet’s optimism or pessimism” (47). Because interpretations of Ecclesiastes vary, I establish in the body chapters a personal context for each writer by considering her/his religious and philosophical background and by asking whether s/he comes to Ecclesiastes primarily as a skeptic or as a believer. The personal context presented in each chapter will
compliment the cultural context established in this introduction. Though interpretations vary, several general concerns strike most readers of Ecclesiastes, and – in their own way – the authors I consider respond to many of the following aspects of the book.

Part of the Bible’s wisdom literature, a genre which includes works intended to instruct readers on the nature of reality, Ecclesiastes presents a wisdom at odds with much else in the Bible. From the book’s second verse – “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:2) – Ecclesiastes differs from mainstream Christianity. William P. Brown, in his commentary, points out that the book includes thirty-seven uses of the Hebrew word *hebel*. The KJV translates *hebel* as “vanity,” but *hebel* also gives the sense of emptiness, uselessness, worthlessness, “void,” “ephemerality,” “meaninglessness,” “futility,” and “absurdity,” and most literally, in Hebrew *hebel* means “vapor or breath” (Brown 21-2). *Hebel/vanity* frames Qoheleth’s discourse as the first and last word attributed to him in Ecclesiastes, and he repeats the phrase from 1:2 in his final observation in 12:8: “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.” By framing his narrative with vanity, Qoheleth acknowledges that all of his claims stem from and exist in a world of *hebel*. This frame and the extensive repetition of vanity serves, in Brown’s view, to highlight “the inefficacy of certain aspects of life that must bear the weight of deeply seated human longings and expectations. ‘Vanity’ is like a mirage […] in which human efforts, hopes, and plans ‘evaporate’ before life’s vicissitudes and are replaced by want and misery” (22). Ecclesiastes’ denial of inherent meaning contrasts with the mainline Christian view that a person can secure meaningful salvation through belief in Christ. Qoheleth seven times associates life’s vanity with the
claim that living causes a “vexation of spirit” (e.g., 1:14), therein highlighting the difficulty of trying to live in a world without any recognizable inherent meaning.

In addition to struggling with life’s vanity, Ecclesiastes also departs from mainstream Christian tenets in its assertion that humans cannot influence a distant, mysterious God. Qoheleth emphasizes the distance between people and God by using the general divine name “Elohim” instead of the personal name “Yahweh” often used in the Old Testament. He also argues explicitly, “God is in heaven, and thou upon earth” (5:2).

Partly because of this distance, Qoheleth finds God inscrutable: “I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end” (3:10-1). Qoheleth suggests the impossibility of understanding the ways of God again in Ecclesiastes 8:17: “Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.” Qoheleth’s view departs from a traditionally intimate God invested in human affairs, and further he sees human control as significantly limited in a world where God’s actions are incomprehensible: “Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?” (7:13).

Equally challenging to mainline Christianity, Qoheleth rejects the idea of human afterlife consciousness. He sees death as final: “This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: […] that they go to the dead […]
where] the dead know not any thing, […] for there is no work, nor device, nor
knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (9:3-10). Clearly this contrasts
with New Testament claims about life after death and glory in Christ, but even in the Old
Testament where afterlife belief is less systematic, there are suggestions of an afterlife
that Qoheleth rejects. For example, Isaiah 26:19 claims, “Thy dead men shall live,
together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for
thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.” While Isaiah here
suggests a bodily resurrection, Brown asserts, on the other hand, that “for Qoheleth there
is no life after death” (122). Ecclesiastes’ view of life’s vanity, God’s remoteness, and
death’s finality distance it from mainline Christian thinking.

In fact, the extent of this distance has caused – and continues to cause – some to
question the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the biblical canon. Herbert Marks, in a Norton
Critical edition of the KJV Old Testament, suggests that Ecclesiastes likely would not
have been included in the Bible were it not for its attribution to King Solomon and its
pious five-verse addendum:

Three biblical books were ascribed to Solomon by the editors who added
the late superscriptions: Song of Songs, traditionally supposed to be the
work of his youth; Proverbs, the work of his middle years; and
Ecclesiastes, the work of his disenchanted old age. The principal themes
of the last—the futility of ambition and wisdom, the randomness of
fortune, the remoteness of God, the finality of death—run counter to the
main tenets of biblical theology and ethics, and without the fiction of
Solomonic authorship and the orthodox coda […] it is unlikely that the book would have been admitted to the canon. (1156)

Textual evidence indicates that Solomon could not have written Ecclesiastes, but the claim to Solomonic authorship comes in the book’s first verse: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The coda, contrary to the main vein of Qoheleth’s arguments, presents the traditional wisdom formula, trying to square Qoheleth with biblical theology: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment” (12:14-5). With these two observations, Marks shows Ecclesiastes as both Christian and unorthodox: its canonical inclusion recommends its divine inspiration, but the addendum contradicts the book’s primary claims.

Since God is mostly inscrutable, the future primarily unchangeable, and death inevitable and final, Ecclesiastes focuses most of its guidance on everyday living. This focus on the quotidian leads Qoheleth to suggest that almost the only thing he can know for sure about God is that God encourages people to eat and drink well within a loving community. In Ecclesiastes’ most thesis-like prescription, Qoheleth urges people to take advantage of God’s everyday gifts:

- eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all
the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest. (9:7-9)

Because death ends everyone’s ability to enjoy, Qoheleth still sees life as vanity. However, during “all the days of the life of thy vanity,” humans can enjoy simple pleasures and loving relationships. And, according to Qoheleth, God accepts joy and love as some of the best things for humans to do in their limited lives. Ecclesiastes 11:7 extends Qoheleth’s celebration of enjoyment to another of life’s simple pleasures, that of the sun’s natural beauty: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.” Qoheleth advocates a similar carpe-diem ethic six other times in the book’s twelve chapters, including this famous phrasing in 8:15: “a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” – an obvious precursor to the expression “eat, drink, and be merry!”

Beyond a simply hedonic carpe-diem exhortation, however, Qoheleth sees community as integral to the good life because of its mutual advantages and its acknowledgement of human interdependence. Although often reserved for Christian weddings, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 applies at least equally, and probably more so, to friendship: “Two are better than one; […] or if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him.” This mutuality provides a call to community that doesn’t depend purely on pleasure. And in fact Qoheleth argues that placing too much emphasis on things traditionally associated with pleasure, specifically
money and possessions, ultimately fails to satisfy: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (5:10). Relatedly, many interpreters consider Ecclesiastes 11:1-2 – “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth” – as a call for a kind of karmic charity, encouraging giving in times of prosperity in case a person requires assistance in times of need (e.g., Brown, C. L. Seow, even Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his 1819 West-östlicher Diwan). While each of these recommendations maintains an element of self-interest, each also encourages kindness, giving, and communal support.

Again beyond unreflective carpe-diem philosophies, Qoheleth presents a nuanced view of work and reward, further suggesting how acknowledging the reality of death helps people to live more fulfilling lives. Because money and possessions cannot ultimately make people happy, finding enjoyment in work is better than expecting enjoyment to come from the rewards of work. The second chapter of Ecclesiastes presents Qoheleth’s nuanced view. In amassing a great fortune, many maidens, and widespread fame as a wealthy man, Qoheleth comes to realize the meaninglessness of working toward a reward and becomes disenchanted with living: “Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit. […] For what hath man of all his labor, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun?” (2:18-22, my emphasis). On the other hand, in addition to enjoying food and drink, Qoheleth finds value in enjoying work for its own reward: “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he
should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (2:24, my emphasis). The distinction depends on the prepositions “of” and “in.”

When Qoheleth expects a reward to come out of or from his labor – in the form of monetary gain and the potential for delayed enjoyment – he hates life. When he accepts that a reward can only come in his labor – by enjoying the work itself and doing it well – he praises labor as a gift from God. Qoheleth’s celebration of work for its own sake reflects his persistent reminders of human mortality: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (9:10). People spend a large portion of their lives working, and if a person works only for profitable gain or for self-advantage, she wastes a chance to enjoy and wastes a significant amount of her limited life.

As evidenced by his honest search in chapter two to test the value of pleasure and possessions, Qoheleth’s epistemology depends on empirical evidence. He explains, “I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (2:3). Similarly, in chapter one, Qoheleth cites his autonomous observation as his basis for seeking the nature of life: “I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: […] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun” (1:13-4). Stemming from his honest observations, Qoheleth comes to view the world skeptically. Mark R. Sneed, in his *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes*, explains how this skepticism diverges from traditional Hebrew understandings of justice:
While Qohelet is skeptical about a number of things, the most shocking is his question of the doctrine of retribution, a fundamental principle underlying the Hebrew faith and especially the wisdom literature. This is the teaching that God punishes or rewards persons depending on their behavior. A pious, righteous lifestyle will be rewarded with success and prosperity, whereas wickedness will result in catastrophe and an early death. (4-5)

The book of Proverbs contains many instances of this deed-consequence formula – a hallmark of wisdom literature – promising God’s reward for good actions and punishment for bad ones. For example, Proverbs 3:33 reads, “The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just.” Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, recognizes that life oftentimes doesn’t follow a system of moral reciprocity. Using some of the same language as Proverbs 3:33, Ecclesiastes 7:15 responds with a contrary example: “there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness.” Qoheleth again identifies this injustice in 8:14: “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said this also is vanity.”

Rigorous observation leads Qoheleth to see the world’s injustices and to challenge unreflective declarations that good actions will always be rewarded and evil ones will always be punished. Moreover, Joseph Blenkinsopp sees the book’s unorthodoxy as an
essential reason for including Ecclesiastes in the canon: “It is of the greatest interest that those responsible for the final selection of texts in the Hebrew Bible have left in this critique of wisdom, including theological wisdom, from the inside; and it certainly did not happen by oversight” (78). For those responsible for the formation and final compilation of the canon, the advantage of including a text like Ecclesiastes, which challenges mainline biblical views, comes in its message – from within the Bible itself – to avoid overconfidence or prideful certainty.

While Qoheleth repeatedly points to counterexamples against the proverbial claim that good people will be rewarded and evil people punished, he finds moderate advantages in traditional righteousness, including work, wisdom, and love. Though work cannot guarantee success, finding enjoyment in work offers a reward of its own. Although wisdom can lead to unhappiness – “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (1:18) – Qoheleth advocates it: “Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. […] Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men” (4:13, 7:19). And while righteousness cannot secure prosperity or a long life, it can provide community advantages in the midst of life’s vanity. Qoheleth’s reflections on wisdom show how wisdom (and work, righteousness, joy) can be both advantageous and meaningless. He sees the wise as better than fools, but knows that death ends both of their lives: “Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man’s eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all” (2:13-14). Similarly, Qoheleth follows his most explicit call
to love with a reminder of life’s vanity: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity” (9:9). Life remains vain and ephemeral for two spouses in love, but love adds to the joys of living.

Death makes each of these values temporary, but motivates self-reflection and a more satisfying joy. Marks claims that rather than leading to despair, “it is finally life’s ‘vanity’ that makes it precious” (1173). Brown, likewise, outlines how acknowledging death can encourage living. In his response to what could seem like a contradiction in Ecclesiastes 7:2-3 – “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better” – Brown explains the relationship between death and joy:

Death must be accepted fully, the sage contends, in order to live the good life, however minimal it may seem. Otherwise, life would be a sham, a perpetual state of denial before the inevitable. Joy that is not born of sorrow is artificial[,] …] such joy, born from grief, is resilient to the harsh realities of life, much in contrast to the merriment of fools, whose perception is woefully limited. Without confronting our finitude, Qoheleth claims, we lose our capacity for joy. (73-74)

Qoheleth makes the point explicitly in Ecclesiastes 11:8: “But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.” Like the speaker of Wendell Berry’s 1973 poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” Qoheleth asks readers to “be joyful / though you have considered all
the facts” (lines 38-9). And at its best, Ecclesiastes’ commitment to joy as the highest good can provide motivation for ensuring that all people, in their limited lives, have legitimate access to the ability to enjoy.

Finally, Ecclesiastes’ literary style includes fragments and contradictions, poems, and a first-person-journey narrative. Brown suggests that Qoheleth cites pieces of traditional wisdom to “reexamine conventional norms and values dialogically,” and that he uses contradictions to parallel his philosophy: “[contradictions] seem to serve the didactic purpose of subverting facile interpretations of his discourse and heightening the larger ambiguity that engulfs the book. Finding a uniform, determinate meaning in Ecclesiastes is as elusive as securing enduring gain was for the sage” (12). Norbert Lohfink suggests that the chiastic structure of Ecclesiastes – including the vanity frame and two framing poems – demonstrates the intentional literary craft of the book (8). Craig C. Bartholomew emphasizes the effect of this literary presentation. He claims that Qoheleth’s first-person-journey narrative allows Ecclesiastes to resist conveying a clear, easy message in a way that a more explicitly kerygmatic text could not:

In my view scholars continually fall into the trap of leveling Qohelet toward his hebel pole, or toward his carpe diem-affirmation-of-joy pole. This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it embodies. […] The book is about the struggle to live with and resolve the agonized tension between these two poles. (93)
Ecclesiastes’ literary style supplements its philosophical claims of life’s vanity and uncertainty, while encouraging readers to follow Qoheleth’s example in reflecting honestly on their lives.

While seen as a particularly strange text within the Christian canon – Crenshaw calls it “the Bible’s strangest book” (23) – it’s worth noting that Ecclesiastes provides a reminder that many other parts of the Bible also engage in discussions of joy and make countercultural claims. A recent collection of essays titled The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life suggests the role all of the Bible might play in pursuing happiness. Editor Brent A. Strawn’s opening and closing essays suggest rethinking contemporary understandings of happiness in terms of positive psychology – to include not only pleasure, but also virtue and meaning – in seeking the good life through reflective Bible reading. Strawn relates the human search for happiness to the happiness of God: “happiness is […] God’s mother tongue. God is happy […] and necessarily so […]. Divine happiness, moreover, is directly related to the happiness—the flourishing—of the human and nonhuman worlds. The biblical authors knew this” (322). Regarding the revolutionary power of the Bible, Walter Brueggemann’s Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture explores various ways the Bible as a whole – not just Ecclesiastes – speaks back to institutions of established power. Brueggemann cites in the Old Testament “song[s], oracle[s], and narrative[s] that continually subvert official truth,” and in the New Testament “Jesus and his followers [as] a community that regularly and with great risk subverts and bewilders the establishment” (3). Consequently, more of the Bible than just
Ecclesiastes could motivate – historically has motivated, and at its best continues to motivate – Christians to help alleviate poverty, violence, and injustice in the world. However, while other Christian voices echo Ecclesiastes, the mainstream-Christian view sees Ecclesiastes as a strange book and often seeks to explain or correct it. On the other hand, many late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary voices celebrated Ecclesiastes’ strangeness and contradictions as they played a major role in leading these writers to the biblical book, especially when the book’s strangeness presents a challenge to comfortable, mainline Christianity from within the tradition itself.

The Bible and Literature

Before turning to the late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century fascination with Ecclesiastes specifically, I suggest that an initial reason for Ecclesiastes’ popularity depends on the general influence of the Christian Bible on Western literature and culture at large. As already noted, Bloom calls the Bible “a basic source of American Literature” (23). James Barr, in *The Bible in the Modern World*, sees the Bible’s influence in all of Western literature: “As a literary work, the Bible has been a supreme source of inspiration and imagery; it has been one of the basic underlying ‘myths’ of our literature, perhaps indeed the most important such myth” (55). In his work on Yeats and the Bible, Dwight H. Purdy reveals that in addition to providing inspiration for authors, readers were almost certain to make biblical connections: “one ought never to underestimate how familiar with the Bible were people born before 1900, which includes of course all of the modernists” (23, his emphasis). In his 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye calls the Bible “the main source for undisplaced myth in our tradition” (140), and later, in his 1981
The Great Code: The Bible and Literature, Frye offers a broad analysis of the Bible’s influence.

The Great Code, which Frye describes as “a book concerned with the impact of the Bible on the creative imagination” (xxi), provides several reasons, beyond its general prevalence, for the Bible’s literary popularity. Frye begins with his observations about teaching literature and the necessity of knowing the Bible: “I soon realized that a student of English literature who does not know the Bible does not understand a good deal of what is going on in what he reads” (xii). Frye asks especially in the second half of his book, “What in the Bible particularly attracts poets and other creative artists of the Western world?” (106). I find these three of Frye’s answers especially relevant: 1) the establishment in ancient Israel of a book as the primary cultural achievement, 2) the association between God, words, creation, and poetry, and 3) the allusive model of the Bible itself, which borrows its own types to produce antitypes. First, the ancient Near-Eastern Israelites, in part because they were often banished from their homeland and their holy temple was destroyed twice, were forced to elevate a sacred book to a unique status: “it was the heathen kingdoms that produced the really impressive temples and palaces, while the Israelites produced a book. This doubtless seemed at best only a consolation prize to people who thought of buildings as more substantial than words, but history has long since reversed such a perspective” (Frye 200). History has reversed this perspective largely because the Bible gained its extensive influence. For writers invested in securing their own historical reputations, the Bible provides a model of success and also, not coincidentally, often a source of material.
Second, like many other critics, Frye sees a historical association between God and poets and suggests two main ways the Bible encourages this association through its creation accounts. He writes, “Critics from Elizabethan times at least have noted the analogy between God as Creator and the poet, whose name means ‘maker’” (112). This fits especially in a culture whose most important myth describes creation as a speech act. In Genesis 1:3 God speaks the world into being: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” Similarly, the gospel of John emphasizes the creative function of the Word/logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. […] All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (1:1-3). Frye points to Genesis as the type and John as the antitype, each establishing words as intricate to creation and claiming the power of words to create, and later – when employed by imitating, godlike literary artists – to recreate, reality.

Third, in addition to noting the parallel creation accounts in Genesis and John, The Great Code provides an extensive typology in which the Bible itself provides the first instances of allusions to the Bible. Frye acknowledges that the Bible more closely resembles a library than a single book. However, he claims that it reads – and that it has been read – from beginning to end as a specifically arranged and unified work of art, which contains a “striking […] capacity for self re-creation” (225). Frye gives several examples of this allusive, typological relationship, and focuses particularly on the relationship between of the Old Testament story of Moses (type) and the New Testament story of Jesus (antitype):
the resurrection of Christ, around which the New Testament revolves, must be, from the New Testament’s point of view, the antitype of the Exodus. [...] the birth of Jesus is a threatened birth: Herod orders a massacre of infants in Bethlehem from which Jesus alone escapes. Moses similarly escapes from an attempt to destroy Hebrew children. [...] Moses organizes the twelve tribes of Israel; Jesus gathers twelve disciples. [...] The law is given from Mount Sinai and the gospel preached in the Sermon on the Mount. [...] The Gospels could hardly be more careful than they are to synchronize the Crucifixion with the feast of the Passover, to make it utterly clear that the Passion, as they saw it, was the antitype of the Passover sacrifice. (172-3)

While clearly not all literary allusions to the Bible take this formulaic approach, Frye helpfully shows that allusion to the Bible exists in the Bible. Frye also suggests that this precedent, especially in a book that greatly influenced Western culture and its ideas about what literature is and how to create it, established an atmosphere in which allusion to the Bible has flourished.

**Ecclesiastes’ Modern Literary, Economic, and Philosophical Sensibilities**

Ecclesiastes’ compatibility with realism, naturalism, and modernism depends largely on its literary assumptions, and parallel economic situations and the book’s compatibility with contemporary science and philosophy solidified Ecclesiastes’ late-nineteenth and twentieth-century popularity. Frye spends a number of pages on Ecclesiastes highlighting Qoheleth’s honesty: “the main author’s courage and honesty are
not to be defused. [...] He is not a weary pessimist tired of life: he is a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind” (123).

And while Frye doesn’t use this example specifically, Ecclesiastes fits his type-antitype hypothesis. Proverbs exists as the traditional type describing a moral-reciprocity wisdom formula and Ecclesiastes provides the antitype, questioning Proverbs’ views on reward and punishment through the same genre of wisdom literature. More than any other, this aspect of Ecclesiastes accounts for the book’s literary popularity in the US following romanticism. Responding to romanticism, subsequent US-literary movements were invested in showing the world as it is. While the stylistic representation varies widely from naturalism and realism to modernism – and I discuss Ecclesiastes’ relationship to each of these movements in my chapters – the periods share aesthetically philosophical beliefs about trying to capture the world as it is rather than in an ideal state. By challenging the conventional deed-consequence wisdom found in most of the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes parallels realistic critiques of romanticism by showing that in the real world goodness isn’t always rewarded and wickedness isn’t always punished.

The literary development of naturalism, realism, and modernism occurred alongside social realities similar to developments during the time of Ecclesiastes’ composition. Shared socio-economic developments help to account for Ecclesiastes growing popularity in the late-nineteenth century. In her essay “The American Novel: Realism and Naturalism (1860-1920),” Jeanne Campbell Reesman notes the influence of the Industrial Revolution on these movements, and specifically the “shocking exploitation of natural resources and workers and the slums” (44). She claims that these
economic realities led socially conscious people and literary voices in particular to challenge both the inequalities of the system and the enlightenment idea of the progress of human morality: “naturalism distinctly critiques the industrial wealth of the bourgeoisie and articulates a sense of despair in the face of economic and biological forces too powerful to be reformed, as was the hope of the liberal-minded in the nineteenth century and the dream of the New World” (43). While the Industrial Revolution created exploitative working conditions it also, in bringing people to cities, led to more awareness of those conditions.

This time of economic revolution in the United States relates to the economic situation near the time of Ecclesiastes’ composition. While biblical scholars suggest two different time periods for the likely composition of Ecclesiastes (450-330 BCE in the Persian period or 330-180 BCE in the Hellenistic period), the main economic arguments for dating the book stem from conditions similar to those at the end of nineteenth century in the US. C. L. Seow, who dates the book between 450 and 330 BCE, suggests that Ecclesiastes was produced in a time of significant economic change: “The period in question was one of tremendous economic growth, spurred on in no small part by the introduction of standardized coinage by the Persian central government” (New Oxford 944). Scholars who date the book in the Hellenistic Period between 330-180 BCE base their arguments primarily on Greek influences (e.g., Lohfink, Bartholomew), and Bartholomew squares the discrepancy between dates by suggesting that Persian economic circumstances persisted into the Hellenistic period (57). Brown ties the economic
circumstances to a “spiritual anguish of the times” (7) reflected in Ecclesiastes’ views on life’s uncertainty:

the book of Ecclesiastes was produced during the time of cultural malaise that gripped much of the ancient world beginning with the Persian period [539-337 BCE]. It was a time of turbulent socioeconomic change that prompted many to question the wisdom of the past. […] A] new market-driven economy of global proportions emerged, complete with many entrepreneurial opportunities. Yet such rapid growth did not benefit all people equally. Those who already had extensive capital outlays possessed unprecedented opportunity for cultivating greater assets. Those with lesser means, however, were at a distinct disadvantage. (7-9)

Like the Industrial Revolution, which gave some middle-class people opportunities for economic growth while creating additional risks for exploited laborers, the market-driven economy beginning in, or just before, Qoheleth’s time created similar economic inequalities and fears. The awareness of this inequality played a large role for Qoheleth as it did for realists and naturalists.

Along with these nineteenth- and twentieth-century economic conditions, scientific and philosophical developments in the period contributed to Ecclesiastes’ attractiveness. Reesman claims that socio-economic developments in the late-nineteenth century, later paired with World War I, led to a general feeling of meaninglessness: “Between the Great Panic of the 1890s, which left unheard-of masses of people out of work, and the terrors of World War I, there developed literature of great scope and
diversity, as naturalism and post-World War I modernism mingled loss of meaning with the horrors of war” (52-3). This loss of easily identifiable, traditionally understood meaning began most drastically with Charles Darwin’s work on the origins of life: “the most important force behind naturalism was Darwinian thought. Life as a series of events governed by natural selection proposed in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) suggested that the strong survive and the weak are destroyed: this notion ran counter to religion and genteel morality, including reformism. The middle classes and the Church were incensed” (Reesman 51). While replacing moral reciprocity with an amoral might-makes-right conclusion runs counter to many mainstream religious views, it doesn’t exactly run counter to Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth, in fact, rejects both options for making sense of the world: “there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and […] the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” (7:15, 9:11). But Qoheleth also argues fairly consistently with Darwinian selection, as he does in the conclusion of verse 9:11, “time and chance happeneth to them all.”

In addition to Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud established philosophical conditions markedly consistent with Ecclesiastes’ worldview. Describing the philosophical backdrop of modernism in his essay “Modernism and the American Novel,” Peter L. Hays explains the combined influence of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud:

Darwin had hinted that God was irrelevant, and Nietzsche pronounced God dead. Freud, like Darwin, linked us down to animals in our underlying drives and desires, not up to angels. […] After Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, modern writers were much less likely to reward
virtue and punish vice, as Dickens and Twain had done. Their literary works were less plot-dominated and more psychologically oriented, placing less emphasis on what happened than on why it happened, a movement already apparent in the fiction of Henry James. (61)

Like Hays’ modern writers, Ecclesiastes contains a series of internal, autonomous philosophical reflections rather than a traditionally plot-dominated narrative. And like Darwin and Freud, Qoheleth sets humans on the same plane as animals: “they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:18-20).

While Qoheleth doesn’t share Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death, Ecclesiastes is largely compatible with that proclamation because it focuses less on God’s imminence than does much of the Bible. And, like Nietzsche, Ecclesiastes questions received wisdom. While Jessica N. Berry’s *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* never explicitly cites Ecclesiastes as an influence on Nietzsche, it argues for Nietzsche as a skeptic in an ancient tradition, thereby highlighting a relationship between Nietzschean and Qohelutian skepticism. Berry offers in her conclusion these lines from Nietzsche’s 1895 *The Anti-Christ*: “‘Convictions are prisons. […] Where basic issues about value or lack of value are concerned, people with conviction do not come into consideration. […] If you are going to talk about value and lack of value, you need to see five hundred convictions beneath you,—behind you” (his emphasis, qtd. in Berry 211). Convictions
that blind a person to life’s realities create the same obstructive limitations for Nietzsche as an unreflective acceptance of received wisdom does for Qoheleth. In addition to sharing Nietzsche’s late-nineteenth-century skepticism, Qoheleth’s empiricism also anticipated Darwin’s honest observations in response to what he saw in the world. Furthermore, Qoheleth’s critical approach to the world allows for reevaluating the Genesis creation accounts in light of new scientific discoveries without necessarily abandoning a belief in God.

**Gilgamesh and the Reevaluation of Religious Authority**

Few biblical books are as compatible with a reevaluation of religious authority as is Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth’s constant questioning of received wisdom fits with the revolutionary science, philosophy, and psychoanalysis – especially that of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud – that demanded new understandings of traditional religious views. Relatedly, nineteenth-century developments from within biblical studies also led to new religious understandings. Specifically, source criticism on the literary origins of the Bible focused on the human elements of the Bible’s composition. Historical- and source-critical readings of the Bible, which began in the Enlightenment, gained significant momentum with the 1872 rediscovery of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Most obviously, *Gilgamesh* includes the flood story of Utanapishtim that reads much like the Genesis flood story of Noah. Theodore Ziolkowski’s *Gilgamesh Among Us* provides a brief history of *Gilgamesh*’s rediscovery and the resulting increased interest in the Bible’s composition: after archeologists found and deciphered the epic and George Smith delivered lectures and partial translations in the 1870s, *Gilgamesh* received considerable attention in the
London *Times* and *The New York Times* (23-4). Building on the possible non-biblical origins of the Genesis flood story, Peter Jensen’s 1906 book *Das Gilgamesh-Epos in der Weltliteratur* argues for *Gilgamesh*’s nearly ubiquitous influence on the Bible. Ziolkowski writes, “Jensen sets out to demonstrate that Moses is the Gilgamesh of Exodus. […] He goes on for a thousand pages to depict parallels between Gilgamesh and Abraham, Isaac, Samson, David, and various other biblical figures and arrives inevitably at Jesus, who turns out to be ‘nothing but an Israelite Gilgamesh’ (1029)” (26). While Jensen may have exaggerated *Gilgamesh*’s influence, the epic resonates throughout the Bible and provides powerful evidence for its position as a source text. More importantly, *Gilgamesh* also substantiates the claim that the Bible has source texts other than the divine word of God.

Because it contributed to source-critical work on the Bible and because Ecclesiastes and *Gilgamesh* share several themes, the timely rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* accounts for some of Ecclesiastes’ popularity starting in the late-nineteenth century. In his gloss of Jensen’s work, Ziolkowski includes Qoheleth only in the phrase “various other biblical figures,” but Brown suggests the likelihood that *Gilgamesh* heavily influenced the composition of Ecclesiastes. Brown identifies Gilgamesh and Qoheleth as unsurpassed kings, men “of joy and woe,” and seekers of meaning: “Gilgamesh and Qoheleth find themselves on essentially the same journey, namely, to find meaning within the finitude of existence” (1). The epic tells the story of King Gilgamesh and his rival-turned-friend Enkidu, a wild man created by the gods as Gilgamesh’s equal. After defeating Enkidu in battle, Gilgamesh befriends Enkidu and they journey together to face
the monstrous Humbaba. Before battling Humbaba, Enkidu offers Gilgamesh this encouragement: “A three-ply rope cannot be cut.” “The mighty lion—two cubs can roll him over” (qtd. in Brown 4). Gilgamesh and Enkidu anticipate Qohelet’s investment in community with nearly the same language; compare Enkidu’s advice to Qohelet’s: “if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (4:12, my emphasis).

Gilgamesh and Enkidu prevail over Humbaba, but Enkidu later dies and Gilgamesh realizes his own mortality. Worried about death, Gilgamesh seeks out the wise Utanapishtim, survivor of the flood, in hopes of finding immortality. On his journey, Gilgamesh meets a women tavern owner who offers him this everyday advice, which again anticipates Ecclesiastes: “When the gods created mankind, Death for mankind they set aside [...] Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly, / Make thou merry by day and by night. / Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing, / [...] Let thy garments be sparkling fresh, / Thy head be washed; [...] Let thy spouse delight in they bosom! / For this is the task of [humanity]!” (qtd. in Brown 5). While Gilgamesh ignores this advice at first and continues to Utanapishtim, he eventually returns home without immortality, “yet,” according to Brown, “now willing to embrace his mortality and live within the glory of the ordinary” (6). Brown concludes by highlighting both sages’ appreciation for everyday living: “Like Gilgamesh, Qoheleth comes back from his investigative journey empty-handed, but with renewed appreciation for his ‘vain life’” (7). While not everyone would have recognized these Gilgamesh-Ecclesiastes parallels at the turn of the twentieth
century, the religious and cultural interest in *Gilgamesh* contributed to interest in Ecclesiastes’ ideas as well.

In part due to the rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* in 1872 and the *Instruction of Amenemope* in 1888— an Egyptian text that probably influenced the book of Proverbs— Bartholomew claims that source-critical work on the biblical wisdom literature, including Ecclesiastes, fully began in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bartholomew points specifically to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century work of Siegfried (1898), Laue (1900), and McNeile (1904) as the period when Ecclesiastes’ source criticism developed most significantly (35). The development of biblical source criticism is worth noting because it illustrates the move away from reading the Bible as a book written word-for-word by God, an assumption on which Ecclesiastes doesn’t particularly depend. At the very least, the ideas presented in Ecclesiastes depend less than other biblical books on divine infallibility, and this is especially true when Ecclesiastes challenges other biblical books. Furthermore, this source-critical history shows biblical scholars’ elevated interest in Ecclesiastes in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century: an interest matched by the elevated interest in Ecclesiastes of literary authors writing during the same period.

Additional religious interest in Ecclesiastes followed from a resurgent fascination with the problem of evil in response to Darwin’s work. As Eric Carl Link notes in his essay “The Theodicy Problem in the Works of Frank Norris,” the late-nineteenth century saw dozens of treatises on theodicy. The problem of theodicy, formed from the Greek words *theos* meaning god and *dikē* meaning justice, results from the seeming imbalance of 1) God’s absolute goodness, 2) God’s unlimited power, and 3) the reality of evil.
These tenets of God and evil’s existence have been debated for centuries, at least as early as fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius’s *De ira Dei (A Treatise on the Anger of God)*, but, as Link points out, their frequency increased starting around the 1880s. Link lists several essays on theodicy from the period, including an 1879 article in *The Catholic World* titled “On Evil,” Samuel Z. Beam’s 1892 essay “The Mystery of Evil in the Natural World,” and William James’s 1895 essay “Is Life Worth Living?” (92-5). Link credits Darwin for this resurgence: “Darwinian evolution provided a mechanism (natural selection) for explaining the descent of man without requiring the intervention of a transcendent teleology. But the process of natural selection involved incalculable violence in nature” (92). In addition to challenging biblical creation myths, Darwin’s ideas about evolution demanded that theodicy responses provide “justification for continuing to characterize God as benevolent and omnipotent despite the harsh and violent implications of natural selection” (97). Resulting from theodicy’s newfound scientific aspect, Link explains that in addition to religious periodicals on theodicy, “one finds numerous articles in more secular, academic journals as well, and many of the major philosophers of science of the era chimed in on the question, including Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Fiske, three of the principal influences on the literary naturalists” (97). Link’s association of theodicy with literary naturalism, shows the compatibility of Ecclesiastes’ theodicy with the views of late-nineteenth-century naturalist writers.

Sneed dedicates a chapter of his *The Politics of Pessimism* to Ecclesiastes’ theodicy. He shows how Ecclesiastes’ view accommodates Darwinism by, as Sneed
phrases it, “essentially dissolving” the theodicy problem (185). Qoheleth summarizes his thoughts on justice in the verse Crane twice alludes to and that Glasgow uses as an epigraph. The verse ends with the claim, “time and chance happeneth to them all” (9:11). Life provides no justice, only chance. Qoheleth conveys this similarly in his discussion of oppression in chapter four: “So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter” (4:1). These kinds of comments – conveying skepticism about divine justice – provide Qoheleth’s primary contribution to the question of theodicy:

Qohelet’s favorite way of treating the problem of evil is to deny God’s justice, though certainly not openly! […] It perplexes Qohelet that the righteous and wise seem to fare badly, while the wicked live long and prosper. Qoheleth resolves this problem by referring to God’s eventual judgment but implying simultaneously that God’s standards of judgment are beyond human comprehension. Thus, the component of the trilemma on which Qohelet fixates to resolve the tension created by the theodicy problem is God’s benevolence. But he does it in such a way as to avoid directly implicating God in evil or malevolence. […] Qoheleth’s strategy essentially dissolves the theodicy problem away. It disappears because Qohelet no longer has to defend God’s justice since it cannot be comprehended. With the problem dissolved, Qoheleth can go on to other things. (Sneed 184-5)
While claiming that God’s justice cannot be understood in human terms may prove unsatisfying, it fits with the similarly hard to understand relationship between the seeming waste of natural selection on the one hand, and the sentient life produced by it on the other. And Sneed rightly demonstrates that this resolution allows Qoheleth to focus on other things: “Qohelet provides no certain promise of reward for any style of behavior. He does, however, provide wise counsel that may increase one’s chances of good success, such as living cautiously, moderately, and enjoying the present instead of depending on long-term possibilities” (202). Qoheleth’s quick resolution of the theodicy problem paired with his serious acknowledgement of the world’s injustices made his views popular in a world recently fascinated by the violence of evolution and the decline of religious authority. By refusing to say that God will resolve the problem of evil in the future, Qoheleth can instead focus on living a good life in everyday moments that doesn’t depend on trying to understand a largely unknowable God or on trying to see into a mostly uncertain future.

The Widespread Popularity of The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

On the success of Edmund Fitzgerald’s 1859 translation, The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám – which Wharton places in her heroine Lily Bart’s travel bag in The House of Mirth – saw immense popularity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The Rubáiyát shares several themes with Ecclesiastes, and these parallels added to Qoheleth’s popularity, particularly with authors appealing to a culture mesmerized by Omar Khayyám. Most notably, The Rubáiyát shares Ecclesiastes’ carpe-diem philosophy: “Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup / Before Life’s Liquor in its Cup be dry. […]"
You know how little while we have to stay, / And, once departed, may return no more.

[…] While you live, Drink!—for once dead you never shall return.” (lines 7-8, 11-12, 136). Among life’s enjoyable things for both Qoheleth and Khayyám are companionship and love, especially when enjoyed alongside good food and drink. In *The Rubáiyát* Khayyám calls his lover to join him in the wilderness: “But come with old Khayyam, […] Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, / A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse— and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness— / And Wilderness Is Paradise enow” (lines 33, 41-44). Khayyám describes joy among lovers as paradisiacal and Qoheleth agrees: while their lives last, humans should enjoy simple, good things in life with someone they love.

Several early-twentieth-century writers explicitly connected *The Rubáiyát* to Ecclesiastes. In addition to the connection drawn in the title of George Sparks’ 1900 essay “The Hebrew ‘Rubáiyát,'” Sparks calls Ecclesiastes “the ‘Rubáiyát’ of the Old Testament” (415), and goes on to briefly emphasize the similarity of Qoheleth and Khayyám’s comments on death, focusing on Khayyám reflection, “Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, / Before we, too, into the Dust descend; / Dust unto Dust and under Dust to lie, / Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and—sans End!” (lines 49-52). Qoheleth uses much of the same dust imagery: “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). Even more significantly, Sparks ignores *The Rubáiyát* after these three initial references. This shows the prevalence of *The Rubáiyát* in the US cultural awareness: Sparks feels compelled to evoke *The Rubáiyát* and its connection to Ecclesiastes – even featuring that connection in the essay’s title – even though his essay
focuses not on Ecclesiastes-<i>Rubáiyát</i> parallels but on a fairly straightforward analysis of Ecclesiastes.

Further highlighting <i>The Rubáiyát</i>’s popularity and its link to Ecclesiastes, John Franklin Genung’s 1901 essay-length book <i>Ecclesiastes and Omar Khayyám: A Note for the Spiritual Temper of our Time</i> claims that <i>The Rubáiyát</i> was, in 1901, “on every center-table” (4). Genung adds to the books’ parallels their shared view that humans cannot know the future. Later, in his 1904 Ecclesiastes commentary, Genung connects Ecclesiastes’ modern appeal to Khayyám:

Koheleth’s counsels are eminently timely; and as it has advanced, the feeling has deepened that no former age, probably, has so nearly possessed Koheleth’s combination as does our era of hospitable science, tolerant faith, honored industry. Surely, a generation which has found a gospel in Omar Khayyám may walk congenially with this nobler product of the same spiritual vein. (159)

Finally, William Forbush’s 1906 <i>Ecclesiastes in the Metre of Omar</i> translates Ecclesiastes into verse resembling that of <i>The Rubáiyát</i>, and the introduction calls Ecclesiastes “the most modern book in the Bible” (3). Forbush states, “For certain inevitable moods it is a distinct tonic, and it has a message for a few souls found in no other Scripture” (3). For those in the habit of reading <i>The Rubáiyát</i>, Ecclesiastes had a contemporary message compatible with the spirit of the times.

Twenty-first century scholars confirm the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century popularity of <i>The Rubáiyát</i>, especially in the United States. Michelle Kaiserlian’s
essay “Omar sells: American advertisements based on The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, c. 1910-1920” illustrates Khayyám’s popularity in the US. By identifying the role The Rubáiyát played in marketing, Kaiserlian also suggests Ecclesiastes’s attractiveness for authors trying to sell books. Kaiserlian considers in detail two 1910s marketing campaigns that employed what she calls “Omariana,” one designed to sell Crane’s chocolates, the other American Tobacco’s line of Omar Khayyám cigarettes. Kaiserlian claims that Khayyám’s popularity led to the success of these campaigns: “Omar ads responded to the cultural phenomenon of Omariana by relying on the public’s familiarity with the text itself and contributing to the popular persona that had already formed around the imagined Omar. [...] Advertisers of these products drew on themes presented in the text, including Khayyám’s prescription to live in the moment and his penchant for worldly pleasures” (257). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Omar Khayyám held a level of popularity similar to sports superstars featured in ads at the beginning of the twenty-first. Given The Rubáiyát’s parallels with Ecclesiastes, its popularity increased Ecclesiastes’ popularity, and made alluding to Ecclesiastes similarly marketable and widely recognizable.

Mehdi Aminrazavi’s The Wine of Wisdom: The Life, Poetry, and Philosophy of Omar Khayyám claims Khayyám’s primacy among Eastern influences on the West. Aminrazavi writes, “There are very few non-Western figures who rivaled the fame of Omar Khayyam in the West. [...] His Ruba’iyyat became a household name from the 1870’s to the 1950’s and were discussed by the likes of Mark Twain, Ezra Pound and the public at large” (1-2). Aminrazavi points to the existence of the Omar Khayyám Club of
America, which operated from 1900 to 1936 and published 18 works between 1906 and 1921. He then illustrates Khayyám’s influence on Twain, Eliot, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, claiming Emerson changed his position on Khayyám from dislike to appreciation (230-263). Aminrazavi’s comments on the mixed Western response to *The Rubáiyát* suggest another reason for the increased attention given to Ecclesiastes.

Aminrazavi sees *The Rubáiyát* as a driving force in sacred-secular debates:

Omar Khayyam’s Ruba’iyyat became a powerful symbol for the debate between puritanical Christianity and secularism in the West. For the defenders of the Christian West Khayyam became the symbol of the ‘Other,’ the pagan heretic poet who was bent on weakening the moral fabric of the society by prescribing hedonism. […]n no uncertain terms he advocated drinking wine and making love amidst the uncertainty of life after death. He became the antichrist to the orthodox Christianity, the protagonist in the drama of the Christian West against the secular West.

(2)

To honestly explore whether or not “drinking wine and making love amidst the uncertainty of life after death” fits with Christianity, secularists and Christians both had to turn to Ecclesiastes.

In fact, in an increasingly secular society with an increasingly suspicious view of traditional religious authority, much of Ecclesiastes’ attractiveness depends on its potential as a bridge text either to connect the sacred and the secular or to serve as a point of departure from the sacred to the secular or the secular to the sacred. Qoheleth’s
skepticism about divine interest in the world and his practical focus on living better
everyday lives accounts for much of the book’s popularity. But the fact that Ecclesiastes
is also a biblical book adds to its popularity for people invested in Christianity, as well as
those interested by Ecclesiastes’ challenges to Christianity. Sparks’s 1900 essay draws
attention to the contemporary interest in Ecclesiastes: “[Joseph Ernest] Renan, in modern
times, with the delightful modesty which characterizes many agnostics, pronounces it as
the only altogether charming book that a Jew has ever written” (416). Sparks goes on to
suggest Ecclesiastes’ ability to operate as either as a Christian or an agnostic text: “It
contains […] the creed of a Christian, if looked at from one point of view; if looked at
from another, it is the creed of the agnostic” (416). More recently, Lohfink’s commentary
claims essentially the same things Sparks claimed a hundred years earlier:

For many modern agnostics this book is the last bridge to the Bible. Some
Christians today find in Qoheleth a kind of back door—at once sinister
and highly esteemed—through which their minds can admit those
skeptical and melancholy sentiments that would be refused entry at portals
where cultivation of virtue and belief in the afterlife are inscribed on the
lintel. (1)

Agnostics who want to hold onto some sort of spirituality without contradicting
developments in science, philosophy, and psychoanalysis turn to Ecclesiastes as a text
compatible with those ideas. Christians who recognize the legitimacy of Darwin,
Nietzsche, and Freud are drawn to Ecclesiastes because it offers spiritual guidance from a
position compatible with modernity, skepticism, and melancholia. Even late-nineteenth
and early-twentieth-century atheists, who recognized the influence of the Bible on everyone in the US, not just especially religious people, and who wanted to use that influence for their purposes, turned to the biblical book most in line with their thinking and most suitable to expose, or at least to complicate, mainline Christianity.

**Ecclesiastes’ Parallels in Post-WWI Philosophy**

While less formative in the intellectual circumstances leading to Ecclesiastes’ popularity, post-WWI philosophy provides further evidence of Ecclesiastes’ modern compatibility. In his 1922 book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein echoes Ecclesiastes’ themes of life’s circularity and vanity: “In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value” (T 6.41). Wittgenstein’s rejection of value matches Qoheleth’s assertion of life’s vanity. Further, his view of the inevitability of experience relates to Qoheleth’s most famous passage in chapter three recognizing “a time to every purpose under heaven” (3:1) and Ecclesiastes’ opening poem about nature’s constancy: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again” (1:7). N. Verbin notes the connection between Ecclesiastes and Wittgenstein in his essay “The Ladder and the Cage: Wittgenstein, Qoheleth, and Quietism.” He argues that both Qoheleth and Wittgenstein reject traditional ideas about life’s meaning: “One does not inquire after the meaning of life, having realized that ‘the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem’ (T 6.521)” (480). Life is meaningless, but good things still remain for Qoheleth and Wittgenstein within
life’s meaninglessness: joy in the everyday for Qoheleth, “the desire for logic, ethics, the
transcendental” for Wittgenstein (Verbin 492).

Like Wittgenstein and Qoheleth, Albert Camus agrees that responsible
discussions of the meaning of life must begin by acknowledging that life has no inherent
meaning. Camus’s 1942 book-length essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* opens with the
assertion, “the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a
starting-point” (2). Similarly Qoheleth brackets his philosophy with *hebel*, beginning and
ending with the claim “all is vanity” (1:2, 12:8). Camus further aligns with Qoheleth in
his discussion of the inscrutability of the universe: “The absurd is born of this
confrontation between the human need [‘for happiness and for reason’] and the
unreasonable silence of the world” (28). Based on these and other Camus-Qoheleth
parallels, Michael V. Fox translates Qoheleth’s *hebel* as “absurd” rather than “vanity,”
emphatically declaring, “*Hebel* in Qohelet means ‘absurd,’ understood in the sense
described at length in Albert Camus’s classic description of the absurd, *The Myth of
Sisyphus*” (30). Fox notes the contradictory nature of the absurd and connects this to
Qoheleth’s reflections: “Life is saturated with absurdity: it is humanity’s condition of
existence. Connotations very similar to the absurd as Camus described adhere to
Qohelet’s use of *hebel*: alienation from the observed world; […] a frustrated longing for
coherence; a stale taste of repeated and meaningless events” (31). And yet, Camus too
finds reasons to exist in the midst of absurdity. He lives for consciousness: “To two men
living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences.
It is up to us to be conscious of them. Being aware of one’s life […] is living” (62-3).16
From a Christian-philosophical perspective, Paul Tillich, in his 1952 *The Courage to Be* – the preeminent work of Christian existentialism – recognizes a need for the “courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon oneself” (190). Tillich concludes differently from Qoheleth, but the fact that a Christian theologian feels compelled to address meaninglessness supports the theme’s twentieth-century prevalence. The religious and non-religious concern over “the anxiety of meaninglessness” also suggests reasons why people outside and inside Christianity were interested in Ecclesiastes. Tillich connects this interest specifically to modern artists and praises their ability to confront meaninglessness directly: “The creators of modern art have been able to see the meaninglessness of our existence; they participated in its despair. At the same time they have had the courage to face it and to express it” (147). Though much earlier than the artists Tillich identifies, Qoheleth demonstrates his proto-modernity by facing meaninglessness and expressing it, which again helps to account for modern artists’ eventual interest in Ecclesiastes.17

**Allusion and Intertextuality**

Because of the significant role allusion plays in my analysis, and because scholars have recently identified diverse and contrasting understandings of allusion and intertextuality (e.g., Gregory Machacek, William Irwin), I present here an operative theory of allusion on which to base my subsequent reflections. My suppositions form around two primary views: 1) allusions succeed most powerfully when readers recognize the source text and know its philosophical and aesthetic ideas, and 2) the most interesting allusions do something new with the source text rather than simply reproduce its ideas.
exactly. In his essay “What Is an Allusion?” William Irwin identifies three main aspects of an allusion: “Taken together as a whole, the indirect nature of the reference, the authorial intent, and the possibility of detection in principle amount to a sufficient condition for allusion” (294). I also keep in mind Gregory Machacek’s *PMLA* essay “Allusion,” in which he introduces “phraseological adaptations” to avoid what he sees as the secondary, derivative implications of terms like echo, borrowing, and influence (523). By insisting that the best allusions spin their sources for their own purposes and also that the ideas of the source text build important connections with readers, I hope to emphasize the creative primacy of both the original and the allusive text.

In order for a text to emphasize its source text, its audience must first be able to identify it. This audience-awareness aspect of an allusion’s successfulness required spending the bulk of my introduction on social reasons for Ecclesiastes’ popularity. Julia Kristeva’s original definition of “intertextuality” – a term she coined in 1966 while writing her doctoral dissertation in part on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work – stresses the social setting of a text’s production as an essential element in understanding the text. Graham Allen, in his *Intertextuality*, emphasizes the role social considerations play for both Kristeva and Bakhtin: “Bakhtin and Kristeva share […] an insistence that texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed. All texts, therefore, contain within them the ideological structures and struggles expressed in society through discourse” (35).¹⁸ Machacek explicitly connects Kristeva and Bakhtin’s interest in the social intertext to allusion: “Whether readers notice an allusion and how they interpret it once they do—these are culturally determined matters”
The Ecclesiastes-friendly social conditions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries account for the likelihood that audiences recognized and understood allusions to Ecclesiastes. This introduces a certain reader-response component into allusions. Roland Barthes – another primary theorist of intertextuality – points to reader-response elements in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”: “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (148).

The multiplicity of the text is focused in the reader, and so ultimately is the success or failure of the allusion, but this doesn’t entirely discount the role of authorial intention. In talking about the process of writing his 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco emphasizes his intention as an author: “I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books” (20). Eco claims that writers intend to “speak of other books.” In most of my examples it seems fairly clear that the writers have intentionally alluded to Ecclesiastes because they knew audiences would recognize the allusion and because they have used Ecclesiastes to develop characters, advance plots, and convey their philosophical aims. Irwin appropriately insists on artistic intention while recognizing the reader’s role: “the reader must play a vital role in his or her own understanding of an allusion. That understanding, however, if it is to be genuine, must be in accord with the author’s intent. If it is not, the reader is not understanding the allusion but creating something else” (293). Because of his insistence on authorial intention, Irwin adds the possibility of “accidental
associations” made by the reader but unintended by the author. Accidental associations may add significantly to a literary work but depend, as Barthes indicates, on the reader’s specific experiences and on cultural circumstances rather than on the author.

Beyond taking advantage of shared themes or the cultural capital surrounding a certain text, authorial intention often includes a desire to create something new through an allusion. Gian Biagio Conte, in *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, argues that it is “fruitful to consider the relationship between one text and another as one of transformation” (29). Likewise, Allen sees Kristeva’s investment in transformation in terms of her rejection of her own term “intertextuality”:

> to avoid the reduction of intertextuality to the traditional notions of influence, source-study and simple ‘context’, Kristeva now drops the term intertextuality in favour of a new term, transposition. Whether we use the term ‘intertextuality’ or ‘transposition’ would seem to be less important, however, than recognizing that texts do not just utilize previous textual units but that they transform them and give them what Kristeva terms new thetic positions. (52)

In *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, Hemingway transforms Ecclesiastes’ criticism of proverbial wisdom into a criticism of Ecclesiastes’ own wisdom, therein turning Ecclesiastes on itself. Most notably, protagonist Jake Barnes cannot enjoy life with the woman he loves because of a wartime injury that made him impotent. This new position follows Ecclesiastes skepticism to likewise skeptically consider potential limitations of Ecclesiastes’ own recommendations.
To emphasize the creativity of alluding authors, Machacek develops a new terminology for allusions in which he proposes defining the source text as a “spur” and the alluding text as a “reprise.” Machacek writes, “I hope that the pair slightly privileges the agency of the later author and that it might thus gently counteract the tendency of terms like echo, borrowing, or influence to suggest a secondary, lesser, or derivative status for the imitating author” (530). While I won’t necessarily employ Machacek’s terminology, I appreciate his resolute emphasis on allusive creativity. While I also will not formulaically employ Bloom’s views on transformation set forth in his 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence* and 1975 *A Map of Misreading*, his ideas illustrate one view of textual transformation that prioritizes allusive creativity. While lamentably insensitive to gender equality and perhaps overly insistent on a strict-rivalry relationship between poets, Bloom sets forth a way to think about the transformative creativity often involved in literary allusion. For Bloom all “strong poets” create by willfully misinterpreting the poems of their predecessors: “poetic influence […] proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (*Anxiety* 30). He rewrites Freud’s Oedipus complex in terms of poetic rivalry between poets: every new poet wishes to be free from the dominance of the old. To free themselves and their poems, Bloom suggests that new poets exert a kind of Nietzschean will to power by misreading previous poems and rewriting them according to their misinterpretation: “To live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father” (*Map* 19, his emphasis). All poems, Bloom contends, are willful misinterpretations (whether conscious or unconscious) of
other poems. In my project, I find that this kind of rewriting happens most clearly in modern texts, which are invested in both aesthetic irony and political skepticism. In addition to Hemingway’s skeptical use of Ecclesiastes outlined above, Jean Toomer and Ann Petry allude to Ecclesiastes with both reverence and skepticism. They use their allusions to ask why Ecclesiastes’ potentially helpful philosophy isn’t equally available to black people in the early- to mid-twentieth century.

One assumption underlying Bloom’s analysis is that new poems rarely succeed in reversing their belatedness. The original text continues to exist, and it usually continues to exert more influence than the alluding text. Consequently, readers may extend the allusion beyond its authorial intention. Take, for example, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Reading, or at least reconsidering, Ecclesiastes is part of what Wharton hopes readers will do in response to her title allusion. Along with hundreds of other books and ideas, both books play a role in the reader’s mind, and whatever a reader knows of Ecclesiastes contributes to his experience with the novel. A reader especially familiar with Ecclesiastes may be able to apply the ideas of the source text even more broadly – though not unjustifiably – than the alluding author intended. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily’s tea drinking habits parallel Ecclesiastes’ view of work and reward. When Qoheleth expects a reward to come from his work in terms of money and possessions, he hates life. But when he finds a reward within his work, he considers work a satisfying gift from God. Similarly, when Lily depends on tea only to keep her awake, she misses the satisfaction of the moment and its caffeine leads her into dependence on the sleeping medication that eventually kills her. When she drinks tea with Selden, however, she
experiences moments of playful joy made more vivid by the pleasures of the tea. Even if Wharton didn’t intended this parallel, the atmosphere created by her Ecclesiastes’ allusion encourages the association. Of course it’s nearly impossible to know what an author intended or whether she would sanction an implication of her allusion: Wharton may have intended Lily’s tea drinking to do just the work I’ve outlined.

Still, I find it important to point out that the source text continues to exist, and – especially in a culture highly invested in Ecclesiastes like the culture in which the texts I consider were written – readers’ experiences with the source text influence the allusion’s reception. Because many early-twenty-first-century readers are less aware of Ecclesiastes than were their early-twentieth-century counterparts, my project reintroduces an important level of meaning into these texts which was accessible to many in their original audience. Each of the writers I consider wants readers to think about Ecclesiastes and encourages this association by referencing the book. Several of these references take the form of what Gérard Genette calls “peritexts” in his Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation. Genette’s term “peritext” includes elements on the periphery of the text such as titles, covers, epigraphs, chapter titles, prefaces, and notes. Genette sees these elements as an essential part of how readers respond to a text. Allen explains that for Genette, the peritext “help[s] to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers” (100). Particularly relevant for my consideration of the role Ecclesiastes plays in these texts, Allen reveals how quotations specifically direct readers’ textual reception: “particular quotations used as inscriptions or epigraphs can set up important resonances before the reader begins the text in question” (102). Of the eight authors I consider in
depth, four of them quote Ecclesiastes either in their title (James, Wharton, Hemingway) or in an epigraph (Glasgow; Hemingway uses both title and epigraph). Foregrounding Ecclesiastes through the use of a peritext guides readers’ experiences even before they begin these novels. The remaining four authors either quote Ecclesiastes’ by name within their text (London, Petry), or present more subtle allusions in the text (Crane, Toomer). Demonstrating an authorial intention for these subtle allusions is the most difficult, but such allusions are especially satisfying to discover.

Late-Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literary Uses of Ecclesiastes

These preliminary comments on allusion establish the basis for my focus in the following chapters. Through a consideration of the broad applications and implications of their allusions, I focus on what the authors drawing on Ecclesiastes do with their allusions, on what these authors tell us about Ecclesiastes, and on what Ecclesiastes adds to their texts. In chapters two through four, I show late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers highlighting the compatibility of Qoheleth’s worldview and moral recommendations with naturalism, realism, and modernism. Chapter two reveals that naturalist writers Crane, Glasgow, and London drew on Ecclesiastes because naturalism shares a foundational philosophical framework with the book of Ecclesiastes, especially on nature’s indifference. Chapter three claims that James and Wharton use Ecclesiastes to advance realistic ethical positions in favor of enthusiastic living. Chapter four shows how modernists Hemingway and Toomer allude to and skeptically consider Ecclesiastes, taking their lead from Ecclesiastes’ own skepticism over inherited wisdom. Chapter five shows Petry using allusions to Ecclesiastes to suggest that Ecclesiastes’ worldview would
benefit several characters in two of her novels if not for these characters’ lack of access to Ecclesiastes’ philosophy because of social and racial pressures. Petry also introduces the Bible as a tool for social criticism, which I take up as a means to address twenty-first-century, post-secular realities.

In chapter two, “‘The Race is Not to the Swift’: Ecclesiastes and US Naturalism,” I outline philosophical similarities between Qoheleth and three naturalist writers. Ellen Glasgow’s 1898 novel Phases of an Inferior Planet begins with an epigraph from Ecclesiastes 9:11 that gets to the heart of naturalism: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Nature, not human ingenuity or skill, controls everything. Fellow naturalists Jack London and Stephen Crane also allude to this Ecclesiastes verse. London’s protagonist in his 1904 novel The Sea-Wolf quotes the verse and Crane evokes it in his 1897 short story “The Open Boat” while narrating Billie’s death despite his superior strength. London – who also has his materialistic captain Wolf Larsen recite passages from Ecclesiastes aloud – draws on Ecclesiastes’ contradictions and work ethic, while illuminating its correlation with some of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Glasgow highlights the limits of altruism, shows Ecclesiastes as a bridge between agnosticism and Christianity, and relates the book to Darwinian thought. Crane underscores Ecclesiastes’ views on nature’s indifference and the value of community in an uncertain world. These parallels – especially those evoked in Crane’s story – demonstrate the compatibility of Ecclesiastes with naturalism, realism, and modernism.
My third chapter, “‘He that Loveth Silver’23: Ecclesiastes-Endorsed Realism in The Golden Bowl and The House of Mirth,” advances a reading of these novels in terms of a broad understanding of Ecclesiastes. Henry James and Edith Wharton reject traditional ideas of marital advancement and prescriptive feminine virtue to tell the truth about materialistic, discriminatory high society. That James and Wharton borrowed the titles of their novels The Golden Bowl and The House of Mirth from Ecclesiastes has been well documented in literary criticism. James takes his title from 12:6 – “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.” Wharton takes her title from 7:4 – “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Several readers see these allusions to Ecclesiastes as important aspects of their understanding of the novels, but few venture outside of the surrounding verses in developing their views of how the allusions operate. The biblical book resonates throughout The Golden Bowl and The House of Mirth and shapes these novels significantly. Wharton uses Ecclesiastes’ carpe-diem ethic and its critique of expecting a reward to come from money and possessions – rather than finding rewards in individual moments – to suggest personal and social reforms. James claims the sacredness of mutual romantic relationships and argues for the advantages of realism over romanticism; he also provides Ecclesiastes as an interpretive key to endorse his characters who embrace Qoheleth’s call to live unreservedly with the person they love (9:9).

In chapter four, “‘And the Sun Goeth Down’24: Ecclesiastes-Motivated Skepticism in the Modernism of Ernest Hemingway and Jean Toomer” I make a case for
viewing Ecclesiastes’ ironic skepticism as evocative of a particularly modern sensibility. Hemingway’s 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises* takes its title from Ecclesiastes 1:5: “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose,” and he also considered nine quotations from Ecclesiastes – most of them featuring death – as possible titles for his 1929 novel before deciding on *A Farewell to Arms*. Toomer’s 1923 novel *Cane* also recalls Ecclesiastes 1:5 in its final paragraph by repeating the phrase “the sun arises.” In all three novels, Hemingway and Toomer take both sympathetic and skeptical looks at Ecclesiastes’ philosophical recommendations. Hemingway, for his part, relies on Ecclesiastes to structure *The Sun Also Rises* and propel its plot, but challenges Qoheleth’s call to enjoy life with a spouse. Jake Barnes’ impotence keeps him from a potentially satisfying relationship with Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms* ends with the death of protagonist Frederic Henry’s lover Catherine Barkley. Toomer too uses an Ecclesiastes-frame to structure his novel and sees some advantages of Qoheleth’s philosophy in terms of working and loving in a supportive community. However, especially through “Bona and Paul,” he suggests the difficulty of enjoying life with a lover in a place dominated by racial discrimination. Throughout *Cane*, Toomer variously endorses Qoheleth’s seize-the-day mentality and draws attention to its incompatibility with early-twentieth-century-US racial politics.

In her 1950 essay “The Novel as Social Criticism,” Ann Petry echoes Toomer’s interest in the novel as a way to call attention to social inequalities. My fifth chapter, “‘Already of Old Time’: Taking Ecclesiastes to *The Street,*” considers how Petry uses Ecclesiastes to critique social circumstances in two of her novels. Petry’s 1953 novel *The
Narrows has Cesar the Writing Man chalk Ecclesiastes 1:10 onto the sidewalk: “Is there anything whereof it may be said, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us” (91). Petry emphasizes midcentury-US-social expectations that restricted Qoheleth’s call to “[l]ive joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest” (9:9). Her black protagonist Link Williams and a white woman Camilo Sheffield fall in love with each other, but their primarily loving relationship leads to Link’s murder. On the other hand, Jubine flourishes by following Qoheleth’s call to enjoy individual moments instead of expecting money, possessions, and status to satisfy. Ecclesiastes never makes a direct appearance in Petry’s more famous 1946 novel The Street, but The Street evokes Ecclesiastes’ critique of proverbial wisdom. Petry shows how her heroine Lutie Johnson fails to achieve the American Dream despite regimented hard work. Because of the inequalities facing her, Lutie’s pursuit of the American Dream – an idea that epitomizes the dangerous traditional wisdom of the US – keeps her from some, though not all, of the simple pleasures Ecclesiastes recommends. Building on Petry’s use of the Bible for social criticism, I conclude my project with an epilogue that considers what role Ecclesiastes might play in twenty-first-century conversations about religion and secularism. In “‘A Time to Embrace’26: Ecclesiastes, Postsecularism, and the Value of a Reverent Skepticism,” I argue that the biblical book provides tools to reconsider literal-minded fundamentalism, religious violence, and the capitalistic takeover of Christianity in US economic, political, and religious institutions.

As this introduction demonstrates, interest in Ecclesiastes results from something distinctively modern about the biblical book, especially when the term modern includes
the related philosophical and aesthetic positions of realism, naturalism, and modernism. While their stylistic expressions vary widely, the movements follow Ecclesiastes aesthetically in sharing a foundational anti-romantic approach to a realistic presentation of life. Philosophically, Ecclesiastes’ skepticism parallels realism’s skepticism of romanticism and its views on nature’s indifference parallel those found in naturalism. Both realism and naturalism establish the philosophical basis for modernism, which follows Ecclesiastes’ treatment of its own allusions as an aesthetic model for using allusion skeptically. To further demonstrate Qoheleth’s modernity in subsequent chapters, I follow Alexander Welsh’s lead in *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*. Welsh uses texts written after Shakespeare’s text to suggest why Hamlet continues to pervade the creative consciousness: “A major purpose of this book is to let such later writers help us see why Hamlet is a distinctively modern hero” (x). Similarly, I explore late-nineteenth and twentieth-century writers to consider how each writer contributes to an understanding of Qoheleth as a naturalist, realist, and/or modernist hero. These texts convey Ecclesiastes’ cultural popularity while, at the same time, Ecclesiastes helps the authors of these texts to advance philosophical goals, plot strategies, and character developments in their fiction. Despite its compatibility with modern thinking, however, Ecclesiastes’ practical advice for everyday living is too often overlooked in the unreflectively materialistic social hierarchy found in the fictional worlds of these texts and the real worlds of their authors. Consequently, the writers I consider demonstrate how Ecclesiastes could satisfactorily benefit the lives of their characters and – by extension – they suggest its value for the lives of their readers.
In her essay, which argues for Ellen Glasgow’s place as a naturalist writer, Nancy Walker provides a representative summary of a traditional understanding of the “naturalistic impulse”:

- a commitment to realistic, unsentimental portrayal of the difference between man’s dreams and his possibilities; a sense that the world is essentially incomprehensible, coupled with a belief that scientific discoveries can best explain man’s uncertain relation to the universe; […]
- and a generally pessimistic view of man’s individual efficacy in the face of pressures from his physical and cultural environment. (133)

Leonardo Cassuto and Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s introduction to the essays collected in *Rereading Jack London* suggests slightly revising this view: “American naturalist criticism has been moving beyond its previous locus of determinist ideas to embrace more complex, less dogmatic visions of turn-of-the-century United States culture” (5). While Walker’s impulse still informs discussions of literary naturalism, Cassuto and Reesman rightly identify the complex relationship in US naturalism between free will and determinism, as well as between optimism and pessimism. This complexity – paired with naturalistic views on God’s absence, nature’s indifference, and a commitment to represent the world as accurately as possible – made Ecclesiastes an ideal allusive choice
for writers at the turn of the twentieth century who shared Ecclesiastes’ philosophical worldview and foundational artistic sensibilities.

Many of the questions that the primary speaker of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, addressed more than two thousand years earlier faced naturalist authors at the turn of the twentieth century. How does a person make meaning in an indifferent universe? “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 12:8). Can there be any enduring value in a life that ends with death? “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). Where does morality come from if God/the universe is inscrutable? “[W]ho can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?” (7:13). Where do humans turn when they can no longer trust the received wisdom of the past? “[T]here is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness” (7:15). What should a person do with her one wild, inconsequential life? “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (9:10). Naturalists trying to make sense of these dilemmas found in Ecclesiastes a logical affinity, providing affirmation for their struggles and creative inspiration for their fiction. Their attraction to Ecclesiastes therefore seems nearly inevitable, even in significantly different texts with significantly different goals.

Shared aesthetic ideals deepen naturalists’ attraction to Ecclesiastes; the most striking of which is their aesthetic commitment to tell the truth about life. Qoheleth explains, in the book’s first chapter, his empirical approach to life’s difficulties: “And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and
vexation of spirit” (1:13-14). Qoheleth grounds his aesthetic orientation in terms of pursuing and recording his autonomous search for meaning: “I sought in mine heart […] till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (2:3). Rather than accepting other people’s ideas on that which is good in life, Qoheleth remains true to his heart, to his wisdom and experience. Qoheleth repeats this commitment to follow his own conclusions again and again in Ecclesiastes, especially when he expresses his distrust of traditional-biblical wisdom based on moral reciprocity: “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said this also is vanity” (8:14). Qoheleth follows his wisdom and experience to seek out in his heart the world’s harsh realities.

Likewise, naturalistic writers Theodore Dreiser and the three writers featured in this chapter – Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Ellen Glasgow – argued for honest fiction that acknowledges life’s oftentimes-unfair and widely varied realities. In his 1903 essay “True Art Speaks Plainly,” Dreiser argues that the goal of art is to “tell the truth. […] To express what we see honestly and without subterfuge: […] The extent of all reality is the realm of the author’s pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic” (1757-8). Dreiser chides his contemporaries who preferred that novelists avoid describing the world as it is: “Under this cloak hide the vices of wealth as well as the vast unspoken blackness of poverty and ignorance; and between them must walk the little novelist, choosing neither truth nor
beauty, but some self-conceived phase of life that bears no honest relationship to either
the whole of nature or of man” (1757). In his 1911 novel Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser’s
narrator evokes Qoheleth’s focus on the vanity of existence by claiming that life’s
“uselessness […] has been best expressed by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes” (192); he
likewise echoes Qoheleth’s emphasis on looking more closely at the empirical details of
difficult, messy human lives.

Crane also committed to accurately portray life. In a letter to a magazine editor,
he explained that starting at sixteen years old he felt “the most artistic and the most
enduring literature was that which reflected life accurately. Therefore I have tried to
observe closely, and to set down what I have seen in the simplest and most concise way”
(230). Also like Qoheleth’s test of the world, Crane demands autonomous experiences to
guide his life and his art. In her Crane biography, Linda Davis describes a scene
foreshadowing Crane’s artistic sensibilities. At seven years old, after drinking a beer in
front of his incredulous friend, Crane exclaims, “‘Pshaw! […] Beer ain’t nothing at all.’
Then he added, ‘How was I going to know what it tasted like less’n I tasted it? How you
going to know about things at all less’n you do ‘em?’” (13). Crane implemented this
experimental strategy in writing several of his short stories, including “An Experiment in
Misery,” during which he stayed overnight in a flophouse, and “The Men in the Storm.”
In preparing to write the latter story, Crane, as Davis explains,

chose the day of the blizzard to stand outside in a snow-covered line of
ragged men huddling together “like sheep” as they waited for a West Side
charitable house to open. Wearing only a thin layer of clothing, he stayed
in the punishing cold for some hours. […] That night, though suffering from exposure, he managed to get it all down on paper. […] The next day [his friend CK] Linson discovered Stephen alone in the studio, lying in bed, looking “haggard and almost ill.” “Why didn’t you put on two or three more undershirts, Steve?” he asked. “How would I know how those poor devils felt if I was warm myself?” (79-80)

Crane’s response demonstrates his commitment to empirical accuracy, while recognizing that it leads him – as it does Qoheleth – to acknowledge life’s difficulties and unfair realities.

London, commenting on socialism, suggests that honest presentations of life should lead to better art and to a better world. In his 1905 speech “Revolution,” which he delivered at several US universities, London expresses his distrust of American editors who resist publishing fiction that depicts real hardships. He also highlights his view on the need for empirical observation:

So far as the science and the sociology of the revolution are concerned, the average editor is a generation or so behind the facts. He is intellectually slothful, accepts no facts until they are accepted by the majority, and prides himself upon his conservatism. He is an instinctive optimist, prone to believe that what ought to be, is. The revolutionist gave this up long ago, and believes not that what ought to be is, but what is, is, and that it may not be what it ought to be at all. (Essays 114)
By depicting life as it is, London hopes to identify the contrast between real life and ideal life, therein providing visibility for those suffering and motivation for correcting injustices. Similarly, Qoheleth draws attention to this contrast by pointing to the difference between the ideal world as supposed by the traditional deed-consequence wisdom formula and the real world in which good people are not always rewarded and evil people are not always punished.

Glasgow shares these views on writing, experience, and the dangers of the romantic tendencies of the US public. In her Glasgow biography, Susan Goodman uses language similar to Qoheleth’s to explain Glasgow’s commitment to autonomy: “She wanted to explore whatever was real and vital in her own heart” (28). Goodman further notes that Glasgow “had sworn to write only what was ‘sound, solid, and true-to-life’” (63). In a 1916 New York Times interview titled “Evasive Idealism,” Glasgow criticizes US readers for accepting dishonesty:

in America we demand from our writers […] an evasive idealism instead of a straightforward facing of realities. […] W]hat the American public seems to desire is the cheapest sort of sham optimism. […] T]he sort of book which takes best in this country […] is the sort of book in which there is not from beginning to end a single attempt to portray a genuine human being. Instead, there are a number of picturesque and attractive lay figures, and one of them is made to develop a whimsical, sentimental, and maudlinly optimistic philosophy of life. That is what the people want—a
sugary philosophy, utterly without any basis in logic or human experience. (Kilmer M10)

Instead of this empty, false optimism, Glasgow pursues a more genuine optimism by accurately depicting the world: “The optimism I mean […] does not come from an evasion of facts, but from a recognition of them. The constructive novelist, the novelist who really interprets life, never ignores any of the facts of life. Instead, he accepts them and builds upon them” (M10). Like the moderate advantages Qoheleth finds in eating and drinking well in a loving community, which originate from and conclude with his claim “all is vanity” (1:2, 12:8), Glasgow feels that presenting the world’s flaws and glories adds meaning to life without lying about its difficulties.

As each of these writers indicates, naturalists share with Ecclesiastes a commitment to describe the world accurately. They also share literary assumptions on the value of multiple perspectives, searching for the core truths of reality, and the heroism of trying to make meaning in a meaningless world. In her essay “The American Novel: Realism and Naturalism (1860-1920),” Reesman claims, “the most lasting lesson of realism and naturalism is that the more perspectives used, the more real and natural fiction can be” (58). While limited to his own perception, Qoheleth considers multiple possibilities in his quest “to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven” (1:13), most notably in his failed attempt to find happiness in money and possessions.² Reesman further suggests that both realism and naturalism “sought to answer the question ‘What is real?’ and not merely ‘How to depict reality?’” (57). Qoheleth’s main assumption – “all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (1:14) – attempts to
capture reality by offering a nonnormative voice of dissent true to his experience. Donald Pizer, in his *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, calls the naturalist hero “the character who continues to look for meaning in experience even though there probably is no meaning” (37). Qoheleth starts by assuming that “all is vanity” and eventually concludes that it is so, but he drops his claim that life is also a “vexation of spirit” after the book’s first half: the phrase last appears in the sixth chapter out of twelve. Like the naturalist hero, Qoheleth continues to look for meaning in a world without meaning and, as his journey progresses, he finds some moderate advantages that leave him a little less vexed.

In addition to sharing artistic sensibilities and philosophical assumptions with naturalists, part of Ecclesiastes’ widespread appeal depends on the book’s versatility, and so I outline in the rest of this chapter several specific reasons why Ecclesiastes resonates with the individual naturalist writers Jack London, Ellen Glasgow, and Stephen Crane. Because London explicitly identifies his use of Ecclesiastes in his 1904 novel *The Sea-Wolf* by having Captain Wolf Larsen quote extensively from the book, I begin with London. I move then to Glasgow’s 1898 novel *Phases of an Inferior Planet* because Glasgow uses an Ecclesiastes’ verse for the novel’s epigraph and includes Ecclesiastes in a sermon near its conclusion, but she never identifies the book by name. Least obviously, Crane subtly alludes to Ecclesiastes in two of his stories – his 1894 “The Men in the Storm” and 1897 “The Open Boat” – and so I finish with his obscure but thematically powerful use of Ecclesiastes. Through a consideration of these specific texts and each author’s life, I draw attention to components of Ecclesiastes that make Qoheleth a proto-
naturalist. London illuminates Ecclesiastes’ contradictions, work ethic, and potential correlation with Nietzschean thought. Glasgow highlights the limits of altruism, Ecclesiastes’ place as a bridge text to and from Christianity, and its compatibility with Darwinism. Finally, Crane underscores Ecclesiastes’ views concerning nature’s indifference and the value of living in a cooperative community; and, like Qoheleth, Crane presents his partially antagonistic response to a tradition from a position of intimate knowledge of the religious tradition he criticizes.

**Jack London’s Ecclesiastes—Reciting Nietzschean Superman**

London, who grew up poor and taught himself primarily by reading library books, knew Christianity but, unlike Crane and Glasgow, had no formal Christian training. Instead, he filtered much of his experience with Christianity through his relationship with socialism. When Christian ideas led its practitioners toward social justice and solidarity with the working class, London praised those actions: “I joined the groups of working class and intellectual revolutionists, and for the first time came into intellectual living. Here I found keen-flashing intellects and brilliant wits; for here I met strong and alert-brained, withal horny-handed, members of the working-class; unfrocked preachers too wide in their Christianity for any congregation of Mammon-worshippers” (*Essays* 88). London even occasionally described the goals of socialism using Christian language: “Seven million revolutionists, organized, working day and night, are preaching the revolution—that passionate gospel, the Brotherhood of Man” (*Essays* 114-5). On the other hand, and more often in London’s opinion, when Christians corrupted Christian ideas he identified their hypocrisy: “I met men who invoked the name of the Prince of
Peace in their diatribes against war, and who put rifles in the hands of Pinkertons with which to shoot down strikers in their own factories. […] This man, a pillar of the church and heavy contributor to foreign missions, worked his shop girls ten hours a day on a starvation wage and thereby directly encouraged prostitution” (Essays 90). Even London’s phrase “congregation of Mammon-worshipers,” which follows his praise of broadminded Christian preachers participating in the revolution, implies his distrust of traditional religion.

And ultimately, though he acknowledges that Christian ideas can at their best lead people to do good work, London rejected basic Christian beliefs and spent his life looking for meaning in a godless world. Borrowing Voltaire’s phrase as he discusses the superior position of cavemen relative to turn-of-the-twentieth-century workers, London reveals his atheism: “The caveman, with his natural efficiency of I [one], got enough to eat most of the time, and no caveman went hungry all the time. Also, he lived a healthy, open-air life, loafed and rested himself, and found plenty of time in which to exercise his imagination and invent gods” (Essays 102). In the preface to his London biography, Alex Kershaw points to London’s search for faith and meaning without god: “Viewed from the distance of almost a century, his quest for faith in a godless world, his existential angst, his belief in technology and his violent fictions all have resonance for contemporary man” (xxv). Writing about some of London’s last stories, David A. Moreland outlines London’s quest for finding meaning amidst meaninglessness:

Darwin, Spencer, and Marx had been his guides when he had sought escape from poverty and the life of a work beast; now, as he realized that
materialism offered the individual scant aid in comprehending the meaning of his own life and death, he turned not toward traditional religion but to the psychoanalytical works of Freud, Prince, and especially Jung. Groping for something beyond a pessimistic materialism, he still felt it essential to find an empirical base for his beliefs. (50)

While his search never led him to embrace traditional religion, and in many ways necessitated that he reject it, London was familiar with Christian ideas and texts, especially Ecclesiastes.

In London’s semiautobiographical novel *John Barleycorn*, the narrator holds several drunken conversations with himself – what London terms the White Logic – in which he reflects on the meaninglessness of life. In one of these conversations, the narrator evokes Ecclesiastes: “It is nothing new, these vital lies men tell themselves, muttering and mumbling them like charms and incantations against the powers of Night. […] They were vexed by the brazen law of the Ecclesiast that men die like the beasts of the field and their end is the same” (123). Here, London references Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 – “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” – to make his point on the inevitability of death. Furthermore, according to his wife Charmain’s 1921 biography, London – like his character Wolf Larsen in *The Sea-Wolf* – used to read Ecclesiastes aloud to others: “he would be inclined to read aloud, poetry, or perhaps his own stories. And I know there were listeners,
captured and enchained by his charm, in whose ears still rings his rich and solemn voice in the stately numbers of Ecclesiastes” (367). Ecclesiastes provided London with a traditional voice that supported his view of the world’s meaninglessness in the face of death: in *The Sea-Wolf*, he makes use of its similarity with Nietzchean ideas, its commendation of good work, and its contradictory claims.

*The Sea-Wolf* tells the story of the genteel, shipwreck-survivor Humphrey Van Weyden, who narrates the action, and the brutish philosopher of his rescuing ship Captain Wolf Larsen. Rather than taking Van Weyden ashore, Larsen employs him on his seal-hunting ship the *Ghost*. After Larsen later collects another genteel sea-survivor, Maud Brewster, Brewster and Van Weyden fall in love, escape from the *Ghost*, and eventually survive together while Larsen dies alone. London presents Van Weyden as his story’s protagonist, but it was its villain Larsen who captured audiences. A 1904 *Argonaut* review calls Larsen the novel’s hero: “And who is the hero of the book? Larsen!—Larsen, undoubtedly” (qtd. in Nuernberg 103). Likewise, in a 1905 letter, Ambrose Bierce described Larsen as a first-rate achievement; Bert Bender confirms Bierce’s lasting impression: “most readers can agree with Ambrose Bierce’s remark that the novel’s ‘great thing—and it is among the greatest of things—is that tremendous creation, Wolf Larsen. … The hewing out and setting up of such a figure is enough for a man to do in a life-time” (115). Part of Larsen’s charm comes from his interest in Ecclesiastes. He reads aloud extended sections from chapters two and nine and then outlines his affinities with Qoheleth:
The Preacher who was king over Israel in Jerusalem thought as I think. You call me a pessimist. Is not this pessimism of the blackest?—

‘All is vanity and vexation of spirit,’ ‘There is no profit under the sun,’
‘There is one event unto all,’ to the fool and the wise, the clean and the unclean, the sinner and the saint, and that event is death, and an evil thing, he says. For the Preacher loved life, and did not want to die, saying, ‘For a living dog is better than a dead lion.’ He preferred the vanity and vexation to the silence and unmovableness of the grave. And so I. To crawl is piggish; but to not crawl, to be as the clod and rock, is loathsome to contemplate. It is loathsome to the life that is in me. […] Life itself is unsatisfaction, but to look ahead to death is greater unsatisfaction. (87-8)

Larsen’s views on meaning, death, and the will to survive especially parallel Qoheleth’s.

While this is the only time in the novel that London evokes Ecclesiastes by name, the extended focus on it in this three-page scene encourages reading Larsen’s character through an Ecclesiastes lens. And while London eventually critiques the villain Larsen’s limited understanding of Ecclesiastes’ view of the good life, having Larsen read from the book draws attention to Ecclesiastes themes throughout the novel, especially regarding Van Weyden’s relationship with work and his and Brewster’s survival through companionship.

Immediately after Larsen proclaims his affinity with Ecclesiastes Van Weyden introduces him to The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, another text with Ecclesiastes parallels. Van Weyden, having just listened to Larsen’s use of Ecclesiastes to support his
own pessimism, responds, ‘‘You are worse off than Omar,’ I said. ‘He, at least, after the customary agonizing of youth, found content and made of his materialism a joyous thing.’ ‘Who was Omar?’ Wolf Larsen asked, and I did no more work that day, nor the next, nor the next. In his random reading he had never chanced upon the Rubáiyát’’ (88). To Van Weyden’s surprise, however, Larsen spins the joyful carpe-diem ethic of the Rubáiyát toward pessimistic self-preservation in the face of death:

“That’s the keynote. Insolence! He could not have used a better word.” In vain I objected and denied. He deluged me, overwhelmed me with argument. “It’s not the nature of life to be otherwise. Life, when it knows that it must cease living, will always rebel. It cannot help itself. The Preacher found life and the works of life all a vanity and vexation, an evil thing; but death, the ceasing to be able to be vain and vexed, he found an eviler thing. Through chapter after chapter he is worried by the one event that cometh to all alike. So Omar, so I, so you.” (89)

Larsen accurately identifies that the acknowledgement of death is an important element in the philosophy of both Khayyám and Qoheleth, and by putting these two texts side-by-side, London further connects the texts and further suggests reading the novel in light of Ecclesiastes. On the other hand, Van Weyden correctly assumes – even if he can’t articulate it here – that death isn’t the final element for either sage, but rather an element which should encourage living joyfully.
While it happens only rarely, and never in community, Larsen’s interest in Ecclesiastes and *The Rubáiyát* does in fact lead him to embrace fleeting moments of joy before death:

‘It strikes me as remarkable, to say the least, that you should show enthusiasm,’ I answered coldly. ‘Why, man, it’s living! it’s life!’ [Larsen] cried. ‘Which is a cheap thing and without value.’ I flung his words at him. He laughed, and it was the first time I had heard honest mirth in his voice. ‘Ah, I cannot get you to understand, cannot drive it into your head, what a thing this life is. Of course life is valueless, except to itself. And I can tell you that my life is pretty valuable just now—to myself. It is beyond price, which you will acknowledge is a terrific overrating, but which I cannot help, for it is the life that is in me.’ (61-2)

Paralleling Qoheleth’s constant claim that “all is vanity” (1:2) Larsen asserts, “of course life is valueless.” However, again paralleling Qoheleth’s recommendation to enjoy in the face of death, vanity, and meaninglessness, Larsen experiences moments of joy in which life feels valuable to him. Observations like this one make Larsen, despite his brutality, far and away *The Sea-Wolf*’s most interesting character, and, as the *Argonaut* reviewer and Bierce suggested, arguably even its most likable one. Larsen was so likable, in fact, that his likeability eventually tried London’s patience: “I have again and again written books that failed to get across. Long years ago […] I attacked Nietzsche and his superman idea. That was in *The Sea Wolf*. Lots of people read *The Sea Wolf*, no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy” (*Letters* 1513). But even if many
readers have enjoyed Larsen’s character, London does – regardless of how he saw Larsen’s reception – deter readers from wholly adopting his philosophy.

More often than celebrating Ecclesiastes’ calls to enjoy, for instance, Larsen dwells unhealthily on Qoheleth’s pessimism. His pessimism becomes apparent in his Ecclesiastes-evoking warnings about the negative side of wisdom. Larsen presents his distrust of wisdom in his introduction of his brother Death Larsen – a fellow seal hunter and captain on a steamship called the *Macedonia*. While discussing Death’s difference from Wolf, Van Weyden suggests, “‘he has never philosophized on life,’ I added. ‘No,’ Wolf Larsen answered, with an indescribable air of sadness. ‘And he is all the happier for leaving life alone. He is too busy living it to think about it. My mistake was in ever opening the books’” (84). Though it doesn’t present Qoheleth’s final conclusions on wisdom, Ecclesiastes 1:18 expresses the same sentiment as Larsen: “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” Later, Larsen likewise claims that he would be happier if he were less aware:

I sometimes catch myself wishing that I, too, were blind to the facts of life and only knew its fancies and illusions. They’re wrong, all wrong, of course, and contrary to reason; but in the face of them my reason tells me, wrong and most wrong, that to dream and live illusions gives greater delight. And after all, delight is the wage for living. Without delight, living is a worthless act. (178-9)³
Unlike Larsen though, Qoheleth eventually concludes that acknowledging death – not denying it – is necessary for living the good life. Here again London’s allusion suggests that Ecclesiastes may do more in *The Sea-Wolf* than just support Larsen’s worldview.

While critics occasionally acknowledge Larsen’s use of Ecclesiastes, I haven’t found any who employ it in analyzing his character. For example, Reesman’s *Critical Companion to Jack London* includes Larsen’s association with Ecclesiastes in the summary section of *The Sea-Wolf* but not in the commentary section. Reesman’s summary reads, “Van Weyden happens upon Larsen reading the Bible, quoting aloud several passages in Ecclesiastes” (229). After quoting Larsen, however, she moves directly to further summary without comment. Likewise, Kathleen B. Hindman, in her essay “Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf*: Naturalism with a Spiritual Bent” quotes a portion of Larsen’s Ecclesiastes-focused speech in chapter 11 without pursuing it in her analysis. Hindman quotes several lines near the chapter’s conclusion – including “The Preacher found life and the works of life all a vanity and vexation, an evil thing; but death, the ceasing to be able to be vain and vexed, he found an eviler thing” (qtd. in Hindman 107). But she explicates the lines without reference to Ecclesiastes. Eric Carl Link’s essay “The Five Deaths of Wolf Larsen” quotes *The Sea-Wolf* passage in which Larsen claims that his “mistake was in ever opening the books” (qtd. in Link 157) and also includes in his five deaths the possibility that Larsen’s death comes at the hand of God. However, Link nowhere mentions Ecclesiastes. The critical indifference to Ecclesiastes is perhaps most remarkable in Hindman’s essay dedicated to *The Sea-Wolf’s* spirituality and in Link’s essay discussing Larsen and God. It seems to me, however, that avoiding Ecclesiastes in
their analyses simply demonstrates that critics are aware of Larsen’s association with Ecclesiastes but ultimately unsure how to treat it. I hope to remedy this uncertainty by connecting Larsen’s downfall and Van Weyden’s uplift to their differing relationships with Ecclesiastes.

Rather than analyzing Ecclesiastes’ influence in Larsen, many critics appropriately have seen in Larsen a Nietzschean superman. Though London rejected Nietzsche’s worldview – symbolized in *The Sea-Wolf* by his treatment of Larsen – Nietzsche heavily influenced London, and London presented through Larsen several reasons he found Nietzsche attractive. Kershaw, in fact, points to Nietzsche as London’s most powerful influence: “it was the German Friedrich Nietzsche whose ideas would affect him most. […] Above all, Nietzsche provided Jack with an argument to validate egotism” (77). Furthermore, Reesman notes in her critical biography *Jack London’s Racial Lives* that London began reading Nietzsche in 1904 – the same year he published *The Sea-Wolf*. Larsen summarizes Nietzsche’s philosophy fairly succinctly in an early conversation with Van Weyden: “I believe that life is a mess,” he answered promptly. ‘It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength’” (45-6). Corresponding to his emphasis on self-preservation, Larsen argues against altruism: “One man cannot wrong another man. He can only wrong himself. As I see it, I do wrong always when I consider the interests of others” (67). London never names Nietzsche in
relation to Larsen, but like Nietzsche’s superman Larsen wills himself to power on his
ship and keeps his own interests always as his top priority.4

Most clearly, given the lack of an explicit association of Larsen with Nietzsche in
the novel, London’s own comments on the novel solidify the relationship between Larsen
and Nietzsche. London wrote in a letter to a friend, “I have been more stimulated by
Nietzsche than by any other writer in the world. At the same time I have been an
intellectual enemy to Nietzsche. Both Martin Eden and The Sea-Wolf were indictments
by me of the Nietzschean philosophy of the superman” (Letters 1485). Larsen’s self-
acknowledged kinship with Qoheleth shows that he finds Ecclesiastes compatible with
these Nietzschean ideas. And London’s use of Ecclesiastes to voice Larsen’s thoughts
indirectly indicates that London too found some overlap between Nietzsche and
Qoheleth. Qoheleth and Nietzsche share an emphasis on the finality of death and the need
to take advantage of life on earth. Larsen mentions each of these ideas as he continues his
argument against altruism: “with nothing before me but death, given for a brief spell this
yeasty crawling and squirming which is called life, why, it would be immoral for me to
perform any act that was a sacrifice. Any sacrifice that makes me lose one crawl or
squirm is foolish—and not only foolish, for it is a wrong against myself and a wicked
thing” (69).

While Qoheleth and Nietzsche do share some worldviews, Larsen too strictly
parallels Nietzsche’s superman and misses the communal aspect of Qoheleth’s
philosophy. After only a few weeks of knowing Van Weyden, Larsen acknowledges that
Van Weyden knows him better than almost everyone: “I can tell you that you know more
about me than any living man, except my own brother” (178). This general lack of intimacy leaves Larsen longing for any kind of human interaction, and even though his brother Death Larsen serves as his main seal-hunting competitor and a threat to his life, he replaces kindness with competition and longs to beat him to the best seal-hunting locations. One morning after Death had cheated Wolf out of good hunting the day before Larsen asks Van Weyden about Death’s ship: “‘What of the Macedonia?’ ‘Not sighted,’ I answered. I could have sworn his face fell at the intelligence, but why he should be disappointed I could not conceive. I was soon to learn. ‘Smoke ho!’ came the hail from on deck, and his face brightened. ‘Good!’ he exclaimed, and left the table at once to go on deck and into the steerage” (181). Though he doesn’t admit it, Larsen needs some human interaction and he finds it in a not wholly satisfying and ultimately devastating competition with his brother.

As a result of their competition, Death commandeers all of Wolf’s men from his ship and leaves Larsen alone to die from a brain illness. Throughout The Sea-Wolf, Larsen experiences debilitating headaches. Van Weyden reports the first of these headaches in the opening third of the novel: “For three days this blinding headache lasted, and he suffered as wild animals suffer, as it seemed the way on ship to suffer, without plaint, without sympathy, utterly alone” (80). The headaches persist and Larsen continues to suffer alone. When they become worse and weaken the rest of his body, he loses his strength, his men leave him for his brother’s ship, and he has no one to help him. Even when Larsen miraculously lands on the same island as Van Weyden and Brewster, he fails to befriend them, and uses some of his last strength to sabotage their
efforts to repair his ship. And though Van Weyden and Brewster are more kind to Larsen than they might have been expected to be, he remains distant and dies alone, “sceptical and invincible to the end” (276). London symbolizes the limit of the superman: without his strength he cannot survive.

Because London intended *The Sea-Wolf* as an indictment of the Nietzschean superman, London may have wanted readers to scrutinize all of the ideas associated with Larsen, including those associated with Ecclesiastes. However, London’s view of Ecclesiastes is broader than Larsen’s, and London condemns Larsen partly for not embracing all of the implications of Qoheleth’s philosophy. When considered alongside the significant other Ecclesiastes references, London’s initial use of Ecclesiastes in service of Larsen’s Nietzschean egotism leads to thinking about Ecclesiastes more broadly. Van Weyden, for example, paraphrases Ecclesiastes himself in a conversation with Brewster: “The battle is not always to the strong. We have not the strength with which to fight this man; we must dissimulate, and win, if win we can, by craft. […] We must stand together” (166). Most obviously, Van Weyden’s first sentence echoes Ecclesiastes 9:11: “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.” The second two sentences borrow fewer words, but make essentially the same assertion as Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: “Two are better than one; […] For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. […] And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him.” Though the narrating Van Weyden doesn’t name his use of Ecclesiastes, London has prepared readers to notice the allusion by consistently referencing Ecclesiastes. As Brewster and Van Weyden do
withstand Larsen to survive together while he dies in solitude, *The Sea-Wolf* suggests the need for the communal aspect of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy, which Larsen lacks.

Another significant aspect of Ecclesiastes’ diverse influence in *The Sea-Wolf* comes in Van Weyden’s transformation from “a scholar and a dilettante,” who “had never done any hard manual labour” in his life, into a competent working man (39). In his essay “Sea Change in *The Sea-Wolf*,” Sam S. Baskett calls Van Weyden’s transformation “central to the unifying theme” of London’s novel: “Had London entitled the novel ‘The Rise of Humphrey Van Weyden,’ the complexity of his characterization might have received the considered attention it deserves” (97). Hindman agrees, showing that the transformation comes about largely because of Larsen’s influence: Van Weyden “awaken[s] to his own animal nature and achiev[es] thereby the proper balance between instinctive and spiritual life. It is this balance that London seems to be advocating by setting up these two men as foils one to the other” (99). Van Weyden incorporates the advantages of Larsen’s physical life without abandoning valuable spiritual connections.

He does so via Ecclesiastes. Without crediting Ecclesiastes’ views on work, Van Weyden – who, like Hindman, credits Larsen – benefits from Qoheleth’s advocacy of physical labor as a part of the good life. Qoheleth hates work when he expects it to provide him a reward apart from the work itself, in the form of money and possessions which end in death: “I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me” (2:18). However, he embraces work done for its own sake in the satisfaction of the moment: “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his
labour” (2:24). London, an avid worker who wrote one thousand words per day, recognized the emphasis on work in Ecclesiastes and made use of it in describing the development of Van Weyden. In his brief essay “How I Became a Socialist,” London discusses the pride he took in work: “Work was everything. It was sanctification and salvation. The pride I took in a hard day’s work well done would be inconceivable to you. It is almost inconceivable to me as I look back upon it” (Essays 58). Prior to his arrival on the Ghost, Van Weyden has almost no experience with work, and his privileged status forms at least part of the reason why Larsen suggests that he stay aboard as a member of the crew: “I have a counter proposition to make, and for the good of your soul” (27). While Van Weyden can’t imagine it at the time Larsen’s counter proposition does prove good for his soul as it teaches him both the perils and pleasures of work.

Firstly, his experiences on the Ghost provide Van Weyden with an intimate opportunity to see how working people live. And, as his first job drains the humanity from him, he sympathizes almost immediately: “I shall be able to appreciate the lives of the working people hereafter. I did not dream that work was so terrible a thing. From half past five in the morning till ten o’clock at night I am everybody’s slave” (53). Likewise, in his 1905 essay, “What Life Means to Me,” London warns against the dangers of overworking: “This employer worked me nearly to death. A man may love oysters, but too many oysters will disincline him toward that particular diet. And so with me. Too much work sickened me. I did not wish ever to see work again” (Essays 86). Where the market empties work of its honor and pride he finds arguments for socialism: “All things were commodities, all people bought and sold. The one commodity that labor had to sell
was muscle. The honor of labor had no price in the market-place” (*Essays* 86-7). London stresses the need to distinguish between positive work and exploitative work and between healthy working-class people and the destitute. Qoheleth never makes an explicit distinction between the two, but in his preference for the value of work for its own sake over work meant exclusively for a monetary reward he too suggests that good work will and should have honor in it outside of the marketplace.

Van Weyden, too, learns that so long as his work doesn’t debilitate him physically or mentally it can provide satisfaction, excitement, pride, and deepened companionship. Larsen provides direct lessons in the first two of these values. Showing Van Weyden a navigation device he created, Larsen claims: **“I have enjoyed working it out.” “The creative joy,” I murmured. [Larsen responds,] “I guess that’s what it ought to be called. Which is another way of expressing the joy of life in that it is alive, the triumph of movement over matter, of the quick over the dead, the pride of the yeast because it is yeast and crawls”** (81). Ecclesiastes 9:10 expresses a similar fondness for what Van Weyden and Larsen agree to call the creative joy of work: **“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”** While a person lives, he should find satisfaction in thinking and working. Larsen also finds work exciting. Just before trying to survive a Pacific-Ocean storm, he energetically condemns Khayyám for overemphasizing life’s easy pleasures: **“Hump,” he said, becoming cognizant of the fascinated gaze I bent upon him, “this beats whisky and is where your Omar misses. I think he only half lived after all”** (128).
After several weeks aboard the *Ghost*, Van Weyden begins to embrace on his own the pride and occasional joy that comes with good work. He reflects, “I found I was taking a certain secret pride in myself. Fantastic as the situation was,—a land-lubber second in command,—I was, nevertheless, carrying it off well; and during that brief time I was proud of myself, and I grew to love the heave and roll of the *Ghost* under my feet” (119). Later, Van Weyden finds comfort in the rhythm of work and relaxation, recognizing that working makes even his meals more enjoyable: “In the cabin I found all hands assembled, sailors as well, and while coffee was being cooked over the small stove we drank whisky and crunched hard-tack. Never in my life had food been so welcome. And never had hot coffee tasted so good” (136). Ecclesiastes 5:12 similarly outlines the ability of good work to make everyday activities more satisfying: “The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.” Van Weyden acknowledges his debt to Larsen for providing him an opportunity to learn the value of satisfying labor – “I had much for which to thank Wolf Larsen” (229) – but he could almost as appropriately be thanking Qoheleth.

And, in fact, Van Weyden goes a step further than Larsen by productively pairing work with another of Qoheleth’s tenets, the importance of companionship and love. Van Weyden and Brewster escape the *Ghost* and land on an uninhabited island where they have to build their own shelter. While constructing a house, they work together happily: “But it was work, hard work, all of it. Maud and I worked from dawn till dark, to the limit of our strength, so that when night came we crawled stiffly to bed and slept the animal-like sleep of exhaustion. And yet Maud declared that she had never felt better or
stronger in her life. I knew this was true of myself” (232). Here again Van Weyden evokes Ecclesiastes’ claim about the sweet sleep of laborers, and finds that working together in a loving relationship makes him feel better and stronger than he ever has in his life. And though they’re not yet married, during these scenes the two essentially follow the recommendations of Ecclesiastes 9:9: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.” Brewster and Van Weyden surpass Larsen’s understanding of Ecclesiastes by adding to it the community element that makes both work and life better: “for the rest of the afternoon we made merry over our labour. […] We were both very tired when we knocked off for supper, and we had done good work, too, though to the eye it appeared insignificant” (250). While death makes work and love ultimately insignificant, work and love provide Brewster and Van Weyden with individual moments of meaning in the midst of the overall meaninglessness of existence.

London demonstrates in The Sea-Wolf that Ecclesiastes can support two diverse philosophical positions. Larsen uses the book’s focus on death and life’s difficulties to argue for his pessimistic worldview. Van Weyden builds on the book’s focus on good work and a loving community to increase his optimism. John Franklin Genung, in his contemporaneously published 1904 Ecclesiastes commentary, notes this difficulty of agreeing even on the book’s most general philosophical conclusions: “since it was first given to the world, no phenomenon has been so remarkable as the extraordinary diversity of interpretation which has gathered round it. […] Every new generation has
contemplated the book from a different angle, or has seen therein its own prevailing attitude toward the universe reflected in a different way (157). Larsen’s and Van Weyden’s previous experiences color their interpretations of Ecclesiastes, and what’s more London’s presentation of their contradictory positions matches Qoheleth’s own use of contradictions in his argument. William P. Brown, in his 2000 Ecclesiastes commentary, suggests that Qoheleth uses contradicting pieces of traditional wisdom to “reexamine conventional norms and values dialogically,” and that the contradictions in Ecclesiastes parallel Qoheleth’s ultimate philosophical position: “[contradictions] seem to serve the didactic purpose of subverting facile interpretations of his discourse and heightening the larger ambiguity that engulfs the book. Finding a uniform, determinate meaning in Ecclesiastes is as elusive as securing enduring gain was for the sage” (12).

Ecclesiastes’ contradictions appealed especially to London, as London himself often held disparate philosophical positions. Cassuto and Reesman write, “His politics displayed a notorious inconsistency, and the range of his works defies intellectual or generic categorization. Though readers have never had trouble approaching it, London’s work is hard to read critically because of its diversity” (6). Similar to the difficulty of concluding whether Ecclesiastes is an optimistic or a pessimistic text, London’s widely varying work makes limiting him to one position difficult. Cassuto and Reesman suggest succinctly, “He was both a pessimist and a humanist” (9). Eric Miles Williamson’s monograph on London opens with these two sentences: “Jack London is misunderstood. People call him confused” (3). Citing Ralph Waldo Emerson, Williamson goes on to suggest the value of being misunderstood and of London’s contradictory philosophies. He
feels compelled to do so because many critics have painted London’s inconsistency negatively. However, like Williamson, some recent critics are attracted by London’s contradictions. Cassuto and Reesman see the value in London’s diverse range:

London’s writing enriches both humanistic and deterministic reevaluations of naturalism. […] London’s fiction often features unresolved clashes between systems of belief. […] The broad conclusion is that London is indeed one of American literature’s representative men. Jonathan Bishop says of Emerson’s “Representative Men” that “Genius is defined by its utter receptivity to the ‘spirit of the hour.’” London was nothing if not engaged with that spirit (5, 6, 9).

In addition to his interest in the contemporarily popular Ecclesiastes, London engages with the popular philosophies of, among others, Nietzsche and Omar Khayyám in The Sea-Wolf.

London also addresses the theodicy question – itself a kind of contradiction – which had, as Link’s essay “The Theodicy Problem in the Works of Frank Norris” shows, become especially popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Link explains that in the decades between 1880 and 1910, dozens of both religious and secular publications were dedicated to trying to reconcile God’s absolute goodness and power with the reality of evil. In The Sea-Wolf, London contributes to the discussion in a way largely consistent with Ecclesiastes’ treatment of the theodicy problem. The most challenging theological statements come from the ship’s cook after he gets beaten by a member of the crew. The cook aggressively challenges God’s goodness:
You never knew wot it was to go 'ungry, to cry yerself asleep with yer little belly gnawin’ an’ gnawin’, like a rat inside yer. It carn’t come right. If I was President of the United Stytes to-morrer, ’ow would it fill my belly for one time w’en I was a kiddy and it went empty? […] ’Ow can it be myde up to me, I arsk? ’Oo’s goin’ to do it? Gawd? ’Ow Gawd must ’ave ’ated me w’en ’e signed me on for a voyage in this bloomin’ world of ’is! (101-2)

The cook anticipates and rejects the possible answer to the theodicy problem which claims God can make everything right in the end by improving the lives of sufferers. He responds that even if his future improves, it won’t make up for his extreme, still very real, suffering in the past.

Having introduced the theodicy problem through the cook, London then has his two main characters consider it. Larsen argues that in a godless world, everyone has to make his own justice, and at one point in the novel Van Weyden seems to agree with him: “The worst appeared inevitable; and as I paced the deck, hour after hour, I found myself afflicted with Wolf Larsen’s repulsive ideas. What was it all about? Where was the grandeur of life that it should permit such wanton destruction of human souls? It was a cheap and sordid thing after all, this life, and the sooner over the better. Over and done with!” (124). However, Brewster at this point has not yet boarded the ship, and when she does Van Weyden returns to his optimism. London herein treats the theodicy problem much like Qoheleth treats it. London acknowledges life’s injustices by allowing the cook to voice his intense, lifelong suffering, which Qoheleth also does, among other times, in
Ecclesiastes 4:1: “I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.” Then London gives Larsen a position similar to the conclusion of Ecclesiastes 9:11, there is no recognizable justice because “time and chance happeneth to them all.” And finally, London allows Van Weyden to forget about theodicy by focusing on the small advantages of earthly living in a loving relationship, which Qoheleth suggests in Ecclesiastes 3:22 in response to life’s uncertainty: “I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?”

Qoheleth appealed to London because he found his anti-religious views in Ecclesiastes, but also because of their shared interest in work, evil, and in presenting contradictions without reservation. However, like Larsen, London failed to incorporate all of Ecclesiastes’ recommendations into his daily life, most notably in his expectation that happiness would follow money and fame. Ironically, Kershaw suggests that this was especially true after the publication of The Sea-Wolf: “He was in fact so dispirited by spring 1905, even after The Sea-Wolf had climbed to third place in the national best-seller list, that he kept ‘a loaded revolver in his desk ready to use against himself at any time’. […] His battle for recognition had resulted in crippling disillusionment with the ephemeral rewards it bestowed” (153). Ecclesiastes 5:10 warns of this danger: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.” In fact, London eventually fell into a trap similar to the one in which
Edith Wharton’s heroine Lily Bart falls. According to Andrew Sinclair’s biography Jack, by 1915 London “was ordering six times the normal prescription of opium, hyoscyamine, and camphor capsules,” while “also taking regular injections of atropine and belladonna mixed with opium and morphine; […] he was taking the fatal ‘uppers and downers’ of modern pill-pushers in an age that regulated the sale of drugs extremely inefficiently” (218). London eventually overdosed on morphine. And while his death probably had nothing to do with Ecclesiastes, it is eerily reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 4:2-3, verses that contradict Qoheleth’s primary claims but nonetheless contribute to the complexity of his message: “I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.”

**Ellen Glasgow’s Ecclesiastes-Preaching Agnostic Darwinist**

Glasgow grew up in a strict Christian, Calvinist household and maintained a complicated relationship with God throughout her life. Goodman explains in her Glasgow biography that as a child Glasgow rejected her father’s Calvinism and stopped going to church: “Because Glasgow could never dissociate her vision of her father’s religion from the man himself, she saw Calvinism as a punitive, authoritarian, and irrationally sentimental system” (10). In her 1954 posthumously published autobiography The Woman Within, Glasgow calls herself the family’s foremost “rebel against the Calvinist conscience” (59). And yet, Glasgow didn’t abandon God: “In my own rebellious way,” she writes in the autobiography, “I was trying to find Him” (93). Goodman charts Glasgow’s interest in the divine: sometimes she actively pursued God and other times she
agonistically questioned Christian ideas: “Glasgow tried to sort out questions about
religion, which had preoccupied her since childhood. Even then she had wondered why
God let people and animals suffer when He could prevent it” (95-6). At one point she
flirted with mysticism (99), at another she “engaged in a bitter argument over religion
with the rector of St. Bartholomew’s Church. He expressed his acceptance of Divine
Love and a guarantee of immortality, which she took delight in denying both his premise
and conclusion” (204). Near the end of her life, she expressed an eventual peace in
ambiguous terms, unclear whether the peace she felt was God or Nothing: “The peace I
felt was not the peace of possession. It was […] a sense of infinite reunion with the
Unknown Everything or with Nothing […] or with God. But whether Everything or
Nothing, it was surrender of identity. […] In my death, as in my life, I was still seeking
God, known or unknown” (289-90). Maintaining a relationship with a distant, inscrutable
God, who doesn’t provide immortality or comprehensible justice, relates closely to
Qoheleth’s divine relationship and begins to account for Glasgow’s interest in
Ecclesiastes.

Goodman notes that Glasgow’s 1925 novel *Barren Ground* reconciles her views
with Calvinism. Goodman writes, “she had found what she had been seeking since her
teens: a code of humane stoicism ‘sufficient for life or for death’ (*WW*, 271), a code that
she herself understood to incorporate many of her father’s Calvinist values” (166). As
Glasgow’s search for the divine and a moral code returns her to her Calvinistic roots, the
compatibility of Ecclesiastes and Calvinism becomes significant, and each may have
influenced Glasgow toward the other. The most well-known-Calvinist tenets include the
doctrine of predestination, the absolute autonomy of God, and the so-called Protestant work ethic. William P. Brown, in his essay “Calvin and Qoheleth Meet after a Hard Day’s Night,” sees Calvin and Qoheleth as sort of strange friends. He suggests that while Calvin never preached on Ecclesiastes, and only rarely quoted it in his writings, the two share similar views on the value of work and joy (74-6). The deterministic aspect of predestination relates to the most often quoted of Qoheleth’s reflections, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 – which begins “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose” – as the claim that everything has an established time suggests that the time has already been determined. Similar to Calvinism’s emphasis on God’s autonomy, Ecclesiastes 7:13 suggests: “Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?” Glasgow, who thought about God and Calvinism throughout her life, and who – judging from the Ecclesiastes epigraph to her 1898 novel Phases of an Inferior Planet – thought significantly about Ecclesiastes, likely noticed this relationship between Ecclesiastes and Calvinism.

More significant than just the similarities in Calvinism and Ecclesiastes, however, is how each of their ideas actively contributed to, or at least match with, turn-of-the-twentieth-century ideas. In the introduction to their book The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era, Aliki Barnstone, Michael T. Manson, and Carol J. Singley connect Calvinism to modernism in a way that fits with many links I outlined between Ecclesiastes and modernity in my introduction:

Both Calvinism and modernism emphasize an alienation of self from God and nature, whether through the Calvinist’s apprehension of a fearsome,
punishing deity or through the post-Darwinian skeptic’s sense that God is distant or absent. Both Calvinism and modernism encourage introspection, a heightened self-consciousness that reflects anxiety over an inability either to affirm or alter one’s place in the universe. A paralysis of will and a failure to act, especially for one’s own well-being, may equally afflict the Calvinist and modernist. Indeed, one might argue that modernism is a kind of Calvinism manqué: it maintains Calvinism’s harshness and despair without its visionary idealism, and its suffering without salvation. (xxii)

These specific modern views have their origins in naturalism, and so Calvinism shares many these traits with naturalism as well. Like Calvinism, Ecclesiastes asserts humanity’s alienation from God, the need for autonomy, and the difficulty of responding to life’s vanity. Like naturalism, Ecclesiastes records life’s harshness without idealism, and its suffering without afterlife salvation.

Glasgow’s reading of Marcus Aurelius, specifically her interest in his claim against the value of lasting fame, reveals a further Ecclesiastes connection. Goodman writes, “At Thebes, [Glasgow] contemplated the paradox of enduring monuments marking a transitory existence and underlined Marcus Aurelius’s line ‘that neither a posthumous name is of any value, nor reputation, nor anything else’” (73). This remark from Aurelius echoes Ecclesiastes 1:11 and 2:16: “There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after. […] For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten.” Qoheleth’s
concern over fleeting memories fits with his view on life’s vanity and his call to enjoy transient moments while they last. In *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, Glasgow further ties her interest in Aurelius with her interest in Ecclesiastes. To go along with the Ecclesiastes epigraph that precedes the novel, she used an Aurelius epigraph to introduce the second book.

In Glasgow’s second novel *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, her interest in Ecclesiastes, her lifelong confrontation with Calvinism, and – as the novel reveals – her investment in the ideas of Charles Darwin all combine to highlight Ecclesiastes’ compatibility with Darwinism and agnosticism, and ultimately to suggest the limits of altruism. Though Glasgow focused her later writing on the South, specifically on her home state of Virginia, she set *Phases* in New York City. Narrated in the third-person, the novel tells of an unsuccessful marriage and attempted reconciliation between aspiring-singer Mariana Musin and agnostic-scientist-turned-priest Anthony Algarifice. Mariana stops working after their marriage, Algarifice loses his job, and their child soon dies from malnutrition. Mariana then leaves Algarifice to pursue a singing career abroad where she marries a wealthy man. Upon receiving an inheritance from her new husband’s uncle, she leaves her husband and returns to New York eight years after she left. In the meantime, Algarifice nearly dies from starvation, but Father Spears, who had previously raised Algarifice in the church orphanage, rescues him and leaves him a position at his church. Algarifice becomes an Episcopal priest and performs his priestly duties impressively, but he remains agnostic and pays more attention to New York’s poor districts than to his wealthy parishioners. When Mariana and Algarifice meet again, they
fall back in love and decide to run away together to a farm in Georgia. However, Mariana gets caught in a rainstorm that aggravates her latent pneumonia and she dies. Algarcife nearly kills himself in his grief, but just before he does so someone comes to his door to inform him of a violent strike in the bowery, and the novel ends with Algarcife rushing out from his apartment in an attempt to “prevent bloodshed” (325).

The novel begins with an unattributed Ecclesiastes epigraph, which reproduces all of Ecclesiastes 9:11: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Marion K. Richards, in her book *Ellen Glasgow’s Development as a Novelist*, sees the epigraph as intricately tied to the novel’s themes: “The title and the philosophical speculations of the hero indicate that Miss Glasgow is expounding a theory that man is a pawn of his hereditary nature and of forces beyond his control. She introduces the novel with a question from Ecclesiastes, IX:11” (43). Richards sees in the epigraph the random misfortune of Algarcife’s life: “His unhappiness is caused by an unfortunate marriage – one of Miss Glasgow’s most frequent causes of unhappiness. But the marriage seems to have been engineered by the Fates, the stars, or whatever indifferent forces direct the destinies of man” (44). Richards leaves her analysis at this, but the epigraph also foreshadows the ineffectuality of Algarcife’s exceptional intellect, “neither yet bread to the wise,” and it must also apply to Mariana’s misfortune. Furthermore, the epigraph relates loosely to Glasgow’s own suffering. While writing *Phases*, she began a lifelong
battle with deafness that – through no fault of her own – led to what she called “a panic of terror” (*WW*, 152).

Ecclesiastes appears again without acknowledgement in the text of one of Algarcife’s sermons, and Glasgow draws special attention to Ecclesiastes by referencing that sermon twice in the novel’s conclusion. Algarcife quotes Ecclesiastes 6:12, evoking Glasgow’s interest in the ephemerality of fame that attracted her in Aurelius: “For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?” (315). Algarcife then recalls this sermon while contemplating suicide on the novel’s third to last page (323). By placing the repeated quote so near the novel’s conclusion, Glasgow brackets *Phases of an Inferior Planet* with quotations from Ecclesiastes.

The fact that both of these Ecclesiastes references go unacknowledged demonstrates how familiar Glasgow expected her audience to be with Ecclesiastes. In a November 1898 review of the novel by *Academy*, one contemporary reviewer supports Glasgow’s assumption: “The life of everyone is, in large measure, a struggle against pessimism and melancholy, and contains sorrow enough, without calling in this ill-omened prophet to destroy the last germ of hope. For that is the conclusion of the whole matter” (qtd. in Scura 27). Without naming the ill-omened prophet as Ecclesiastes, the reviewer conveys his familiarity with the book by quoting 12:13: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.” This conveys a fairly high level of familiarity since the closest any character comes to identifying Ecclesiastes by name occurs when Claude Nevins and Mr. Paul express their distrust of Solomon’s wisdom. Nevins banteringly
exclaims, “An hour of Mariana is worth all the spoken or unspoken thoughts of—of Marcus Aurelius, to say nothing of Solomon” (41). Paul responds, “As for Solomon, his wisdom has been greatly exaggerated” (41). Though traditional authorship of Ecclesiastes was ascribed to Solomon, Solomon isn’t named in the biblical book, and so recognizing even this reference requires a degree of familiarity. On the other hand, Glasgow isn’t subtle about drawing attention to Ecclesiastes for readers with some familiarity with the book. Nevins and Paul’s dinnertime conversation, especially when paired with the epigraph, encourages readers to consider their own position on Solomon’s wisdom.

Furthermore, Glasgow draws attention to the value of Ecclesiastes by consistently associating Ecclesiastes’ themes and ideas with the likable Jerome Ardly. Describing Ardly for the first time, the narrator associates him with Qoheleth’s interest in wisdom, wine, women, and the desire to trust his experience: “He himself was a self-contained young fellow, who, like a greater before him, followed with wisdom both wine and women. His life was regulated by a theory which he had propounded in youth and attempted to practice in maturer years. The theory asserted that experience was the one reliable test of existing conditions” (31). The phrase “like a greater before him” makes the reference to Qoheleth almost explicit. Eight years later, when Nevins congratulates him on his political success, Ardly borrows a whole phrase from Qoheleth: “My hand hath found its share to do, and I have done it with all my might” (220), which closely matches Ecclesiastes 9:10: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” Characters and the narrator consistently describe Ardly as handsome despite his hardships, indicating the rewards of his commitment to Ecclesiastes’ philosophy.
Mariana, for example, remembers thinking of Ardly as glowing at a time when, she later learns, he was in the middle of an illness: “She remembered how strong and masterful he had looked with the glow of heart disease, which she had thought the glow of health, upon his face” (123). Like Ecclesiastes, Ardly takes suffering and vanity as the starting place for the good life. Entering Nevins’ studio, the narrator notes that Ardly “had grown handsomer in the last eight years, though the world had gone less well with him than with Nevins” (220). When Algarcife sees Ardly, he notices “his eyes bright and his handsome face aglow,” and concludes, “Politics agree with you, I see” (296-7). That Glasgow consistently evokes Ardly’s appeal suggests Ecclesiastes’ value and its importance in the novel.

However, while Ardly importantly points to the possibility of successfully implementing Qoheleth’s recommendations, he plays such a peripheral role that he serves mainly as a catalyst to draw attention to the protagonist Algarcife’s precarious Ecclesiastes relationship. Critics have seen in Algarcife a Darwinian agnostic who sacrifices his own life for the good of others. These first two elements fit with Ecclesiastes, but Algarcife suffers unnecessarily because he doesn’t balance his work for the good of others with relaxation and goodness for himself. On Algarcife’s relationship with Darwin, J. R. Raper writes in his book *Without Shelter: The Early Career of Ellen Glasgow*, “Algarcife is Miss Glasgow’s most blatantly Darwinian protagonist” (110), and suggests further, “Algarcife’s notion of sympathy parallels closely that of Darwin” (111). Glasgow provided support for this reading in *Phases* by placing several of Darwin’s books in Algarcife’s study (35) and by noting his attempt to reconcile Darwin’s theory
with other theories. When Mariana asks him about his work, Algarcife replies, “Dogging at a theory of heredity which will reconcile Darwin’s gemmules, Weismann’s germ-plasm, and Galton’s stirp” (51). Glasgow’s personal interest in Darwin also supports this reading. Goodman describes how Glasgow made it a point to visit Darwin’s grave, a site where Glasgow claimed, “One should just stand silent and think” (58). Glasgow also “wept at the foot of his grave” and wrote a hasty, but heartfelt, poem in which she calls Darwin “England’s greatness” (58).

More so than most biblical books, Ecclesiastes accommodates Darwin’s work on natural selection and the origins of life. In the final phrase of Glasgow’s Ecclesiastes epigraph, Qoheleth argues fairly consistently with Darwinian selection: “time and chance happeneth to them all” (9:11). And, like Darwin’s work, Qoheleth sets humans and animals on the same plane: “they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:18-20). Compared to the first Genesis creation account, Ecclesiastes seems like a proto-Darwinist text. In Genesis chapter one, God speaks life into existence in six days, and verses 27-8 establish significant distinctions between humans and animals: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing.” Like most human
assumptions before Darwin, Genesis sees a distinct difference between humans and animals. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, puts them on the same level. Additionally, Qoheleth’s general view of God’s distance from human affairs – he proclaims “God is in heaven, and thou upon earth” (5:2) and uses the general divine name “Elohim” instead of the personal name “Yahweh” – fits with the impartiality of natural selection.

Adding another Ecclesiastes parallel, Algarcife symbolizes Ecclesiastes’ potential as a text bridging Christianity and agnosticism by serving as an agnostic Christian priest. Algarcife shows his agnosticism in a youthful debate with Father Spears by rejecting Christian supremacy:

"atheist, agnostic, sceptic, what you will. It only means that you offer me an irrational assumption, and I reject it. It is the custom of you theologians to fit ugly epithets to your opponents, whereas the denial of Christianity no more argues atheism than the denial of Confucianism does. It merely proves that a man refuses to acknowledge any one of the gods which men have created. (106-7)"

Like Algarcife, Ecclesiastes never outright denies its Israelite religious traditions, but again like Algarcife, it does challenge traditional assumptions, including those assumptions concerning moral reciprocity: “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous” (8:14); the certainty of afterlife consciousness: “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave” (9:10); the meaning of life: “all is vanity” (1:2); and, as already indicated, the differences between
humans and animals. Likewise, while continuing his agnosticism in the second book, Algarcife acts as a capable priest like the Preacher Qoheleth.

Glasgow draws attention to the irony of Algarcife’s position when, in his Christianity-inspired sermons, she has him refute agnostic, scientific articles he wrote previously. Mrs. Ryder, a wealthy parishioner in Algarcife’s church, explains to a friend that Algarcife’s sermons “are in answer to those articles in the Scientific Weekly” (205), and later she congratulates Algarcife on getting “the better of the Scientific Weekly writer” (229). Knowing that he authored both texts, “A sudden boyish laugh broke from Father Algarcife—a laugh wrung from him by the pressure of an over-whelming sense of humor. ‘I don’t think it is a question of equality,’ he replied, ‘but of points of view’” (230). While agnostic readers prefer the Scientific Weekly articles, Mrs. Ryder tells her friends how highly the bishop values Algarcife’s sermons: “the bishop was saying to me yesterday that never before had the arguments against the vital truths of Christianity been so forcibly refuted” (205). Only two years after the publication of Phases, George Sparks, in his 1900 article “The Hebrew ‘Rubáiyát,” describes Ecclesiastes in terms that easily apply to Algarcife’s analytical reading and rhetorical writing abilities: “[Ecclesiastes] contains—O, the wonders of exegesis!—the creed of a Christian, if looked at from one point of view; if looked at from another, it is the creed of the agnostic” (416). While most characters want to take a side in the debate, Algarcife, like Qoheleth and Glasgow herself, feels comfortable existing with the ambiguity. In The Woman Within, Glasgow explains that she doesn’t feel compelled to take either a strictly Christian or a strictly agnostic stance: “within myself I found a sense of justice and compassion that I could not
betray. The pious might receive this as moral evidence of Divine nature. The skeptic would, no doubt, ascribe it to the long result of evolution. For my part, I had no quarrel with either, or with any other, interpretation” (271-2). The insistent ambiguity of Ecclesiastes in response to Qoheleth’s honest inquiry makes Ecclesiastes a good match for Glasgow and for her character Algarcife.

However, Algarcife’s Ecclesiastes parallels end here, and Glasgow goes on to show how Algarcife’s inability to implement more of Ecclesiastes’ recommendations hurts him and his relationship with Mariana. Algarcife overcommits to altruism and limits his own happiness. Ecclesiastes 7:16 warns of this danger, “Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” Algarcife is overly righteous, exceptionally wise, and, while he doesn’t destroy himself by suicide, he nearly does. And, at any rate, he consistently weakens himself by overworking, leading him toward, what Glasgow terms, “his slow suicide” (241). In connecting Glasgow to Darwin, Raper emphasizes “Darwin’s model of human nature,” which, he claims, “involves an essential tension between two life-protecting instincts: the instinct which preserves the individual in the struggle for existence, self-interest or egoism; and the instinct which tempers that struggle and lies at the foundations of human society, the social instinct or altruism, the key to the moral sense” (53). Raper suggests that in *Phases*, Glasgow offers Algarcife as a Darwinian exemplar with the potential to provide a new path to a better civilization: “Glasgow gives the impression that Algarcife’s ‘peculiar sensitiveness of sympathy’ is a foretaste of a truer civilization than presently exists” (111). Raper helpfully points out that Darwin sees both self interest and social interest as
key components to human flourishing, but he ignores Algarcife’s overemphasis on the social, altruistic aspect that keeps him from a healthy self-interest that should encourage him to take care of himself, enjoy life’s simple goods, and cultivate an intimate, loving community. Algarcife is in fact peculiarly sensitive to sympathy not in the forward-thinking, positive way Raper claims, but in a way that leaves him desperate to the point of suicide. Algarcife forces altruism onto himself because, lacking the Qohelutian elements of wife, wine, and moderate work paired with relaxation, he doesn’t know how to be happy.

Glasgow makes Algarcife’s unhappiness most clear in three scenes referencing suicide. The first occurs a week after Mariana leaves: “[Algarcife] reached for a phial of morphia pellets which he kept in his desk, and, dissolving one in water, swallowed it. For a moment the temptation to take the contents of the phial at a dose assailed him” (179). Algarcife doesn’t try to kill himself in this scene, but it foreshadows the suicidal thoughts that remain with him for the rest of the novel. The second suicide reference occurs when Algarcife decides to take Father Spears position in the church exclusively because he hopes that it will lead him to a quicker death: “When, at the death of Father Speares, he was called to the charge, he accepted it without a struggle and without emotion. He saw in it but an opening to heavier labor and an opportunity to hasten the progress of his slow suicide” (241). The “heavier labor” includes Algarcife’s charitable work, and this reflection shows most clearly that Algarcife himself thinks that altruism alone, rather than adding productively to his life, will “hasten the progress of his slow suicide.” A third suicide scene comes after Mariana’s death: “The colorless liquid in the small blue phial
lay within reach of [Algarcife’s] grasp. It seemed to him that he saw already a man lying on that leathern sofa—saw the protruding eyes, the relaxed limbs, the clammy sweat, and saw nothing more that would be after him under the sun” (324). Algarcife seems committed to killing himself this time, but a knock on the door leads him to an opportunity to help others avoid violence, and Algarcife rises to the occasion feeling not happiness but only “lifeless” obligation (324).

Algarcife’s proclivity toward suicide demonstrates the limits of altruism most strikingly, but scenes earlier in the novel also suggest its limitations. While writing a scientific treatise on altruism, Algarcife’s disposition immediately contradicts his argument: “‘Optimism is the first duty of the altruist.’ He wrote on with the feeling that he was existing as an automaton” (156). Algarcife cannot live up to what he calls the altruist’s first duty, even while writing the sentence, and he clearly fails to be optimistic when he becomes suicidal. In another scene near the end of book one, Algarcife questions “unsympathetically his old pursuit of knowledge. What did it all mean? For what had he given his heritage of youth and manhood? For Truth. Granted, but what was Truth that he should follow it unswervingly until he passed from flesh and blood to a parcel of dry bones?” (181). He recognizes that if his only truth is to help others, truth doesn’t prove ultimately satisfying. Even in book two after becoming a priest, Algarcife lacks an emotional connection to anything except his dog: “It was a vagrant that he had rescued from beneath a cable-car and brought home in his arms. His care had met its reward in gratitude, and the bond between them was perhaps the single emotion remaining in either life” (215). Glasgow doesn’t recommend avoiding altruism altogether: in The Woman
Within, for example, she advocates kindness and lessening the world’s pain. But clearly altruism alone doesn’t satisfy Algarifice. To be truly happy, Glasgow suggests through Phases, a person should pair her desire to help others with a commitment also to taking care of herself. Justice must be second to joy as the highest good; for the goal of justice should be to provide all people with access to joy and flourishing.

Glasgow offers Ecclesiastes as a path to balance altruism productively with enjoyment. While Algarifice and Mariana fail to take full advantage of Qoheleth’s recommendations, they seem on the verge of implementing his ideas at one point late in the novel. Glasgow artfully introduces this section with a conversation between Algarifice and Ardly, the character most influenced by Qohelet. After their conversation, Algarifice goes into his church, reflects on his resurging relationship with Mariana, and writes his Ecclesiastes sermon, which along with the epigraph frames the novel in Ecclesiastes. Then, later that night as a result of these Ecclesiastes influences, Algarifice finds joy in some of life’s simple pleasures:

He entered the rectory, and in a few moments went in to dinner. To his surprise he found that he was hungry, and ate heartily. All instincts, even that for food, had quickened with the rebirth of emotion. He drank his claret slowly, [imagining] Mariana seated across from him[. . . .] She would sit opposite him again, but not here. He had a farm in the South, […] where] they would go to begin life anew and to mend the faith that had been broken. He would till the land and drive the plough and take up the common round of life again. (306-7)
In this one scene, Algarcife takes or imagines taking pleasure in four of Ecclesiastes’ main tenets: he enjoys food and wine and anticipates enjoying work and his renewed love for his wife.

Mariana also benefits from the anticipation of living happily with Algarcife. Mariana’s hopefulness of seeing Algarcife again makes her healthier, nicer, and more alive:

For the next few days she lived like one animated by an unnatural stimulant. She talked and moved nervously, and her eyes shone with suppressed excitement, but she had never appeared more brilliant, and her manner was charged with an irresistible vivacity. To Miss Ramsey she was unusually gentle and generous. [...] To a [close] observer there would have appeared, with the sharper gnawing at her heart, the dash of a freer grace to her gestures, a richer light to her eyes. (282)

Later, just before their first kiss in more than eight years, Mariana dismisses potential concerns about their precarious future: “‘What will matter,’ she replied, ‘so long as we are together?’” (304). Like Algarcife, Mariana in this moment anticipates living well with the spouse she loves.

Unfortunately for Mariana and Algarcife, their Ecclesiastes-inspired happiness doesn’t last long. While attending Algarcife’s Sunday service, Mariana regrets asking him to leave his secure position in the immaculately wealthy church and questions her ability to make him happy:
the rich curtains, the warmth of the Turkish rugs, the portraits in their massive frames, jarred her vibrant emotions. How could he pass from this to the farm in the South—to the old, old fight with poverty and the drama of self-denial? Would she not fail him again, as she had failed him once before? Would she not shatter his happiness in a second chance, as she had shattered it in the first? (313-4)

Mariana’s hesitation over the advisability of their decision leads her into a trance where she walks through the rain trying to collect her thoughts. She concludes against running away with Algarcife, “It was all over; this was what she saw clearly—the finality of all things. What was she that she should think herself strong enough to contend with a man’s creed?—faith?—God?” (317). Though Algarcife isn’t invested in his position Mariana doesn’t know this, and – lacking exposure to Ecclesiastes’ creed – she can’t imagine how important she is to his happiness. Partly because she gives up on their future and partly because she’s confused by the rain and the city, Mariana walks in the rain for hours. This aggravates her pneumonia and soon leads to her death.

Before dying, though, Mariana has a final chance to speak with Algarcife. Seeing him crying over her, Mariana suggests to Algarcife the impossibility of their actual happiness living together: “‘Don’t,’ she said, gently; and then, ‘It would have been very nice, the little farm in the South, and the peaches, and the cows in the pastures, but,’ she smiled, ‘I am not very thrifty—the peaches would have rotted where they fell, and the cows would never have been milked’” (322). While it seems possible that Mariana and Algarcife could have made each other happy, they would have had to rely more on
Ecclesiastes. However, based on Mariana’s dying words and on clues Glasgow reveals earlier in the novel, their relying on Ecclesiastes seems unlikely. Early in Phases when Nevins and Ardly ask Algarcife to share a drink, Algarcife refuses on account of his work: “‘Taken collectively,’ he remarked, ‘the human race is a consummate nuisance. What a deuced opportunity for work the last man will have’” (42). While Algarcife only values work, Brown, in his Ecclesiastes commentary, notes Qoheleth’s endorsement of combining work, joy, and community: “The positive value of work emerges when labor is set within the formative context of rest, refreshment, and fellowship” (90). Algarcife works long hours alone in his room, and instead of joining friends for refreshing fellowship he calls them “a consummate nuisance.”

Additionally, Algarcife increases his own workload in the novel’s first half by not allowing Mariana to work, which, in turn, keeps her from enjoying her work. Excited by the possibility of joining a comic opera, Mariana suggests that she could lessen the family’s financial trouble by signing. Algarcife refuses to consider it: “‘Mariana,’ he put out his hand in protest, ‘you shall not do it. I will not let you’” (151). In response, “Mariana tapped her foot upon the floor impatiently” and eventually leaves the room “sullenly” because Algarcife keeps her from enjoying her work singing (151). Several recent critics view this fact as an especially degrading aspect of their marriage and as a significant limitation on Mariana’s life as an artist. Gwendolyn Jones, in her essay “Ellen Glasgow’s Homiletic Vision,” calls Algarcife “[b]lind to his wife’s need for artistic expression” (4); and Linda Kornasky, in her essay “Sexuality and the Death of the Southern Woman Artist,” argues similarly, “Mariana knows that renewing her marriage
Karen A. Walker’s essay “The Art of Escape: The Search for Female Identity in Ellen Glasgow’s *Phases of an Inferior Planet*” emphasizes the damage this does Mariana: “With no place and no mate, such women pursuing individual identity are alienated and alone” (71). While not the most progressive text – though perhaps the Bible’s most progressive text – Ecclesiastes endorses these turn-of-the-twenty-first-century readings of Glasgow’s novel: the freedom to work as an artist would improve Mariana’s life and her marriage to Algarcife.

Besides lacking meaningful work, the youthful Mariana’s inability to temper enjoyment with the reality of suffering and death keeps her from Qoheleth’s philosophy. Mariana claims an affinity with some Ecclesiastes elements: “I love the world. I love living and breathing, and feeling the blood quicken in my veins. I love dancing and singing and eating and sleeping. The simple sensuousness of life is delicious to me” (75). However, her denial of suffering leaves her unprepared for life’s difficulties: “I make it a point to believe that suffering and death do not exist. I know they do, but I believe they do not” (75). Brown explains that Qoheleth’s view of sustainable joy acknowledges death, suffering, and injustice: “Joy that is not born of sorrow is artificial. [… J]oy, born from grief, is resilient to the harsh realities of life” (73-4), Mariana’s philosophy cannot account for her daughter’s death, and so she leaves Algarcife to pretend that it never happened. Overall, because Algarcife and Mariana cannot implement these Ecclesiastes elements early in their relationship, they would have had a difficult time existing happily in an Ecclesiastes-inspired relationship even if Mariana had lived. By showing how this
inability hurts Mariana and Algarcife, Glasgow demonstrates the value of Ecclesiastes for living a good life.

Judging by contemporary reviews chiding *Phases of an Inferior Planet* for its depressing presentation of life Glasgow may also have employed her Ecclesiastes epigraph as a protection against charges of immorality and atheism. Mariana’s desertion of her marriage and Algarcife’s insincere entry into the priesthood led to such harsh criticism as in this December 1898 review in *Literature*: “The book is hardly likely to appeal to the ordinary healthy English reader” (qtd. in Scura 29). Even more aggressively, a January 1899 review in the *Bookman* called Glasgow’s novel “black,” “not literature in its higher sense,” “too bitter and gloomy,” “depressing, unwholesome,” and a “profanation of holy things” (qtd. in Scura 30). This last charge of profanation against things holy highlights how threatening to Christianity Glasgow’s novel could have been perceived. While the Ecclesiastes epigraph wouldn’t necessarily keep her critics from claiming that she had distorted the biblical book, Glasgow could at least point to the epigraph to lessen charges of immorality by noting the relationship of Ecclesiastes to her novel’s themes.

Ecclesiastes appealed to Glasgow because it provided her with a religious text compatible with Darwinism, agnosticism, and her philosophical battle with her father’s lingering Calvinism. In *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, Glasgow used Ecclesiastes to stress the need for balancing altruism with enjoyment, a balance she applies to her own worldview in *The Woman Within*:
Although I felt no obligation to endure the unendurable, I had long ago decided that it was easier to suffer than to make suffer, and my nerves more than my will shrank from any act that would increase the sum total of pain. I loved happiness, and I hated cruelty[. …] The question of whether or not a God ruled the universe had no bearing whatever on my private belief that it was better to be humane than to be cruel. (271-2)

But, as was the case in London’s life, Glasgow’s interest in Ecclesiastes included pessimism and depression. Goodman describes an episode when, after a fight with her romantic friend Henry Anderson, Glasgow locked herself in her bedroom and “took an overdose of sleeping tablets” (151). Glasgow survived, and, like London’s suicide, her attempt probably was not directly related to Ecclesiastes. Nonetheless, when viewed alongside her advocacy of Ecclesiastes in *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, Glasgow’s attempted suicide draws attention again to Qoheleth’s observations on the difficulty of surviving in a complex, messy, seemingly meaningless world.

**Stephen Crane’s Ecclesiastes-Invoking Optimistic Naturalism**

Crane grew up immersed in Christianity. In her Crane biography, Linda H. Davis notes his parents’ Christian zealousness and Christianity’s influence on Crane throughout his life:

Stephen Crane’s childhood as the son of the Reverend Jonathan Townley Crane, a Methodist minister, and Mary Helen Peck Crane, a clergyman’s daughter and a member of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union [which advocated Christian social reforms, including prohibition], had its
share of psychological terrors – the worst of the religious rhetoric flying out at the sensitive young boy, it seems, like furies or black riders coming from the sea, as he would later write. (4)

Crane attended three separate, religiously affiliated schools, the first of which, Pennington Seminary, his father had attended to prepare for the ministry. Though the ministry never attracted Crane, who saw himself instead as a future soldier, Davis describes Pennington as a school that “dispensed religion in heavy doses” (21) to all of its students. While at Pennington, Crane followed the rules of mandatory church attendance and Bible reading, as he did while attending two other Christian-affiliated schools, Claverack College and Lafayette College (23, 30).

Throughout his time at each of these Christian schools, Crane – somewhat playfully – tried to avoid church attendance and Bible study, but despite his efforts he knew the Bible well and commented on it sometimes positively and oftentimes negatively in his fiction. Crane’s intimate relationship with Christianity, formed during his childhood and adolescence, relates to Qoheleth’s knowledge of other texts within the Hebrew Bible. Both Crane and Qoheleth challenged what they felt were false claims or hypocritical positions. Qoheleth gives this challenge most aggressively in response to his view of the incapability of the deed-consequence wisdom formula with real life. Deuteronomy 11:13-8 presents one example of this formula:

if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, That I will give you the rain of your land in
his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; And then the LORD’s wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly.

Deuteronomy promises fertile rain to those who obey God and destructive drought to those who deny God. Ecclesiastes 11:3, on the other hand, explains that rain falls without regard to human action: “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth.” If the clouds are not full of rain, Qoheleth implies, then the clouds do not empty themselves. Either way, nature doesn’t respond to human morality. Familiar with these deed-consequence formulas as well as with the world’s uncooperative, indifferent realities, Qoheleth prefers his firsthand observations to traditional moral assumptions.

Crane approached Christian texts in much the same way: using his familiarity with a text to serve his autonomous reflections. In a discussion with a chancellor at Syracuse University – his fourth and last religiously affiliated school – Crane implemented an Ecclesiastes persona: “Stephen disagreed with Chancellor Charles N. Sims in a class he was teaching and provoked the chancellor into an appeal to the Bible. ‘Tut, tut – what does St. Paul say, Mr. Crane, what does St. Paul say?’ said old Sims. ‘I know what St. Paul says, but I disagree with St. Paul,’ came the reply” (Davis 34). Chancellor Sims expected Crane to subordinate his own reflections to Paul’s letters in the
New Testament, but, like Qoheleth before him, Crane raises his experience above a text which doesn’t fit with his view of reality.

George Monteiro sees an example of Crane antagonizing Christianity in his 1894 story “The Men in the Storm,” which parodies a Christian text. In his book *Stephen Crane’s Blue Badge of Courage*, Monteiro suggests that Crane uses a strategic allusion to Ecclesiastes in much the same way Qoheleth strategically references Proverbs. The story describes a blizzard scene in New York City during which several homeless people try to secure lodging at a shelter. When the doors to the shelter finally open Monteiro sees an ironic parallel in the line, “the battle for shelter was going to the strong” (Crane 221). Monteiro contrasts this line with Ecclesiastes 9:11 – “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” – to highlight Crane’s critique of the ways Christianity avoids its own imperative to improve the lives of poor people (22). Crane wants to discourage Christians from using this Ecclesiastes verse, and other biblical verses, to delay social reform efforts by pointing to the privileged status given to the poor by the Bible. In another 1894 story, “An Experiment in Luxury,” Crane draws similar attention to a Christian pacification of the poor: “Theologians had for a long time told the poor man that riches did not bring happiness, and […] when a wail of despair or rage had come from the night of the slums they had stuffed this epigram down the throat of he who cried out and told him that he was a lucky fellow” (203). For Crane, anytime interpretations of Christian texts allow, however inadvertently, Christians to defer assistance to the poor and suffering, Christianity fails.
Monteiro sees another allusion to Ecclesiastes 9:11 in Crane’s 1897 story “The Open Boat.” But whereas Crane reads Ecclesiastes against the grain in “The Men in the Storm,” “The Open Boat” reference goes with the grain and engages more of Ecclesiastes’ nuance. The story gives Crane’s fictional account of his real-life experience shipwrecked after the SS Commodore sank near the Florida coast. Narrated in the third person, the story largely follows the thoughts of the semiautobiographical correspondent, who – along with the ship’s captain, cook, and an oiler named Billie – finds himself in a four-person lifeboat. Working together overnight and receiving aid from some passersby on shore, all of the characters survive except for the strongest among them, Billie the oiler. Monteiro writes, “the waves that spare the correspondent take their ransom in the person of the strong swimmer who was well ‘ahead in the race’ [Crane 1794]. That the oiler dies while the others survive is as inexplicable as the passage in Ecclesiastes which his death recalls” (188). Again the passage is Ecclesiastes 9:11: “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong […] but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Furthermore, the Ecclesiastes verse provides Crane with some of the language for his description of Billie swimming – “The oiler was ahead in the race. He was swimming strongly and rapidly” (1794, my emphasis) – and his charged narration of the exclamation from the saintly passerby that insinuates Billie’s death: “suddenly the man cried: ‘What's that?’ He pointed a swift finger” (1795, my emphasis). Here, Crane’s allusion coincides with Qoheleth’s purposes: while Billie’s strength should propel him to safety, his death demonstrates nature’s indifference.11
The three years between the publication of “The Men in the Storm” and “The Open Boat” may account for Crane’s changed attitude toward Ecclesiastes. Robert Shulman’s essay “Community, Perception, and the Development of Stephen Crane” does suggest a development in Crane’s thinking from – what Shulman sees as – the individualism of his 1885 novel *The Red Badge of Courage* to the community focus of “The Open Boat” (esp. 446-7). Regardless, Ecclesiastes fits ideologically not only with Crane’s presentation of Billie’s death, but with much of Crane’s eventual worldview.

Chester L. Wolford, in his study of Crane’s short fiction, notes the similarities between Crane’s work and Qoheleth’s: “As if taking his cue from Ecclesiastes, Crane wrote many of these stories to expose the truth of the Preacher’s cry: ‘Vanity of vanities. All is vanity’” (7). While Crane doesn’t take all of his cues from Ecclesiastes, it feels to Wolford as if he could have. Fittingly, in “The Open Boat,” Crane’s major themes echo Ecclesiastes. Like Ecclesiastes, “The Open Boat” presents a disinterested, amoral universe and advocates the importance of community in response to the lack of inherent meaning in human lives that end with death.

Critics have explicated Crane’s views on nature and community, but they have not thus far connected those views to Ecclesiastes. For example, Anthony Channell Hilfer’s essay “Nature as Protagonist in ‘The Open Boat’” concludes, “Crane gives us a nature that has agency without intention or personality, a nature that is visible without being intelligible” (256). On Crane’s praise of community, Edward R. Stephenson’s essay “The ‘Subtle Brotherhood’ of Crane and Hemingway” writes, “Man must look to the kindness of other men for meaning” (47). Patrick K. Dooley links both themes in the
third chapter of his book *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane*. In the chapter titled “Humanism: Brotherhood in an Indifference Universe” Dooley claims, “Crane’s conclusions about the human situation […] result from] careful experiential observations and thoughtful reflections on the worth of human effort in an indifferent universe. […] Thirty hours in an open boat convinced him that [the] natural world is an invaluable catalyst for releasing energy, inspiring effort, and creating subtle brotherhood” (79).

Outside of Monteiro, however, no one has acknowledged Crane’s allusion to Ecclesiastes. Even Monterio’s analysis only passingly notes the allusion and then moves to discuss Crane’s critique of evangelical “Life-Boat” hymns that promise Christ’s protection in adversity. This critique fits with Ecclesiastes’ uncertainty of the future and skepticism over moral reciprocity, but Monteiro doesn’t feature these parallels. I emphasize the depth of the Ecclesiastes allusion by focusing on “The Open Boat” journey narratives that echo Qoheleth’s journey in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes begins and ends with the conclusion “all is vanity” (1:2), but Qoheleth reflects throughout Ecclesiastes on his past experiences that led him to that conclusion. Early in his life, Qoheleth expects money and possessions to provide happiness and has to learn that they will not. He also seems formerly to have been invested in the biblical moral-reciprocity formula, but honestly reflecting on the world’s reality suggests that the formula doesn’t hold. Qoheleth implements his strategy – “I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things” (1:13) – and eventually discovers the world’s vanity. In the course of his experience on the water in a lifeboat, Crane’s correspondent makes a similar kind of faith journey that starts with his
expectation that the world will treat him justly and ends with his recognition of the world’s indifference and death’s finality. Hilfer – who while not citing the Ecclesiastes allusion does evoke the Old Testament’s other great voice of dissent, that of Job, whose challenge to God predates the correspondent’s similar challenge to the universe – sees three stages in the correspondent’s assumptions about nature: he complains of nature’s “incompetence” and “malice” before concluding on its “indifference” (249-52).

Hilfer’s view of the correspondent’s progression relates to the three separate points in which the correspondent repeats this question: “If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods, who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?” (1785, 1788, 1790). In response to his first charge, the correspondent concludes that because of all of his hard work and the hard work of his friends they will in fact not be drowned:

“If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble? The whole affair is absurd…. But no, she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work.” Afterward the man might have had an impulse to shake his fist at the clouds: “Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you!” (1785)
The men’s view of what Hilfer calls nature’s incompetence depends on a parallel assumption that nature is supposed to work based on moral reciprocity. At this point the men expect nature to correspond to their version of a deed-consequence justice formula: their hard work should guarantee their survival.

The narrator leaves the second repetition of this challenge without comment, instead describing the men working together to keep the boat in the correct position. After the last repetition of the challenge, however, the correspondent begins a philosophical shift that starts by moving him away from seeing nature as fair and just toward thinking of nature as unjustly adversarial: “During this dismal night, it may be remarked that a man would conclude that it was really the intention of the seven mad gods to drown him, despite the abominable injustice of it. For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural” (1790). For a moment, the correspondent feels as though nature is treating him maliciously. However, the correspondent concludes with an even further philosophical shift in which he starts to see nature not as an adversary, but as absolutely indifferent: “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers” (1790). When he thinks that nature really does want to drown him despite his hard work, the correspondent readies himself to throw bricks at the temple of such an unjust
universe. He quickly realizes, however, that nature is uninterested in human affairs and so throwing bricks is ineffectual and naïve.

Crane makes these conclusions explicit just before the men attempt their landing. Looking up at the vast unmanned watchtower above their small lifeboat, the correspondent sees a symbol of humanity’s insignificance and nature’s disinterestedness: “This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent” (1792).

The correspondent’s philosophical journey – the result of which he summarizes in his phrase “the unconcern of the universe” (1792) – aligns his view of nature to Qoheleth’s. Ecclesiastes 1:4-7 presents the universe’s unconcern poetically:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

Qoheleth shows the transience of human life compared to the constancy of nature, therein suggesting humanity’s insignificance when facing the eternal repetition of the universe. Like the correspondent, Qoheleth yearns to understand the morality of God and of the
universe. But like Crane, Qoheleth concludes that comprehending an amoral created order, in which “the race is not to the swift” and “time and chance happeneth to them all” (9:11), is impossible. Finally, in “The Open Boat” Billie is welcomed into death not by the splendor of an afterlife, but only by the “sinister hospitality of the grave” (1795). Crane’s phrasing approaches Ecclesiastes’ thoughts on the death in 9:10 – “for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” – and solidifies the correspondent’s acceptance of nature’s indifference.

After concluding that death is final and nature unknowable, the correspondent’s recourse must come, not from the universe, but from himself and his fellow humans. Following his brief desire to assault the sea gods, the correspondent reflects on how important he feels to himself: “Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: ‘Yes, but I love myself’” (1790). Though he no longer believes in a personification of fate or the universe, the correspondent still loves himself and finds his life important. Here arises Crane’s formula for combating the absence of God in an indifferent universe: his fellow sufferers, who feel similarly abandoned by the mad gods of the sea and that old ninny-woman Fate, can also love him as he loves himself and as he loves them in return. Stephenson claims that Crane highlights the value of this conclusion by presenting – alongside the correspondent’s journey toward accepting nature’s indifference – a similar journey toward embracing brotherhood:

The correspondent, it seems, “had been taught to be cynical of men” [Crane 1783]. He had been taught that his best chance for survival lies in a
kind of cynical detachment, a tough-minded withdrawal from others and
the exercise of a kind of primitive self-reliance. But the correspondent
begins to see that perhaps this is not the best way to face reality. In fact,
there may be much to be gained from having to face it with others. Thus,
the correspondent sees that this experiment in communal survival “was the
best experience of his life” [Crane 1783]. (44)

Again, Crane’s conclusions echo those of Ecclesiastes. Where the correspondent
comes to see the need for a “subtle brotherhood of men” (1783), Qoheleth follows a
similar progression. Not until after Qoheleth sees the vanity of loneliness does he
recommend communal advantages of cooperation. Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 outlines Qoheleth’s
distaste for loneliness: “Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun. There is one
alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end
of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches” Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 then follows
this observation with a specific recommendation: “Two are better than one; because they
have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but
woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if
two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail
against him, two shall withstand him.” The men in “The Open Boat” benefit from several
of the advantages – including cooperation, companionship, and warmth – advocated in
this one Ecclesiastes passage.

The most obvious parallel between Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and “The Open Boat”
comes in Crane’s presentation of the cooperative rowing of the correspondent and oiler.
During the night they agree to take turns keeping the boat from colliding with rocks that would capsize it. And though they are exhausted each time they finish rowing, they readily volunteer to take their turn:

The oiler plied the oars until his head drooped forward, and the overpowering sleep blinded him. And he rowed yet afterward. Then he touched a man in the bottom of the boat, […] “Will you spell me for a little while?” he said, meekly. “Sure, Billie,” said the correspondent, awakening and dragging himself to a sitting position. They exchanged places carefully, and the oiler, cuddling down in the sea-water at the cook’s side, seemed to go to sleep instantly. (1792)

The two men trade places just as meekly and graciously when the correspondent needs relief:

“Billie, will you spell me?” “Sure,” said the oiler. As soon as the correspondent touched the cold comfortable sea-water in the bottom of the boat, and had huddled close to the cook's life-belt he was deep in sleep, despite the fact that his teeth played all the popular airs. This sleep was so good to him that it was but a moment before he heard a voice call his name in a tone that demonstrated the last stages of exhaustion. “Will you spell me?” “Sure, Billie.” (1792).

This level of camaraderie, apparent even before these rowing exchanges, leads the narrator to call the relationship among the men in the lifeboat a “subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas” (1783). The narrator further suggests the
superiority of this experience over any other in the correspondent’s life: “There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heartfelt. […] there was this comradeship that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life” (1783).

Also quickly apparent, the support the men receive from an unknown saintly passerby recalls Qoheleth’s claim that one person can literally lift up another when he falls. Crane writes,

Then he saw the man who had been running and undressing, and undressing and running, come bounding into the water. He dragged ashore the cook, and then waded toward the captain, but the captain waved him away, and sent him to the correspondent. He was naked, naked as a tree in winter, but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint. He gave a strong pull, and a long drag, and a bully heave at the correspondent’s hand. The correspondent, schooled in the minor formulae, said: “Thanks, old man.” But suddenly the man cried: “What's that?” He pointed a swift finger. The correspondent said: “Go.” (1795)

The man from the beach has no connection to these men aside from their shared humanity, but he risks his life to pull the others free from the water and onto the shore. Without an invested god to reward the shipwrecked men’s hard work, this symbolically haloed man plays the role of salvific god. And, to the end, the captain and correspondent guide him toward their adopted brothers.
Less obviously, the scenes in which the oiler and correspondent share rowing duties also evoke Ecclesiastes 4:11: “if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?” During their brief respites of sleep, both the oiler and correspondent lie down with the cook to stay warm: “They exchanged places carefully, and the oiler, cuddling down in the sea-water at the cook’s side, seemed to go to sleep instantly. [...] As soon as the correspondent touched the cold comfortable sea-water in the bottom of the boat, and had huddled close to the cook's life-belt he was deep in sleep” (1792).

Qoheleth’s comment on the sleep of laborers applies here as well: “The sleep of a labouring man is sweet” (5:12). Their exhaustion and the warmth they get from the cook make it easy for the oiler and correspondent to sleep. And while not directly related to Ecclesiastes 4:12: “And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him,” Crane notes the advantages of having someone nearby in a precarious situation. A shark frightens the correspondent when he thinks he is the only one awake – “he did not wish to be alone. He wished one of his companions to awaken by chance and keep him company with it” (1790) – and he imagines it would have frightened him less if he had known that the captain was also awake: “‘Did you see that shark playing around?’ ‘Yes, I saw him. He was a big fellow, all right.’ ‘Wish I had known you were awake’” (1791).

In a story largely about the dangers of the sea, Crane even manages to include some of Ecclesiastes’ recommended simple pleasures. For example, the correspondent awakens and takes momentary joy in the light of the sun: “When the correspondent again opened his eyes, the sea and the sky were each of the grey hue of the dawning. Later, carmine and gold was painted upon the waters. The morning appeared finally, in its
splendor, with a sky of pure blue, and the sunlight flamed on the tips of the waves” (1792). Qoheleth’s truism applies, Crane seems to suggest, in almost any situation: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (11:7). The men also latch onto Qoheleth’s carpe-diem recommendation when, indulging in the fantasy of rescue, they smoke together: “the four waifs rode impudently in their little boat, and with an assurance of an impending rescue shining in their eyes, puffed at the big cigars and judged well and ill of all men. Everybody took a drink of water” (1784). Likewise, the cook tries to lighten the mood in the middle of the men’s struggle by talking about food: “‘Billie,’ he murmured, dreamfully, ‘what kind of pie do you like best?’” (1788). Because Billie does especially appreciate the cook’s attempt at levity, the cook lets it drop, peaceably adding a final remark about food: “Well, I was just thinking about ham sandwiches, and—” (1788). Recalling both the goodness of human community and Qoheleth’s praise of food, drink, and comfort, Crane describes the sustenance and warm clothing passersby bring to the survivors: “It seems that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffeepots” (1795).

Finally, like Ecclesiastes, “The Open Boat” demonstrates how physical struggles and a mental awareness of death and humanity’s position alone in the world can add productively to human lives. Again in his description of “the subtle brotherhood of man,” the narrator points to the quality of this brotherhood: “No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him. They were a captain, an oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, and they were friends, friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree than
may be common” (1783). They’re better friends because they face death. But their friendship isn’t based on self-preservation so much as it is based on recognizing the limited duration of their lives and on trying to survive together. When the correspondent finally makes it to land safely, he feels “as if he had dropped from a roof, but the thud was grateful to him” (1795). He recognizes, along with Qoheleth, that death should be delayed as long as possible, but also that recognizing death will help him to be grateful for life. As Herbert Marks puts it in his Norton Critical edition of the KJV Old Testament, “it is finally life’s ‘vanity’ that makes it precious” (1173).

On the heels of Darwin’s scientific explanation of the origin of species and Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, “The Open Boat” conveys the philosophical spirit at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Ecclesiastes helped Crane to incorporate elements of this philosophical spirit into “The Open Boat,” including nature’s indifference, the unpredictability of chance, the importance of community, and the rebellion against death. Unfortunately for him and his readers, Crane didn’t fare especially well with this last element, dying in 1900 from tuberculosis at the age of 28. Still, in Crane’s brief career, this minister’s son – who knew the Bible well enough to quote it in order to disagree with it without hesitation – achieved fame and influence as a naturalist writer and set the stage for much that followed him in US literature. That literature includes Glasgow’s *Phases of an Inferior Planet* and London’s *The Sea-Wolf*, each of which borrowed from and contributed to the same Ecclesiastes-receptive philosophical spirit.
And, like Crane, both Glasgow and London recognized the role Ecclesiastes could play in their fiction. Because of their shared philosophical attitudes concerning the uncertainty of received wisdom, the uncaring but determining effects of the universe on human lives, and the lack of inherent meaning in the world, all three of these diverse writers found a common muse in Ecclesiastes. Glasgow’s main Ecclesiastes parallels consist of symbolizing Ecclesiastes potential as a bridge text to or from Christianity and aligning it with Darwinism. She also uses insights from Ecclesiastes to demonstrate the dangers of altruism without a healthy balance between work and refreshment. London shows the attractiveness of Qoheleth’s contradictions and work ethic, while distinguishing between the poor and the destitute. In The Sea-Wolf, he dramatizes how companionship completes Ecclesiastes’ positive influence on Humphrey Van Weyden, while showing how ignoring companionship hurts Wolf Larsen, London’s Ecclesiastes-reciting Nietzschean superman. Published in the same year as The Sea-Wolf, The Golden Bowl by Henry James marks a shift in my project from naturalism to realism and, incidentally, a shift from texts with at least partially hidden references to Ecclesiastes to two novels featuring Ecclesiastes in their titles. Published only a year after The Golden Bowl, Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth also takes its title from the Ecclesiastes, and I turn to these two novels in the next chapter.
Chapter Three | ‘He that Loveth Silver’

Ecclesiastes-Endorsed Realism in *The Golden Bowl* and *The House of Mirth*

Many of Ecclesiastes’ similarities with realism parallel the similarities Ecclesiastes shares with naturalism presented in the preceding chapter. Like naturalists and realists, Qoheleth, the primary voice of Ecclesiastes, shares a commitment to present the world honestly following his autonomous reflections. Donald Pizer’s discussion of late nineteenth-century realism, in his 1966 monograph *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (revised in 1984), provides a way to think about two pointed ways in which Ecclesiastes parallels realism even beyond a primary commitment to “verisimilitude of detail derived from observation and documentation” (1). Pizer offers a corrective to George J. Becker’s 1949 formative definition of realism by modifying two of Becker’s three criteria for realism. Pizer keeps only verisimilitude intact and then modifies Becker’s views on representativeness and objectivity:

My belief is that late nineteenth-century American realism varies from Becker’s definition in two important ways. First, it achieves a greater diversity in subject matter than is suggested by [Becker’s] criterion of the representative [which Pizer finds limiting]. Secondly, it is essentially subjective and idealistic in its view of human nature and experience—that is, it is ethically idealistic. (2)
The two novels featured in this chapter, Henry James’ 1904 *The Golden Bowl* and Edith Wharton’s 1905 *The House of Mirth*, exhibit these late-nineteenth-century aspects of realism that Pizer suggests. Both novels expand representative subject matter by focusing largely on women, and both offer nonromantic, but ethically idealistic, personal and social reforms, which they convey in part through their allusions to the nonromantic, but ethically invested Ecclesiastes. These allusions start in the novel’s titles: James’s title appears in Ecclesiastes 12:6: “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,” and Wharton’s title appears in Ecclesiastes 7:4: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”

Pizer based his realism definition on James’s and fellow realist William Dean Howells’ foundational remarks about literature, which also support Ecclesiastes-realism parallels. Howells and James famously articulated the realist view that art should represent reality. Howells’s 1899 lecture “Novel Writing and Novel Reading” sets truth as the criterion for novel writing:

> By beauty of course I mean truth, for the one involves the other. […] So I make truth the prime test of a novel. If I do not find that it is like life, then it does not exist for me as art; it is ugly, it is ludicrous, it is impossible. […] The novel I take to be the sincere and conscientious endeavor to picture life just as it is, to deal with character as we witness it in living people, and to record the incidents that grow out of character. This is the supreme form of fiction. (1748-9)
In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” James likewise implores fellow writers to “Write from experience, and experience only;” and quickly adds, “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” (86). While realists diverge from Ecclesiastes stylistically, Qoheleth shares their foundational aesthetic commitment to gaining authenticity through detailed observation about the world: “And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: […] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun” (1:13-4).

Starting from the assertion to write from experience, James explains how faithfully recording experiences will yield diverse, varied, and complex literary expressions. James writes, “Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms. […] Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness” (85). Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s essay “The American Novel: Realism and Naturalism (1860-1920)” explains James’s spider-web mentality in terms of psychological realism: “In the hands of James the realist novel was transformed into masterpieces of psychological realism. […] In his late career James transformed his realism into his peculiarly absorbing and inordinately complex interior discourse” (47). Somewhat like James’s presentation of the varied thoughts in his characters’ minds, Qoheleth presents his own complex internal reflections, including his potentially contradictory claims that life is both worth living and inherently meaningless. Craig C. Bartholomew’s commentary reveals Qoheleth’s intention behind these contradictions: “scholars continually fall into the trap of leveling Qohelet toward his hebel [vanity,
meaninglessness] pole, or toward his *carpe diem*-affirmation-of-joy pole. This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it embodies” (93). In Bartholomew’s view, Qoheleth intends for these contradictions to play an essential role in his literary presentation of the world’s complexity. Or, to borrow James’s wording, Qoheleth – like James after him – finds that “experience is never limited, and it is never complete” (85).

In his 1900 essay “The Future of the Novel,” James emphasizes how autonomous reflection will help to convey the varieties of experience. He writes, “There is no woman – no matter of what loveliness – in the presence of whom it is anything but a man’s unchallengeably own affair that he is ‘in love’ or out of it. It is not a question of manners; vast is the margin left to individual freedom” (339). Extending James’s metaphor to convey the importance of all kinds of individual freedom shows another parallel with Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth expresses a preference for freethinking throughout his search for meaning: “I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness” (7:25). Rather than accepting other people’s ideas on life, Qoheleth remains true to his heart, to his wisdom and experience. For example, Ecclesiastes 8:14 directly challenges the moral-reciprocity assurances found in the book of Proverbs: “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous.” Stressing freedom of thought allows Qoheleth, as it later did James, to express his concerns about overly ideal, romantic traditions.
James promises that readers will connect with his method of detailing experience through keen, autonomous observation. He writes, again in “The Art of Fiction,” “Selection will be sure to take care of itself, for it has a constant motive behind it. That motive is simply experience. As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it. This closeness of relation is what we should never forget” (91). Ecclesiastes’ faithful search for reality aligns the book with this realistic tenet, but also – as I’ve discussed in the introduction – Qoheleth’s conclusions appealed to people’s experiences in the early-twentieth century. Many people felt the truth of Qoheleth’s claims that all is vanity, that humans cannot understand God or fully control their lives, that life isn’t fair, and that the best response to life’s vanity is to enjoy.

Wharton echoes several of James’s comments on realistic writing and also, in her own way, aligns herself with Ecclesiastes. In addition to noting Wharton and James’s friendship, Reesman sees a close aesthetic relationship between the pair: “Edith Wharton coupled the moral and psychological focus of James with her own incisive judgment and wit, flawless ear, and broader vision” (48). In her 1924 book *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton stresses her shared commitment to autonomous observation and experience: “True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision. That new, that personal, vision is attained only by looking long enough at the object represented to make it the writer’s own; and the mind which would bring this secret germ to fruition must be able to nourish it with an accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience” (18-9). Anticipating even some of Wharton’s language, Qoheleth champions his personal vision gained through experience, wisdom, and knowledge: “I communed with mine own heart,
saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge” (1:16). Qoheleth prepares himself for reflecting on the world by accumulating wisdom, knowledge, and experience in the way Wharton later argues that a writer must.

In lamenting what she sees as an overemphasis on newness, Wharton argues for the value the past holds for writing and for human lives. She writes, “Another unsettling element in modern art is that common symptom of immaturity, the dread of doing what has been done before; for though one of the instincts of youth is imitation, another, equally imperious, is that of fiercely guarding against it” (17). For Wharton, avoiding imitation doesn’t necessarily lead to innovative art, largely because she agrees with Qoheleth that there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 emphasizes the persistence of the past: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.” Instead of frantically trying to avoid the past to escape imitation, Wharton recommends listening to traditional voices so that a writer can process those ideas and then build his own opinion: “gradually he will come to see that he must learn to listen to them, take all they can give, absorb it into himself, and then turn to his own task with the fixed resolve to see life only through his own eyes” (22). Autonomy doesn’t depend on ignorance of the past, but in fact on an intimate knowledge of it. Qoheleth’s autonomy comes from his knowledge of proverbial wisdom and his conscious rejection
of its deed-consequence wisdom formula: “All things have I seen in the days of my
vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man
that prolongeth his life in his wickedness” (7:15). As Wharton would suggest more than
2000 years later, Qoheleth uses his knowledge of past wisdom to see the present through
his own eyes.

Finally, Wharton sees the need for a writer to say something significant about life.
She writes, “there must be some sort of rational response to the reader’s unconscious but
insistent inner question: ‘What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does
it contain for me?’ […] A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds
a light on our moral experience” (27-8). Qoheleth’s subject is existence. His foundational
claim in his first words of Ecclesiastes – “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of
vanities; all is vanity” (1:2) – demands that he address life’s vanity and say something
about what people should do in response to it. And Qoheleth himself recognizes that he
must do so: “I sought in mine heart […] till I might see what was that good for the sons
of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (2:3).

Ultimately, Qoheleth delivers. He answers Wharton’s question about what judgment on
life his story contains and offers his response to readers. He develops a consistent thesis
in response to life’s vanity: live with enthusiasm, help people, work and enjoy, eat and
enjoy, drink and enjoy, “[I]live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the
life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for
that is thy portion in this life” (9:9). The similarity in their approaches to writing helps to
account for Wharton’s interest in Qoheleth. Comparable similarities between James and
Qoheleth led to James’s interest in Qoheleth and highlight parallel aesthetic assumptions in Wharton and James.

In fact, of all the writers I consider in this project, Wharton and James have the most in common. However, in her Wharton biography, Hermione Lee records Wharton’s hesitation over being too closely associated with James: Wharton expressed “a definite desire not to be thought of as his disciple. By the time Wharton was at ‘the top of her tree’ with *The House of Mirth*, she was sick of always being compared to Henry James” (215). Still, Lee acknowledges their extensive similarities: “Wharton and James did share subjects and attitudes, character-types and social themes. As all writers do who are friends, they spent years exchanging literary allusions and jokes, thoughts on their reading, and gossip about authors; and they occasionally exchanged plots, too” (216). In addition to aesthetic similarities, James and Wharton shared philosophical worldviews stemming from their friendship, social positions, and vocations. As their Ecclesiastes-related titles suggest – despite Wharton’s avowed distaste for *The Golden Bowl*, which Lee explains simply, “She hated *The Golden Bowl*” (219) – they also share philosophical worldviews with Qoheleth. Such views – shared by all three authors – include their distrust that money and possessions can provide ultimate happiness, their advocacy of gaining love rather than money in romantic relationships, and their endorsement of living enthusiastically as the proper response to the likelihood that consciousness ends with death. On the basis of their shared aesthetic approaches and philosophical similarities with Ecclesiastes, even more consideration – than has thus far been given – can be paid productively to James’s and Wharton’s title allusions.
I present in this chapter an analysis of *The Golden Bowl* and *The House of Mirth* in light of a broad consideration of Ecclesiastes. Because Wharton explicitly acknowledged her use of Ecclesiastes for her novel’s title I begin with her. James makes his use of Ecclesiastes fairly clear by pairing his title with the breaking of the golden bowl in the course of the novel, but, as recently as 2005, J. Hillis Miller has claimed, “no direct evidence that I know of confirms that James had this text in mind” (242). While I cannot present evidence that James *claimed* to have Ecclesiastes in mind, I hope to make it clear through a prolonged analysis of Ecclesiastes and *The Golden Bowl* that James *did* have this text in mind while writing his novel. By considering these specific texts and each author’s life, I reveal Qoheleth as a proto-realist, in much the same way I have presented him as a proto-naturalist. Wharton highlights Ecclesiastes’ carpe-diem ethic and its critique of transactional living, while offering Ecclesiastes-inspired personal and social reforms for her heroine Lily Bart and New York high society. Through Ecclesiastes, James demonstrates the sacredness of mutual romantic relationships and the advantage of realism over romanticism; he also provides Ecclesiastes as an interpretive key to stress the superiority of his characters who embrace Qoheleth’s call to live unreservedly with the one “thou lovest” (9:9).

**Edith Wharton’s Ecclesiastes-Deprived Tragic Heroine**

In her 1934 autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton outlines what she sees as her primarily positive childhood experience with Christianity. She writes, “the New York of my youth was distinctively Episcopalian; and to this happy chance I owe my early saturation with the noble cadences of the Book of Common Prayer, and my
reverence for an ordered ritual” (10). Later in A Backward Glance she expresses her childhood delight in reading the Old Testament: “Ah, the long music-drunken hours on that library floor, with Isaiah and the Song of Solomon and the Book of Esther” (70).

Lee, in her Wharton biography, notes some of the less pleasant childhood experiences Wharton had with Christianity: “Her anxiousness to please her mother was mixed up with a fixed idea of a punitive and vengeful God, a Being who had little in common with her parents’ mild, conventional strain of Episcopalianism. […] Ideas of punishment and shame weighed on her mind” (36). By the time Wharton wrote A Backward Glance at the end of her life, she had a renewed interest in Christianity, specifically Catholicism, and she perhaps presented her childhood God-relationship more positively than she might have.

Lee suggests, on the other hand, that Wharton’s youthful fear of God, paired with her reading in philosophy, led her away from the Church in her twenties and thirties. Lee writes,

The process was speeded up by the reading she was doing in the 1890s on evolution, ethics and anthropology. […] Wharton who, like George Eliot, would in her novels be profoundly interested in ethics and morality, moved away from her childhood fear of a punitive God, and from her family’s bland, conservative Christianity, to an undeclared position of skeptical agnosticism. (62)

Wharton’s move away from conservative Christianity toward skeptical agnosticism doesn’t, as Lee mentions, keep religious themes out of her fiction. Carol J. Singley, in her
book *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, suggests that in fact Wharton’s religiosity pervades her fiction: “Wharton’s writing [...] reflects both a mind and spirit intensely engaged in abstract questions; one can no more separate her religious and philosophical perspectives from her fiction than one can divorce T. S. Eliot’s Christianity from his poetry” (xi).

In her attempt to accommodate Darwinian evolution, skepticism, and agnosticism with her childhood interest in religion and especially the Old Testament, Wharton – almost inevitably – found a text offering solace and solidarity in the biblical-skepticism of Ecclesiastes. In turn, she then featured the book in her novel *The House of Mirth*.

That Wharton borrowed the title for *The House of Mirth* from Ecclesiastes 7:4 has been well documented in literary criticism. Several readers even see Wharton’s allusion to Ecclesiastes as an important aspect of their understanding of the novel (e.g., Cynthia Wolff, Candace Waid, Helen Killoran). However, few readers venture outside of verses 7:1-4 in their views of the allusion’s effect, and no critics have advanced a reading of the whole novel in terms of a broad understanding of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy. Given Wharton’s keen interest in the Old Testament, religion, and spirituality, and certain of the novel’s thematic elements – including Wharton’s early introduction of Omar Khayyám’s carpe-diem ethic, her distrust of wealth for wealth’s sake, and the complications created for her heroine Lily Bart by transactional marriage – even more should be made of the title allusion. Ecclesiastes resonates throughout *The House of Mirth* furthering Wharton’s critique of New York’s materialistic, discriminatory high society.
The House of Mirth tells the story of the beautiful, but relatively poor Lily Bart and her experiences with the high society of the Dorsets and Trenors, the middle-class society of her romantic friend Lawrence Selden and his cousin Gerty Farish, and the lower-class society of the impoverished but happy Nettie Struther. While Lily considers at times marrying for money, she ultimately cannot do so, and she dies from overdosing on sleeping medication after using the last of her money to try to salvage her reputation. Focusing on Ecclesiastes 7:4, most readers tracking Qoheleth’s influence in The House of Mirth use the allusion to categorize the novel’s characters and themes as either negative (the house of mirth) or positive (the house of mourning). Nancy Topping Bazin builds on this understanding, but concludes that neither house works for Lily or, by extension, for Wharton (99). Lily rejects both the capitalistic world of the house of mirth (the fashionable world of the Dorsets and Trenors) and the Christian world of the house of mourning (Gerty Farish’s dingy goodness). That Lily dies without finding a way to navigate between these two houses indicates Wharton’s feeling “that Lily should have some other choice than the ones she has” (Topping Bazin 99). While Lily indeed needs a choice other than the ones she has, Topping Bazin’s analysis associates Ecclesiastes too closely with mainline Christianity. Instead, Ecclesiastes’ philosophy itself, a voice of dissent from within the Christian tradition, could potentially offer Lily this important other choice, if her upbringing and society would allow it.

In line with her larger project exploring Wharton’s skeptical, passionate spirituality and its relationship to her fiction, Singley suggests that Wharton uses Ecclesiastes to establish a connection between the novel’s Darwinian forces and
Wharton’s spiritual interests. For Singley, the Ecclesiastes allusion links these diverse elements and provides a way to talk about *The House of Mirth*’s complex spirituality: she suggests further allusions to Christian pilgrimage (Lily’s travels), the Song of Songs (Selden and Lily), and Jesus’ sacrifice (Lily burns Selden’s letters) resulting in an ineffectual Christianity (Lily still dies), but then offers Lily as the wise woman from the book of Proverbs who can show readers a spiritual path based on Christian wisdom teachings (70-88). Singley’s analysis, however, goes a long way around to emphasize the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The more immediate connection to Christian wisdom teachings comes in the title allusion itself. Ecclesiastes, albeit a less mainline voice than that of Proverbs, is also categorized as wisdom literature and could have provided Lily a spiritual, philosophical path. Such a path would, following Qoheleth, acknowledge transience, death, and sorrow while embracing the momentary joys of eating, drinking, and loving.

Candace Waid charts the history of *The House of Mirth* from its start in Wharton’s manuscripts to its role in elevating Wharton to a literary superstar. While her brief analysis of the Ecclesiastes allusion only focuses on the wordplay between Selden’s desire to speak to Lily in “the morning” (324) and “the house of mourning” in Ecclesiastes 7:4, Waid’s historical overview provides further evidence for the novel’s connections to Ecclesiastes. The novel underwent two title changes; it began as “A Moment’s Ornament” and was briefly “The Year of the Rose,” both references to Lily Bart (Waid 174). *The House of Mirth*, notably not a specific reference to Lily, highlights the novel’s wider concern. But while Wharton, of course, liked her novel’s eventual title,
she “was horrified to discover that without consulting her the publisher had decided to use the passage from Ecclesiastes as an epigraph” (Waid 176). Wharton resisted the epigraph in order to avoid moralizing, but by doing so she also rejected a potentially narrowing focus for the title’s allusion. An epigraph would direct readers to one or two verses from Ecclesiastes; using just a fragment for the title evokes the entire biblical book. Similarly, Wharton indicates the novel’s deep resonance with Ecclesiastes in a letter to William Crary Brownell at Scribner’s: “I think the title explains itself amply as the tale progresses” (Letters 94). Taking seriously Wharton’s phrase “as the tale progresses” recommends paying continual attention to the parallels between Ecclesiastes and The House of Mirth.

Exploring the allusion also sheds light on readings of The House of Mirth less interested in Ecclesiastes. Critics Linda Wagner-Martin and Lillian Robinson see the novel attempting primarily progressive work, especially toward advancing gender equality. Other critics Wai Chee Dimock and Robin Peel find the novel primarily conservative because Wharton’s ironic portrayal fails to present a viable social alternative and so has to accept resignedly the continued existence of the damaging gendered marketplace. Pointing to Ecclesiastes’ call to enjoy in the midst of sorrow provides a way to reconcile these divergent perspectives. While enjoyment doesn’t depend principally on changing socioeconomic structures, if gender inequality or extreme poverty keeps a person from even life’s simple pleasures like eating, drinking, loving, and working, Qoheleth’s philosophy can provide an initial motivation for trying to ensure all people have a legitimate chance to enjoy.
Wharton draws attention to this enjoyment aspect of Qoheleth’s philosophy in her presentation of Lily’s reading interests. Wharton’s narrator observes of Lily that “she always carried an Omar Khayyam in her traveling bag” (65). Cynthia Wolff identifies this as a reference to *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which she describes as “the poet’s meditations and speculations on the mysteries of existence, and his counsel to drink and make merry while life lasts” (333). *The Rubáiyát* encourages a *carpe diem* philosophy: “Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup / Before Life’s Liquor in its Cup be dry. […] You know how little while we have to stay, / And, once departed, may return no more. […] While you live, Drink!—for once dead you never shall return” (lines 7-8, 11-12, 136).4 Much of Ecclesiastes also implores the value of enjoying eating and drinking in response to the limited days of human life: “it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion” (5:18).5 Also like Khayyam, Qoheleth recognizes the vanity of a life that eventually ends in death: “I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? […] And how dieth the wise man? as the fool?” (2:14-15, 16). Though death upsets Qoheleth, he recognizes the transience of human life and the finality of death.6 And he suggests that while their lives last, humans should enjoy.

Among life’s enjoyable experiences for both Qoheleth and Khayyam are companionship and love, especially when enjoyed alongside food and drink. *The Rubáiyát* calls Khayyam’s lover to join him in the wilderness: “But come with old
Khayyam, […] Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, / A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness— / And Wilderness is Paradise enow” (lines 33, 41-44). Khayyam describes joy among lovers as paradisiacal, and in his most thesis-like prescription, Qoheleth agrees:

> eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest. (9:7-9)

Because death ends everyone’s ability to enjoy, Qoheleth still sees life as vanity. However, during their limited lives humans can enjoy simple pleasures and loving relationships. And, according to Qoheleth, God accepts joy and love as some of the best things for humans to do.

A seize-the-day mentality, however, seems potentially at odds with Wharton’s title allusion. Vanity, sorrow, and death pervade Ecclesiastes, and in verse 7:4, Qoheleth claims that the house of mourning is superior to the house of mirth. Qoheleth brackets his philosophy with an acknowledgment of the futility of existence. He begins with the phrase “vanity of vanities; all is vanity” in verse 1:2 and repeats it in his conclusion in verse 12:8. Elsewhere in chapter one, Qoheleth describes human actions as empty annoyance: “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (1:14). In chapter two, he identifies human life as dreadful
and meaningless: “Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me. […] For what hath man of all his labor? […] For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief” (2:17, 22-23). These conclusions stem primarily from Qoheleth’s insistence on the finality of death: “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). Because of death, Qoheleth sees life primarily as suffering.

But also because of death, Qoheleth claims that it is good for humans to enjoy in the moment eating, drinking, and loving before they can no longer do so. The proper relationship for Qoheleth between enjoyment, sorrow, mourning, and mirth, depends on self-awareness and reflection. The house of mirth represents empty distractions and drunken forgetfulness. The house of mourning reminds people of their limited lives and encourages reflective joy in the moment. Those living perpetually in the house of mirth, the Dorsets, Trenors, and Brys, never seem to reflect on their mortality. Their mirth manifests a shallow, thoughtless escapism rather than a reflective enjoyment accounting for the somber realities of existence. For example, Selden recognizes a valuable change in Lily from mirth to mourning after Bertha Dorset kicks Lily off of her yacht: “The strain of the last hours had restored to her face the deeper eloquence which Selden had lately missed in it” (216). When Lily loses track of reality and is indoctrinated into the house of mirth, she looks less attractive to Selden. When she is removed from that world, even in such a serious situation as alleged infidelity, she appears to Selden in all of her beauty.
In addition to acknowledging mortality and the somber realities of existence, Qoheleth’s search for self-awareness recognizes that material goods and distracting pleasures cannot provide real joy. In his youth, Qoheleth made a test of pleasure – he said to his heart, “I will prove thee with mirth” (2:1). He gathered “great possessions” of “silver and gold,” “servants and maidens,” “vineyards,” “houses,” “singers,” and the “treasure of kings” (2:4-8). He spared no expense and sought every worldly pleasure he could imagine: “whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy” (2:10). But when reflecting on his possessions, Qoheleth despises them: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (2:11). Increasing wealth for wealth’s sake leaves Qoheleth unsatisfied: “Therefore I hated life; [...] I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me” (2:17-18). This failed test of pleasure completes Qoheleth’s disillusioning experience in what he later calls the house of mirth.

Real joy for Qoheleth depends on more than mindless distractions or a large collection of material possessions. Qoheleth realizes that these things eventually fail to add genuine happiness to a person’s life. Wharton illustrates this concern in Lily’s financially conservative aunt Mrs. Peniston, who fits in Qoheleth’s category of a person who has a lot of money but lacks the ability to enjoy it: “a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honor, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it
is an evil disease” (6:2). Mrs. Peniston rarely spends her money – having only infrequent dinners and never redecorating her home – and she doesn’t seem to enjoy her life at all. Instead, she leaves nearly all of her money to Grace Stepney, who seems equally unlikely to use that money to enjoy life.

Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale all spend most of their time building their fortunes, but Trenor and Dorset are both unhappy, and Rosedale never really achieves the social place he desires. Qoheleth warns against consistently adding to material wealth without taking the time to enjoy what it can offer: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (5:10). In response to Lily’s question about work, Trenor expresses his fatigue and explains the amount of work he has to do to maintain the lavish Bellomont estate: “You don’t know how a fellow has to hustle to keep this kind of thing going.’ He waved his whip in the direction of the Bellomont acres” (81). Carry Fisher describes George and Bertha Dorset’s fragile marriage and George’s unhappiness: “Bertha has been behaving more than ever like a madwoman, and George’s powers of credulity are very nearly exhausted” (239). Society shuns Rosedale because he is both too-recently wealthy and Jewish; even when his massive wealth catapults him into society, society accepts him only grudgingly. Like Qoheleth’s “great possessions,” money, status, and extravagant country homes do not help these characters to enjoy their lives.

As evidenced by Trenor’s rant against overworking to keep up his estate, working toward the goal of great possessions also fails to satisfy. Qoheleth suggests that because money and possessions cannot ultimately make people happy, finding enjoyment in work
is better than expecting enjoyment to come from the rewards of work. In addition to enjoying food and drink, Qoheleth finds value in enjoying work for its own reward: “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (2:24, my emphasis). Qoheleth’s celebration of work for its own sake fits with his persistent reminders of human mortality: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (9:10). People spend a large portion of their lives working, and if a person works only for profitable gain or for self-advantage, she wastes a chance to enjoy and she wastes a significant amount of her limited life.

Wharton’s critique of expecting a reward from work is most apparent in her presentation of the transactional-marriage mentality pervading New York high society. Lillian Robinson’s essay “The Traffic in Women” explains that marriage, virginity, and fidelity play key roles in both the old Old New York money (like Lily’s aunt Mrs. Peniston) and the new Old New York money (like Trenor and Dorset, who aggressively trade in stocks to increase their wealth). However, the codes play out differently. For those in the old Old money category, sexual morality provides a means for preserving and passing family fortunes: “a bride’s virginity and a wife’s fidelity are part of the household inventory, property that enables the orderly inheritance of other forms of property along the lines of legitimate patriarchal descent” (Robinson 343-44). In Robinson’s second category, new Old money, economic speculators also demand the appearance of morality, but they see marriage as a chance to increase wealth rather than
maintain it: “It is not economic continuity that matters in this world but the daring
transaction, at least the successful daring transaction” (Robinson 348). For a woman, an
upwardly mobile transactional marriage increases her social position through her
husband’s money. For a man, it increases his social position through his connection to a
beautiful, virtuous wife. Rather than finding a reward in marriage in the form of love, the
reward from such a marriage manifests as social capital.

At the beginning of the novel, Lily buys into this kind of new Old money venture
capitalism. Answering Selden’s question about how she defines success, Lily responds:
“Why, to get as much as one can out of life, I suppose” (68). This emphasis on getting
something from life informs Lily’s desire to marry Percy Gryce as she imagines that his
money will elevate her above everyone else:

Her vulgar cares were at an end. She would be able to arrange her life as
she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot
penetrate. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far
more jewels than Bertha Dorset. She would be free forever from the shifts,
the expedients, the humiliations of the relatively poor. […] She felt she
could trust it to carry her through to the end. And the end, on the whole,
was worth while. (49-50)

Lily’s attitude parallels Qoheleth’s attitude during his test of pleasure: “So I was great,
and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem” (2:9). As Mrs. Gryce, Lily
would have more money and power than even Judy and Bertha. Though she doesn’t love
or even especially like Gryce, Lily, at this point, finds the reward from marrying him sufficiently compensating.

But like Qoheleth, Lily reevaluates her situation. If she could be satisfied with a marriage to Gryce or even to Rosedale, Lily would prove successful in securing an upwardly mobile marital transaction. But, somewhere inside her, Lily foundationally distrusts marrying for money. In a conversation with Selden, she anticipates the danger of working for social and economic gains through marriage: “Then the best you can say for me is, that after struggling to get them I probably shan’t like them?” She drew a deep breath. ‘What a miserable future you foresee for me!’ ‘Well—have you never foreseen it for yourself?’ […] ‘Often and often,’ she said” (71). Despite the social cues to the contrary and her real interest in fashion and financial security, Lily remains unconvinced that money itself would make her happy. This realization highlights Lily’s earlier reflection about courting Gryce: “She was almost sure she had ‘landed’ him: a few days’ work and she would win her reward. But the reward itself seemed unpalatable just then: she could get no zest from the thought of victory. It would be a rest from worry, no more” (28). Lily’s anticipated discontent from the reward for her work leaves her disenchanted.

Carry Fisher suggests two options for Lily’s consistently failed attempts at securing a profitable marriage: “Sometimes,’ she added, ‘I think it ’s just flightiness— and sometimes I think it ’s because, at heart, she despises the things she ’s trying for” (189). Lily adds validity to Carry’s latter alternative as she reflects on her failed marriage attempts. She calls her afternoon walk at Bellomont with Selden “an irresistible flight” from Gryce’s proposal, and remembers “similar situations, as skillfully led up to, but
through some malice of fortune, or her own unsteadiness of purpose, always failing of the intended result” (253). Lily’s unsteadiness of purpose, her inherent distrust of transactional marriage, stops her from marrying men she doesn’t love because working toward a goal cannot replace enjoying herself in the moment:

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce […] but she could not ignore him, […] she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life. (25)

No matter how much money they can provide, Lily knows that marrying Gryce or Rosedale will eventually bore her. And while most of Lily’s friends disregard this reality as inconsequential, Lily knows that money alone is not enough – even if she cannot always act on this realization.

The social pressures to secure a successful daring transaction convince Lily that Selden doesn’t have enough money to justify marrying him. But unlike her relationships with Gryce, Rosedale, and Trenor, Lily enjoys conversations with Selden and prefers the immediate pleasure of intimacy with him in the moment. As Selden approaches her after her success as a *tableaux vivant*, “Lily felt the quicker beat of life that his nearness always produced. She read, too, in his answering gaze the delicious confirmation of her triumph, and for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful” (137). Later, when considering her response to Selden’s request to see her, Lily recalls the excitement of his presence: “It would be pleasant to have that sensation again
… no one else could give it to her in its fullness” (139). Present joy satisfies Lily more than the prospect of a successful marital transaction. Yet, even after their kiss, Lily adheres to the social prescription that keeps her from embracing her love for Selden.

Lily’s *tableaux-vivant* success relates to her skills as a social coordinator. Lily performs well: she understands social expectations, exceeds in conversation, and her genuine kindness leads most people to follow her social lead and embrace her company. Wharton makes it clear that Lily has insufficient training to work in a hat factory and, given her upbringing, the position of social coordinator best fits with what could be called Lily’s vocation. As such, this role could provide Lily with a connection to Qoheleth’s invitation to find joy in her work. For the most part, however, high society forces Lily to use her vocational skills – just as it has forced her to use her marital eligibility – to secure a reward rather than to enjoy being in community with people she loves. As her initial group of friends pushes her away, Lily has to find new people who will support her in exchange for her entertainment. At least at first, this is fairly easy for Lily to do: “Her immense social facility, her long habit of adapting herself to others without suffering her own outline to be blurred, the skilled manipulation of all the polished implements of her craft, had won for her an important place in the Gormer group” (237). The same skills also win her a place with the Duchess of Beltshire, and without Bertha Dorset’s interrupting influence, Lily probably could have maintained these kinds of social and economic connections indefinitely.

But Lily, though exceptionally skilled, gets little satisfaction from earning her reward via her coordinator position. Reflecting on her experience with the Duchess, Lily
questions why she doesn’t perform this role more often: “how easily it was all done, if one possessed the knack of doing it! She wondered at herself, as she had so often wondered, that, possessing the knack, she did not more consistently exercise it” (200). Lily doesn’t exercise her vocational skill more often because it doesn’t add happiness to her life. She is only playing a part – she isn’t really friends with these people and they don’t really care about her. Being nice to win the reward of financial security leaves Lily unsatisfied. She feels this void even more when she takes a place with the Gormers: “The renewed habit of luxury—the daily waking to an assured absence of care and presence of material ease—gradually blunted her appreciation of these values, and left her more conscious of the void they could not fill” (237). Whereas bantering with Selden and talking with real friends make Lily happy, flattering people for their approval and their money does not.

Similarly, two episodes over tea allude to Qoheleth’s philosophy. Lily’s relationship to drinking tea deteriorates from an initial desire for enjoying tea to a purely utilitarian use of tea. Late in the novel, as Lily struggles from exhaustion, she meets Rosedale on the street and they go to a café where Rosedale recommends that she drink a cup of strong tea: “Lily smiled faintly at the injunction to take her tea strong. It was the temptation she was always struggling to resist. Her craving for the keen stimulant was forever conflicting with that other craving for sleep” (289). Lily has become addicted to caffeine and drinks tea as her only means to stay awake, rather than as a tasteful drink meant for enjoyment. The scene with Rosedale differs widely from her earlier memorable experience drinking tea with Selden: “[Selden’s] words recalled the vision of that other
afternoon when they had sat together over his tea-table and talked jestingly of her future. There were moments when that day seemed more remote than any other event in her life; and yet she could always relive it in its minutest detail” (306). While drinking tea with Selden, Lily tastes the tea and enjoys conversing about it and over it. The tea is meant not merely to keep her awake but as an added pleasure to her experience of the moment. That Lily “could always relive” this moment with Selden “in its minutest detail” speaks of course also to her love for him.

*The House of Mirth* records these and other changes to Lily’s personality as part of her fall from New York high society. In *A Backward Glance* Wharton expresses her desire to show that society’s destructive potential: “A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals” (207). Still, throughout the novel, Lily summons some resistance. She avoids a transactional marriage and occasionally voices her desire for another life: “She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself” (39). As her situation worsens, Lily sees her dependence on others and her entrapment in the social system, but she maintains a sense of her individual self: “Whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality” (101). Eventually, Gerty recognizes that the society that produced Lily fails her and then leaves her alone: “now all the things she cared for have been taken from her, and the people who taught her to care for them have abandoned her
too” (271). Lily must seek an alternative life without much direction toward a satisfying answer: “what manner of life,” she asks throughout the novel, “would it be?” (39).

In Qoheleth’s view, for Lily to flourish, she needs to embrace the freedom to adopt a personal philosophy that would allow her to love and to be loved, to enjoy life using the money she has without the insistence on increasing material wealth. She might consider dating Selden to allow herself an opportunity to experience love in her relationship. She could live in a reasonable apartment that would allow her to enjoy life responsibly, remembering that the best things are eating, drinking, working, and loving in the moment rather than having the newest dresses, making yearly trips to pricey Mediterranean hotels, and throwing extravagant parties to gain social clout. And she could hold and attend intimate gatherings where she might enjoy human interaction with friends without worrying about damning appearances. Wharton points to some potential Ecclesiastes-inspired ideas in her presentation of Nettie, Gerty, and Selden, who all, at times, offer Lily insights into happiness. Nonetheless, Robin Peel rightly notes that Wharton’s presentation of these characters includes an ironic element, which exposes a limitation of their philosophy (60-79). My prescription for Lily’s life contains its own irony. Lily cannot embrace Qoheleth’s philosophy in her society, and this reality too forms part of the novel’s social critique.

The closest Wharton comes to prescribing an exemplary life philosophy comes in her presentation of Nettie Struther. In Nettie, Lily finds a happy woman in a loving home: her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen. The poor little working-girl who had found
strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence.

(319)

Lily recognizes Nettie’s life as meager and potentially perilous, but her home is warm and clean, her baby needs her, and she and her husband share their lives. Nettie’s home “had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff” (320). Because nothing lasts forever, Qoheleth encourages embracing the momentarily permanent – a good house like Nettie’s that allows her to make the most of the moments of her life. However, Wai-Chee Dimock claims that Wharton doesn’t say more about Nettie’s life “because she cannot afford to” (389). Nettie’s current position proves satisfying, but if “sickness or mischance” (319) take even the little money she has, it will be impossible for her to live by Qoheleth’s philosophy. An important distinction separates the poor from the destitute. Poor people like Nettie and her husband can enjoy within their means, but the destitute cannot enjoy. Given the working-class reality of New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century, many people would not have had enough money even consistently to satisfy their human needs, much less to enjoy the pleasures of eating and drinking. Unsafe, unhealthy working conditions would have kept many of these same people from finding enjoyment in their work as well.

But even at her lowest, Lily never finds herself in as frail a position as Nettie’s. Gerty provides a philosophical option closer to her situation, especially as part of that which restricts Lily’s happiness relates to her status as a woman of New York high society. For example, Lily blames being a woman for the fact that she cannot live like
Selden: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (7). But when Selden points out that Gerty maintains a reasonable degree of freedom and lives in her own flat, Lily rejects the option. According to the society Lily has been taught to value, she cannot keep her own apartment, she must marry to increase her wealth, and she even ought not to spend the afternoon alone with Selden. This society subjects women to an unequal marital code:

Ah, there’s the difference—a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses.

[…] Your coat’s a little shabby—but who cares? […] If I were shabby no one would have me […]. We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership. (12)

Selden and even Gerty can get away with dinginess, but Lily cannot. Lily’s indoctrination in the fashionable world leads her to despise dinginess as much as anyone. And while Gerty offers the only alternative Lily sees as a foil to her current trajectory, she dismisses that life as even more undesirable than one in which she tries to follow the social restrictions: “It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish” (25).

While the alternative of a life like Gerty’s might seem like the most reasonable path for Lily to take, Wharton consistently calls attention to the social expectations that discourage Lily from embracing or even respecting Gerty’s lifestyle. Selden mentions Gerty when he and Lily are talking about girls who live in flats, but he quickly recognizes that Gerty’s life does not appeal to Lily: “he was struck with the irony of suggesting to
her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (7). Without Selden’s prodding, Lily cannot even imagine the parallels of her situation to that of Gerty’s, and even when she does imagine them she doesn’t take those parallels seriously: “we’re so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat” (7-8). Lily recognizes her dependence on the social value system, citing heredity and her environment as reasons why she cannot live happily as Gerty does: “the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no—I won’t blame anybody for my faults: I’ll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress” (226). Growing up, “Lily could not recall a time when there had been money enough” (30), and the same feeling of a lack of money follows her throughout her life, initially not because she doesn’t have money, but because she always desires more. Gerty, on the other hand, spends her time raising money on behalf of struggling working-class women.

But despite Gerty’s goodness and her freedom, the narrator – perhaps in these passages playing the role of a representative society member – consistently disparages her, making Gerty’s position seem even more untenable for Lily. On the morning following Lily’s *tableaux-vivant* success, Gerty “woke from dreams as happy as Lily’s. If they were less vivid in hue, more subdued to the half-tints of her personality and her experience, they were for that very reason better suited to her mental vision” (149).
According to the narrator, Gerty possesses a limited mental capacity. And while characters’ intelligences should be expected to vary, Gerty’s naiveté and intelligence are repeatedly ridiculed. For example, Gerty has a difficult time reading people, which the narrator attributes to her goodness but hints that her slowness of intellect contributes as well: “Gerty Farish was not a close enough reader of character to disentangle the mixed threads of which Lily’s philanthropy was woven” (151). Further, the narrator draws attention to Gerty’s “somewhat inarticulate nature” (236) and describes her staircase as “[d]ull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people” (263). Even when Gerty articulates an impressive point about Lily having been abandoned by the people who taught her to care for money, the narrator disparages her mental ability: “Gerty broke off, abashed at the sound of her own eloquence, and impeded by the difficulty of giving precise expression to her vague yearning for her friend’s retrieval” (271). Society people find Gerty uninteresting, slow-witted, “poor[,] and dingy” (89); and, as long as Lily respects the opinions of society even in the slightest, she cannot follow Gerty’s example.9

Through Selden, though, Lily eventually does see an alternative life for herself. While Selden eventually backs out on his philosophy by abandoning Lily, early in the novel he offers Lily several viewpoints that she finds intriguing. Lily likes Selden because he can enjoy his life among high-society people without contaminating himself in the house of mirth:

he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the
world outside the cage appeared to Lily [...]. It was Selden’s distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (54-5)

Wharton attributes to Selden’s mother his ability to enjoy and at the same time not be consumed by material pleasures: “It was from her that he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic’s carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean’s pleasure in them” (152). These lines about Selden’s stoic and Epicurean nature make for a fairly accurate single sentence summary of Qoheleth’s philosophy. The great possessions of Qoheleth’s youth ultimately mean nothing to him because he cannot take anything with him when he dies, but the wine from vineyards and the songs of singers provide life-affirming pleasures in the moment.

That Lily and Selden, despite their similar views and obvious attraction, cannot at the same time imagine themselves happy in marriage forms a main part of the novel’s social critique. By the time Lily sheds her social adherence to a successful transactional marriage and sees Selden as a serious suitor, Selden feels his own strictures from the sexual marketplace. Robinson identifies the precarious nature of Lily’s charm: “Lily’s sexual attractiveness is undeniably a material asset in her struggle to improve her social and financial position through marriage. But ironically it is also a liability as long as it is not yet backed up by money and status” (349). Likely speaking on behalf of Wharton herself, Ned Van Alstyne agrees, “In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations” (157). Because Lily associates herself at the beginning of the novel with the daring-transaction, capitalistic exchange, Selden distrusts her innocence
after seeing her with Trenor. And, for the most part, he abandons her. Robinson sees Selden submitting to the same cultural biases that inhibit Lily:

he not only benefits from the double standard that destroys Lily but he feels free, despite his own actual affair with a married woman, to judge Lily for the appearance of a relationship with a married man. Once his hypocrisy is recognized […] it is possible to read Selden’s relationship to income and expenditure as an ironic parallel to Lily’s, rather than a contrast to it. (354)

Selden’s affair with Bertha (whatever its extent) goes relatively unnoticed, while the mere appearance of an affair with Trenor costs Lily her respectability, even in Selden’s eyes. Despite what Lily sees earlier as Selden’s ability to find a way out from the ridiculousness of New York high-society life, here he too follows the established social regulations on women’s morality.

And he does so to his own and to Lily’s detriment. Selden and Lily cannot be happy together first because of Lily’s indoctrination into the daring-transactional-marriage mentality and later because of Selden’s acquiescence with the same system. Wharton accentuates her social critique by presenting Selden – a primarily positive, caring character in Lily’s life – as a complicit participant in the oppressive, hypocritical sexual market. After finding Lily dead, Selden bemoans their formative social circumstances: “He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart” (329). Only an alternative set of social circumstances, an alternative social philosophy could have allowed Lily (and, to a lesser extent, Selden) freedom enough to be happy.
Just before her death, Lily longs for happiness: “all her being clamoured for its share of personal happiness. Yes—it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account” (320). If Qoheleth is right that happiness and enjoyment make life worth living, a society actively keeping Lily—as well as nearly every other character in the novel—from experiencing joy requires some kind of social change.

Initially, though, the kind of social change suggested by *The House of Mirth* may not seem particularly significant. Both Peel and Dimock, for example, conclude that Wharton’s ironic portrayal of all of the characters’ social philosophies—even those philosophies with positive aspects like Nettie’s, Gerty’s, and Selden’s—leaves readers disappointed, without an identifiable solution, and still with the status quo. While Peel and Dimock correctly identify that no one character embodies an exemplary social philosophy, Wharton points toward another philosophy by alluding to Ecclesiastes in her novel’s title. Even then, Ecclesiastes doesn’t necessarily demand a progressive socioeconomic stance. Qoheleth advocates a philosophy of enjoyment within a person’s current economic position. And if the novel only calls for an internal philosophical change, it provides little motivation for altering damaging external circumstances. Given Lily’s privileged class status, she could have made a personal decision to enjoy her life while living off of a small income like Gerty, without necessarily improving her wider social world. However, living like Gerty would have had profound social and economic consequences for Lily. Wharton’s powerful social critique comes then in the fact that, as
Lily could not free herself from her world’s social pressures, those social pressures destroyed her.

As such, *The House of Mirth* does provide motivation for altering aspects of Wharton’s social world. The novel’s gender critique especially suggests the need for new social attitudes adopting gender equality. Gender inequality keeps Lily from two central aspects of Qoheleth’s philosophy: love and joy. In addition to keeping her from loving Selden, the unequal, gendered sexual marketplace also contributes to Lily’s disinheritance. Without an inheritance – especially as she is in debt to Trenor – Lily cannot enjoy life’s good, simple pleasures. On the other hand, Freddy Van Osburgh is not disinherited from his fortune after his exploits with Mrs. Hatch. In fact, while Trenor and Rosedale interfere to keep Freddy from marrying Mrs. Hatch, the fact that he almost does marry her “would always be ascribed to Miss Bart’s connivance” (283). In matters of sexual morality, women are held responsible and judged harshly while men may do as they please without consequence. Wharton makes it apparent that the gender double standard in early twentieth century New York high society hurts Lily most of all. Given that gender inequality acts considerably in driving Lily to unhappiness and to death, the novel identifies the need for gender equality and in doing so attempts important work toward its progress.

Finally, taking Qoheleth’s counsel for enjoyment seriously can also provide motivation for ensuring all people have access to joy, even if Qoheleth himself doesn’t specifically prescribe it. Ecclesiastes could do more to craft a specific response to the world’s social inequalities, but its universal call to enjoy still points in a progressive
direction. *The House of Mirth*, while conscious of gender inequality, could say more about economic inequality; still, the socioeconomic critique the novel does provide is not insignificant. Pointing to joy as the highest good of human experience through the title and thematic allusions to Ecclesiastes, *The House of Mirth* establishes a lofty social vision: everyone should have access to joy. Such a vision would require a socioeconomic revolution. And while Wharton cannot envision the specifics of this kind of mass-scale social change, she does give readers a place to start. Lily’s observation of Nettie’s frail happiness is astute: “It was a meager enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance” (319). Nettie’s poverty and lung trouble kept her from enjoyment before Lily’s donation to Gerty’s Girls’ Club, and Lily recognizes that similar circumstances could afflict Nettie again, unless socioeconomic circumstances improve for the poor and the potentially destitute. Still, Lily’s observation of Nettie’s current happiness should not be dismissed: Nettie *has* “reached a central truth of existence” (319). Even, and perhaps especially, without access to the great possessions of Rosedale, Trenor, and Dorset, Nettie experiences individual moments of love and of joy. For “there is nothing better,” indeed, “than that a man [and a woman] should rejoice” (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

Ecclesiastes appealed to Wharton as a catalyst for the social reforms she suggests in *The House of Mirth*, as the book also appealed to Wharton in her life. On the final page of *A Backward Glance*, Wharton demonstrates her own close connection to Qoheleth’s views on experience, wisdom, sorrow, death, and enjoying in the moment: “Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death; yet there are always new countries to see, new books
to read (and, I hope, to write), a thousand little daily wonders to marvel at and rejoice in, and those magical moments when the mere discovery that ‘the woodspurge has a cup of three’ brings not despair but delight. The visible world is a daily miracle” (379). Wharton and Qoheleth agree: “all is vanity,” but “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest,” and “a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9:10, 11:7). Furthermore, Lee notes Wharton’s visible interest in Catholicism near the end of her life: “Many of Wharton’s friends supposed that she might be thinking of converting” (714). And while Lee explains that Wharton’s “attraction to Catholicism was aesthetic as much as devotional” (714), she includes in Wharton’s reading interests “her Bible, much marked” (668). Wharton, then, represents a kind of success story for Ecclesiastes-endorsed Christianity. This skeptic in scripture offered Wharton a lifelong connection to Christianity compatible with her own evolving views.

Henry James’s Ecclesiastes-Propelled Psychological Marriage Plot

Although Henry James wasn’t conventionally religious, he was the younger brother of William James, who – although also not conventionally religious – authored the famous 1902 The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Fred Kaplan draws attention to William’s influence on Henry in his Henry James biography: “If Henry junior had an immediate hero, it was his brother William. Less than two years older, William somehow seemed to him superior, partly because of age but also because of energy, sociability, and talent. […] He also seemed smarter, better able to pick things up immediately” (20). Both brothers were “born into a Presbyterian family that had been
for generations committed to Calvinism and to business” (5), but Kaplan later explains that their father practiced “a spiritual exclusiveness so distinct that he practiced a religion of one” (20). As a child, Henry didn’t like the taboo of his father’s nonconformity, but it contributed to both his familiarity with religion – to which William certainly also contributed – and his future unconventional religious views.

One such unconventional view on nature’s indifference aligns especially closely with Ecclesiastes, and particularly with the naturalistic vein of Ecclesiastes. Kaplan sees this evolving trend in an 1867 essay James wrote on James Anthony Froude for The Nation: “To comment on literature was to comment on life, even to the extent of revealing the skepticism about Providence inherent in his comment that ‘what strikes an attentive student of the past is the indifference of events to man’s moral worth or worthlessness’” (Kaplan 68). James’s statement recalls, even if it doesn’t specifically draw from, the proto-naturalistic Ecclesiastes 9:11: “time and chance happeneth to them all.” Summarizing James’s 1910 essay “Is there Life after Death?,” Kaplan shows another of James’s unconventional views, aligning this position with Ecclesiastes’ skeptical view of the afterlife. James, according to Kaplan, answered his title question by concluding, “he did not know,” but “that he thought it unlikely” (563). Qoheleth too confesses, “Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward[?]” (3:21).11 And while James never conducted an extensive religious study like his brother William or turned to mainline religion like his friend Wharton, his fiction included religious and spiritual themes throughout his career. One immediately apparent example is James’s 1895 story “The
Alter of the Dead,” in which the protagonist “worships […] deceased ‘Others’ with a religious devotion” (Haralson 197).

Stemming from James and Wharton’s friendship, and their related aesthetic sensibilities outlined at the beginning of this chapter, critics have often noticed parallels in their fiction. The most discussed parallel involving James’s The Golden Bowl is to Wharton’s 1920 novel The Age of Innocence, which critics have seen as similar both stylistically (e.g., Jill M. Kress) and in terms of plot (e.g., Millicent Bell). Somewhat surprisingly, given the proximity of their publication dates and their Ecclesiastes-related titles, few critics discuss the similarities in The Golden Bowl and The House of Mirth. Likely, the hesitation comes from the novels’ aesthetic differences, which Bell emphasizes in the claim that aesthetically The House of Mirth “was as far as could be conceived from the late or even the early Henry James” (227-8). Still, Eric Haralson and Kendall Johnson see links between Wharton’s Lily Bart and James’s Charlotte Verver (née Stant): “Charlotte is a stunningly beautiful, intelligent, independent young woman, and yet she is poor and unmarried. In her social milieu, these deficiencies potentially trump every other personal characteristic, and Charlotte runs a very real risk of becoming another Lily Bart” (95). The transactional-marriage mentality ensnares Charlotte and another of James’s main characters, Prince Amerigo, who both – unlike Lily – enter lucrative marriages without prioritizing love.

Over two volumes – The Prince and The Princess – and six books, The Golden Bowl tells of two marriages and one affair from the psychological viewpoints of its four main characters and commentary from the quirky, matchmaking gossip Fanny and her
comical husband Colonel Bob Assingham. The novel opens with the relatively poor, Italian Prince Amerigo contemplating – “rather serious than gay” (28) – his recently agreed upon marriage to Maggie Verver, an American living in England with her wealthy, widowed father, Adam Verver. But if Amerigo contemplates his marriage unenthusiastically, he enters it in fairly good faith. Soon, however, Charlotte – Amerigo’s former lover and Maggie’s childhood friend – arrives in England for the wedding. The former lovers spend an afternoon together ostensibly to buy Maggie a marriage gift, but after considering a golden bowl they abandon their quest empty-handed. After Maggie and Amerigo’s marriage, Maggie encourages Adam to marry as well and he chooses Charlotte. Preferring to spend their time as father and daughter, Adam and Maggie ignore their respective spouses and Charlotte and Amerigo are left alone often enough to consummate an affair. Maggie discovers the affair by purchasing the same golden bowl Charlotte and Amerigo considered for her wedding gift. Maggie then skillfully controls the situation to convince Charlotte and Adam to leave for the US, separating Charlotte and Amerigo. The Ververs’ departure leaves Amerigo and Maggie with their first real chance at happiness in their marriage, and James suggests the possibility of their finding it with Amerigo’s final line to Maggie: “I see nothing but you” (595).

J. Hillis Miller addresses *The Golden Bowl* in his 2005 book *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*. He argues, correctly in my view, that Maggie’s speech and sign acts deftly bring about the conclusions she desires without exposing her family to the ridicule infidelity might otherwise have caused: Charlotte and Adam return to the United States; Maggie and Amerigo remain together in England. Maggie deceives
others to secure these results, which leads Miller to ask whether or not Maggie’s deception can be justified: “Has Maggie acted in justice, in tune with the right? Can what she has done be justified?” (289). Less explicitly, Miller asks essentially the same question of Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair, which, according to Tessa Hadley’s *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure*, represents, “the primary critical quarrel over [the novel]” (154). Miller asks if Ecclesiastes can illuminate James’s position on the morality of Charlotte and Amerigo’s adultery, but he cannot decide whether or not it does:

Verses one through seven, however, may be taken either to suggest that Charlotte and the Prince were right to commit adultery while they were still young enough to do so, and enjoy it, or, contrariwise, that they should have remembered God in the days of their youth and not have indulged in illicit sex, since all is vanity. As verse fourteen, which ends the chapter and the whole book of Ecclesiastes, roundly asserts, “God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” (243)

While Miller leaves the question unanswered, citing what he sees as an irreconcilable contradiction in Ecclesiastes, he raises an important question to which I will return.¹⁵

By emphasizing the moral ambiguity of Maggie’s effective deception – and, to a lesser extent, by drawing attention to the difficulty of determining the morality of Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair – Miller transfers the responsibility for judgment onto readers. In his own reading, Miller focuses his attention on Maggie. Drawing an example from the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, Miller claims that
Maggie is both justified through her speech acts – like the Americans justified themselves through the Declaration and their success in the revolution – and not justified from the perspective of an ethical code that prohibits lying or a set of laws established to maintain the current power structure – like England’s laws against treason and revolution.

Maggie’s act, Miller explains, is like the Revolution, “it creates by the act itself the grounds that justify it” (289). Consequently, Miller concludes, “Maggie is both justified and not justified” (290). He then points out that in a similar way his reading of *The Golden Bowl* is both justified and not justified: “Nothing justifies, in the sense of prescribing it, the analogy between Maggie’s perjury and the Declaration of Independence I have drawn. I draw the analogy on my own hook. I hold, nevertheless, that the analogy is a self-evident truth” (290).

Ultimately, Miller emphasizes the need for both personal creativity and commitment to textual evidence. He writes, “The reader is, in the end, in a situation like Maggie’s. The reader must act on his or her own, on the basis of a reading that has no fully prescribed basis, though that reading must try to follow as closely as possible the tracks James has made in the snow” (290). While I agree with Miller that no absolutely unequivocal answer can be made, I suggest that a main part of what Miller calls James’s snow tracks comes in the novel’s title allusion to Ecclesiastes. Whereas Miller abandons the allusion because of what he sees as its contradictory assertions – “How on earth are these biblical verses relevant to *The Golden Bowl*? I confess that I cannot see a clear connection” (243) – I hope that a prolonged look at the entirety of Ecclesiastes alongside *The Golden Bowl* will answer both of Miller’s questions outlined above. James’s title
allusion encourages readers to make a positive judgment of both Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair and Maggie’s character that, pace Miller, has a solid “prescribed basis” (290). My analysis also shows that James accomplishes Maggie’s shift in perspective from romanticism to realism using the symbolism of the golden bowl and its association with the proto-realist Ecclesiastes.

In the six hundred pages of The Golden Bowl, James creates ample space for a variety of allusions, and in addition to Ecclesiastes, the golden-bowl symbolism evokes multiple texts and meanings. Most straightforwardly, Peter Brooks claims, “The gilded bowl with the hidden flaw within is almost too blatant a symbol of Maggie’s marriage to the Prince” (190). Though the bowl symbolizes Maggie and Amerigo’s marriage, it also—as Brooks is quick to point out—does more than just symbolize their marriage: it transforms depending on context. In addition to Ecclesiastes, critics have seen in the golden bowl possible allusions to Tristan and Isolde and Keats’s Grecian urn (Gribble), Blake’s “The Book of Thel” and Poe’s “Lenore” (Grimstad), and the Christian Holy Grail (Todasco). James himself may playfully refer to the versatility of his symbol within the novel in these lines: “the intention remained, like some famous poetic line in a dead language, subject to varieties of interpretation” (579). While James probably did intend for these multiple allusions to operate, the fact that the novel’s characters consistently discuss the bowl breaking (e.g., Charlotte 109) and that the bowl eventually does break (454) solidifies the bowl’s primary association with Ecclesiastes 12:6: “Or ever […] the golden bowl be broken.”16
Likewise, at least six of the novel’s intertextual meanings directly relate to Ecclesiastes. The bowl itself appears twice: James associates it first with Charlotte and Amerigo’s love, and, in its second appearance, with Maggie’s renewed investment in her marriage to Amerigo. Third, Charlotte and Amerigo discuss the bowl just before first consummating their affair. The three additional Ecclesiastes references could blend into the many meaningful but nonessential literary allusions James employs if not for the novel’s title and James’s repeated use of the golden bowl. Less explicit than the appearances of the bowl, James alludes to Ecclesiastes by borrowing phrases from the biblical book. First, he first borrows the phrase “under the sun” (213), which has become a ubiquitous English-language cliché but has done so through its original appearance 29 times in the King James Version of Ecclesiastes. James then borrows the phrase “house of mourning” (236) from Ecclesiastes chapter seven in which it twice appears, first in 7:2: “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart,” and again in 7:4, the same verse from which Wharton titled The House of Mirth: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Lastly, James borrows from Ecclesiastes 11:1 – “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” – to present Maggie’s reflection on Amerigo’s affair. By highlighting Ecclesiastes with his title, James prepares readers to recognize each of these Ecclesiastes allusions, and then, confident in his readers’ ability to recognize these references, he surrounds the Ecclesiastes elements with significant plot movements, character developments, and thematic revelations. Each golden-bowl reference and Ecclesiastes
borrowing signals a significant moment in *The Golden Bowl*, and, following James’s lead, I focus primarily on the scenes surrounding these elements in developing my analysis.

The first advantage of an Ecclesiastes-focused reading of *The Golden Bowl* comes in realizing that James elevates romantic love as a good higher than social appearances. Charlotte and Amerigo are right to love each other and to act on it. In her introduction to *The Golden Bowl*, Ruth Bernard Yeazell highlights the appeal of James’s presentation of their affair: “The sympathy with which *The Golden Bowl* represents its adulterers has nonetheless prompted many readers to resist the design of its plot. And there are good reasons, particularly in the novel’s first half, for feeling that both justice and narrative interest lie with the lovers” (xvi-xvii). Likewise, Ecclesiastes’ influence in volume one lies with the lovers. From the first appearance of the golden bowl to the consummation of Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair, Ecclesiastes justifies the passionate fervor with which Charlotte especially approaches her love for Amerigo. Miller suggests Ecclesiastes 12:1 – “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” – as a verse which might support the lovers’ affair. Moreover, Ecclesiastes’ overall message advocating joyful commitment to love in the moment justifies their affair most of all. Qoheleth champions this kind of zealous, carpe-diem companionship in his central thesis statement in 9:9-10:

> Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity:
for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under
the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there
is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither
thou goest.

Charlotte is not of course Amerigo’s wife. And so by associating the lovers with
Ecclesiastes, James expands Qoheleth’s commendation to include extramarital
relationships, but he still depends on Ecclesiastes as an allusive key to guide readers’
reception of the affair.

With the first appearance of the golden bowl, James emphasizes Charlotte’s
legitimate love for Amerigo, therein also expanding Qoheleth’s commendation of love to
include women. On the eve of Amerigo and Maggie’s marriage Charlotte asks Amerigo
to help her pick out a marriage gift for Maggie. The search primarily provides a cover for
the former lovers to spend a final afternoon together, but they do stop in an antique shop
where Charlotte contemplates buying what the shopkeeper proudly calls, “My Golden
Bowl” (107). The capital letters recall the novel’s title and emphasize the bowl’s
importance. Charlotte connects the bowl explicitly to Ecclesiastes 12:6 when she inquires
about a potential crack in the bowl’s construction: “Not even if he should have to say to
me ‘The Golden Bowl is broken’?” (109). James pairs an allusion to Ecclesiastes with an
explication of Charlotte’s continued love. At the start of their visit, which provides their
first chance at meeting privately since Amerigo’s engagement, Charlotte explains that she
has come back not for Maggie’s wedding but to see Amerigo: “I came back for this. […]
To have one hour alone with you” (90). James then uses Charlotte’s conversation with
the shopkeeper to remind readers why Charlotte and Amerigo can’t marry. Though she wants the bowl, as she previously wanted Amerigo, Charlotte cites its price: “‘Well, for me only the price. I’m poor, you see – very poor. […] I like it,’ she said – ‘I want it. But I must decide what I can do’” (110). The extent of what she can do depends on her parting words to Amerigo, “I would marry, I think, to have something from you in all freedom” (113). Charlotte means that she could receive a wedding gift from Amerigo if she married someone else, but her phrase foreshadows their eventual adulterous relationship made possible by Charlotte’s marriage to Adam.

Amerigo is also passionately attracted to Charlotte, though he remains cooler and more distant. During James’s introduction of Charlotte, which takes place at the Assinghams just as Amerigo is asking Fanny to see him through his engagement, Charlotte mesmerizes Amerigo:

He saw her in her light: that immediate, exclusive address to their friend was like a lamp she was holding aloft for his benefit and for his pleasure. It showed him everything – above all her presence in the world, so closely, so irretrievably contemporaneous with his own: a sharp, sharp fact, sharper during these instants than any other at all, even than that of his marriage. (58)

This flattering description of Charlotte from Amerigo’s perspective follows an equally flattering description of Amerigo from Fanny’s perspective after he learns that Charlotte is on her way to Fanny’s house: “He seemed, leaning on crimson damask, to take in the bright day. He looked younger than his years; he was beautiful, innocent, vague” (55).
During their search for Maggie’s wedding gift, Amerigo repeatedly calls Charlotte “my dear” – “cara mia” in Italian, which recalls their former courtship in Rome and which they speak together in the antique shop leading the shopkeeper, not surprisingly, to mistake them for a couple (105). Amerigo’s flirtation becomes especially aggressive when, during their ineffectual search for a gift for Maggie, he asks Charlotte if he can buy something for her instead. The implication is that a gift from Amerigo would propel Charlotte above Maggie, and James uses this too to foreshadow its looming reality.

But while Charlotte and Amerigo’s contrived afternoon together could prejudice readers against them, they respectfully remain apart from each other for the first year of Amerigo and Maggie’s marriage, and – despite seeing each other often when Charlotte marries Adam – they remain faithful for at least two more years after Charlotte’s marriage (205). After this three-year interval, Charlotte explains to Fanny her justified concern about not getting enough attention from her husband. In doing so, Charlotte also alludes to Ecclesiastes and identifies the main reason readers’ sympathies might fall to the lovers in the novel’s first volume. In the relevant scene, Maggie, Amerigo, and Charlotte arrive at a dinner party without Adam, who has remained at home on account of not feeling well. Maggie almost immediately departs to check on her father, leaving Charlotte and Amerigo to attend the party together, whereupon Fanny suggests to Charlotte that she should have returned instead of Maggie. Anticipating Fanny’s anxieties over the appearance of attending the party alone with Amerigo, Charlotte boldly states, “You can ask me anything under the sun you like, because, don’t you see? you can’t upset me” (213). The Ecclesiastes reference “under the sun” appears just as Charlotte
articulates for the first time how Maggie and Adam’s intimacy jeopardizes both her marriage to Adam and Amerigo’s to Maggie:

‘Maggie thinks more, on the whole, of fathers than of husbands. And my situation is such,’ she went on, ‘that this becomes immediately, don’t you understand? a thing I have to count with.’ Mrs. Assingham, vaguely heaving, panting a little but trying not to show it, turned about, from some inward spring, in her seat. ‘If you mean such a thing as that she doesn’t adore the Prince—!’ ‘I don’t say she doesn’t adore him [Charlotte replies]. What I say is that she doesn’t think of him.’ (213-4)

Because Maggie ignores Amerigo and monopolizes Adam’s time, neither Charlotte nor Amerigo can cultivate a healthy marriage relationship. This scene reminds readers that Adam married in the first place at Maggie’s request, and that Maggie didn’t anticipate that his marriage would change their lives: “You think [Adam asks Maggie] that I had better get married just in order to be as I was before?” (152). Rather than to encourage Adam and Charlotte’s intimacy, their whole marriage was intended as a way to maintain Adam and Maggie’s comfortable way of life.

After Fanny’s talk with Charlotte, and Amerigo and Charlotte’s public display without their spouses, Fanny discusses Amerigo and Charlotte with her husband Bob. Fanny stresses the danger of their relationship, but the conversation culminates with Bob’s insightful advice that Fanny “Leave it […] to them” (234) and Fanny’s begrudging consent to do so. The chapter ends when Fanny and Bob leave their carriage, where they’ve been holding the discussion, and walk up their drive, which the narrator describes
as an “approach to a house of mourning” (236). Fanny understands the house of mourning as a symbol of her failure to keep everyone happy, but the next chapter opens, only two sentences later, by endorsing Charlotte and Amerigo’s love: “It appeared thus that they might enjoy together extraordinary freedom, the two friends, from the moment they should understand their position aright” (237). From the point of view of the lovers, the “house of mourning” reference to Ecclesiastes chapter seven precedes a realization of their freedom and opens the possibility for them to enjoy each other. Fanny and Bob agree to let the lovers love, and the narrator confers on them a blessing indicating their relative innocence: “Nothing stranger surely had ever happened to a conscientious, a well-meaning, a perfectly passive pair: no more extraordinary decree had ever been launched against such victims than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid” (238). The fact that Amerigo and Charlotte do enter their marriages in good faith and don’t immediately rekindle their former love adds to the sympathy of their reception, and the Ecclesiastes reference leading up to it confirms James’s endorsement of the pair.

Solidifying James’s justification of the lovers’ happiness, The Golden Bowl surrounds the consummation of Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair with religious references. James agrees, it appears, with Amerigo and Charlotte’s self-assessment of their relationship as “sacred” (254, 255). And to convey its sacredness, James depends on the biblically canonized Ecclesiastes for authority and sets their lovemaking amid Gloucester’s famous cathedrals. The lovers’ first day of freedom centers on the novel’s
second discussion of the golden bowl. After being left alone by their host, Lady Castledean, Amerigo and Charlotte promise to seize the day. Amerigo begins,

‘I feel the day like a great gold cup that we must somehow drain together.’

[And Charlotte responds,] ‘I feel it, as you always make me feel everything, just as you do; so that I know ten miles off how you feel! But do you remember,’ she asked, ‘apropos of great gold cups, the beautiful one, the real one, that I offered you so long ago and that you wouldn’t have? Just before your marriage’—she brought it back to him: ‘the gilded crystal bowl in the little Bloomsbury shop.’ (290)

The chapter ends with Charlotte expressing her barely contained desire for Amerigo – “These days, yesterday, last night, this morning, I’ve wanted everything” – and Amerigo’s response, “You shall have everything” (293). James then leaves readers to imagine the rest of the lovers’ day, and readers fill in the blanks building on James’s previous description of their intimacy:

‘It’s sacred,’ he said at last. ‘It’s sacred,’ she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge. (254-5)
The lovers’ passion for each other and the religious atmosphere in which James surrounds their affair generates a positive presentation of the lovers’ romance, especially in a novel that takes its title from a biblical book advocating passion and love as good things God has provided.

One distinction, however, should be noted between Charlotte and Amerigo regarding their relative embodiment of Qoheleth’s philosophy. Charlotte embraces Ecclesiastes’ call to “live joyfully” with a lover, and to do so with all of her “might” in the face of life’s “vanity” (9:9-10). She reprimands Amerigo for dwelling on the cracks in the golden bowl: “Don’t you think too much of ‘cracks’ and aren’t you too afraid of them? I risk the cracks” (290). Like Qoheleth, Charlotte realizes that life won’t always be good, but that life offers a few good things like love that, passionately pursued, make life worth living. Amerigo, while desiring the surface pleasures of their relationship, shies away from passionately committing to Charlotte: “But as to cracks,” he explains, “risk them as much as you like for yourself, but don’t risk them for me” (291). Yeazell sees in this exchange Charlotte’s greater investment in the affair, which leads to her larger role in advancing the novel’s plot: “That reminder that all their impulses are not in fact identical also hints at what the rest of the novel will amply demonstrate: the burden of its plot falls especially on its women” (xix-xx). Brooks claims, “[Volume] 2 of The Golden Bowl more consistently follows Maggie’s perspective than [Volume] 1 does the Prince’s” (187). Given Amerigo’s marginal role in the volume bearing his title, Charlotte’s passionate joie de vivre encourages thinking of her as the Ecclesiastes-endorsed heroine of volume one in much the same way Maggie will become the Ecclesiastes-endorsed
heroine of volume two. In fact, it is Charlotte via the golden bowl that leads Maggie to adopt Ecclesiastes’ philosophy and to improve her life.

In *The Golden Bowl*’s second volume Ecclesiastes’ influence moves from the lovers to Maggie where it helps to generate a sympathetic portrayal of her previously dispassionate character. While she doesn’t take a typical or an ideal path, Maggie adopts the Ecclesiastes-endorsed desire to love her husband directly from his mistress Charlotte. James establishes this possibility early in the novel when he reveals that part of what Maggie likes best about Amerigo is seeing other women fall in love with him: “she never admired him so much, or so found him heartbreakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had originally and fatally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute her substance” (146). Further, both Bob and Adam hint that Charlotte’s role is to help Maggie. Early in the novel Bob exclaims, ‘So that Charlotte has come out to give [Maggie] lessons?’ (86). And, nearer the end, Adam asks Maggie, “Don’t you remember that that, originally, was what we were to get [Charlotte] for?” [Maggie replies,] ‘Oh yes—to give us a life’” (394). Yeazell states explicitly that Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair leads to Maggie’s commitment to Amerigo: “It takes adultery here to get a marriage going” (xvi). When she realizes Charlotte and Amerigo have acted on their love, Maggie starts to actively think of her husband, legitimately misses him, and embarks on a journey to win him back.

James depicts this journey by using Ecclesiastes allusions alongside Maggie’s developing intimation of the lovers’ affair. Volume two opens with Maggie’s vague
concern about the state of her life, and when Amerigo returns from Gloucester she wants to tell him how much she needs him, but ultimately cannot: “‘You’ve seemed these last days – I don’t know what: more absent than ever before, too absent for us merely to go on so. […] There comes a day when something snaps, when the full cup, filled to the very brim, begins to flow over. That’s what has happened to my need of you – the cup, all day, has been too full to carry. […] Some such words as those were what didn’t ring out” (338). The reference to the cup provides a loose reference to Ecclesiastes, which is then highlighted by the novel’s title. A month later, Maggie feels the same anxiety, and this time connects it to Charlotte and Amerigo. She hypothesizes, while alluding to Ecclesiastes, that they may be having an affair. Qoheleth writes, “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” (11:1), and James presents Maggie’s thoughts in similar language: “There came an hour inevitably when she knew with a chill what she had feared and why; […] she was none the less to have to admit after many days that the bread he had cast on the waters had come home and that she should thus be justified of her old apprehension” (379-80). James surrounds Maggie’s discovery of Amerigo and Charlotte’s love with Ecclesiastes both to draw attention to the value of romantic love and to symbolically transfer Ecclesiastes’ influence from the lovers to Maggie: Maggie sees Charlotte and Amerigo happily in love, she recognizes the call to love in Ecclesiastes, and she embraces this call for her own relationship.

Completing the transfer of Ecclesiastes’ influence, James sets the breaking of the bowl at the center of Maggie’s full realization of the lovers’ affair, and so at the definitive moment when she vows to change her life. Maggie uncovers the affair when, after
purchasing the golden bowl Amerigo and Charlotte considered buying for her wedding gift, the shopkeeper who sold it to her arrives at her house to apologize for overcharging, recognizes Amerigo and Charlotte in two photographs, and tells Maggie the story of when he saw them together, even verifying the date with another receipt. Maggie invites Fanny to view the offending bowl and to hear the lovers’ story. Fanny, trying to deny her knowledge of the affair as well as Maggie’s new evidence, raises the bowl above her head and then “dashed it boldly to the ground, where she had the thrill of seeing it lie shattered” (454). As Fanny breaks the bowl, Amerigo enters the room to learn that Maggie knows about his affair. Maggie, however, doesn’t tell him how much she knows and in fact never tells anyone, including Adam and Charlotte. This leaves readers unsure of both the extent of Adam and Maggie’s knowledge of the affair and Amerigo and Charlotte’s knowledge of what Maggie knows, though Amerigo appears to know more than Charlotte. What readers do know from the golden-bowl episode is that Maggie discovers that Charlotte and Amerigo were intimate prior to her wedding and they spent the eve of her wedding together. Readers also see that whatever the extent of Maggie’s other knowledge of the affair, it changes her profoundly.

For the rest of the novel Maggie works effectively to repair her marriage and – following and then surpassing Charlotte’s lead – to foster a genuine intimacy with Amerigo. Yeazell locates the shift from Charlotte’s love for Amerigo to Maggie’s love for Amerigo in Maggie’s identification with Charlotte: “The heroine of The Golden Bowl may identify with her rival, but she also displaces her – identifies, in fact, precisely in order to displace her” (xxi).19 As Bob had incredulously suggested earlier, Maggie does
take lessons from Charlotte. And by the end of the novel, Maggie even acknowledges Charlotte’s positive influence on her life: “How can we not always think of her? It’s as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us – as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us’ (579-80). Yeazell emphasizes Charlotte’s role in improving Maggie’s life by citing the literal and symbolic journey of the golden bowl:

So tightly arranged is the structure of James’s plot that even its climactic discovery follows on a hint from Charlotte, whose ‘casual speech about there being in Bloomsbury such “funny little fascinating” places and even sometimes such unexpected finds’ leads directly to the Princess’s own encounter with the golden bowl and thus to her conclusive knowledge of the others’ intimacy (438). Since it is that knowledge […] that marks the decisive shift in the relations of the triangle, the other woman’s mere pretext of a wedding present ironically becomes, in the end, her real gift to the marriage. (xxi)

And while Yeazell appropriately concludes that Charlotte helped to create the circumstances for Maggie and Amerigo’s marriage to succeed, Ecclesiastes also contributes positively, which James conveys through the golden-bowl symbolism and Charlotte’s connection to Ecclesiastes.

Maggie wins Amerigo through a combination of secrecy, maneuvering, and desire, and eventually creates a marriage in which both she and Amerigo invest. Following the breaking of the golden bowl, Maggie imagines that Amerigo can hear her implied supplication for happiness in light of her new approach to their marriage: “I’m
not such a fool as you supposed me. Look at the possibility that since I am different there may still be something in it for you – if you’re capable of working with me to get that out” (462). Maggie could make essentially the same unspoken challenge to Amerigo using only quotations from Ecclesiastes: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest” and “do it with thy might” (9:9-10). In the end, Maggie ensures both her commitment and Amerigo’s by convincing her beloved father and his wife to return to the US. The Ververs’ imminent departure leads to Amerigo and Maggie’s most passionate scene:

He was so near now that she could touch him, taste him, smell him, kiss him, hold him; he almost pressed upon her, and the warmth of his face – […] beautiful and strange – was bent upon her with the largeness with which objects loom in dreams. She closed her eyes to it, and so, the next instant, against her purpose, had put out her hand, which had met his own and which he held. (584)

This scene ends when Maggie convinces Amerigo to “Wait!” (584), but immediately after Adam and Charlotte depart, Amerigo and Maggie express an even deeper commitment by engaging vulnerably with one another: “close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: “‘See’? I see nothing but you.’ And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast” (595). The novel ends thus, completing the narrator’s earlier assessment that Maggie “had done all” (557). She wins Amerigo back from Charlotte and gives her marriage a chance at an Ecclesiastes-endorsed passionate joy.
Reflected in Maggie’s progression away from her childhood love for her father toward her adulthood love of her husband is her parallel evolution from romanticism to realism. Both of these developments depend on the golden bowl, and so symbolically on Ecclesiastes’ influence. In all of the novel’s first volume and up to the breaking of the bowl in the second volume, James presents Maggie and Adam as romantics. Amerigo teases Maggie in the novel’s opening scene: “‘You Americans are almost incredibly romantic,’ [And she agrees,] ‘Of course we are. That’s just what makes everything so nice for us.’ ‘Everything?’ He had wondered” (32). Amerigo also notices their “romantic disposition” (33) and their “romantic spirit” (37). Furthermore, Adam and Maggie are strangely romantic in thinking that their marriages won’t change their lives, that they will continue living contentedly together the same as they did before marrying. James dramatizes this romantic thinking in Maggie and Adam’s relationship to the infant Principino: “It was of course an old story and a familiar idea that a beautiful baby could take its place as a new link between a wife and a husband, but Maggie and her father had, with every ingenuity, converted the precious creature into a link between a mamma and a grandpapa” (140). This speaks poorly for Maggie’s marriage, and James stresses the unreflective aspect of Maggie’s relationship with her father in Amerigo’s conclusion that Adam “had been brought up to the romantic view of principino” (140-1). Adam and Maggie were brought up to the romantic view of most things, and for much of the novel this romantic view limits Maggie’s ability to engage her life passionately.

In the novel’s second volume, however, Maggie’s worldview shifts toward realism. Just before Fanny smashes the golden bowl Maggie reveals her romantic wish
for the bowl without its cracks: “Well, what I want. I want a happiness without a hole in it big enough for you to poke in your finger. […] The golden bowl – as it was to have been. […] The bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack” (483-4).

What Maggie doesn’t address here, but what James reveals in his allusion to Ecclesiastes, is that acknowledging the cracks, eventually seeing the golden bowl broken, is what improves her marriage and her life. These lines from Maggie encourage Bryan Berry – whose essay “Henry James and the Heavenly Light” helpfully outlines a variety of religious themes in James’s fiction – to conclude that “the golden bowl is an emblem of our hope for a perfect union of human consciousnesses in love. And yet, the bowl has a crack in it, for the perfect union is impossible in a flawed world. In the end, the novel points upward to an unseen ideal form of the visible good and the communion of souls” (35). Berry rightly notes that Maggie, Amerigo, and Charlotte do not live in a perfect world but in the real world. However, Berry follows Maggie’s initial preference for a flawless bowl too far. As James demonstrates through Charlotte’s persistence that she “risk[s] the cracks” (290), he advocates in The Golden Bowl not some kind of heavenly, romantic love without cracks, but a realistic love that has its grounding in messy but potentially glorious reality. Qoheleth grounds all of his claims in the reality and inevitability of death. Ecclesiastes Chapter 12 employs multiple images – including the broken golden bowl (12:6) – to depict death, and death serves as foundational for Qoheleth’s wisdom: “Death must be fully accepted,” William P. Brown stresses in his Ecclesiastes commentary, “in order to live the good life, however minimal it may seem” (73). Brown notes that, for Qoheleth, accepting the inevitability of death and suffering
leads to a realistic optimism: “joy, born from grief, is resilient to the harsh realities of life” (73-4).

Dependent on this understanding of Ecclesiastes’ realism, the breaking of the bowl acts symbolically as a division between Maggie the romantic and Maggie the realist. Fanny breaks the bowl near the end of the fourth book and the fifth book opens with Maggie reflecting on her improved perspective: “It was as if she had come out—that was her most general consciousness; out of a dark tunnel, a dense wood, or even simply a smoky room, and had thereby, at least, for going on, the advantage of air in her lungs. […] The change brought about by itself as great a difference of view as the shift of an inch in the position of a telescope” (477). Akin to coming out of Plato’s cave, Maggie sees the real world for the first time. And she gets there through learning of the lovers’ affair: “It was the first sharp falsity she had known in her life, to touch at all, or be touched by; […] and yet, yes, amazingly, she had been able to look at terror and disgust only to know that she must put away from her the bitter-sweet of their freshness” (498). She must recognize the “sore travail” (Ecclesiastes 1:13) of the world’s vanity and then search for its joys. By discovering Amerigo and Charlotte’s affair, which culminates in the breaking of the golden bowl, Maggie loses the innocence of her previous romanticism but gains an experience of grief, which makes authentic joy possible. Most significantly for her marriage, Maggie embraces Amerigo not with a flawless bowl, but after the golden bowl is broken.

And Maggie does embrace him. She demonstrates her shift from romanticism to realism most explicitly in her successful transfer from excessive selflessness to a healthy
selfishness in her relationship with Amerigo. Early in the novel, Amerigo jokes about Maggie’s selflessness: “She’s not selfish – God forgive her! – enough” (99). But as Maggie’s lack of selfish assertion manifests only in her devotion to her father, it becomes an issue in their marriage and leads – at least in part – to Amerigo and Charlotte’s affair. When Fanny discovers that affair and feels Maggie must know something about it, she anticipates Maggie’s change in perspective and her subsequent effective handling of the situation: “she wore her blind. Now, at last, her situation has come to a head. To-day she does know it. And that’s illuminating. […] We might have pitied her before – for all the good it would then have done her; we might have begun some time ago. Now, however, she has begun to live. And the way it comes to me […] is that she’ll triumph” (307). As Maggie continues to remove “her blind,” Fanny predicts not exactly that “she’ll get the Prince back,” as Bob suggests, but that she will awaken to a larger truth: “What I take her to be waking up to is the truth that, all the while, she really hasn’t had him. Never. […] Maggie was the creature in the world to whom a wrong thing could least be communicated. It was as if her imagination had been closed to it, her sense altogether sealed. That therefore, […] is what will have to happen. Her sense will have to open” (308). Fanny sees Maggie’s innocence, but expects her discovery of Amerigo’s affair to broaden her view of the world. Fanny also recognizes Maggie’s capacity for expanding her worldview and for making her marriage work.

Throughout volume two Maggie opens her sense for realism and asserts herself in her relationship with Amerigo. She laments their growing distance and desires to make it up to him: “She wanted him to understand from that very moment that she was going to
be with him again, quite with them, together, as she doubtless hadn’t been since the ‘funny’ changes” (344). Following the breaking of the bowl, Maggie acts on this desire, and Amerigo recognizes the change in her. Though he wouldn’t have thought so before, Amerigo sees Maggie’s recent thought processes and comments on her emotional complexity: “It’s you, cara, who are deep” (471). Then, by keeping Amerigo dependent on her silence regarding his affair, Maggie transforms their relationship: “It was as if she had passed, in a time incredibly short, from being nothing for him to being all” (492). Next, Maggie sets out to subtly persuade Adam and Charlotte to move away, convincing Charlotte that it is her own idea. Maggie even admits her newfound selfishness for her husband Amerigo to her father Adam: “Ah, it’s just he who’s my selfishness. I’m selfish, so to speak, for him. I mean, […] that he’s my motive – in everything” (516). All the while, she increasingly cultivates Amerigo’s desire for her: “It was more wonderful than she could have told; it was for all the world as if she was succeeding with him beyond her intention” (574). And as Charlotte and Adam recede into the distance, Maggie contemplates having Amerigo to herself: “She knew at last really why – and how she had been inspired and guided, how she had been persistently able, how, to her soul, all the while, it had been for the sake of this end. Here it was then, the moment, the golden fruit that had shone from afar” (594). With Amerigo’s final line “I see nothing but you” (595), James marks Maggie’s journey as a triumphant success: from her father to her husband, from being an ignored spouse to an engaged lover, and from a romantic worldview to a realistic one.
This Ecclesiastes-focused analysis answers the two questions raised earlier by Miller and Hadley. Miller’s analysis, with which I began my discussion of *The Golden Bowl*, cannot make sense of the Ecclesiastes allusion in the novel’s title because Miller sees the potential for the reference equally to encourage or to discourage adultery. Miller’s analysis of Ecclesiastes 12:14 – “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” – however, fails to take into account the entirety of Ecclesiastes. Although understandably because he is not a biblical scholar, Miller fails to note that verses 9-14 are generally considered the work of a pious scribe trying to fit Ecclesiastes with the rest of the canon, and so these verses do not reflect the main vein of Qoheleth’s thought. Even with these verses in the book’s final form, however, Miller’s analysis should take into account the way Qoheleth would expect God to “bring every work into judgment.” Because Qoheleth’s ultimate good is to enjoy life before death takes away the ability to enjoy, Qoheleth expects God to judge people based on how closely she or he has followed the call to enthusiastically enjoy, which may – according to James’s novel – even include the enjoyment of a romantic affair. The emphasis on living in *The Golden Bowl* leads Yeazell to conclude that James sets joy above all other moral considerations: “In no other Jamesian fiction does an appetite for life so trump the dream of moral purity” (xiii). The emphasis on living passionately endorses Charlotte’s love for Amerigo.

Also noted above, Hadley sees the novel’s primary critical quarrel in the discrepancy between “whether James is writing to justify the Ververs or the lovers, whether he is giving us a happy or a tragic ending” (154). Hadley herself responds to the
question thus: “It helps defuse the quarrel to suggest that he is creating a world in which both readings co-exist: not reconciled, but in a perpetual tension” (154). The tension Hadley sees, I argue, exists because in the first half of *The Golden Bowl*, Ecclesiastes’ philosophy helpfully influences Charlotte whereas in the second half it benefits Maggie. Each woman desires to “Live joyfully with the [person] whom [she] lovest” (*Ecclesiastes* 9:9). By the end of the novel, though, Ecclesiastes influence succeeds in resolving the tension and offering a primarily happy ending: Maggie earns a chance at happiness with Amerigo, who like Maggie has had to come around to investing in their marriage, but who also like Maggie does invest in it by the novel’s conclusion. Similarly, Charlotte also embraces the chance finally to be with her husband Adam without the distracting, emotionally draining, presence of Maggie and the Principino. Given the entirety of Ecclesiastes as the criteria for judgment, Charlotte’s passion earns a positive judgment in both volumes. Maggie, who learns from Charlotte and receives Ecclesiastes’ influence through the symbolic transfer of the breaking of the golden bowl, improves her life in volume two to also earn a positive judgment. Even Amerigo, who misses two legitimate chances to pursue a passionate relationship with Charlotte, finally invests in his marriage with Maggie and receives an Ecclesiastes endorsement as well.

Ten years after the publication of his final novel *The Golden Bowl* and only one year before his death, James seems to have drawn again on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. In a 1915 letter to his friend Edmund Gosse, James explains the poor critical and public reception of the New York Edition of his collected fiction published between 1907 and 1909. The letter expresses James’s pain at the edition’s lack of success, writing that it
received no “critical attention at all” (Letters 778). Furthermore, James conveys in the
same letter that he had recently learned “from [his publisher William] Heinemann that
four or five of my books that he has have quite (entirely) ceased to sell and that he must
break up the plates” (779). By the time he wrote the letter in 1915, however, James,
conveys his relative failure in good humor, mockingly comparing himself to Shelley’s
Ozymandias: “my poor old rather truncated edition, in fact entirely frustrated one […]
has the grotesque likeness for me of a sort of miniature Ozymandias of Egypt (“look on
my works, ye mighty, and despair!”)—round which the lone and level sands stretch
further away than ever” (777-8). Admitting the impermanence of fame and monuments –
like the monument of James’s collected edition – echoes Qoheleth’s reflections on the
ultimate emptiness of great possessions and the transience of memory: “There is no
remembrance of former things” (1:11). Overall, James moved on from his mild
disappointments – he was after all still largely successful – in a particularly Qohelutian
manner. Commenting on Heinemann’s breaking up the plates of his texts, James accepts
the passing of his books’ popularity and jokes at definitions of success: “Of course he
must; I have nothing to say against it; and the things in question are mostly all in the
Edition. But such is ‘success’!” (779). And even in his 72nd year, James assures Gosse
that he’d like to get outside to see the sun: “I am doing my best to feel better, and hope to
go out this afternoon the first for several!” (779). While James may not have been
consciously thinking of Ecclesiastes in transitioning his definition of success, he again
benefited from Qoheleth’s wisdom to create a happy ending to the disappointment of his
New York Edition, as he did more consciously while writing The Golden Bowl.
In the sense that *The Golden Bowl* can – using Ecclesiastes as criteria – be considered a novel with a happy ending, it diverges sharply from Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Still, the novels share an investment in realistically presenting the marriage marketplace and the complex relationships it engenders. The novels’ writers – Wharton and James – share ideas on elevating realism above romanticism, especially in the ways Pizer outlines realism. In addition to a messy, realistic presentation of courtship, James and Wharton add to the diversity of realism by choosing complex women as their main characters. They also, like Pizer suggests, write with an ethical ideal in mind. James presents his ethical ideal in Charlotte’s passion and Maggie’s successful development toward actively participating in her marriage; Wharton offers her ethical ideal in her warning against the frivolous society that destroys Lily Bart. Both writers – so familiar with religion and religious texts – almost invariably discovered title allusions in Ecclesiastes with which to convey these ethical ideals in favor of passion and love, and against transactional living and romantic thinking. Similarly familiar with Ecclesiastes, but more confrontational in their approaches to borrowing from it, Ernest Hemingway and Jean Toomer turn Ecclesiastes’ skepticism onto Ecclesiastes’ philosophy itself. In the next chapter, I turn to these writers and to three of their modernist novels from the 1920s.
Chapter Four | ‘And the Sun Goeth Down’: Ecclesiastes-Inspired Skepticism in the Modernism of Ernest Hemingway and Jean Toomer

While Margaret E. Wright-Cleveland begins her essay comparing Jean Toomer and Ernest Hemingway by acknowledging that the authors were “neither friends nor acquaintances,” she outlines several similarities between them, focusing specifically on Toomer’s *Cane* and Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (151). Both *Cane* and *In Our Time* were published by Boni and Liveright in the mid-1920s, Wright-Cleveland categorizes each as a short-story cycle built on a circular structure, and they are both concerned – Wright-Cleveland argues – with the historical construction of race in the United States.² Having helped to shape and having been shaped by modernism, Toomer and Hemingway overlap in many of their views on writing and on meaning. Their shared interest in Ecclesiastes provides a further parallel between the two authors and manifests particularly in Toomer’s 1923 *Cane* and Hemingway’s 1926 *The Sun Also Rises*.

Before turning to these specific modern texts, I first want to make a case for thinking of Qoheleth – the primary voice of Ecclesiastes – as a proto-modernist writer. In terms of a general worldview, several modern ideas originated with realism and especially with naturalism. The philosophical parallels between Ecclesiastes and modernism are, therefore, often those parallels already outlined in my previous chapters dedicated to naturalism and realism. Like naturalists, realists, and now modernists, Qoheleth sees the world as indifferent to human concerns, life as inherently meaningless,
and traditional wisdom as unqualified to address contemporary realities. In defining the modern literary impulse, Peter Hays connects these kinds of disillusioning truths to modern writers’ rebelliousness: “we can define modernism in literature as experimental, transgressive in nature, in rebellion against previous work in both form and content. […] It frequently deals with alienation in its subject matter, no doubt reflecting the feelings of its authors” (61). Qoheleth, too, felt alienated and rebellious. He begins and ends his observations with the phrase, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:2, 12:8). Vanity, the King James Version’s translation of the Hebrew word hebel, conveys a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness, which Qoheleth sees as a result of nature’s indifference and of the failure of traditional wisdom. In Ecclesiastes 9:11, he laments the utter randomness of life, concluding that it is oftentimes chance – not goodness, skill, or preparation – that determines the world’s realities.

Hays further defines modern-literary aesthetics in terms of multiple perspectives and reader participation, while also acknowledging the possibility for readers to uncover meaning. He writes, “The American modernist novel frequently insists on multiple, simultaneous points of view. […] It leaves things out and demands that the reader fill them in, figure them out, as with conflicting views” (61). Because the world will not explain itself, neither – modernists claim – should literature that attempts to represent that world. Instead, modernists ask readers to make sense of their work’s confusion. William P. Brown explains how Ecclesiastes creates a similar task for readers: “contradictions,” Brown argues, “serve the didactic purpose of subverting facile interpretations of his discourse[. …] Qoheleth’s peculiar pedagogical style, moreover, is rooted in his fluid
oscillations between the conventional and the subversive, the classical and the radical, like a pendulum swinging back and forth between contradictions” (13). More so than most biblical books – which contain straightforward narratives and fewer internal contradictions – Ecclesiastes anticipates the modern aesthetic sensibility that places the reader in an active role.

When reading modern texts, as when reading Ecclesiastes, readers must try to make sense of the text’s confusion, but – as Hemingway indicates – when the writing is done well enough, this process leads readers to more richness and meaning than they would find in traditional narratives. Hemingway encourages reader participation by omitting practically all explanation in his writing. In an interview with George Plimpton for *The Paris Review*, Hemingway explained this strategy in terms of his iceberg theory: “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows” (84). In his autobiographical *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway reveals how brevity and omission productively add to a reader’s experience with a text: “This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (70-1).³ Hemingway’s texts use omission as a catalyst for reader participation: the reader feels more than what has been written.

Toomer, in his texts, also strives to convey the most immediate experiences instead of detached explanations. Establishing a close parallel with Ezra Pound’s aesthetic essay “A Retrospect” – in which Pound insists on a “[d]irect treatment of the
‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” (3) – Toomer outlines his general aesthetic goals in terms of what he calls essentializing and spiritualizing experience:

In writing I aim to do two main things. One. To essentialize experience. To essentialize is to strip a thing of its nonessentials and to experience the concentrated kernel of the thing. Two. To spiritualize experience. To spiritualize is to have one’s psyche or spirit engage in a process similar to that of the body when it digests and assimilates food. To spiritualize is to digest, assimilate, up-grade, and form the materials of experience—in fine, to form oneself. It is the direct opposite of sensualization, and of mechanization. It has to do with intensifying and vivifying both the writer and the reader. (Selected Essays 44)

The semiautobiographical elements in Cane – particularly in “Bona and Paul” and “Kabnis” – demonstrate Toomer’s spiritualization of experience, forming and enlivening himself through writing. Furthermore, Toomer’s claim that he wanted his writing to “spiritualize experience” echoes Qoheleth’s project in Ecclesiastes. In his journey narrative, Qoheleth never ignores the world’s unfair, seemingly meaningless realities, but he also considers the world’s complexities from within a spiritual framework and maintains a reverent relationship with God.

Toomer, Hemingway, and Qoheleth also share an aesthetic parallel in their use of a circular structure. Ecclesiastes’ chiastic structure – though not itself uniquely modern – indicates the intentionally literary craft of the book (Lohfink 8). This structure includes the “vanity of vanities” repetition in verses 1:2 and 12:8 and two framing poems set at
either end of the book. Qoheleth further demonstrates his interest in circular structures in his most famous passage at the beginning of chapter three – “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (3:1) – and even more so in the book’s opening poem, part of which Hemingway quotes for his second epigraph to The Sun Also Rises: “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirlleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again” (1:5-7). The Sun Also Rises begins in Paris, moves into rural Spain, to an urban Spanish festival, back to rural Spain, and the novel concludes with its protagonist set to return to Paris. Similarly, Cane begins in the rural southern US, moves to the northern urban centers of Washington DC and Chicago, and concludes back in the rural South.

Like the use of a circular structure, the literary use of allusion is not uniquely modern. However, modern authors often use allusion in uniquely modern ways, highlighting the tension between the source text and their new, alluding text. Hays notes this tension in high-modernist poetry: “The allusions to history and to classical literature in Pound and in Eliot create a tension between old and new. The form of their poems is modern, in fragmented appearance, in poetic line, in juxtaposition of levels of discourse. […] Yet the poems cling to tradition, appealing both to ancient languages and ancient history” (65). While this tension sometimes leads modern poets to allude to texts in ways that coincide with the goals of the original texts, Nina Baym highlights the oftentimes
ironic nature of modern allusion: “modernist works often allude to previous literature ironically, or deliberately fracture traditional literary formulas” (6). One example of the latter phenomenon exists in the well-known first lines of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (lines 1-4). Eliot’s introduction echoes Geoffrey Chaucer’s opening lines in *The Canterbury Tales*: “Whan that Aprille, with hise shoures soote, / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote / And bathed every veyne in swich licour, / Of which vertu engendred is the flour” (lines 1-4). Unlike Chaucer’s April – which overcomes drought and engenders life – Eliot presents April as cruel, highlighting the “dead land,” unsatisfied “desire,” and “dull roots.” The modernist Eliot alludes to Chaucer’s hopeful scene in order to powerfully contrast that hopefulness with the unremitting despair of his post-World War I wasteland.

Here again, Ecclesiastes anticipates modernism by distrusting traditional biblical wisdom – which claims a system of moral reciprocity as the basis of justice – and alluding to it to point out these tensions. Moreover, like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Qoheleth evokes the language of these tenets to complicate their claims. Brown calls this style of allusion a “yes-but expression” and sees “numerous examples” of the construction in Ecclesiastes (13). Joseph Blenkinsopp notes that Qoheleth “cites or comments on traditional verities in a way which he must have known would be offensive to pious ears” (72). Consider, for example, the relationship between Proverbs’ attitude toward poverty and Ecclesiastes’ attitude. Proverbs 10:4 associates laziness with suffering and diligence with wealth: “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand:
but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.” Ecclesiastes draws on Proverbs and includes some of the same language: “The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh” (4:6). In this initial verse Qoheleth agrees with Proverbs to an extent, but he gives a counterexample in the next: “Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (4:6). Whereas Proverbs finds work wholly positive, Ecclesiastes maintains a place for rest, claiming that too much diligence can lead to a life full of vexation. Qoheleth makes a similar use of Proverbs’ promises for divine justice. Proverbs 3:33 connects curses and blessings with wicked and just moral actions: “The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just.” Again using specific language from Proverbs, Qoheleth argues the opposite. In the world of reality, he claims, “there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness” (7:15).

Most of the Old Testament agrees with Proverbs, not Ecclesiastes. Blenkinsopp identifies the prevalence of deed-consequence wisdom formulas: “From beginning to end the history [of Israel] is dominated by this law of moral causality” (51). While this biblical theme exists in multiple variations, the two categories introduced in the above Proverbs quotations recur: 1) good, wise people will prosper while evil, foolish people will suffer poverty and 2) good, wise people will live long lives while evil, foolish people will die young. Psalm 37:25 introduces a version of the former: “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” Ecclesiastes, however, identifies these expectations as obviously incomplete. While
righteousness might lead to a comfortable life blessed by God, Qoheleth knows from observation that this is not always the case: “I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there” (3:16). Furthermore, Qoheleth realizes that righteousness does not always yield sustenance and wealth: “neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding” (9:11).

Proverbs again provides the most explicit example of a text that connects death and wickedness. Proverbs 10:27 sees the fear of the Lord as indicative of a person’s lifespan: “The fear of the LORD prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened.” This view extends to several other biblical texts. Psalm 1:6 reads, “For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.” In First Chronicles the narrator connects Saul’s death to his disobedience: “So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD” (10:13). Finally, in Deuteronomy, believers are promised good lives in exchange for keeping God’s commandments: “Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth” (4:40). On the other hand, rather than connecting righteousness to longevity, Qoheleth laments the inability of wisdom and goodness to prolong a person’s life: “As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? […] how dieth the wise man? as the fool” (2:15-6). Ultimately, Qoheleth sees that no actions can influence death: “there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner” (9:2).
Regardless of a person’s cleanliness, righteousness, or proclivity to sacrifice, she dies and traditional wisdom cannot help her. It is Qoheleth’s modified wisdom – that acknowledges the reality of death rather than accepting a false wisdom that claims it can extend life – which he hopes will help people to live passionately during their limited lives.

By reexamining conventional wisdom, Ecclesiastes therein reclaims wisdom’s power. Brown – who calls Qoheleth “a master of irony” who “turned wisdom against itself” (31) – explains the role of adaptation and reevaluation in Qoheleth’s project: “Qoheleth is an eclectic who is more than willing to adopt conventional form and content as he strives to tear down and rebuild the ethos of wisdom” (13). While moral-reciprocity cannot be reconciled with reality, an experiential wisdom can still provide moderate advantages. Toomer’s allusions to Ecclesiastes in Cane take up this project as he uses Ecclesiastes to fight longstanding racial discrimination in the United States. In both Toomer’s and Hemingway’s Ecclesiastes allusions, they approach the text with a high level of respect, but still consider it skeptically, playing with the tensions between their texts and Ecclesiastes. They genuinely invest in Qoheleth’s ideological and philosophical viewpoints while, at the same time, turning Ecclesiastes’ skepticism on its own worldview. This strategy gives their allusions an Ecclesiastes-inspired modern edge of ironic skepticism.

Because Hemingway titled The Sun Also Rises with an Ecclesiastes quotation, used an Ecclesiastes epigraph for the novel, and later considered another Ecclesiastes quotation for the title of his 1929 novel A Farewell to Arms, I consider Hemingway first.
Toomer’s twice repeated allusion to the same Ecclesiastes verse – “the sun arises” – comes in the final paragraph of *Cane*, and so I turn secondly to this less-explicit, but no-less-serious allusion. Both novelists use their allusions to Ecclesiastes to structure their novels and present moral recommendations, and they both ultimately adopt Ecclesiastes’ skepticism. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway presents two characters in desperate need of finding meaning in their lives; the novel implicitly offers them a path to meaning through its Ecclesiastes allusions, but then denies them that meaning because of Jake Barnes’ impotence. In *A Farewell to Arms*, two characters thrive by following Ecclesiastes’ philosophy only to have that meaning extinguished when Catherine Barkley dies. Toomer frames *Cane* with allusions to Ecclesiastes and suggests Ecclesiastes’ skepticism as a tool for keeping the “white folks” from making the “Bible lie” (114). However, when *Cane* presents characters with opportunities for applying Ecclesiastes’ moral philosophy of enjoyment, many of them – because of racial and social discrimination in the United States – cannot.

**Ernest Hemingway’s Ecclesiastes-Structured Lost Generation Novel**

In *The Religious Design of Hemingway’s Early Fiction*, Larry E. Grimes succinctly outlines Hemingway’s religious expression and his evolution from Protestantism to Catholicism:

> When the liberal theology, sentimental piety, and Victorian morality of Hemingway’s childhood were forced to do battle against the irrational forces and terrible realities of World War I and its aftermath, they failed Hemingway in the fray. The result of this failure is Hemingway’s peculiar
religious odyssey. He does not turn to atheism when Protestantism fails him, nor do his characters—they continue to practice their religion, however pathetically, and to admire people for whom religion still works. Hemingway converts to Catholicism (however nominally) and continues to attend mass and say prayers until his death. (3)

Hemingway’s religious experience, according to Grimes, often paralleled that of his protagonists. Robert W. Lewis Jr. points to Jake Barnes, the first-person narrator in *The Sun Also Rises*, as one such protagonist. Hemingway shared with Jake, as well as with Qoheleth, a proclivity to question his received tradition and a desire to maintain some kind of religious engagement. Lewis writes, “Like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, he [Jake] is skeptical and yet devout; he does not believe, but he wants to believe” (30). While most Hemingway critics now see religion as an important part of his fiction, he held—like Qoheleth—an unconventional set of religious beliefs. Nonetheless, accepting Tennyson’s claim that “there lives more faith in honest doubt […] than in half the creeds” (XCVI), Hemingway shared with Qoheleth and many of his own characters an intensely questioning faith with a markedly spiritual component.

In addition to this realistic faith, Hemingway shared several other philosophies with Qoheleth— including a concern over death, pain, and suffering, but also an emphasis on creating meaning for oneself and enjoying individual moments. A. E. Hotchner’s 1966 *Papa Hemingway* begins with Hotchner’s recollection of how Hemingway had once told him, “Every man’s life ends the same way” (x). Qoheleth, in Ecclesiastes 3:20, agrees, “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again,” and, in 9:3-5,
conveys the finality of all lives: “there is one event unto all: […] that they go to the dead […] and] know not any thing.” Catherine Bourne, from Hemingway’s posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden*, worries that “Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know” (86). The sentiment could have been taken straight from Ecclesiastes 1:18: “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” Based on these quotations and others, Hays notes that Hemingway’s “subject matter was disillusionment, loss, and initiation into the pain of the world” (69), and that Hemingway anticipated the existentialism of “Sartre and Camus, […] insisting that those he writes about determine their lives through their choices, and that character is displayed and dignity achieved by a stoic response to misfortune” (70). Michael V. Fox goes so far as to translate the Hebrew word *hebel* as “absurd” rather than “vanity,” declaring that Qoheleth’s use of the word should be “understood in the sense described at length in Albert Camus’s classic description of the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*” (30). Finally, because of life’s absurdity, its sorrow, and the inevitability of death, Hemingway also followed Qoheleth’s call to seize the day: he pursued pleasure and passion before death through big-game hunting and fishing and eating and drinking well in pleasant cities around the world.

Hemingway’s first major novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, depends largely on Ecclesiastes. It tells the story of war-wounded Jake Barnes, his would-be lover Lady Brett Ashley, and several of their friends and acquaintances before, during, and after the San Fermin bullfighting festival in Pamplona, Spain. Though Brett and Jake desire a romantic relationship, they do not pursue each other because of Jake’s impotence.
Instead, Brett pursues several other men, including a young and talented bullfighter named Pedro Romero whom Jake introduces to Brett. When Brett and Romero separate, Brett calls Jake back to her and they reflect again on the painful impossibility of their romance. Because Hemingway draws explicit attention to his Ecclesiastes title *The Sun Also Rises* (1:5) by pairing it with an Ecclesiastes epigraph from the same chapter (1:5-7), more critics have addressed Hemingway’s interaction with Ecclesiastes than have critics of any of the other Ecclesiastes-invested texts I discuss in this project. As with Wharton’s novel and James’s novel, many readers do address Ecclesiastes only in passing, but unlike critics of James and Wharton, several critics of Hemingway’s novel make Ecclesiastes central to at least part of their understanding of the text. Readers advancing such views have seen Bill Gorton as a symbol of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes because of his presentation of general philosophical aphorisms which often align with Qoheleth’s views (Ross), Robert Cohn as the fool from Ecclesiastes based on his romanticism, naiveté, and inability to learn from personal experience (Cowan), Jake Barnes as a skeptical believer in the mold of Ecclesiastes who recognizes life’s suffering, the finality of death, and the mysteries of God and of existence, while at the same time appreciating the value of food, drink, good companions, and satisfying fellowship (Lewis), and Ecclesiastes as a model for the structural repetition of the novel as foreshadowed in the epigraph (Budick).

Rather than simply reconcile and connect these multiple existing interpretations featuring Ecclesiastes, I present an analysis of Ecclesiastes’ influence on *The Sun Also Rises* that seems to me both more foundational and more pervasive. From the novel’s first
epigraph taken from a conversation with Gertrude Stein – “You all are a lost generation” – Hemingway establishes a need for guidance toward meaning. And several of the novel’s main characters desperately need a sense of meaning in their lives. H. R. Stoneback discusses Jake’s experience, for example, in terms of a religious pilgrimage, calling Jake “a pilgrim seeking a deeper participation in grace through the careful practice of ritual and discipline” (145). The novel’s second epigraph taken from Ecclesiastes provides an option for a lost generation in need of meaningful guidance. Moreover, as a reminder of this Ecclesiastes option, each of the novel’s three books provides a concrete example of a character advocating Qoheleth’s philosophy: in Book I Count Mippipopulos praises the enjoyment of food, wine, and love; in Book II the hotel owner Montoya advocates passion; and in Book III Jake himself recognizes the simple pleasures of quiet living before Brett calls him away and he’s reminded again that – due to his impotence – he cannot “[l]ive joyfully with the wife whom [he] loveth” (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Jake’s final realization represents Hemingway’s skepticism over finding meaning even in the primarily positive book of Ecclesiastes, thereby questioning whether humans can find any valuable meaning in life at all.

Though he deleted two initial chapters from The Sun Also Rises that featured Brett and Jake, Hemingway nonetheless quickly establishes their thwarted romance as a foundational plot element and a key to understanding each character. In Book I, attempting to lessen the pain caused by their inability to be together, Jake and Brett replace the other with someone else. Jake meets a prostitute named Georgette whom he takes to dinner and then to a bar. When she tries to touch him, Jake explains only that
he’s sick, which provides the first obscure introduction to his impotence. Brett arrives at the same bar with a group of gay young men. Brett and Jake soon gravitate toward each other, and their bantering conversation reveals their jealousy. When Jake’s friend Robert Cohn – who happens also to be at the bar – becomes instantly infatuated with Brett, Jake jokes with her: “You’ve made a new one there. […] I suppose you like to add them up” (30). Brett, for her part, can’t understand why Jake has brought a prostitute as his date: “What possessed you to bring her?” (30). The answer to this question lies in the symbolic nature of Jake and Brett’s replacements. Both have chosen stand-ins with representative characteristics. Brett’s promiscuity leads Jake to choose a prostitute to replace her; Jake’s inability to have sex with Brett leads her to replace him with men uninterested in having sex with her.

Because they desire each other instead, Brett and Jake quickly tire of their replacements and escape together into a taxi. Upon entering the cab, the Brett complains about her currently unsatisfying life: “Oh, darling, I’ve been so miserable” (32). When Jake kisses her, Brett pulls back, citing the ultimate disappointment of their physical interactions: “Please don’t touch me. […] I can’t stand it” (33). Jake asks if she loves him, Brett responds: “Love you? I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me” (34), and an ironic conversation about love follows:

“It’s funny,” I said. “It’s very funny. And it’s a lot of fun, too, to be in love.”

“Do you think so?” her eyes looked flat again.

“I don’t mean fun that way. In a way it’s an enjoyable feeling.”
“No,” she said. “I think it’s hell on earth.”

“It’s good to see each other.”

“No. I don’t think it is.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“I have to.” (35)

Brett has to see Jake because she loves him, but she resents their love because she knows they can’t be together physically. Moreover, to Jake’s suggestion that they had “better keep away from each other” (34) to avoid this inevitable disappointment, Brett asks him to kiss her: “Kiss me just once more before we get there” (35). Their confusion over this dilemma informs Jake and Brett’s experiences throughout the novel as they try to find meaning in their lives.

Most immediately, after Jake drops Brett at a café and walks home, thinking about her keeps him from sleeping. As he’s getting into bed, Jake damns Brett: “To hell with Brett. To hell with you, Lady Ashley” (38). And, as he’s reflecting on the wound that left him impotent and on the impossibility of a life with Brett, Jake starts to cry: “I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry” (39). This is the first time Jake records his experience of having difficulty sleeping; however, Hemingway makes it clear that this is a recurring condition connected to Brett. Jake’s internal monologue reveals this connection most explicitly in Book II. Again, Brett serves as the catalyst for Jake’s insomnia, and he uses some of the same damning language toward her:
I heard Brett go into the room next door. [Brett’s fiancé] Mike was already in bed. He had come in with me an hour before. He woke as she came in, and they talked together. I heard them laugh. I turned off the light and tried to go to sleep. It was not necessary to read any more. I could shut my eyes without getting the wheeling sensation. But I could not sleep. There is no reason why because it is dark you should look at things differently from when it is light. The hell there isn’t! I figured that all out once, and for six months I never slept with the electric light off. […] To hell with women, anyway. To hell with you, Brett Ashley. (151-2)

Jake associates his insomnia with Brett for a third time when riding the train to pick her up in Madrid at the end of the novel: “I did not sleep much that night on the Sud Express” (243). Jake’s inability to sleep underscores his passionate love for Brett and his disappointment in their inability to be together, as well as his intense need for some kind of positive meaning in life. It also highlights how he would like to implement Qoheleth’s recommendation to love, but cannot.

Brett suffers from the same persistent desire and disappointment in her relationship with Jake. Only hours after their taxi ride together, Brett gets drunk in the company of a count named Mippipopolous and asks the count to take her to Jake’s apartment where she wakes him up in the middle of the night. Jake asks Brett how she convinced the count to bring her to his place, and she confesses her love for him: “Told him I was in love with you. True, too. Don’t look like that. He was damn nice about it. Wants to drive us out to dinner to-morrow night” (41). They kiss, but when Jake asks
Brett to stay, she refuses and saunters drunkenly back to the count’s waiting car. For a moment, Brett’s foolishness of waking him up and immediately leaving helps Jake to confront the situation stoically. But, just as quickly, he again conveys his love for her: “This was Brett, that I had felt like crying about. Then I thought of her walking up the street and stepping into the car, as I had last seen her, and of course in a little while I felt like hell again” (42).

The next day, Count Mippipopolous treats Brett and Jake to a fine dinner during which he reveals his affinity with Ecclesiastes. The count takes a great interest in wine – especially champagne – and knows a good deal about it. However, when Jake suggests that the count write a book on wines, Mippipopolous answers with a particularly Ecclesiastes-inspired retort. He does not expect any lasting gain to come from wine, but wants only to enjoy it in the moment: “‘Mr. Barnes,’ answered the count, ‘all I want out of wines is to enjoy them’” (66). The count attributes the development of his ability to enjoy to his variety of life experiences: “You see, Mr. Barnes, it is because I have lived very much that now I can enjoy everything so well. […] That is the secret. You must get to know the values” (67). Qoheleth also tries to understand the world’s values through living. In the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth cites experience as his basis for discovering the good life: “I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (2:3). And, like Qoheleth, the count concludes in favor of fleeting pleasures: “It was a good dinner. Food had an excellent place in the count’s values. So did wine” (68).
To his commendation of food and drink, Count Mippipopolous adds his praise to love. When Brett asks the count if he has ever fallen in love, he answers, “I am always in love. […] That, too, has got a place in my values” (67). And it seems the count falls in love at least for the moment with his experience dining with Brett and Jake: “The count was in fine form during the meal. So was Brett. It was a good party. […] The count was beaming. He was very happy. ‘You are very nice people,’ he said. He was smoking a cigar again. ‘Why don’t you get married, you two?’” (68). With the recommendation that Brett and Jake marry, Count Mippipopolous aligns his view nearly entirely to the foundational elements of Qoheleth’s invitation to enjoy:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart;

[…] Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. (9:7-9)

Like Qoheleth, the count finds great joy in eating and drinking in a loving relationship. And, in what he thinks will be a kind and helpful recommendation, he suggests this joy to Brett and Jake.

Instead of responding to the count’s suggestion that they get married, however, Brett and Jake quickly change the subject. Nevertheless, the idea of marriage remains with them for the rest of the night and eventually spoils their excitement over the meal. Brett explains that while with Jake she hasn’t once thought of her fiancé Mike: “Funny. I
haven’t though about him for a week” (69). Mike’s absence has been overshadowed by Jake’s presence. More significantly, though, Brett’s observation that she has failed to think of Mike demonstrates that her future marriage will lack the kind of joy that she might have had with Jake. This depresses them both, but in an effort to salvage the former happiness of the evening Brett asks Jake to dance:

“Come on. Let’s dance,” Brett said.

We danced. It was crowded and close.

“Oh, darling,” Brett said, “I’m so miserable.”

I had that feeling of going through something that has all happened before.

“You were happy a minute ago.”

The drummer shouted: “You can’t two time—“

“It’s all gone.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. I just feel terribly” […]

I had the feeling as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated, something I had been through and that now I must go through again. (70-1)

At the close of Book I, Brett and Jake find themselves in their recurring situation: desiring each other without the possibility of fulfillment. Brett feels upset after dancing and asks Jake to take her home. Jake rides with Brett back to her hotel, but she asks him not to come inside: “We kissed standing at the door. She pushed me away. We kissed again. ‘Oh, don’t!’ Brett said. She turned quickly and went into the hotel” (71). The
Ecclesiastes option in Book I of enjoying food, wine, and love – presented most concretely through the example of Count Mippipopolous – fails because the two lovers cannot consummate their love.

Complicating their relationship further, early in Book II Jake learns that Brett spent a romantic weekend in San Sebastian with Robert Cohn. This reminder of the impossibility of his relationship with Brett leads Jake to seek meaning in someplace other than love. In Book II, Jake attempts to find meaning in the rituals of Catholicism, fishing, bullfighting, and the San Fermin Festival. While he readily admits that he’s not the best Catholic, Jake is drawn to cathedrals and monasteries throughout Book II. When he first arrives in Pamplona, he goes to the Catholic cathedral where he prays for everyone he knows, starting with Brett and including the count. After praying for a while and becoming a little sleepy, Jake reflects on his Catholicity:

all the time I was kneeling with my forehead on the wood in front of me, and was thinking of myself as praying, I was a little ashamed, and regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it, at least for a while, and maybe never, but that anyway it was a grand religion, and I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time; and then I was out in the hot sun on the steps of the cathedral, and the forefingers and the thumb of my right hand were still damp, and I felt them dry in the sun. The sunlight was hot and hard, and I crossed over beside some buildings, and walked back along side-streets to the hotel. (103)
By praying for Brett and the count in a Catholic cathedral, Jake evokes Ecclesiastes. Further, by thrice referencing the sun as Jake leaves the cathedral, Hemingway makes the connection explicit by alluding to the novel’s Ecclesiastes’ title and to the biblical book’s interest in the sun: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (11:7). The fact that Jake regrets he “was such a rotten Catholic” (103) draws attention again to his physical inability to enjoy life with the woman he loves and to his unsuccessful search for meaning.

Jake comes closest to Ecclesiastes’ philosophy in Book II during his time – away from Brett – fishing with his friend Bill Gorton in a small village in rural Spain. Bill and Jake’s success “utilizing” the pleasures of the earth has led Morton L. Ross to see Bill as the novel’s Ecclesiastes figure. Clearly, Bill advocates some of the things Qoheleth advocates, which – with the notable exception of love – are in the same vein as those advocated by Count Mippipopolous in Book I. Relaxing in the sun during a meal after fishing, Bill encourages Jake to take advantage of their moment together: “Let us rejoice in our blessings. Let us utilize the fowls of the air. Let us utilize the product of the vine. Will you utilize a little, brother?” (126). Hemingway draws special attention to Ecclesiastes’ worldview by crafting Bill’s dialogue in an overtly biblical style, employing the construction “Let us” to introduce words like “rejoice,” “blessings,” and “brother.”

And, indeed, Bill and Jake are happy in these scenes: holding quasi-philosophical discussions, fishing outdoors, eating and drinking together. Only when they talk about Brett does Jake shut down the conversation: “I’d a hell of a lot rather not talk about it”
(128). Overall, they enjoy their time benefiting from Bill’s Ecclesiastes-inspired desire to “utilize” and to enjoy.

On the other hand, as a young man still trying to find his way in life, Bill doesn’t quite fit the Ecclesiastes mold. As Count Mippipopolous argues, life experiences are necessary for worldly wisdom, and Ecclesiastes was traditionally attributed to King Solomon in his old age. Though they attempt to live by Ecclesiastes’ philosophy and do so with a moderate amount of success, Bill and Jake are seekers, not world-wise Ecclesiastes characters. Moreover, on Bill’s first introduction in the novel, he explains to Jake that during a recent trip to Vienna he was so drunk he barely remembers it. This places Bill in the wasteful extravagance of the house of mirth instead of Qoheleth’s house of reflective joy. Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 reads, “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Good wine and food can supplement good living. But if drunkenness dulls a person’s ability to reflect on life and the reality death, then wine leads not to a better life but to an escape from life. Ecclesiastes advocates passionate living, as Bill and Jake embrace in rural Spain, but not drunken escapism, which Bill enacts in Vienna and later at the festival. Ultimately, Bill’s anti-Semitism – he calls Cohn “That kike!” (168) – disqualifies him from a special affinity with a Hebrew philosopher despite his sometimes-successful application of Qoheleth’s worldview.
Rather than Bill, Book II’s Ecclesiastes-endorsed character is Pamplona hotel owner and bullfighting aficionado Montoya. Montoya celebrates Qoheleth’s call to passion in Ecclesiastes 9:10: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” When talking with Jake, whom he takes to be an “aficionado,” Montoya “always smiled as though bull-fighting were a very special secret between the two of [them]” (136). Jake explains how he learned “aficion” from Montoya:

Aficion means passion. An aficionado is one who is passionate about the bull-fights. All the good bull-fighters stayed at Montoya’s hotel; that is, those with aficion stayed there. […] I had stopped at the Montoya for several years. We never talked for very long at a time. It was simply the pleasure of discovering what we each felt. […] When [other aficionados] saw that I had aficion, and there was no password, no set questions that could bring it out, rather it was a sort of oral spiritual examination with the questions always a little on the defensive and never apparent, there was this same embarrassed putting the hand on the shoulder, or a “Buen hombre.” But nearly always there was the actual touching. It seemed as though they wanted to touch you to make it certain. Montoya could forgive anything of a bull-fighter who had aficion. He could forgive attacks of nerves, panic, bad unexplainable actions, all sorts of lapses. For one who had aficion he could forgive anything. At once he forgave me all my friends. (136-7)
Furthermore, Jake’s reflection on aficion contains a spiritual element: as a test of his aficion, the other aficionados put Jake through an “oral spiritual examination” (137). It also includes an indictment of “commercial bull-fighters” (136) who lack passion and only participate for the money. This rejection of seeking money instead of experience echoes Ecclesiastes 5:15: “[a man] shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand” (5:15). This allusion specifically and the monologue in general recalls Jake’s earlier observation, “Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters” (18). Ecclesiastes, with its emphasis on death’s finality and the transience of earthly possessions, also advocates living life “all the way up.”

As the San Fermin Festival promises the passion of bullfighting, the pleasures of wine and food, and the company of friends, Jake justifiably anticipates a week of Ecclesiastes-inspired enjoyment during the fiesta. Two days before it begins, Jake formulates this worldview:

Enjoying living was learning to get your money’s worth and knowing when you had it. You could get your money’s worth. The world was a good place to buy in. It seemed like a fine philosophy. In five years, I thought, it will seem just as silly as all the other fine philosophies I’ve had. Perhaps that wasn’t true, though. Perhaps as you went along you did learn something. I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about. (152)
Like Qoheleth, he advocates enjoyment, reflecting on personal experiences, and concentrating on everyday living. His enthusiastic anticipation continues until the start of the fiesta: “We all felt good and we felt healthy[. . .] You could not be upset about anything on a day like that” (155).

However, when the fiesta begins, the house of unreflective mirth leads Jake into a serious depression. Whereas before the fiesta Jake explains, “It was a quiet life and no one was drunk” (154), by the end of the fiesta Jake admits, “I was drunker than I ever remember having been” (227). The fiesta offers Jake some satisfying moments – primarily in his interactions with Brett – but it is in these satisfying moments with Brett, contrasted with their inability to be together, that Jake goes from anticipation to depression. Likewise for Brett, these experiences with Jake show her internal struggle for meaning and happiness. Significantly, she spends much of her time in Book II seeking meaning in the same places as Jake: she’s curious about his investment in Catholicism and legitimately enjoys watching the bullfights under Jake’s tutelage. Jake recalls one of the good mornings before the fiesta: “I went to church a couple of times, once with Brett. She said she wanted to hear me go to confession, but I told her that not only was it impossible but it was not as interesting as it sounded, and, besides, it would be in a language she did not know” (154). Brett’s curiosity continues one night as they walk through town: “Is that San Fermin’s?” she asks, and then, “Let’s go in. Do you mind? I’d rather like to pray a little” (212). Although Jake acknowledges, “The praying had not been much of a success” (212), Brett needs guidance and – because she loves him – turns to Jake’s example as a possible path to meaning.
Brett and Jake have more success watching the bullfights together. In Hemingway’s version of two lovers using sports as a means of flirtation – as Bona and Paul do playing basketball in *Cane* – Jake explains bullfighting to Brett in a way that generates passion. Sitting near enough each other that they can whisper privately, Jake tutors Brett about the bulls’ intellect and intentionality: “‘My God, isn’t he beautiful?’ Brett said. We were looking right down on him. ‘Look how he knows how to use his horns,’ I said. ‘He’s got a left and a right just like a boxer.’ ‘Not really?’ ‘You watch.’ ‘It goes too fast.’ ‘Wait. There’ll be another one in a minute.’ [...] ‘I saw it,’ she said. ‘I saw him shift from his left to his right horn.’ ‘Damn good!’” (144). Jake’s excitement at Brett’s intuition matches Brett’s excitement at her new discovery. Later, Jake also praises Brett’s ability to appreciate the work of the bullfighters: “She saw how close Romero always worked to the bull, and I pointed out to her the tricks the other bull-fighters used to make it look as though they were working closely. She saw why she liked Romero’s cape-work and why she did not like the others” (171). Together, Brett and Jake passionately invest in the spectacle and in each other. And while Jake’s appreciation of bullfighting doesn’t depend on Brett, he realizes how much more enjoyment comes when sharing it with the woman he loves.

Carried away by their shared passion for bullfighting, Brett even tries to get closer to Jake by engaging in an affair with the young bullfighter Romero. She first shares her feelings about Romero with Jake. And she does so while she and Jake take – what would look to an outsider like – a lovers’ walk: “‘Do you still love me, Jake?’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Because I’m a goner,’ Brett said. ‘How?’ ‘I’m a goner. I’m mad about the Romero boy.
I’m in love with him, I think’’’ (187). By introducing the topic with a question about Jake’s love for her, Brett associates her love for Romero with her love for Jake. And Jake delivers. Because he loves her so much, Jake arranges Brett’s affair with Romero himself even though he knows that it will cause him pain and sever his relationship with Montoya. Initially, the affair satisfies Brett absolutely: “Brett was radiant. She was happy. The sun was out and the day was bright. ‘I feel altogether changed,’ Brett said. ‘You’ve no idea, Jake.’ ‘Anything you want me to do?’ ‘No, just go to the fight with me’” (211). Brett wants to go to the bullfight with Jake because she wants hiscompanionship to complement her new physical relationship with Romero. Being physical with Romero replaces her physical desire for Jake, but only if she can still enjoy Jake’s emotional, intellectual, and spiritual company at the bullfight, only when she can still share the passion of bullfighting with him.

While the fallout from the affair doesn’t catch up with Brett until she leaves Jake behind and accompanies Romero to Madrid, for Jake it begins right away and costs him one of his most meaningful relationships. Montoya – Jake’s friend of “several years” who “forgave [him] all of his friends” (137) – cannot forgive Brett’s flirting with Romero, Romero’s drinking late into the night before his bullfight, or Robert Cohn’s physical assault of Romero based on his intense jealousy for Brett. Jake records Montoya’s immediate and absolute break with him: “Just then Montoya came into the room. He started to smile at me, then he saw Pedro Romero with a big glass of cognac in his hand, sitting laughing between me and a woman with bare shoulders, at a table full of drunks. He did not even nod. Montoya went out of the room” (180-1). Their once intimate
relationship does not improve. Later, Brett and Jake pass “Montoya on the stairs. He bowed and did not smile” (213). In the last scene at Montoya’s hotel, near the beginning of Book III, Montoya avoids Jake and Bill during lunch: “We had lunch and paid the bill. Montoya did not come near us” (232). Montoya, who epitomizes the passion of bullfighting for Jake, and by extension for Brett, shuns both of them and all of their friends for their disgraceful inability to revere bullfighting and the bullfighters.

By the end of Book II, the Ecclesiastes option of living “life all the way up” (18) – presented in Montoya’s definition of aficion – fails. Jake’s desire for and pain over not being able to be with Brett has thwarted this option for giving meaning to his life. And so, without Brett and without hope, he gets drunk with Bill: “Sure. Get tight,” Bill suggests, “Get over your damn depression” (227). While “drunker than [he] ever remembered having been” (227), Jake learns that, though she tried to find him to say goodbye, Brett has gone off with Romero. He upgrades his intoxication level from “tight” to “blind,” and when he finally gets to his bed, he feels absolutely alone: “The bed went sailing off and I sat up in bed and looked at the wall to make it stop. Outside in the square the fiesta was going on. It did not mean anything” (227-8). The fiesta means nothing since Jake cannot enjoy any of it. Watching the bullfights with Brett was “Damn good!” (144), talking with Montoya was always a simple “pleasure” (136), but Brett has left him again after forcing him to sacrifice his friendship with the passionate Montoya.

After his flurry of drunkenness and a good nap, however, Jake bounces back fairly well. At the beginning of Book III, he decides to spend a quite week in San Sebastian, in which he nearly becomes the book’s Ecclesiastes-inspired character himself.
Though at first he regrets not going back to Paris with Bill, Jake quickly realizes that he wouldn’t benefit from any more time in the house of mirth: “I wished I had gone up to Paris with Bill, except that Paris would have meant more fiesta-ing. I was through with fiestas for a while. It would be quiet in San Sebastian. […] It was pleasant to be drinking slowly and to be tasting the wine and to be drinking alone. A bottle of wine was good company” (236). Jake spends his time drinking slowly and enjoying himself in the sun: “I swam out to the raft, pulled myself up, and lay on the hot planks. […] I lay on the raft in the sun until I was dry” (239). After swimming he finds a cool chair and a drink to watch the passersby: “I sat out on the terrace and enjoyed the fresh coolness in the hot day, and had a glass of lemon-juice and shaved ice and then a long whiskey and soda. I sat in front of the Marinas for a long time and read and watched the people, and listened to the music” (239).

Still, during these episodes when Jake feels primarily happy, the hint of dissatisfaction remains. Jake has to experience the pleasures alone. Or, even worse, he has to share a raft with two people laughing and in love. Jake can’t help but think of Brett and what their life together could have been. James Nagel – whose analysis misses only the role Ecclesiastes plays in underscoring Jake’s pain – highlights several narrative details conveying Jake’s desire for Brett:

simple things too can be meaningful, such as a walk around Paris, where, in the evenings, he sees the lovers strolling arm in arm. […] During his train trip down to Pamplona Jake shares a compartment with an American couple and their young son, an oblique reminder of what Jake is not going
to have. [...] After the fiesta, when Jake has his quiet interlude in San Sebastian, he swims out to a raft only to discover he must share it with a pair of young lovers. [...] All of these details are painful reminders of the war, of his wounding, of the woman he cannot have, of the family that will never be. Jake has selected these details to be included in his narrative, and the implications are that they are deeply meaningful. [...] The “lost” part of his generation is represented primarily in his life, and it is his normative emotional response and sensitive narration that make the circumstances all the more tragic for they reveal how little consolation there is in the fact that the sun also rises. (497)

While he doesn’t quite say so, Nagel’s final reference to the novel’s title implies that Ecclesiastes ultimately cannot offer Jake any consolation in San Sebastian without the woman he loves. And so, because he loves her as much as ever, when Brett wires from Madrid, Jake goes. He even signs his reply telegraph, “LOVE JAKE” (243).

By sending Romero away and asking only for Jake, Brett demonstrates that she loves him too. Because Romero loves her in a pure way – “Pedro Romero had the greatness. He loved bull-fighting, and I think he loved the bulls, and I think he loved Brett” (220) – Brett cannot betray him by continuing to love Jake at the same time. Mike, on the other hand, is too worldly for pure love: “I’m going back to Mike. [...] He’s so damned nice and he’s so awful. He’s my sort of thing” (247). Brett settles for Mike because she knows she’ll still be able to invest in her relationship with Jake – and anyone else – while married to Mike. She even tries to take solace in not ruining Romero’s life:
“You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch. [...] It’s sort of what we have instead of God” (249).

Brett’s implication that she and Jake lack a connection to God accentuates Hemingway’s skeptical use of his allusion to Ecclesiastes. When Jake suggests that, in fact, “Some people have God. [...] Quite a lot,” Brett counters, “He never worked very well with me” (249). Starting with his very next comment – “Should we have another Martini?” (249) – Jake makes a final test of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy. He eats a good meal with the woman he loves: “We lunched up-stairs at Botin’s. It is one of the best restaurants in the world. We had roast young suckling pig and drank rioja alta. Brett did not eat much. She never ate much. I ate a very big meal and drank three bottles of rioja alta” (249). But ultimately the experience just isn’t enough: “‘We touched glasses. ‘Bung-o!’ Brett said. I drank my glass and poured out another. Brett put her hand on my arm. ‘Don’t get drunk, Jake,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to.’ ‘How do you know?’ [Jake responds]” (250). Even Ecclesiastes – suggested from the outset of The Sun Also Rises in its title and second epigraph, in its Ecclesiastes-inspired characters advocating a passionate seize-the-day ethic – can’t provide the impotent Jake Barnes with a connection to God. And so, despite Brett’s appeals, Jake feels that his only option is to get mindlessly drunk.

As this analysis reveals, Jake and Brett not only desire a romantic relationship that they cannot have, but their desire serves as the primary force propelling the novel and its Ecclesiastes allusion. Brett solidifies her love for Jake once more with her final line of dialogue: “‘Oh, Jake,’ Brett said, ‘we could have had such a damned good time
together’” (251). There are, of course, good reasons to question whether the pair actually would have been happy together – not least of all Jake’s ironic response to Brett’s claim, which concludes the novel: “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (251). Still, Hemingway couches Brett and Jake’s search for meaning in terms of an Ecclesiastes-endorsed love they cannot consummate. Taking his cue from the skeptic in scripture to skeptically consider Ecclesiastes’ philosophy itself, Hemingway leaves readers questioning whether there can be any meaning for a lost generation in a world torn apart by World War I.

Hemingway’s 1929 novel *A Farewell to Arms* uses Ecclesiastes similarly. Hemingway follows the book to a point, but skeptically considers Qoheleth’s wisdom in the end. Paul Smith notes that out of 43 total titles Hemingway considered for *A Farewell to Arms*, more than a fifth of them are either direct quotations from or close paraphrases of Ecclesiastes. Smith underscores these nine Ecclesiastes-related titles that Hemingway considered for the novel: “‘Thing that Has Been’ (1:9), ‘Knowledge Increaseth Sorrow’ (1:18), ‘The Peculiar Treasure’ (2:8), ‘One Event Happeneth to them All’ (2:14), ‘One Thing for them All’ (3:19), ‘Nothing Better for a Man’ (2:24), ‘A Time of War’ (3:8), ‘One Thing is Certain’ (cf. 2:14, 3:19), and ‘The Long Home’ (12:5)” (75). Although Ecclesiastes plays a lesser role in *A Farewell to Arms* than in *The Sun Also Rises* – and relies on a different reason for the lovers’ unhappiness – clear connections exist between Hemingway’s 1929 novel and the biblical book. These associations come in a parallel thesis statement on the value of eating, drinking, and living joyfully with a lover, an Ecclesiastes-inspired character named Count Greffi, and Hemingway’s ultimately skeptical treatment of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy conveyed through Catherine’s death.
*A Farewell to Arms* tells the story of an English nurse Catherine Barkley and American Frederic Henry, who serves as an Italian officer during World War I. Catherine and Henry fall in love while Henry is injured, conceive a child, and try to escape the war in Switzerland when Henry defects from the Italian army. After a few blissful months, however, Catherine and the baby die in childbirth. The novel’s most explicit Ecclesiastes allusion follows Henry’s defection and near-death experience, having almost been shot for being an officer: “I was not made to think. I was made to eat. My God, yes. Eat and drink and sleep with Catherine. To-night maybe. No that was impossible. But to-morrow night, and a good meal and sheets and never going away again except together” (233).

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 conveys the same sentiment: “eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. […] Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest.” Henry underscores the allusion by including the word “God” in his reflection and by formulating this realization in response to almost dying, a path which parallels Qoheleth’s acknowledgment of death as the motivating force leading him to embrace a seize-the-day mentality. Henry’s Ecclesiastes-inspired conclusion accounts for Hemingway’s interest in using Ecclesiastes for the novel’s title and establishes Henry’s view of the good life as indispensably tied to eating and drinking with Catherine. Catherine conveys a similar feeling early in the novel when she explains to Henry, “You’re my religion” (116).

A second Ecclesiastes parallel comes in the form of another count, this time Count Greffi. Like Count Mippipopolous in *The Sun Also Rises*, Count Greffi enjoys good champagne, finds pleasure in life’s simple moments, and uses his experience as the
foundation for his worldview. Henry meets the ninety-four-year-old Greffi in a billiard room where he is practicing skillfully:

On a card table a little way beyond the light was a silver icing-bucket with the necks and corks of two champagne bottles showing above the ice. The Count Greffi straightened up when I came toward the table and walked toward me. He put out his hand, “It is such a great pleasure that you are here. You were very kind to come to play with me.” (259)

While playing together, they share life philosophies – Henry always deferring to Greffi: “Would you like to live after death?’ I asked and instantly felt a fool to mention death. But he did not mind the word. ‘It would depend on the life. This life is very pleasant. I would like to live forever,’ he smiled. ‘I very nearly have’ (261). Like Qoheleth, Greffi prefers living life in the moment to hoping for a life after death. Finally, Greffi makes his Ecclesiastes affiliation clear as the conversation turns to religion. Henry worries that he only feels religious at night, but Greffi quickly assures him, “Then too you are in love. Do not forget that is a religious feeling” (263).

These reflections on the goodness of life and the religiosity of love make Catherine’s death even harder for Henry. He anticipates the dangers of childbirth during Catherine’s delivery and, instead of waiting around the hospital, eats both lunch and supper with a ravenous appetite for food and drink: “At two o’clock I went out and had lunch. […] The waiter brought a dish of sauerkraut with a slice of ham over the top and a sausage buried in the hot wine-soaked cabbage. I ate it and drank the beer. I was very hungry” (318). At supper, he revisits the same local café and repeats the ritual: “I ate the
ham and eggs and drank the beer. The ham and eggs were in a round dish—the ham underneath and the eggs on top. It was very hot and at the first mouthful I had to take a drink of beer to cool my mouth. I was hungry and I asked the waiter for another order. I drank several glasses of beer. I was not thinking at all” (329). While Henry couldn’t have helped Catherine in the waiting room of the hospital – and was even encouraged by the hospital staff to eat – the intensity of his appetite is remarkable. At a time when many people would be unable to eat anything, Henry eats hungrily. Because he knows he might lose Catherine, Henry tries to draw on other aspects of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy, primarily relying on food and drink.

But, in his fear of losing the woman he loves, Ecclesiastes fails Henry. As eating and drinking did for Jake at the end of *The Sun Also Rises*, these potential pleasures provide Henry with only a distraction: “I thought of asking the waiter for a paper, but I could not concentrate. […] I ordered another beer. I was not ready to leave yet. It was too soon to go back to the hospital. I tried not to think and to be perfectly calm. […] I drank another beer. There was quite a pile of saucers now on the table in front of me” (329). Whereas good food and drink add joyfully to Henry’s life when shared with Catherine – especially in the hospital scenes in Milan where they drink together, looking out onto the city while everyone else sleeps – without her they prove moderately damaging, distracting Henry during the last moments of Catherine’s life.

Throughout Henry’s internal monologue in the novel’s final pages, he evokes several concerns Qoheleth shares, questioning the value of life and concluding with the utter reality of death. When he discovers that his son has died, Henry wishes briefly that
he too were dead: “I had no religion but I knew he ought to have been baptized. But what if he never breathed at all. He hadn’t. He had never been alive. […] Poor little kid. I wished the hell I’d been choked like that” (327). Henry echoes Ecclesiastes 4:2-3, in which Qoheleth considers the possibility that because vanity and suffering are so prevalent, death and nonexistence might be preferable: “I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.” In the end, honestly considering this possibility helps Qoheleth to find reasons to live even in the midst of suffering. Likewise, Henry quickly acknowledges that he doesn’t actually wish he were choked like his child. Nonetheless, he retains a penetrating view of life’s sadness and death’s finality: “No I didn’t. Still there would not be all this dying to go through. Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. […] You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you” (327). Recognition of the finality of death permeates Ecclesiastes, not least of all in four of the nine Ecclesiastes quotations Hemingway considered for his novel’s title: “One Event Happeneth to them All” (2:14), “One Thing for them All” (3:19), “One Thing is Certain” (cf. 2:14, 3:19), and “The Long Home” (12:5).

Instead of the death of his son, however, it is Catherine’s death that demands Henry’s primary reflection. He searches for a moral reason behind Catherine’s suffering and possible death: “Poor, poor dear Cat. And this was the price you paid for sleeping together. This was the end of the trap. This was what people got for loving each other. […] She can’t die. Why would she die? What reason is there for her to die? There’s just a
child that has to be born, the by-product of good nights in Milan” (320). When he learns that she has had a hemorrhage, Henry attempts to make a deal with God, promising loyalty in exchange for Catherine’s health:

I sat outside in the hall. Everything was gone inside of me. I did not think.
I could not think. I knew she was going to die and I prayed that she would not. Don’t let her die. Oh, God, please don’t let her die. I’ll do anything for you if you won’t let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don’t let her die. Dear God, don’t let her die. Please, please, please don’t let her die. God please make her not die. I’ll do anything you say if you don’t let her die. You took the baby but don’t let her die. That was all right but don’t let her die. Please, please, dear God, don’t let her die. […] I went into the room and stayed with Catherine until she died. She was unconscious all the time, and it did not take her very long to die. (330-1)

Though he has Henry consider blaming Catherine’s death on having sex and Henry’s lack of religion, Hemingway ultimately agrees with Qoheleth regarding the erroneousness of moral reciprocity. There is no reason that Catherine should die except that everyone dies: “All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked” (9:2). And yet, without Catherine, none of these philosophical reflections helps Henry, who refuses any consolation and the novel ends as he walks to his hotel alone. For Hemingway, in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, Qoheleth’s philosophy fails without all of its primary elements: the ability to enjoy eating and drinking with a loving companion. Despite multiple elements suggesting the value of Ecclesiastes in each novel,
both Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry suffer from their inability to “[l]ive joyfully with the wife whom [they] loveth” (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

Jean Toomer’s Ecclesiastes-Framed Critique of Making the Bible Lie

In her essay “Toomer’s God in Cane,” Hélène Christol claims, “Toomer himself was haunted by God; his search for meaning through religion, which can be traced in his letters and unpublished short stories, started in the 1910s” (114). In an autobiographical discussion of his views during the years leading up to the publication of Cane in 1923, Toomer outlines the influence of several philosophies – eastern, western, even scientific – on his religious thinking:

I came into contact with an entirely new body of ideas. Buddhist philosophy, the Eastern teachings, occultism, theosophy. […] These ideas challenged and stimulated me. […] Also, our own Christian Bible. I had read it as if it were a new book. Just simply as a work of literature I was convinced that we had nothing to equal it. Not even Shakespeare—my old God—wrote language of such grand perfection. And my religious nature, given a cruel blow by Clarence Darrow and naturalism, but not, as I found, destroyed by them—my religious nature which had been sleeping was vigorously aroused. (Wayward 119-20)

Toomer’s emphasis on his religious feelings having been “given a cruel blow […] but not […] destroyed” points to an initial parallel with Ecclesiastes (and, coincidentally, Hemingway): while Toomer acknowledges that he cannot – in good faith – accept everything from any religious tradition, he maintains a commitment to religiosity.
Toomer, in fact, continued a multifaceted spiritual-religious journey throughout the rest of his life. Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr note Toomer’s spiritual quest, especially after he published *Cane*: “After 1923 Toomer formed a series of attachments to spiritualists like George Gurdjieff and religious groups like the Quakers which continued virtually until the end of his life. It seems clear that Toomer’s commitment to a ‘spiritual quest’ was serious and deeply felt” (2-3). While Scruggs and VanDemarr rightly argue that Toomer’s spiritual journey after 1923 didn’t influence *Cane*, Toomer’s journey does show him as a person invested in religion and spirituality, who like Qoheleth was willing to approach those ideas with skeptical passion. This skeptically passionate approach to religion – alongside his renewed interest in the Bible – influenced *Cane* even if Gurdjieff and Quakerism did not.

In a December 18, 1922 letter to Sherwood Anderson, Toomer reveals a specific affinity with Ecclesiastes, starting in the book’s skepticism and extending also to its optimism. Toomer praises Anderson’s enthusiasm in the midst of the world’s depressing realities: “Your acute sense of the separateness of life could easily have led to a lean pessimism in a less abundant soul. Your Yea! to life is one of the clear fine tones in our medley of harsh discordant sounds” (qtd. in *Cane* 159). Like Anderson, Qoheleth acknowledges reasons for pessimism, while – in the same way Toomer praises Anderson for his “Yea! to life” – he finds reasons to be joyful anyway:

> what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.
There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (2:22-4)

Later in his letter to Anderson, Toomer continues, “It seems to me that art in our day, other than its purely aesthetic phase, has a sort of religious function. It is a religion, a spiritualization of the immediate” (qtd. in Cane 159). Because Qoheleth predicates his call to seize the day on the finality of death, the phrase, “a spiritualization of the immediate,” supplies a succinctly accurate paraphrase of Ecclesiastes’ focus on enjoying everyday pleasures before death eliminates all joy: “For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing” (9:4-5).

As death informed Qoheleth’s philosophy, the death of Toomer’s grandfather informed his aesthetic while writing Cane. In their introduction to Cane, Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. present this death as foundation for Toomer’s art: “Precisely as [his grandfather] Pinchback’s health declined, Toomer found his voice as an artist: ‘He sank very rapidly. All during December I nursed him; and, at the same time, I wrote the materials of Cane. […] He died the day after I had finished the first draft of ‘Kabnis,’ the long semi-dramatic closing-piece of Cane’” (xxv). Toomer grew up mainly in his grandparents’ home and, while they often had a contentious relationship, his life with his grandfather was formative. Toomer’s presence during his grandfather’s final days provided a sense of reconciliation: “In these last days he seemed to know just what I meant to him. I knew and realized all he had done for me” (qtd. in Cane xxv).
Acknowledging his grandfather’s impending death helped Toomer to reconcile with him and encouraged him while writing *Cane*. The crafting of the longest section of *Cane* coincided with the reminder of looming death and, as Byrd and Gates argue, “the powerful, quasi-mythic encounter at Kabnis’s conclusion […] was informed by this final intense encounter” (xxvi). Toomer not only shares an interest in death and the “spiritualization of the immediate” with Qoheleth, but he also alludes to Ecclesiastes twice in *Cane*’s final paragraph: “Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises” (115). Scruggs and VanDemarr highlight the subtle allusion made more explicit by its repetition: “The twice-cited allusion to Ecclesiastes (‘the sun arises’) is the eternal return of the circle” (203). Toomer’s allusion to Ecclesiastes 1:5 – “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose” – is to the same verse Hemingway would use three years later to title *The Sun Also Rises*.

*Cane* – Toomer’s first and only major work – presents poems, stories, drama, and a novella set in the rural south, the urban north, and finally again in the rural south. This hybrid novel established Toomer as an indispensible figure “in two branches of American modernism: the writers and critics who compose the New Critics and the ‘Lost Generation,’ and those who compose the New Negro movement or the Harlem Renaissance” (Byrd and Gates xx). With little plot or character consistency, the settings play a unifying role as do, for many readers, spiritual themes. Christol sees spirituality as a significant, pervasive influence on the text:
Everywhere in the text, signs of western and African religions as referential and symbolic fields abound: in the vernacular prophetic tone of the narrative voices, in the frequent allusions to the Bible, the prayer-like style of most stories, the various allusions and invocations to Jesus, the suggestion of a variety of religious practices going from the Catholicism of “Becky,” the Baptist church of Barlo, the Jewish imagery of “Fern,” [to] the “shoutings” of the Kabnis section. (114)

Toomer corroborates these observations in a letter to his friend Waldo Frank. Toomer said of his poem “Prayer,” “its idea is essential to the spiritual phase of CANE,” explaining that it fit in “the spiritual curve” of the collection (qtd. in Scruggs and VanDemarr 130). Toomer’s emphasis on spiritual elements has led many readers to read *Cane* as a kind of semiautobiographical spiritual journey. For example, Byrd claims, “Toomer’s most important theme” is “human development, or man’s lack of and search for wholeness” (15). Fredrick L. Rusch goes a step further to connect *Cane*’s search for meaning specifically with Toomer himself: “The restless searching and aching discontent displayed by many of the characters of *Cane* were representative of its author” (xi).

On the other hand, Scruggs and VanDemarr lament what they view as an overemphasis on spiritual autobiography. And indeed they rightly maintain the need to avoid anachronistically applying, for instance, Toomer’s Gurdjieffism onto the crafting of *Cane*: “this future choice is largely irrelevant to *Cane*’s meaning. The ‘spiritual’ always appears in *Cane* within a political context. […] To insist that *Cane* be a ‘spiritual autobiography’ is to disregard his text’s most important enactment: the transformation of
the isolated spectator into the witness of history” (4, 7). And yet, even though they mostly avoid Toomer’s spirituality, Scruggs and VanDemarr are the critics who first identified the Ecclesiastes allusion in Cane’s final paragraph. Here again Ecclesiastes provides a bridge: in Cane, Ecclesiastes bridges not only the sacred and the secular – as it does in Ellen Glasgow’s Phases of an Inferior Planet for example – but, more specifically, the sacred and the political. Cane is intensely political, and – in addition to providing a frame for the novel, inspiring its structure, and contributing thematically – Ecclesiastes advances a significant part of the novel’s political agenda, particularly in its elevation of skepticism as a necessary resource to deter “white folks” from coopting the Bible to maintain the status quo.

Toomer frames Cane with allusions to Ecclesiastes’ circularity both within the text and as paratexts. The pages preceding each of Cane’s three sections contain parts of circles (3, 39, 79), and the first and last stories “Karintha” and “Kabnis” evoke Ecclesiastes’ investment in circular repetition. “Karintha” repeats the phrase “the sun goes down” six times verbatim, and alludes to it twice more with the word “sunset” and the final unfinished line “Goes down…” (5-6). Paired with the twice repeated phrase “the sun arises” in the final paragraph of “Kabnis,” Toomer draws particular attention to Ecclesiastes 1:5: “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down.” The two Ecclesiastes verses following 1:5 also feature circularity in the earth’s natural cycles: “The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again (1:6-7).
Ecclesiastes’ interest in circularity extends from these natural phenomena into the cycle of human lives: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was” (12:7). Finally, the book’s repetition of its “vanity of vanities” mantra, which introduces Qoheleth’s commentary in 1:2 and provides his final word in 12:8, its chiastic use of framing poems, and its insistence that there is “a time to every purpose under the heaven” (3:1) all serve to associate the text with the processes of repetition and return.

Toomer fully intends these cyclical parallels, pointing to three circles in Cane’s structure:

From three angles, CANE’s design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. [...] From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song. (Reader 26)

The aesthetic, regional, and spiritual circles come together in Toomer’s use of Ecclesiastes. Most immediately, the allusion to Ecclesiastes 1:6 contributes to Cane’s regional circularity: “The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again.” The action in Cane moves from the rural South in section one, to urban centers in the North in section two, and returns back to the South in section three. Cane’s aesthetic circle parallels its regional settings with its aesthetic arc from simple to complex forms and back to simple ones.
Both of these circles invite a spiritual return to origins – which Toomer emphasizes in the character Kabnis, who visits the South of his ancestors despite his discomfort while living there. Moreover, of the six stories and poems Toomer mentions with respect to the spiritual circle of *Cane*, five – excluding only “Theater” – have direct ties to Ecclesiastes.

*Cane*’s circularity encourages rereading the text in light of its ending. Because “Kabnis” contains the text’s most explicit Ecclesiastes reference, a rereading of *Cane* in light of “Kabnis” reveals the larger role Ecclesiastes plays throughout Toomer’s hybrid novel. In addition to the repeated allusion to Ecclesiastes in the final paragraph, Ecclesiastes-inspired language, themes, and characters permeate of “Kabnis.” *Cane*’s final story follows its title character Kabnis, a northerner teacher in a rural Georgia school, during his time philosophizing, drinking, and occasionally working with a group of local men and women. Akin to Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, Kabnis plays the role of a skeptical seeker in need of guidance and meaning. Also like Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, “Kabnis” presents multiple characters with some connection to Ecclesiastes. Kabnis points to the first group of Ecclesiastes characters himself. Looking out onto the southern homes of rural black people, Kabnis speculates, “Negros within it are content. They farm. They sing. They love. They sleep” (84). Though Kabnis doesn’t seem impressed – except that he wishes he could sleep as easily as they do – these people represent four essential aspects of Qoheleth’s philosophy: work, joy, love, and rest. Most relevant to Kabnis’s reflection, Ecclesiastes 5:12 connects satisfying labor to a healthy cycle of work and relaxation: “The sleep of a labouring man is sweet.” Outlining these
aspects of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy early in the story prepares readers to recognize its other Ecclesiastes allusions.

One such allusion comes in the character of Layman, a local man who has befriended Kabnis. The first description of Layman associates him with Qoheleth: “Professor Layman, tall, heavy, loose-jointed Georgia Negro, by turns teacher and preacher, who has traveled in almost every nook and corner of the state and hence knows more than would be good for anyone other than a silent man” (86). The traditional rendering of Qoheleth as a “preacher” who “taught the people knowledge” (12:9) parallels Layman’s description as a “teacher and preacher.” Layman’s worldly experience and his tendency toward silence echo Qoheleth’s emphasis on experiential wisdom and his advice to “let thy words be few” (5:2). Later, Layman emphasizes the value of silence himself: “its the worst ones in th community that comes int th church t shout. I’ve sort a made a study of it. You take a man what drinks, th biggest licker-head around will come int th church an yell th loudest. An th sister whats done wrong, an is always doin wrong, will sit down in th Amen corner an swing her arms an shout her head off” (89).

Furthermore, Layman points out the fallacy of moral reciprocity. Responding to Kabnis’s assumption that he and Layman are safe because they’re gentlemen, Layman gives contrary evidence: “Nigger’s a nigger down this away, Professor. An only two dividins: good an bad. An even they aint permanent categories. They sometimes mixes um up when it comes t lynchin. I’ve seen um do it” (87). Layman and Kabnis are not necessarily safe just by being good gentlemen. Here, Layman evokes Qoheleth’s challenge to traditional wisdom – “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work
of the wicked” (8:14) – while stressing the dangers of assuming that the world operates on a system of moral reciprocity. If a person erroneously thought that only wicked black men were lynched – or, relatedly, thought that all lynched black men must have deserved it – this attitude would lessen the imperative to change a system that allows for the lynching of black men.

Kabnis himself echoes some aspects of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy while missing others. Though Kabnis shares more with Qoheleth’s fellow skeptic Job, he does try to appreciate the values of drinking and living in the moment. Remembering his role as a teacher prohibited from drinking, Kabnis laments, “Can’t take a swig of licker. What do they think this is, anyway, some sort of temperance school? How did I ever land in such a hole? Ugh. One might just as well be in his grave” (84). Ecclesiastes 6:3 points to a similar discrepancy between living and living well: “If a man […] live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, […] I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.” Qoheleth and Kabnis prefer death to a life without joy. Still, like Qoheleth, Kabnis sees death as the end of satisfaction: “When I’m dead I don’t expect t be satisfied” (106). The line echoes Ecclesiastes 9:5: “the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward.” While death may be preferable to a life without joy, a life that offers satisfaction and joy exceeds death in every respect. Finally, in a long monologue directed toward Father John – a former slave living in Kabnis’s friend Halsey’s basement, who Kabnis assumes cannot talk, and who will soon proffer Cane’s most famous critique – Kabnis again reveals his allegiance to living well: “When you had eyes, did you ever see th beauty of th world?” (112). Here, Kabnis’s interest in
beauty resonates with Ecclesiastes 11:7: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.”

On the other hand, Kabnis focuses too much on enjoyment and misses out on other significant aspects of Qoheleth’s philosophy. The final section of “Kabnis” describes a party in Halsey’s basement, including Kabnis, Halsey, their friend Lewis, Father John, and two women. Kabnis expresses his desire for unreflective pleasure, rejecting Halsey’s interest in his work and Lewis’s interest in Father John: “What the hell’s wrong with you fellers? You with your wagon. Lewis with his Father John. This aint th time fer foolin with wagons. Daytime’s bad enough f that. Ere, sit down. Ere, Lewis, you too sit down. Have a drink. Thats right. Drink corn licker, love th girls” (105). While this may sound like a helpful call toward balancing work and restful joy, Kabnis soon reveals his distaste for work and the incompatibility of his worldview with Qoheleth’s: “Great God Almighty, a soul like mine cant pin itself onto a wagon wheel an satisfy itself in spinnin round. Iron prongs an hickory sticks, an God knows what all … all right for Halsey … use him. Me? I get my life down in this scum-hole. Th old man an me—” (113). And though Kabnis claims an interest in “th old man” Father John, he appreciates him most when Father John isn’t talking and Kabnis can wax moderately philosophical. However, it is ultimately in Father John, not Kabnis, that Toomer reveals the full extent of Cane’s Ecclesiastes allusion.

Avoiding Kabnis’s too-narrow emphasis on joyful living alone and furthering Layman’s Ecclesiastes-inspired views in favor of brevity and against unreflective adherence to received wisdom, Father John’s short speech highlights Ecclesiastes’
corrective skepticism as a political necessity. Lewis associates Father John with Ecclesiastes when the old man is first introduced: “But what under the sun does he do down there?” (102, my emphasis). The phrase “under the sun” appears 29 times in the King James Version of Ecclesiastes and helps to foreshadow Father John’s prophetic role. Lewis also describes Father John as a “mute John the Baptist of a new religion or a tongue-tied shadow of an old” (104). Father John’s speech – a speech made after years of not speaking – consists of only two sentences and epitomizes Ecclesiastes’ concern about traditional wisdom: “Th sin whats fixed… […] upon th white folks—[…]—f tellin Jesus—lies. O th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (114). Father John crystalizes Toomer’s skepticism over received wisdom, especially when that wisdom has been appropriated to maintain the status quo. The former slave Father John is most likely referring to certain interpretations of the Curse of Ham in Genesis serving as a divine justification for slavery. Many black writers in the first half of the twentieth century made similar claims. Sterling Brown’s 1931 poem “Strong Men,” for example, also exposes the historical implementation of Christianity in the United States: “They taught you the religion they disgraced” (line 10). By making the Bible lie, the white folks disgraced Christianity.

As Toomer shows in Father John’s speech, and in Cane’s allusions to Ecclesiastes more generally, skepticism can act as a political agent. Ecclesiastes provides a resource – from within the Bible itself – that asks Christians to keep the Bible from lying. It voices skeptical dissent as an example of healthy, reflective questioning of the Bible rather than unreflective association of the biblical message with dominant social and political
powers. As groups of people who have suffered from religiously motivated violence or discrimination know, examples of rich white folks making the Bible lie abound. For example, if its thesis were implemented in tax policies, Bill O’Reilly’s 2013 book *Killing Jesus* – which postulates that Jesus’ death was intimately tied to the evils of taxation – would increase class disparity in the US under the endorsement of a certain interpretation of the Bible.\(^\text{11}\) Similarly, starting in the fifteenth-century and continuing to exist in biased property laws today, European colonizers have interpreted promised-land metaphors in Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy as validation for subjugating indigenous people in the Americas and commandeering their lands.\(^\text{12}\) As evident from these past and present misuses of the Bible, neither Ecclesiastes nor *Cane* can prevent white folks – or anyone else – from making the Bible lie. Both texts, however, elicit serious motivation to correct particularly hurtful lies while providing helpful examples for a well-meaning, skeptical Christian to follow.

Kabnis experiences a spiritual shift in the scene following Father John’s revelation. Halsey’s sister Carrie K. also witnesses Father John’s speech, and while the speech moves her instantly, it has a less immediate effect on Kabnis. Kabnis’s first reaction essentially dismisses Father John: “So that’s your sin. All these years t tell us tht th white folks made th Bible lie. Well, I’ll be damned. Lewis ought t have been here. You old black fakir —” (114). Carrie changes Kabnis’s mind. She asks if that represents his “best Amen?” (114), and then “turns him to her and takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hands. Her palms draw the fever out. With its passing, Kabnis crumples. He sinks to his knees before her, ashamed, exhausted. His eyes squeeze tight. Carrie presses his face
tenderly against her. The suffocation of her fresh starched dress feels good to him” (114-5). Kabnis feels ashamed by his hasty dismissal of Father John’s skepticism and comforted by Carrie’s touch. The story ends with a description of light circling Carrie and Father John as Kabnis goes out to a new day in which “the sun arises” (115). While these images of light and the potential of love – associated with Ecclesiastes – could provide a positive conclusion to Cane, Scruggs and VanDemarr hesitate to accept a hopeful ending:

All the images that have been associated with miscegenation and death – cradle, treetops, pines, child, birth – are now transformed into a ‘birth-song’ of hope. The twice-cited allusion to Ecclesiastes (‘the sun arises’) is the eternal return of the circle to origins, confirmed again in the aura emanating from the two figures within the ‘soft circle’ of light and by the circle of the sun’s ‘cradle.’ That sun is the poet as son, the religious significance of his sacred calling as artist linked to the aura cast around Carrie K. and Father John. It is the moment of unanimisme that Toomer has sought throughout Cane. The problem with such an optimistic reading of Cane’s conclusion, however, is that everything leading up to the ‘gold-glowing child’ of the final sentence contradicts such optimism. (203)

Thinking of Cane as a circle demands reading this final optimism in light of “everything leading up to” it. While Ecclesiastes’ worldview contributes positively to the lives of some of Toomer’s characters – and may contribute positively to Kabnis’s future life –
racial discrimination keeps the majority of characters in *Cane* from the good things suggested by its Ecclesiastes allusions.

Before moving to *Cane*’s concern over characters’ access to Ecclesiastes’ philosophy, I first highlight moments in *Cane* where Ecclesiastes’ philosophy operates positively. In addition to the structural inspiration *Cane* takes from Ecclesiastes, three of *Cane*’s early poems share the biblical book’s optimistic appraisal of joyful work and of love. “Cotton Song” presents a positive view of enjoyed work in the moment. The first line, “Come, brother, come. Lets lift it,” echoes Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow.” The cotton workers praise working together in a community, lifting each other up by singing and working together. And while they might be tempted to look ahead to evening and the completion of their work, the workers focus on work in the moment. The poem presents this immediacy in the workers’ thrice repeated assertion against waiting for the Last Judgment. The first stanza introduces this theme – “Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day / But lets not wait for it” (lines 3-4) – and the poem returns to it by repeating the line, “We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!” (lines 12 and 16). The workers anticipate not having to work when the Judgment Day arrives, but they don’t want to wait for freedom from oppressive work. Instead of waiting for a time when they won’t have to work, they decide to remove their own “shackles” by finding pleasure in the work together with their friends. The poem also connects this satisfying work to the presence of God on earth: “God’s body’s got a soul, / Bodies like to roll the soul, / Cant blame God if we don’t roll, / Come, brother, roll, roll!” (lines 5-8, repeated in lines 17-
20). Rolling bales of cotton provides intimate access to God and has been given by God as an avenue to joy. Qoheleth too finds value in enjoying work as its own reward: “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (2:24).

Relatedly, both “Evening Song” and “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” reflect Ecclesiastes’ emphasis on the positive value of love. “Evening Song” depicts its speaker’s reflections on his lover Cloine while they lie in bed together after having sex. Cloine falls asleep first, wrapped around the speaker: “curled like the sleepy waters where the moon-waves start” (line 9). And, as the speaker drifts off to sleep, he describes her glowingly: “radiant, resplendently she gleams, / Cloine dreams, / lips pressed against my heart” (lines 10-12). This picture completes the speaker’s celebration of having Cloine in his life, which begins with the line, “Full moon rising on the waters of my heart” (line 1), and employs the words “Promises” and “Miracle” to convey Cloine’s ability to give his life fullness and meaning. “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” delivers a complementary emphasis on passionate love in the moment. Couched in terms of electrical currents and electric lights, the poem celebrates the beloved’s capacity to electrify the speaker: “let your breath be moist against me / […] then with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent” (lines 4, 10-12). Qoheleth presents a less explicit version of love, but these poems clearly align with Ecclesiastes’ emphasis in 9:9 on love.

These three poems, however, stand out against the majority of Cane. Building on Scruggs and VanDemarr’s observation about Cane’s overall pessimism, Karen Jackson
Ford argues that Toomer achieves a progression toward pessimism through his specifically modern use of poetry: “The beauty and authority of lyric poetry belong to the idealized past that part 1 desires to represent; the corruption and loss of such cultural authority belong to part 2; and the fact that lyric poetry cannot be recovered even when the narrative returns to the South in part 3 points to the function of the lyric in *Cane*: its function is to fail” (7-8). While on the surface the conclusion of “Kabnis” seems optimistic, Scruggs, VanDemarr, and Ford see contradictory forces at work – in both content and form – that convey an underlying pessimism. Building on the allusion to Ecclesiastes in the final paragraph of “Kabnis,” one way to square this discrepancy between optimism and pessimism is to suggest that in addition to the positive values Ecclesiastes offers, it – like the rest of the Bible – should not be allowed to lie. The political power of skepticism, encouraged by Ecclesiastes, must also be applied to Ecclesiastes. As a modern text using allusion skeptically, *Cane* asks whether the promises of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy are available to everyone. And, as it turns out, oftentimes they are not. Toomer exposes multiple situations in which some characters, like some people, lack access to Ecclesiastes’ worldview because of the US racial situation. Whereas “Cotton Song” praises the positive value of work, “Harvest Song” shows that exhausting working conditions eliminate its pleasures. Whereas love flourishes in “Evening Song” and “Her Lips Are Copper Wire,” *Cane* presents at least twice as many examples – in the stories “Blood-Burning Moon,” “Avey,” “Box Seat,” and “Bona and Paul” – of the inability of love to transcend the dominant racial situation.
The intensity of the work presented in “Harvest Song” burdens the speaker so heavily that it deprives him not only of the pleasures of work but also many of the other pleasures Ecclesiastes recommends. The poem begins by linking the speaker’s fatigue to his inability to enjoy food: “I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All my oats are cradled. / But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger. / I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it” (lines 1-3). Fatigue has blunted the speaker’s taste buds so much that he often avoids food altogether: “I have been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my hunger” (line 10). In the end, he prefers pain to food because it distracts him from his intense hunger: “My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger” (line 16). The speaker’s insatiable hunger, brought on by draining working conditions, opposes the pleasures of food, drink, and work advocated in Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, work in “Harvest Song” keeps the speaker from enjoying the sight of his eyes as advocated in Ecclesiastes 11:9: “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; […] and in the sight of thine eyes.” Rather than provide the speaker with an opportunity to rejoice in the vastness of the harvest fields and the strength of his youth, the work blinds him: “My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time. / I am a blind man” (lines 4-5). The work likewise deafens the speaker, leaving him unable to share the community songs celebrated in “Cotton Song”: “My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time. / I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters whose throats are also dry. / It would be good to hear their songs […] even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me. / I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am
chilled, I fear to call” (lines 11-14). The speaker knows it would be good to commune
with his fellow workers, but he’s left so dehumanized by the exhausting work that he
ultimately cannot enjoy their fellowship.

Resulting in a similar inability to enjoy fellowship, US racial prejudices keep
several of Cane’s characters from enjoying life with the person they love. “Blood-
Burning Moon” tells of a love triangle featuring a black woman, Louisa, a white man,
Bob Stone, and a black man, Tom Burwell. Louisa likes Bob and Tom and, on the night
of the story’s action, has tentative plans to meet both: “A strange stir was in her.
Indolently, she tried to fix upon Bob or Tom as the cause of it. To meet Bob in the
canebrake, as she was going to do an hour or so later, was nothing new. And Tom’s
proposal which she felt on its way to her could be indefinitely put off” (31). When Tom
hears his friends talking about Louisa and Bob, he responds aggressively: “He sprang up.
Glared at the men and said, ‘She’s my gal.’ Will Manning laughed. Tom strode over to
him. Yanked him up and knocked him to the ground. Several of Manning’s friends got up
to fight for him. Tom whipped out a long knife and would have cut them to shreds if they
hadn’t ducked into the woods” (32). Tom lashes out against his black friends as a stand in
for what he sees as the injustice of a white man courting the black woman he loves. Tom
then goes immediately to Louisa to profess his love and to ask about Bob. When Louisa
counters by asking what Tom might do to Bob if the rumors were true, Tom explains,
“Cut him jes like I cut a nigger” (33). While jealousy drives Tom, the racial situation –
Tom always has to defer to white men, white men can use black women and then discard
them – plays into his jealousy.
Bob, for his part, struggles with the racial dynamic in his relationship with Louisa as well. He avoids telling his sister and mother about his love for Louisa and fears how his northern friends would react if they discovered it. He feels entitled to her as a member “of the old Stone family” (35), but embarrassed by the prospect of fighting over her with a black man. Still, Bob decides to fight for Louisa, and even momentarily questions his constant references to her blackness: “She was worth it. Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not, just gal?” (35). Part of Louisa’s appeal for Bob, however, lies in her blackness – both because of its transgressive nature and, perhaps more so, because it need not involve a long-term commitment: “No, it was because she was nigger that he went to her” (35). Bob arrives at their rendezvous location to find Louisa missing, continues to her house where he finds her with Tom, and quickly attacks Tom. Though he’s clearly overmatched, Bob attacks repeatedly each time Tom lets him go. When Bob brings out a knife, Tom slashes Bob’s throat with a knife of his own, and Bob lives long enough only to make it to Broad Street and pronounce Tom his murderer. The town’s white men pursue Tom, capture him, and burn him to death. In an ironically detached commentary, the narrator presents the situation in terms of Louisa, “Two deaths for a godam nigger” (37). Louisa, who had seemed genuinely, if naively, interested in both Bob and Tom, cannot pursue a life with either. She falls victim to a racial situation in which she, Bob, and Tom cannot coexist. Bob falls victim to his inability to think of Louisa as more than a black woman and his perceived superiority over all black people. Tom falls victim to his repressed racial aggression and a system that burns black men without trials. No one lives “joyfully with the wife whom [s/he] lovest” (Ecclesiastes 9:9).
“Avey” also exposes the difficulties of love for two characters in Cane’s racial situation. The black narrator’s detached intellectualism, which he has learned in white schools, keeps him from passionately embracing a relationship with the title character. The narrator reveals his love for Avey as early as the story’s second sentence – “Just how I come to love her, timidly, and with secret blushes, I do not know” (44). However, the narrator considers himself superior to Avey because of his education and ambition. He calls her “lazy,” “slovenly,” “indolent,” and “no better than a cow” for “taking life so easy” (46-7). And yet, when they meet after five years, the narrator still desires her. That is, he desires his idea of what he thinks she should be:

I traced my development from the early days up to the present time, the phase in which I could understand her. I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need. How it could not meet it. I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope. (48)

When the narrator gets outside of his mind long enough to look at Avey, he realizes that she has fallen asleep, bored by his talk about himself, his assumptions about her, and his ideas about her future. Rather than enjoying his time with Avey in the moment – as Qoheleth recommends – the narrator imagines how she could be better. The narrator’s learned ambition leaves him incapable of pursuing Avey recklessly. While this
discrepancy isn’t exclusively racial, the narrator reveals a racial element in his inability to reconcile the ambition he learned in white schools with his distaste for the women at those schools, who are also too caught up in ambition and in the future. He is drawn to Avey’s live-in-the-moment passion without being able to embrace it himself.

The romantic situation in “Box Seat” progresses similarly, here focusing on pretentions of the main woman character. Muriel and Dan, two black characters who love each other, cannot live happily together because of Muriel’s commitment to social conformity. She reflects to herself:

Shame about Dan. Something awfully good and fine about him. But he don’t fit in. In where? Me? Dan, I could love you if I tried. I don’t have to try. I do. […] I won’t let myself. I? [Muriel’s landlord] Mrs. Pribby who reads newspapers all night won’t. What has she got to do with me? She is me, somehow. No she’s not. Yes she is. She is the town, and the town won’t let me love you, Dan. (59)

Aloud, Muriel asks Dan, “Why don’t you get a good job and settle down?” (60). Dan replies by proposing to her: “Muriel, I love you. I want you, whatever the world of Pribby says. Damn your Pribby. Who is she to dictate my love? I’ve stood enough of her. […] For once in your life you’re going to face what’s real, by God—” (61). Dan tries to explain that love – not social appearances – will give reality to Muriel’s life. But, as Toomer’s title insinuates, Muriel remains trapped in her literal and metaphorical box seat. Dan follows Muriel to a theater show, looks up at her in her box seat, and imagines her captivity to conformity: “Muriel—bored. Must be. But she’ll smile and she’ll clap. Do
what you're bid, you she-slave. Look at her. Sweet, tame woman in a brass box seat. Clap, smile, fawn, clap. Do what you're bid” (63). The story reaches its climax when a performing dwarf offers Muriel a rose that she would rather not take from what she considers his revolting hand: “As her hand touches it, Dan springs up in his seat and shouts: ‘JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!’” (67). While the Bible gives no indication that Jesus was in fact actually a leper, Dan’s point stands: Muriel’s incapacity to embrace a social outcast costs her a chance at flourishing. And though Muriel rejects Dan based on his lower-class status, race drives his class distinction. Given the US racial situation in the 1920s, Dan’s lack of a consistent job likely has more to do with his inability to find work as a black man than his desire not to work. Muriel and Dan are kept from love not because they don’t love each other – but because the racially charged social situation will not allow Muriel to embrace her love for Dan.

In “Bona and Paul,” Toomer makes his most explicit critique of a love lost to US racial discrimination. He emphasizes the story’s importance by claiming that it is in “Bona and Paul” that “the curve [of Cane] really starts” (Reader 26). Scruggs and VanDemarr call the story “a brilliantly powerful depiction of how American racial categories separate and deny ‘unity’” (187). Likewise, the story dramatizes the value Ecclesiastes could offer its title characters if not for the pressures of their racial situation. The story follows a white woman Bona and a racially mixed man Paul through an afternoon and evening in their complicated courtship. Reflecting to herself during her first appearance in the text, Bona conveys her confused love for Paul: “He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger. Bona! But don’t all the dorm girls say so?
And don’t you, when you are sane, say so? That’s why I love—Oh, nonsense. You have never loved a man who didn’t first love you” (70). Bona’s uncertainty continues throughout the story as she wavers between falling in love with Paul and being repulsed by his ambiguous racial identity. She first demonstrates her attraction to Paul while the two play basketball together, in which she “[a]lmost hugs Paul to guard him” (71).

Toomer draws special attention to Bona’s desire for Paul by contrasting Bona’s participation in the game with her earlier excused illness and the fact that she hasn’t previously asked to play.

On the other hand, after arranging a date with Paul for the same evening, Bona hesitates to fully embrace him. When they meet, Bona’s instant excitement quickly dissipates: “Bona […] holds Paul’s hand. She squeezes it. Her own emotion supplements the return pressure. And then, for no tangible reason, her spirits drop. Without them, she is nervous, and slightly afraid. She resents this. Paul’s eyes are critical. She resents Paul” (73). Toomer’s phrase “for no tangible reason” is pregnant with racial undertones. When Bona professes her love for Paul and Paul doesn’t reciprocate, she couches her disappointment in racial terms: “Suddenly she stiffens. Stops. ‘But you have not said you love me.’ ‘I cant—yet—Bona.’ ‘Ach, you never will. Youre cold. Cold.’ Bona [internally]: Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere” (74). Bona’s friend Helen reveals some of the reasons both women find themselves attracted to and repulsed by Paul:

She [Helen] tries to get [her boyfriend] Art to break with him, saying, that if Paul, whom the whole dormitory calls a nigger, is more to him than she is, well, she’s through. She does not break with Art. She goes
out as often as she can with Art and Paul. She explains this to herself by a
piece of information which a friend of hers had given her: men like him
(Paul) can fascinate. One is not responsible for fascination. Not one girl
had really loved Paul; he fascinated them. Bona didn’t; only thought she
did. Time would tell. And of course, she didn’t. (76)

Bona admits something of a shared fascination with Helen in her initial reflection about
why she loves Paul – “He is a nigger. […] That’s why I love—” (70) – and these racial
thoughts persist.

Paul’s first reflection on Bona acknowledges their racial difference while
conveying his interest in her, and these racial issues influence him as they do Bona. In his
room, he thinks to himself, “Bona is one window. One window, Paul. […] Paul follows
the sun into himself in Chicago. He is at Bona’s window. With his own glow he looks
through a dark pane” (71). With this and two further references to seeing darkly, Paul
evokes his namesake, Saint Paul of the Bible: “For now we see through a glass, darkly;
but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”
(1 Corinthians 13:12). In addition to the resolution of Paul and Bona’s relationship, this
allusion establishes Paul’s path toward seeing his racial situation more clearly as main
trajectory of the story. One catalyst for this development comes when Paul, Bona, Art,
and Helen arrive at a bar and everyone looks at Paul questioningly: “Suddenly he knew
that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference” (74). The experience,
while insulting, helps Paul to mature: “Their stares, giving him to himself, filled
something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his
consciousness. There was fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real” (74). Paul begins to take pride in his blackness as part of his identity.

Through this experience and his reflections, Paul’s interest in Bona changes. He hopes that Bona might be a part of his new view of himself – and that she might even be able to help him to embrace it. He promises to reveal something to Bona in hopes that she too will abandon comfort and safety to accompany him on his journey. When Bona asks, “I’d like to know—I know—something of you,” Paul answers, “You will—before the evening’s over. I promise it” (76). Though he doesn’t say so exactly, Paul promises to share his racial identity with her. Just before he does so, they dance. While focused only on each other, Bona and Paul are beyond the confines of race: “The dance takes blood from their minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. Passionate blood leaps back into their eyes. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor. They know that the pink-faced people have no part in what they feel” (77). Their passion on the dance floor gives Paul the confidence to reveal his race in front of Bona. They leave the bar, presumably so they can have sex, and their relationship looks promising.

However, Paul overestimates Bona’s ability to transcend racial prejudice. At the exit, Paul exchanges a look with the black doorman: “As the black man swings the door for them, his eyes are knowing. Too many couples have passed out, flushed and fidgety, for him not to know” (77). Paul – in his newfound desire to embrace his blackness – returns to talk with the doorman, whom he calls Brother: “Youre wrong.’ ‘Yassur.’ ‘Brother, youre wrong. I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen” (77). Paul feels confident
enough in his identity to outwardly acknowledge his own blackness by addressing the black doorman. He also feels confident enough in Bona that he can reveal this element of his identity. He hopes that she will love him, that they will know each other, and that he will know himself. He tells the doorman how it will be “something beautiful”: “I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know. That I thought of her. That my thoughts were matches thrown into a dark window. […] That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me” (77-8).

Paul feels faithful to both his racial identity and his love for Bona. He anticipates a new, fully passionate life. Watching Paul and the doorman, however, Bona again reevaluates her love for Paul and leaves him alone: “Paul and the black man shook hands. When he reached the spot where they had been standing, Bona was gone” (78). Returning to the Corinthians allusion, Toomer’s Paul “know[s] even as also [he is] known”: he understands Bona’s unalterable racial prejudice as she discovers his newfound pride in being black.

While “Bona and Paul” presents a coming-of-age story about Paul’s excitement over his racial identity, it also shows that the world isn’t ready for it. In becoming the best Paul that he can be, he loses Bona. Because Bona’s racial prejudice keeps her from considering Paul a legitimate lover, losing Bona may not present such a big loss. Nonetheless, Bona and Paul do share moments of passion, and they may have flourished in a less prejudiced setting had racial fear and hatred not removed their access to Ecclesiastes’ philosophy. Because of this lack of access to a core recommendation in Ecclesiastes’ worldview, *Cane* applies Ecclesiastes’ skepticism to Ecclesiastes itself. But
Toomer also recognizes that using skepticism as a political agent can help to create world circumstances in which Bona and Paul would have had the opportunity to “live joyfully with the [spouse] whom [they] lovest” (9:9), regardless of race, class, sexuality, religious affiliation, social expectations, or strategic political posturing.

And *Cane* itself presents significant moments where Ecclesiastes leads characters toward flourishing. Through these stories – especially when combined with the imperative demanded by other stories to change hurtful social structures – Toomer reminds readers that while fighting for racial and social justice, it’s important to make time to enjoy. After the publication of *Cane*, Toomer wrote little. Like Qoheleth, he “let [his] words be few” (5:2). Also like Qoheleth, who “applied [his] heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom” (7:25), and Hemingway, who “continue[d] to attend mass and say prayers until his death” (Grimes 3), Toomer remained a seeker for the rest of his life. He refused to settle for unexamined received wisdom, as is evident in his attraction to the innovative George Gurdjieff and in his later conversion to Quakerism. Like Qoheleth before them, both Toomer and Hemingway use skepticism to question traditional ways of understanding the world. And, as modernists, they used their allusions reverently but also ironically. By presenting two characters ultimately unable to enjoy life with the wife they love, Hemingway questions whether life offers everyone any sort of satisfying meaning, while at the same time encouraging those who are capable of adopting Ecclesiastes philosophy to do so. By highlighting Ecclesiastes’ skepticism as a tool for questioning interpretations of the Bible and revealing how racial discrimination keeps some characters from a philosophy of joy, Toomer demands a more equal access to
flourishing in the US, especially from those who would consider themselves Christian. Like Toomer and Hemingway, Ann Petry sought values in the Bible and approached it skeptically. Building on Petry’s citation of Ecclesiastes in her 1953 novel *The Narrows*, the final chapter takes Ecclesiastes to Petry’s more famous 1946 novel *The Street*. 
In her 1950 essay “The Novel as Social Criticism,” Ann Petry implicitly responds to Richard Wright’s 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Petry takes issue partly with what she sees as Wright’s overemphasis on Marxism, but mainly with his dismissal of traditional sources of moral authority. “Tradition,” according to Wright’s essay, “is no longer a guide” (49). Petry asserts, on the other hand, that literature has provided guidance since its beginnings:

The idea that a story should point a moral, convey a message, did not originate in the twentieth century; it goes far back in the history of man. Modern novels with their “messages” are cut from the same bolt of cloth as the world’s folk tales and fairy stories, the parables of the Bible, the old morality plays, the Greek tragedies, the Shakespearean tragedies. Even the basic theme of these novels is very old. It is derived from the best known murder scene in literature. The cast and the setting vary, of course, but the message [...] is essentially the same: And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother: And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper? In one way or another, the novelist who criticizes some undesirable phase of the status quo is saying that man is his brother’s keeper. (95)

For Petry, the Bible embodies and continues to influence a literary tradition that exposes social inequalities: “it would make more sense if some of the fictional emphasis on social
problems were attributed to the influence of the Old testament idea that man is his brother’s keeper” (96).

Petry acknowledges that Marxism can play a helpful role in social critique, but she warns against forgetting about the foundational role of the Old Testament. She writes, “I think one of the difficulties here is the refusal to recognize and admit the fact that not all of the concern about the shortcomings of society originated with Marx. […] Though part of the cultural heritage of all of us derives from Marx, whether we subscribe to the Marxist theory or not, a larger portion of it stems from the Bible” (96). Petry’s primarily positive experiences growing up in a small New England town – some of which were rooted in Christianity – contributed to her interest in the social role of the Bible. Unlike many of her protagonists, Petry grew up in relative privilege. Her encouraging mother and father provided Petry with middle-class American values and opportunities: she attended school from the age of four and went to church every week, where she heard her father sing “tenor in the choir of the Congregational Church” (qtd. in Holladay 5). She also learned that she had access to the philosophies of Benjamin Franklin: “My parents truly believed that early to bed, early to rise would make any person healthy, wealthy, and wise. They had two daughters, so they did not say this would make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise but that it would have this effect on any person” (qtd. in Holladay 7). While Petry’s 1946 novel The Street challenges the assumption that Franklin’s ideas could benefit any person, Petry herself had a solid family, religious, and educational foundation that produced an American success story.
While Petry never speaks directly of Ecclesiastes in “The Novel as Social Criticism,” she indicates her specific interest for this biblical book in her 1953 novel *The Narrows*. Her character Cesar the Writing Man chalks Ecclesiastes 1:10 onto the sidewalk: “Is there anything whereof it may be said, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us” (91). Much like Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, *The Narrows* approaches Ecclesiastes’ worldview with both reverence and skepticism. One character, a photographer named Jubine, emphasizes Qoheleth’s preference for enjoying individual moments over expecting money and status to satisfy. On the other hand, racial prejudice keeps the two main characters – a black man named Link Williams and a white woman named Camilo Sheffield – from Ecclesiastes’ call to “[l]ive joyfully with the [spouse] whom [they] lovest” (9:9). In fact, racial elements obscure their love to the point that their relationship leads to Link’s murder. Ecclesiastes makes no direct appearance in Petry’s novel *The Street*, but her interest in the Old Testament and the novel’s Ecclesiastes-evoking ideas encourage an analysis of this novel through an Ecclesiastes lens as well. Most notably, *The Street* shares Ecclesiastes’ critique of received wisdom, which is evident in Lutie Johnson’s failure to achieve the American Dream despite her commitment to Ben Franklin’s model of self-made success. Taking Ecclesiastes to *The Street* – justifiably, but without an obvious authorial cue – paves the way for taking Ecclesiastes to a variety of contemporary religious issues. The biblical book provides resources for addressing literal-minded fundamentalism, religious violence, and the capitalistic takeover of Christianity by economic, political, and religious institutions in the United States.
Ann Petry’s Ecclesiastes-Resonant Critique of the American Dream

In *The Narrows*, where Petry explicitly quotes Ecclesiastes, the biblical book operates on multiple levels. The novel tells the story of an interracial love story featuring Link and Camilo, which is complicated not only by race, but also because Camilo is married and heir to a lucrative munitions company. Link and Camilo first meet after Link rescues her from a potential attack, and they develop an interest for each other while waiting in a bar for Camilo to relax. Petry introduces the potential romance during the same scene in which they read Ecclesiastes 1:10 on the sidewalk, drawing special attention to Qoheleth’s emphasis on enjoying life with a spouse. *The Narrows* then follows Camilo and Link as they fall in love in New York City hotels and, less often, their hometown in suburban Connecticut. After a few passionate months, however, in what otherwise would have been only a lovers’ quarrel, Camilo calls Link a “black bastard” (257). By introducing this racial dimension to their argument and to their relationship, Camilo leads Link to imagine that she sees him not as a loving companion but as a “[p]lantation buck” (280). The pain this realization causes Link precipitates the end of their relationship. Unable to accept his conclusion, Camilo imagines that Link is seeing another woman and in her jealousy accuses him of rape. When Camilo loses her credibility in court by hitting a child with her car, her husband Captain Sheffield kidnaps Link, tries to get him to sign a confession, and eventually kills him. Even after being shot, Link reiterates the love he shared with Camilo, underscoring the damaging midcentury US racial situation that prohibits it: “The truth is, […] we were in love” (407).
Like Toomer’s “Bona and Paul,” *The Narrows* presents Ecclesiastes’ philosophy as an option for happiness and then demonstrates the ways in which race restricts Link and Camilo from flourishing according to Qoheleth’s worldview. From the first introduction of Ecclesiastes in the text, Petry explicitly associates the book with Link and Camilo’s love. They read Cesar the Writing Man’s quotation of Ecclesiastes during their first night together and it is Camilo who shows it to Link: “If the girl had not stopped to watch Cesar the Writing Man, Link would have walked past him” (91). Because Camilo and Link watch Cesar as he writes, he may even choose the quotation based on their potential romance. Link initially dismisses the quotation as an “admonishment” (91), but later reconsiders its message as he begins to fall in love with Camilo:

> He thought, All life goes in a circle, around and around, you started and one place, and then came right back to it again. ‘It hath been already of old time, which was before us.’ […] And the girl? This girl, who at the sound of the words ‘I love you’ repeated, and he had been repeating them purposely, had withdrawn, moved away, is she someone you have known before? No. He had never known anyone with quite so easy and natural a manner. […] This little one with her head lifted, chin up in the air, revealing the flawless throat […] made for kissing. (94)

Camilo enjoys her evening with Link as well. Having arranged to meet again, she conveys her excitement for Link by laughing without reservation: “I enjoyed myself,’ [she said.] And smiled. Then, for no reason at all that he could determine, she laughed—a bubbling joyous sound” (96).
The rest of the chapter records Link’s growing infatuation, which is based only on one evening together and a shared viewing of an Ecclesiastes-inspired sidewalk display. As Camilo drives away, Link remembers her laugh and acknowledges to himself his love for her:

[He thought again about] what her face was like when she laughed, the mouth curving with laughter, the eyes lighted, head thrown back, showing the long line of the throat. It’s not possible, not possible, but inevitable, he thought. There is nothing I can do to stop the process. I am falling in love with her. Not falling in love with her. I am in love with her. I have already, at the sight of that beautiful laughing face, once again, placed my trust, my belief, placed it irrevocably, in the hands of another human being. (96)

Link then goes into a local bar to share the experience: “‘Friend,’ Link said, ‘let us drink to the night’” (96). If this love-struck toast to the night weren’t convincing enough, Link professes his love aloud at the end of the chapter. To the bartender’s question about the source of his giddiness – “If you’re not drunk, what’s the matter with you?” – Link responds simply, “I’m in love” (98).

Before long, Camilo shares Link’s love. When Link brings her to his house for the first time, fearful of how she’ll respond to his childhood room, Camilo reassures him by repeating, “I love you, I love you, love you” (154). In the next narrated scene – Christmas morning in Harlem – Camilo wishes everyone an enthusiastic “Merry Christmas,” and Link realizes, “We’re both at the stage where we love everybody […] —anybody and everybody who doesn’t have the hold on ecstasy that we have. We keep wanting to
spread it around” (154). Later, in a conversation about their town’s river, Camilo subconsciously reveals her love for Link even in the presence of her mother Mrs. Treadway and her husband Captain Sheffield. Though her husband introduces the idea that the river contains surprises, Camilo – because she met Link at the river – describes its surprises glowingly: “That’s the way I feel about it, too. It’s almost as though you had finally found something you’d been hunting for all your life without really knowing that you’d been looking for it. And then you see that it’s there, the thing you’ve been hunting for is there, in the river” (204). Camilo had been searching for Link her entire life until she found him by the river. And, for most of the novel, she seems unable to get enough of his presence.

And yet, racial elements influence both characters and keep Link and Camilo from the potential of lasting love. On a night when Camilo and Link are discovered sleeping in Link’s room – in the house he shares with his adoptive mother and Christian conservative Abbie Crunch – Abbie forces Camilo from the house naked in the middle of the night. While Abbie seems more concerned with what she sees as the immorality of premarital cohabitation, race contributes to her outburst. When Link tries to comfort Camilo in her car, she introduces the irreparable racial element into their relationship: “‘You black bastard,’ she said, voice furious. ‘Let go of me’” (257). In the following scene, and throughout the rest of the novel, Link repeats Camilo’s phrase “you black bastard” as a mantra as he struggles to move past their once-flourishing relationship. Furthermore, Camilo perpetuates racial stereotypes by accusing Link of raping her when he refuses to consent to renewing their relationship: “‘I’ll get even,’ she said. ‘I’ll hurt
you just like you’ve hurt me’’ (319). She then tears her clothing and accuses Link of rape. While Camilo should not escape all blame for her actions, her society’s racism clearly plays into her confusion over Link.

After Camilo attacks Link using racial markers, Link faces his own confusion in his thoughts about her. He fears that she thinks of him only as the powerful body of a slave for purchase: “Part of his mind parroted, I bid two hundred; look at his teeth, make it three hundred; the gentleman says five hundred; look at his muscle, look at his back; the lady says one thousand dollars. Sold to the lady for one thousand dollars. Plantation buck. Stud” (280). Still, in his very next thought, Link recalls his love for Camilo and his expectations for their life together:

He had been in love with her, wooed her, won her, thought there was between them that once in a lifetime kind of love. He remembered the snow falling on her hair, on her face, on the tip of her nose, and that he had been filled with tenderness, with a yearning tenderness, known once again what complete and utter surrender was like, […] and that he wanted to marry her, thinking of her as the mother of his children, thinking of a home and a continuing, enduring love, not this all at once and clearly, not clearly, incoherently, illogically, but all of it inside him when he kissed the tip of her nose, and asked her to marry him. (280)

Link’s transparent love for Camilo – especially when presented in a reflection prompted by the pain she has caused him – demonstrates the steadfast nature of his love.

Nonetheless, the racial barriers keeping them from Ecclesiastes’ philosophy are many.
Link’s friend Weak Knees warns him about the dangers of trying to flourish in an interracial relationship in the US: “I said to him if a man’s got to have a piece of white tail then he oughtta go live in some other country, some country where they don’t give a damn about such things” (304). Weak Knees’ dismissive description of Camilo as “a piece of white tail” suggests that he too has reservations about an interracial relationship, and these reservations cloud Link’s thinking. Immediately following his memory of Camilo, Link again couches his disappointment in terms of slavery: “Bought and sold, he thought. [...] She was always giving him presents. [...] Kept man. Stud” (280). The US racial situation limits and discourages Link and Camilo’s love.

Ultimately, the racial prejudice that produces the novel’s most explicit violence comes from Camilo’s mother and husband. Ostensibly because they believe that Link has raped Camilo, Sheffield shoots Link to death while Camilo’s mother watches. However, before Link confesses that they were in love with each other, only Camilo’s mother seeks violence: “I want the truth from you,’ [Sheffield] said. ‘We brought you here to tell the whole story of what happened there on the dock. And I want the truth.’ He isn’t geared for this, [Link thought,] he isn’t geared for violence. But the woman is” (404). Sheffield gears up for violence when he realizes that Camilo really loved Link and that they really were in love: “Then the man’s face did change, slowly, it became still, stunned” (407). Here, Sheffield decides to shoot Link not because he raped his wife – because Link did not rape his wife and Sheffield intuitively knows it – but because his wife was in love with a black man. This scene has rightly led Deirdre Raynor to criticize reading The Narrows solely as a love story gone wrong. Raynor, instead, reads Link’s death as Petry’s
anti-lynching critique: “What is important about this text is what it reveals about the economics of lynching (execution without due process) as exemplified by the class conflict between Link, Mrs. Treadway, Camilo and Captain Sheffield; by myths used by racist whites to justify lynching Link” (372). Link and Camilo’s love cannot flourish given the racism of the mid-twentieth-century US; but, even more dammingly, it is that love itself that leads directly to Link’s murder.²

While less primary than the plight of Link and Camilo, the photographer Jubine embodies another Ecclesiastes connection in The Narrows. In opposition to the newspaper editor Peter Bullock’s unwavering pursuit of the American Dream, Jubine emphasizes Qoheleth’s preference for joy in the moment. Bullock offers Jubine a job at his newspaper, but Jubine declines, pointing out that he already makes more money selling his pictures than Bullock could pay him. Because of the modesty of Jubine’s lifestyle, Bullock doesn’t believe him: “‘Whyn’t you buy some decent clothes and a car? And live in a decent house.’ Jubine lived in a loft, wore GI pants and shoes, rode on a motorcycle” (43). Jubine’s response illustrates his allegiance to Ecclesiastes while also exposing Bullock’s discontent as the result of his expectation that possessions will satisfy him:

My clothes keep me warm. My loft keeps the rain and the wind away from my person. And I am free. But you, my dear Bullock, you are a slave, to custom, to a house, to a car. You have given yourself little raw places in your stomach, little sore burning places, so that you cannot eat what you want and you cannot sleep at night, because you have turned so many
handsprings to pay for that long shiny car and you’ve got to keep on
turning them so that you can buy expensive tires for it, so that you can buy
the expensive gas that goes in its belly. It’s a slave ship. (43)

Bullock is never satisfied because he’s always trying to increase his wealth. This costs
him the freedom to enjoy the experience of utilizing his possessions and keeps him from
restful sleep.

Here, Jubine echoes Ecclesiastes’ understanding of the dangerous cycle of
accumulation. “Consumption,” writes William P. Brown in his Ecclesiastes commentary,
“in short, does not render contentment; it simply leads to more consumption, a vicious
cycle” (60). Based on his personal test amassing “great possessions” (2:7), Qoheleth
realizes that things alone cannot fulfill him, especially because he cannot take his vast
possessions with him into death:

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase. […] When goods increase, they are increased
that eat them and what good is there to the owners thereof? […] The sleep
of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the
abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. […] As he came forth
of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall
take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. […]I]n all
points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath
laboured for the wind? (5:10-16)
Jubine realizes that Bullock’s abundance keeps him from sleeping well, that no matter how much he increases his possessions they will never satisfy him, and that ultimately, in death, Bullock will take nothing that he can “carry away in his hand,” that his labor will be only “for the wind.”

Jubine and Qoheleth recognize that this reality applies as much to them as it does to everyone else, and so they both respond with a seize-the-day mentality that ignores possession for possession’s sake. Qoheleth follows his warning against abundance with a reiteration of his ethic of joy: “Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion” (5:18). Jubine precedes his challenge to Bullock with a playful treatise on his future love and joy, which he delivers to Bullock’s secretary:

I will come across a small and lovely one with curly black hair, like yours, and dimples in the cheeks, like yours, and a mouth that suggests honey, like yours. But she will not want Simmons mattresses and Toastmaster toasters and Cannon sheets and Gunther coats and De Beers Limited will not rate with her. She will want me. That’s all. She will share my pumpernickel and my pail of beer and because she can hold my hand she will not want anything else. (41)

Jubine too will “not want anything else” when he finds a loving companion who shares his desire to elevate joy in the moment over chasing after the vanishing allure of material possessions.
Beyond the Ecclesiastes elements evoked by Link and Camilo’s relationship and Jubine’s critique of materialism, *The Narrows* indicates Petry’s overall interest in the King James Bible. As she does in “The Novel as Social Criticism,” Petry again recommends the Bible as a potential source for reevaluating society. In *The Narrows*, Petry focuses on the lack of will that the Bible’s adherents have for putting it to use. Though it also contains an ironic critique of Abbie’s misuse of the Bible, the following quotation from Abbie’s perspective conveys Petry’s sincere view of the Bible and its influence: “All of us, she thought, young and old, all of us here in this funeral chapel were brought up on the King James version of the Bible, all able to quote it, part of our thinking, part of our lives, and we keep moving away from it, forget about it. Even though we go to church” (226). While Abbie seems to want everyone simply to think the same way she thinks, Petry wants Christians to remember the Bible as a means for transformation.

Given Petry’s lifelong interest in the Bible and her use of Ecclesiastes in *The Narrows*, it stands to reason that Ecclesiastes at least indirectly influenced Petry’s earlier novel *The Street*. And, as I hope to demonstrate, the influence of Ecclesiastes on *The Street* is significant and foundational. Like Ecclesiastes’ critique of proverbial wisdom, Petry shows how her heroine Lutie Johnson fails to achieve the American Dream despite carrying out the regimented hard work. While my argument identifying Petry’s concern over the inequalities of the American Dream is not original – in fact, this emphasis may be the single most consistent thread in Petry criticism (cf. Wesling, Wattley, Clark, Bell, Yarborough, and Lattin) – my argument that Ecclesiastes anticipates Petry’s critique and
that the book influenced *The Street* is. Moreover, Ecclesiastes offers guidance that – in other circumstances – could help Lutie to live a more-fulfilling life even in the midst of an unjust social system. However, Petry presents another Ecclesiastes-style critique of Ecclesiastes by demonstrating how being a poor, black woman eventually denies Lutie any ability to enjoy. Considered alongside Petry’s interest in the Bible as a critical tool, the skeptical elements in *The Street* reveal that a significant part of the history of skepticism originated in the book of Ecclesiastes.

*The Street* follows single mother Lutie Johnson through her experiences trying to advance socially and economically. Lutie arrives at an 116th Street apartment in Harlem with her eight-year-old son Bub after working for a rich, white family in the suburbs, separating from her husband Jim over his infidelity, and temporarily living with her father Pop and, in Lutie’s opinion, his lascivious girlfriend. Lutie begins on what she hopes will be an upwardly mobile path when she meets an attractive, successful musician named Boots and sings with his band. However, because his white boss Junto wants to sleep with Lutie, Boots is forbidden from pursuing Lutie romantically and also from paying her to sing. About the same time, Lutie’s apartment superintendent Jones tries to rape her, and when foiled by their neighbor Mrs. Hedges, Jones resolves to punish Lutie by getting Bub in trouble. The eight-year-old Bub gets caught stealing letters from mailboxes (Jones tells him this will help the police to catch a criminal), and is placed in a detention center where he faces reform school. Lutie consults a lawyer to represent Bub, and – even though he knows she doesn’t need a lawyer – he asks for 200 dollars, which Lutie doesn’t have. Lutie asks Boots for the money and Boots sets up a meeting with
Junto, in which Lutie is expected to prostitute herself. She refuses, Boots tries to rape her before Junto has the opportunity, and Lutie beats Boots to death with an iron candlestick. She then abandons Bub, ostensibly for his own good, and flees New York for Chicago. The novel’s tragic conclusion – which echoes Ecclesiastes’ critique of moral causality – demonstrates Lutie’s inability to successfully navigate the American Dream despite working hard toward that focused goal.  

Largely because of her experience working for the white Chandler family in Connecticut, Lutie becomes obsessed with money. When she sees a kitchen advertisement on a train, she recalls how much influence the Chandlers had on her: “That kitchen in Connecticut had changed her whole life” (56). Essentially, the Chandlers’ kitchen – along with their friends, home, parents, money, and books – convinces Lutie to buy into the American Dream: “She thought of the Chandlers and their friends in Lyme. They were right about people being able to make money, but it took hard, grinding work to do it – hard work and self-sacrifices” (315). Lutie assures herself of her capability to sacrifice and to work hard: “she had been able to get this far without help from anyone, why, all she had to do was plan each step and she could get wherever she wanted to go. A wave of self-confidence swept over her and she thought, I’m young and strong, there isn’t anything I can’t do” (63). Lutie believes that as long as she works hard, her hard work will be rewarded with financial success: “she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she” (64).
Lutie’s reference to Benjamin Franklin recalls his formative role in the American psyche and specifically his guidance for living that he offers in *The Autobiography*. Franklin writes,

> Having emerg’d from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro’ Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducing Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. (231)

Franklin’s system plays a large role in establishing the American Dream ideal of the self-made man, and, especially in his “Art of Virtue” section, associates hard work and virtuous behavior with social and economic rewards. Connecting virtue with success – as highlighted in the last chapter – has precedent in the biblical book of Proverbs.

Ultimately, Lutie hopes that following Franklin’s system will help her escape from the poverty of 116th Street: “she didn’t have to stay on this street or any other street like it if she fought hard enough” (206).

Lutie thinks of money as a means of escaping the street because she has seen money’s transformative power. When Mr. Chandler’s brother shoots himself in the head on Christmas morning in front of his mother, brother, sister-in-law, nephew, and Lutie herself, the family covers up the suicide: “she was interested in the way in which money transformed a suicide she had seen committed from start to finish in front of her very eyes into ‘an accident with a gun’” (49). Similarly, when Boots escapes a speeding ticket
by paying off the police officer, Lutie realizes that money can have a similar power for black people: “Money could make a white cop almost smile when he caught a black man speeding. It was the only thing that could get her and Bub out of that street” (166). Lutie places all of her hopes on her ability to make and save enough money to move away from the Harlem streets. However, while Lutie plays her part – working hard and saving money – her blackness and her poverty keep her from the American Dream. She realizes too late that this system of economic advancement is stacked against her: “All the time money. And you wanted it because you wanted to move from this street, but in the beginning it was because you heard the rich white Chandlers talk about it. ‘Filthy rich.’ ‘Richest country in the world.’ ‘Make it while you’re young.’ Only you forgot. You forgot you were black” (389). Lutie works hard but doesn’t succeed. She follows the path prescribed by the American Dream, and the American Dream yields her no upward mobility, no security, and no happiness.

Like the rewards for hard work promised by the American Dream, the biblical book of Proverbs promises God’s reward for good actions and punishment for bad ones. Proverbs 3:33, for example, claims, “The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just.” Largely based on Calvinism and the Protestant work ethic, traditional attitudes in the United States tend to conflate success or failure in achieving the American Dream of self-advancement with a system of moral causality. Not only are good people rewarded and wicked people punished, but they are rewarded and punished specifically in economic terms. Even worse, this mentality can lead people to associate rich, successful people with goodness on the one hand and poor,
struggling people with wickedness on the other. Proverbs plays a further role in this
dangerous mentality: “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of
the diligent maketh rich” (10:4). Based on this system, Lutie either will be rewarded with
monetary blessings for her hard work, or her poverty will be attributed to her own
failings, and likely attached to a label of laziness. But, as Petry makes clear, Lutie does
work hard and she still fails to attain the American Dream. Ecclesiastes recognizes that
sometimes, as is the case for Lutie, life doesn’t follow a system of moral reciprocity.
Using some of the same language as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes 8:14 responds with a reversal
of Proverbs: “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the
wicked.”

In addition to its distance from Proverbs, Mark R. Sneed explains how
Ecclesiastes’ skepticism diverges from almost all other Hebrew understandings of justice.
Sneed writes,

While Qohelet is skeptical about a number of things, the most shocking is
his question of the doctrine of retribution, a fundamental principle
underlying the Hebrew faith and especially the wisdom literature. This is
the teaching that God punishes or rewards persons depending on their
behavior. A pious, righteous lifestyle will be rewarded with success and
prosperity, whereas wickedness will result in catastrophe and an early
death. (4-5)

While Lutie isn’t perfect, Petry doesn’t present her catastrophe as a result of her
wickedness. Instead, Petry shows in The Street that not everyone has the same access to
the American Dream, and she encourages readers to avoid dismissing people without that access as evil or lazy.

Furthermore, judging by Mrs. Chandler’s empty affairs and Mr. Chandler’s alcoholism and his brother’s suicide, the Chandlers’ successful navigation of the American Dream doesn’t make them happy either. Again, The Street echoes Ecclesiastes. The Chandlers, like Peter Bullock in The Narrows, become obsessed by money and it fails to add productively to their lives. Though she has somewhat less of it than the Chandlers and much more of it than Lutie, money doesn’t satisfy Mrs. Hedges either. Mrs. Hedges represents a version of the success story Lutie envisions – she moves from being a homeless woman to a relatively wealthy entrepreneur. Nonetheless, like the Chandlers and Bullock before her, Mrs. Hedges finds money incapable of meeting all of her needs: “She and Mr. Junto had made plenty of money. Only none of it had made her hair grow back. None of it had erased those awful, livid scars on her body” (252). Here the example evokes somewhat more sympathy, but the point remains: although money offers certain advantages, it cannot in itself satisfy: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

While it is easy to understand Lutie’s single-minded pursuit of money, given that she has so little, money not only fails to satisfy Lutie but her obsession over it hurts her. Realizing that money and possessions cannot bring happiness, Qoheleth instead recommends enjoying good food and drink in the moment: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart” (Ecclesiastes 9:7). A person cannot just save money all of her life. Though her conversations with Bub and her parsimonious
actions usually suggest otherwise, Lutie seems at times to realize this for herself. Listening to the radio, she desires to go out dancing: “she would like to go somewhere where there was music like that and dancing and young people laughing” (78). She even sees the Junto Bar as a place for rejuvenation: “The inside of the Junto was always crowded, too, because the white bartenders in their immaculate coats greeted the customers graciously. Their courteous friendliness was a heart-warming thing that helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day’s work” (143). However, Lutie rarely acts on these desires because she wants to save as much money as possible. As a result, she doesn’t dance or laugh with other people, and she doesn’t have any method for reinvigorating her life.

While Lutie may not necessarily need to spend money drinking and dancing, she does need some way to develop connections with other people in her community. For the most part, Lutie avoids making any connections – partly because she considers herself better than her neighbors – and this leaves her isolated and without people to ask for help. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 stresses the importance of developing of a community: “Two are better than one; […] For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.” Petry echoes this advice: “when there were two working if one got sick the other could carry on and there’d still be food and the rent would be paid. It was possible to have a home that way” (371). Because she doesn’t foster connections with people on her street Lutie has no one to help her. Lutie’s attitude is incongruous – and disheartening – given her positive observation of people’s elevated humanity when arriving in Harlem on the subway:
freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here they are no longer creatures labeled simply ‘colored’ and therefore all alike. She noticed that once the crowd walked the length of the platform and started up the stairs toward the street, it expanded in size. The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together. She reached the street at the very end of the crowd and stood watching them as they scattered in all directions, laughing and talking to each other. (57-8)

Harlem helps these people to be human, to laugh and talk together as individuals. But because Lutie wants to make enough money to move away from their world, she mostly ignores them. This leaves Bub without a positive role model and Lutie with no one to talk to when Bub gets in trouble. Consequently, Lutie has no way of knowing that as a first time offender Bub doesn’t need a lawyer – knowledge even the lawyer exploiting her expects Lutie to know.

In addition to keeping her from community relationships that could have protected Bub, Lutie’s obsession with social mobility contributes to Bub’s imprisonment. Because Lutie “was always telling him how important it was that people make money and save money – those things she had learned from the Chandlers” (70), Bub takes up shoe shining on the street as a first effort to earn extra money: “Gee, Mom’ll be proud of me.’ Bub had said” (88). Instead, when he approaches Lutie with his shoe shine kit, she at first doesn’t recognize him – “Gosh, Mom, you didn’t even know me” (66) – and then
scolds him for behaving like the other children in the neighborhood, from whom she wants to escape. Lutie clearly cares for Bub and worries that she talks to him too much about money, but she rarely talks to him about anything else and doesn’t listen to him: “It seemed to him that all that week she talked to him about money. She was impatient, she rarely smiled, and she only half-heard him when he talked to her” (316). After this conversation, Bub tries another moneymaking scheme in an attempt to relieve some of the stress facing his mother. He agrees to help Jones – and, Jones lies, the police – by taking letters from mailboxes in exchange for a few dollars a week. Bub gets caught stealing and sent to a children’s shelter. When Lutie talks with him at the shelter, she doesn’t find out that Jones is responsible, which is a detail that could have helped her to realize hiring a lawyer was unnecessary.

Lutie’s pursuit of upward mobility also keeps her from connecting with her husband and her father. She contributes to the failure of her relationship with Jim by taking a better paying job in the suburbs. Lutie and Jim used to enjoy visiting friends in Harlem and coming home to bed together. But when Lutie goes to live with the Chandlers and begins coming home only once a month to save the money from the train fare, Jim starts seeing another woman. Lutie moves into Pop’s new place, but, because she dislikes Lil and Pop’s lifestyle, she moves into the apartment building in which Jones is the superintendent. Most strikingly, however, she doesn’t return to Pop’s house even after Jones tries to rape her. Following the American Dream’s prescription exclusively for upward mobility, Lutie refuses to move back to Pop’s house because it would represent a backward step. Additionally, Pop may have been able to help her with Bub’s
legal trouble, but she never asks. Not until eleven pages from the end of the novel, and only four pages before she kills Boots, does Lutie finally think to ask Pop for help: “Pop might have some ideas. Yes, he’d have ideas. He always had them. […] She would go and talk to Pop” (424-5). But at this point it’s too late. Lutie has distanced herself from her community and her father, so much that she only sought guidance from the economically superior Boots.

In Boots and Lutie’s relationship, Petry presents a complex Ecclesiastes-resonant social commentary. Lutie enjoys a few good moments with Boots talking over drinks, riding in his car, and singing in his band. In their first ride together, Petry evokes Ecclesiastes 1:7: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.” As Boots speeds back toward the casino, Lutie imagines the car going over into the river: “The car would go down, down, down into the river. The river would silently swallow it and quietly continue toward the sea. […] She thought of the apartment where she lived with a sudden access of warmth, for it was better to be there alive than buried under this silent river” (164). Petry foreshadows the violent end to their relationship in this scene, but she also echoes Ecclesiastes in presenting Lutie’s preference for life over death, even in humble conditions: “a living dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4), and in the potential of Boots and Lutie’s relationship. Rather than take a chance on him romantically, however, Lutie intends to use Boots: “She reaffirmed her intention of using Boots Smith” (166). Lutie doesn’t open herself to love, even though Boots could see falling in love with her: “‘You know, baby, I could fall in love with you easy,’ he said. And, he thought,
it’s true. And that if he couldn’t get her any other way, he just might marry her” (225). Instead of love, Lutie primarily wants Boots to help her advance socially within the framework of the American Dream.

Specifically, Lutie sees her relationship with Boots as a means to a singing career, which she feels is her only way to escape the streets of Harlem. She also, at this point, thinks she will succeed as a singer if she can work diligently at it: “if she could sing – work hard at it, study, really get somewhere, it would give direction to her life” (160).

But of course Lutie’s career as a singer is not only a matter of hard work. Mr. Junto – who Petry names after Franklin’s mutual-improvement club – forbids Boots from paying Lutie to sing: “You’re to keep your hands off her. […] Don’t pay her for singing with the band. Give her presents from time to time. […] This will make it easier for you to arrange for me to see her” (262, 274). Junto anticipates sleeping with Lutie and then setting her up as an especially lucrative prostitute. Junto’s influence means that Lutie cannot earn any money singing and that Boots cannot pursue Lutie romantically. If Boots disobeys, Junto reminds him, “I made you. If I were you, I wouldn’t overlook the fact that whoever makes a man can also break him” (264). Having had his spirit crushed by Junto, Boots relinquishes his chance at flourishing with Lutie: “No. Lutie Johnson wasn’t that important to him. He wasn’t in love with her, and even if he had been she didn’t weigh enough to balance the things he would lose” (274). Even worse, when Lutie asks him to loan her 200 dollars, Boots uses Junto’s power over him as an excuse for trying to rape her: “Sure, Lutie would sleep with Junto, but he was going to have her first. […] Yeah, he can have the leavings. After all, he’s white and this time a white man can have a black
man’s leavings” (423). Junto’s manipulation doesn’t forgive Boots’ attempted rape, but it
does go a significant way toward explaining it.

Ultimately Lutie cannot enjoy life as a singer or as a mother or as a lover. This is
partly because of her obsessive pursuit of the American Dream, but it is primarily the
result of unequal access to flourishing. Like the American Dream, Ecclesiastes’
philosophy – including its calls to enjoy work, food, drink, and loving relationships –
doesn’t wholly work for Lutie because she is poor and black. Lutie recognizes the effects
poverty had on her most satisfying relationship, her marriage to Jim: “It wasn’t his fault it
didn’t work out. And I guess it really wasn’t mine either. We were too poor. And we
were too young to stand being poor” (225). Though they loved each other, Lutie and
Jim’s marriage failed because Jim couldn’t find consistent employment: “when she and
Jim got married it looked as though it should have been a happy, successful marriage.
They were young enough and enough in love to have made a go of it. It always came
back to the same thing. Jim couldn’t find a job. It ate into him. Slowly, bit by bit, it
undermined his belief in himself” (168). Jim cannot find work, Lutie realizes, “because
for years now the white folks haven’t liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for
them to support their families” (388-9). And so Lutie had to find a job to support her
husband and her son. Because that job kept her away from her family for weeks at a time,
it effectively ended their chance at flourishing.

Many people living in Harlem in the mid-twentieth century shared Lutie’s
position. Petry highlights the persistence of racial oppression even on an otherwise
exceptionally pleasant day. She presents this contrast powerfully in a scene that evokes
Ecclesiastes’ interest in moments of happiness. As Lutie reflects on the dangers of the Harlem streets, she remembers also an unseasonably warm spring day filled with joy: “Kids on roller skates and kids precariously perched on home-made scooters whizzed unexpectedly through the groups of people clustered on the sidewalk. The sun was warm. It beamed on the boys and girls walking past arm in arm. It made their faces very soft and young and relaxed” (194-5). Ecclesiastes 11:7 similarly values the sun’s ability to transform a day: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.” Lutie’s memory concludes, however, not with pleasure, but with the death of a young boy. Struck by his worn out shoes, Lutie watches as his sister identifies his body:

she looked at the girl and she saw something – some emotion that she couldn’t name – flicker in the girl’s face. It was as though for a fraction of a second something – hate or sorrow or surprise – had moved inside her and been reflected on her face. As quickly as it came, it was gone and it was replaced by a look of resignation, of complete acceptance. It was an expression that said the girl hoped for no more than this from life because other things that had happened to her had paved the way so that she had lost the ability to protest against anything – even death suddenly like this in the spring. (197)

Lutie learns that a white baker had “killed [the boy] with a bread knife” (198). By juxtaposing the potential goodness of Ecclesiastes’ philosophy with the realities of poverty, Petry shows that this philosophy isn’t available to everyone equally. Like other people on the street, Lutie faces pressures from the white world and precarious financial
circumstances that make it difficult to successfully enact Ecclesiastes’ philosophy. In the novel’s tragic conclusion – as Lutie rides away from her son, having just killed Boots in self-defense – Petry reveals that Lutie cannot.

The utter severities of Lutie’s social conditions have led some readers to view Petry as a literary descendant of US naturalists Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Stephen Crane. Don Dingledine’s essay, for example, “‘It Could Have Been Any Street’: Ann Petry, Stephen Crane, and the Fate of Naturalism,” argues that *The Street* deliberately invokes Crane’s 1893 novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Clearly, Petry’s novel highlights the powerful naturalistic forces of poverty and their resulting social conditions. Lutie reflects, “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people – slowly, surely, inevitably” (229). Petry’s naturalism provides a further link between *The Street* and Ecclesiastes. In fact, Ecclesiastes 9:11 – the same verse used by all three naturalist writers featured in this project – serves as an appropriate warning against blind acceptance of a social system that correlates goodness with success: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Petry demonstrates that hard work cannot guarantee achieving the American Dream. Working hard might improve the likelihood of a person’s success, “but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

However, this should not be taken as an invitation to passivity. If life on the street is so bad that people have “lost the ability to protest against anything” (197) – if they
must resign themselves to mindless drinking and having sex only as an escape from living rather than an enhancement to living – Ecclesiastes’ philosophy isn’t additive. When men like Junto can capitalize on people’s misery by providing empty distractions, Ecclesiastes’ call to enjoy falls short. Mrs. Hedges explained to Junto that “people had to dance and drink and make love in order to forget their troubles and that bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments. Slowly and cautiously Mr. Junto had become the owner of all three” (251). On the other hand, when Ecclesiastes’ critique of the status quo exposes unequal access to happiness and when its counsel for communal enjoyment encourages a system that provides all people a chance to enjoy together, Qoheleth’s recommendations can help people to feel more human. Furthermore, Ecclesiastes can provide motivation to improve the system. Even within its world of poverty and oppression, The Street hints at a way to avoid obsessing over the American Dream and to reclaim a sense of community and of self: “No matter what it cost them, people had to come to places like the Junto, she thought. They had to replace the haunting silences of rented rooms and little apartments with the murmur of voices, the sound of laughter; they had to empty two or three small glasses of liquid gold so they could believe in themselves again” (147).

This Ecclesiastes-focused analysis of The Street helps to illuminate Petry’s use of the Bible as a tool for correcting social ills, an intention she would later formalize in her essay “The Novel as Social Criticism.” As is particularly evident in the quotation that begins this chapter, Petry sees the Bible as a good source for reimagining society and as a specific model for social engagement in fiction: “In one way or another, the novelist who
criticizes some undesirable phase of the status quo is [following the Old Testament idea] that man is his brother’s keeper” (95). Petry reminds readers – as does Toomer’s Cane – that as long as the Bible isn’t coopted by a powerful majority, it can play an active role in addressing racial discrimination and other social injustices. However, Petry rightly reveals in The Narrows that this doesn’t happen as often as it could: “All of us, [Abbie] thought, young and old, all of us here in this funeral chapel were brought up on the King James version of the Bible, all able to quote it, part of our thinking, part of our lives, and we keep moving away from it, forget about it. Even though we go to church” (226).

Like Petry, all of the authors considered in this project encourage religious people – namely Christians in the United States – to recommitment to the Bible’s complexity. Engaging this complexity has declined alongside the rise of literal-minded fundamentalism in the US, but Ecclesiastes can remind Christians of the biblical imperative to view their own beliefs, and those of their tradition, with a high level of honest reflection. This kind of critique of the status quo is part of what significant literature does. In one of its many roles, literature as a skeptical messenger turns its descriptive eye to the world and exposes readers’ prejudices. And, as a foundational text in western civilization, Ecclesiastes helped to fashion literature as a tool for questioning the status quo. This specific contribution to literary history makes Ecclesiastes an especially appealing allusive choice for literary writers.

Furthermore, London, Glasgow, Crane, Wharton, James, Hemingway, Toomer, and Petry played a role in advancing the historical interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Through attentive readings conveyed in their fiction, these authors highlight Ecclesiastes’ affinities
with Darwin and Nietzsche, its place as a bridge text between the sacred and the secular, its insistence on the indifference of nature and the value of a cooperative community, its rejection of transactional living and blind romanticism, its skepticism, its critique of the American Dream, its struggle to bring meaning and joy into an inherently meaningless universe, and its overall compatibility with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century zeitgeist.

The influence of these literary interpretations – while often reflecting progressive biblical scholars’ views of Ecclesiastes – provided motivation for conservative biblical scholars to acknowledge Ecclesiastes’ unorthodoxy as well. In short, these writers benefited from, underscored, and accelerated the recognition of Ecclesiastes’ modernity.
Epilogue | ‘A Time to Embrace’: Ecclesiastes, Postsecularism, and the Value of a Reverent Skepticism

Drawing attention to what Ecclesiastes offered late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century naturalist, realist, and modernist writers not only unearths a fairly comprehensive religious engagement in a literary period often thought antithetical to religion, it also encourages thinking about what Ecclesiastes might offer people in the twenty-first century. Most notably, Ecclesiastes demonstrates to a person interested in religion that she doesn’t have to choose only between literal-minded-fundamentalist religion and godless atheism. Pious skepticism in the mold of Ecclesiastes encourages a place for both reverence and skepticism. Furthermore, any version of Christianity that takes Bible reading seriously – as most at least claim to do – must find a place for an Ecclesiastes-inspired skeptical reappraisal of the status quo. Religious skepticism could then play an active role in encouraging US Christians to rethink their reading strategies, adopt humility instead of religious certainty, and challenge misuses of Christianity to address religious violence and combat the capitalistic cooptation of the Bible by the people in power.

The writers I’ve considered have for the most part featured Ecclesiastes’ skepticism, but many of them, like Qoheleth, also remained invested in religion throughout their lives. Wharton and Hemingway, for example, developed and maintained an interest in Catholicism. Glasgow made a kind of peace with her father’s Calvinism.
And several of James’s late novels present and explore religious themes. This long-term commitment to religion demonstrates that these writers held more than just an artistic interest in the Bible. And while this commitment may not derive exclusively from Ecclesiastes, it is compatible with the biblical book that they showcased in their titles and/or epigraphs. In addition to his skepticism, Qoheleth recommends reverence and humility before God: “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools. […] Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (5:1-2). Because God is utterly removed from humans – “for God is in heaven and thou upon earth” – Qoheleth chooses reverence, care, and brevity.

Qoheleth’s reverence before God coincides with his humility in the face of uncertainty and his recognition of the limitations of wisdom. He explains, “I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” (7:23-4). Instead of claiming certainty in divine matters – as some twenty-first-century US Christians often seem to do – Qoheleth acknowledges that there are some things he can’t find out. Based on his limited understanding of God, the world, and human lives, Qoheleth couches his main recommendation for living in terms of a divine gift: “Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: […] this is the gift of God” (5:18-9). While Ecclesiastes’ reverence is perhaps a strange reverence in relation to the rest of the Bible – not least of
all because it treats the Bible’s other texts skeptically – it is a reverence that can provide people a connection to something larger than themselves without asking them to abandon – and, in fact, while encouraging – their ability to think critically about the status quo, the limitations of their own worldview, and the relationship between spirituality and reality.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 thrust the topic of religious violence onto the world stage. While some of the people who organized those attacks claimed an affiliation with Islam, the publicity of 9/11 led to reflections on violence perpetuated by people claiming a commitment to a variety of religions traditions. Mark Juergensmeyer notes, “Virtually every major religious tradition—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist—has served as a resource for violent actors” (xii). This diversity of religious violence has, in turn, led some people to argue for the immediate and total elimination of religion. For example, Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* and Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* make this argument explicit already in their books’ titles, as does, in its own way, Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. On the other hand, responding to similar issues, Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* challenges the assumed objective neutrality of secularism and questions whether it has provided an improvement to religious worldviews. Even before 9/11, William Connolly posed some of the same questions in *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, and since 9/11 has, in his book *Pluralism*, advocated for a deeper pluralism than a narrowly rational secularism can offer. Connolly rejects both religious certainty and the secular exclusion of religious thought from valid and legitimate public reason. Given the current improbability of even a lessening, much less the disappearance, of religious engagement
in the world, the arguments made by Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins – though certainly not without justification – seem ultimately less helpful than approaches like Asad’s and Connolly’s, which allow for thinking about the multiple roles religion plays in public thinking and its potential role in productively addressing religious violence.

Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God* approaches religious violence in this vein. In a preface to his third edition, Juergensmeyer writes, “this book is not a judgment against religion. Rather it is an appreciation of the power that the religious imagination still holds in public life, and the recognition that many will find in it a cure for violence instead of a cause” (xii). He concludes the book by advocating for an appreciation of religion as part of the solution for addressing religious violence:

Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus, religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two—some assertion of moderation in religion’s passion, and some acknowledgment of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life. In a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself. (248-9)

In his focus on combining religion and “Enlightenment values,” Juergensmeyer advocates for both the sacred and the secular. Furthermore, a renewed appreciation of religion entails an engagement with all of a religion’s sacred texts, even – and especially – when those texts contradict each other and make religious thought more complex, more
challenging, and less certain. This combination of reverence and skepticism appears vital not only to a sociologist of religion as a means to address twenty-first-century religious violence, but the Bible itself offers an exemplar of reverent skepticism in Ecclesiastes. Doubtlessly, this focus on the sacred and the secular contributed to Ecclesiastes’ popularity in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it seems helpful to renew an appreciation for the biblical book in the twenty-first.

A faithful reading of Ecclesiastes demands that skepticism play an important religious role alongside religious reverence. Saba Mahmood provides a powerful example of the kind of committedly reverent religious engagement that Qoheleth maintains even when he’s confused about life and about God. In Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Mahmood records her experiences with the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, a group of women who aspire to be “slaves of God.” Whereas many secular feminists cringe at these women’s voluntary sacrifice of agency – in the same way that many secular humanists cringe at any commitment to religious practice – Mahmood sees the movement as an ethical project that cannot be reduced to uncritical attitudes, unreflective traditionalism, or passive conformity. The women’s intense devotion to the Quranic text leads them to reflect – through recitation as a means of meditating – on the text so that they themselves might be transformed. Likewise, Mahmood values engaging with these women as a possible catalyst for her own transformation:

Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another’s
worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other. (36-7)

Both the mosque movement and Mahmood advocate opening oneself to an external reality that holds the potential for altering perspectives. Similarly, Qoheleth bases his project on experiential wisdom and openness to whatever he discovers. Qoheleth is remade by his observation that life is vanity and it informs all of his recommendations for living. Unlike, for example, Ecclesiastes’ contemporary “The Dialogue of Pessimism,” which, after following similar questions, advocates suicide, Qoheleth chooses to live. He approaches God and the world with reverence regardless of the difficult realities he uncovers.

On the other hand, reading shouldn’t be so committed to a text’s worldview that it allows that worldview to become dangerous. In the US – especially since the rise of the Christian or Religious Right in the 1970s – fundamentalist reading practices have led, in part, to violence directed toward doctors and clinics that perform abortions, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh, the 1996 Centennial Olympic Park bombing by Eric Robert Rudolph, and countless examples of hostility and physical violence toward gays and lesbians. Although religious violence is complex and no reading style will necessarily keep violence out of religion, Ecclesiastes’ skepticism offers some moderate advantages. Because Ecclesiastes provides an example in the Bible
of questioning the Bible, Christians should likewise question anachronistic applications of historically and situationally specific passages about sexuality, justified violence, and alternate belief systems. Essentially, Ecclesiastes asks for humility when facing an uncertain universe: “Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it” (8:17). If a canonized biblical voice admits the limitations of human knowledge, Christian practitioners should follow its example.3

One thing Ecclesiastes’ reverent skepticism should reveal to US Christians is the incompatibility of the biblical message with any kind of capitalistic implementation. Max Weber addresses this phenomenon – primarily as it played out in Northern Europe – in his 1905 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Readily apparent from Weber’s critical analysis, Protestant Christian capitalism leaves little room for Ecclesiastes: “Wealth is thus [considered] bad ethically only in so far as it is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life, and its acquisition is bad only when it is with the purpose of later living merrily and without care” (163). Ecclesiastes argues almost exactly the opposite. For one, living merrily and enjoying the moment make up a core aspect of Qoheleth’s philosophy: “a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (8:15). Further, for Qoheleth, wealth is ethically bad not because of its temptation to idleness, but because of its proclivity to lead to the unsatisfying, unending pursuit of wealth for wealth’s sake: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (5:10). This pursuit –
which is mandated in by turn-of-the-century New York high society in *The House of Mirth* – plays out particularly destructively for Lily Bart. Because Lily neither accepts nor transcends the expectation that she make an especially lucrative marriage, she’s shunned, suffers, and dies. The required acquisition of wealth is hurtful for Lily – again, not because it might result in her enjoyment of life, but in fact the opposite – because it keeps her from living happily with the man she loves.

More recently, Connolly’s *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* makes an attempt to explain the relationship between capitalism and Christianity in the twenty-first-century United States. Connolly coins the phrase “the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” as a means of exploring “the connection *today* between evangelical Christianity, cowboy capitalism, the electronic news media, and the Republican Party” (39, his emphasis). Connolly highlights the complexity of this process by listing a series of contributing political and social elements, which have only a lose connection to only a certain interpretation of religious morality:

The capitalist-evangelical assemblage finds multiple modes of expression, each amplifying the others: in the market apologism and scandal mongering of the electronic news media, in mobilization drives by Fox News, the Republican Party, and campaign ads, in administrative edicts to roll back environmentalism, weaken labor, and curtail minority rights *in the name of religious morality*, in right-wing appointments to the Supreme Court, in support for preemptive wars, in tolerance or much worse of state practices of torture that negate the Geneva Conventions, and in
propagating a climate of fear and loathing against the Islamic world. The resonance machine that results both infiltrates the logic of perception and inflects the understanding of economic interests. (40, my emphasis)

If such religious morality is based at all in the biblical text, only a status-quo-endorsed – rather than a skeptical or a reverent – reading of the Bible will yield this kind of capitalistic Christianity. Such status-quo-endorsed reading strategies echo Toomer’s concern in *Cane* about the “sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (114).

Take, for example, what Connolly identifies as Bush-era “administrative edicts to role back environmentalism […] in the name of religious morality” (40). Various Christian views on the environment demonstrate how certain readings of the biblical message might yield dangerous results, while also providing a chance to explore an Ecclesiastes-inspired response to these dangers. Genesis presents two separate creation accounts with markedly different blueprints for human interactions with the environment. In its first chapter, Genesis advocates the kind of environmental morality adopted by many in the US Republican Party: “God said unto [humans], Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (1:28).

Essentially – although an astute reader might ask how the term “replenish” operates in this passage – this version of creation encourages people to use the environment to their greatest and most immediate personal benefit. This divine blessing for subduing and dominating the earth helps to explain how a person might consider production and consumption as moral values.
However, only eighteen verses later, the second chapter of Genesis advocates a much less exploitative relationship between humans and creation. Genesis 2:15 reads: “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” A divine mandate to dress and to keep the land gives humans the role of preserving the environment for later generations rather than the absolute freedom to use it for their immediate benefit. Emphasizing the second Genesis creation account could help to improve Christian relationships with the environment, and it is this kind of a reading that Ecclesiastes inspires. A skeptically reverent reader would look seriously at both accounts and decide which of the two to embrace based on the current environmental situation. Given the earth’s dwindling resources and the irrevocable damage already caused by human technologies, the first Genesis account proves dangerous. Ecclesiastes’ emphasis on experientially based wisdom encourages readers to approach this text with skepticism. And yet, as a complex book with multiple voices, the Bible offers a second creation account that offers helpful guidance toward preservation. Ecclesiastes invites readers to embrace this text reverently.

But, of course, this specific environmental example is only one aspect of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine. In *God is Back*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge provide a powerful example of the perceived compatibility of Christianity and capitalism. They record a scene from a twenty-first century Chinese Christian Bible study in which the leader connects US prosperity directly to Christianity and tries to persuade group members to import this mentality from the United States:
Countries with lots of Christians become more powerful. America grew strong because it was Christian. The more Christian China becomes, the mightier it will be. If you want China to be a truly prosperous country, you must spread the Word to nonbelievers. If you are a patriotic Chinese, you have to be a Christian. (3)

This unequivocal call to Christianity – in an attempt to accumulate prosperity and gain power – indicates that the association between Christianity and power-wielding capitalism influences many people’s views of Christianity. An Ecclesiastes-inspired reading – skeptical of the current religious opinions that support the status quo and reverent toward texts that complicate such views – would again point to other biblical texts that contradict this understanding. Three brief examples serve to illustrate the point: Jesus tells a rich man to sell all of his possessions and give his money to the poor: “go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven” (Matthew 19:21); the early Christians shared everything in a possession-free community: “neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common” (Acts 4:32); and even the Old Testament book of Leviticus – evoked selectively by the Religious Right in condemnation of what they term sexual immorality – recommends sympathy and not profit: “And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him. […] Take thou no usury of him, or increase” (25:35).

Ultimately, though, Qoheleth claims that money and possessions simply fail to satisfy. Perhaps somewhat cynically, the most rhetorically effective strategy for
distancing Christianity from capitalism might come in Qoheleth’s failed test of excess. In Ecclesiastes chapter two, he creates a situation for himself similar to the American Dream: “I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards” (2:4); Qoheleth goes on to add, in his extensive test of pleasure, “gardens and orchards,” “pools of water,” “servants and maidens,” “great possessions,” “cattle,” “silver and gold,” “men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts” (2:5-8). The phrase, “of all sorts,” covers any other possessions not listed that a person might imagine could make him happy. After gathering all of these things, however, Qoheleth realizes that they are only empty distractions, not additions to living: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, […] I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun” (2:11, 18). Enacting Ecclesiastes’ philosophy requires a degree of financial freedom, but the value of food and wine, swimming pools and songs, friends and lovers, comes in the pleasure gained through communal enjoyment, not in the accumulation of money, status, or possessions.

Qoheleth’s wisdom should lead to a Christian reappraisal of the US obsession with capitalistic production, exploitation, and consumption. It should lead away from literal-minded fundamentalism and toward reverent skepticism. And it should lead to humility, caution, and kindness in response to uncertainty. By highlighting Ecclesiastes’ passionate skepticism, the authors considered in this project remind the culture that there is a resource within the Bible for keeping the Bible from telling lies, for engaging responsibly with religious values, for not being exclusively secular while also not being a
fundamentalist, a purveyor of violence, or an exploitative capitalist. Moreover, the prevalence of allusions to Ecclesiastes in the literary fiction of some of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century’s most influential minds should encourage religious people to take this short, somewhat strange biblical book more seriously.
Notes to Chapter One

1 Ecclesiastes 1:10.

2 As the 1611 King James Authorized Version had effectively no competitors until 1952 when the Revised Standard Version issued its Old Testament, the KJV would have been most available to all of the writers considered in this project. Accordingly, all biblical quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted. I also use the versification as found in the KJV.

3 The Hebrew קהלת is pronounced Ko-hell-et and variously spelled Qohelet, Koheleth, Coheleth, and Qoheleth. The title provides a convenient way to identify the book’s speaker, and while the King James Bible translates קהלת as Preacher, I follow most biblical scholars in preferring Qohel-eth, especially because Ecclesiastes’ speaker is a complex literary character and is generally less interested in preaching than in philosophizing.

4 Outside of the United States, James Joyce in Ulysses (1922) puts Leopold and Molly Bloom’s house at 7 Eccles Street in Dublin and Evelyn Waugh quotes Ecclesiastes 1:2 – “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” – near the conclusion of his 1945 novel Brideshead Revisited (318). I focus on US literature, but Ecclesiastes’ twentieth-century popularity spanned to other English-language literatures and, as I argue in this introduction, other languages and disciplines as well.

5 Comparing Anderson with Ecclesiastes, Charles Scruggs writes, “Anderson skirts the Goth for the theme of mutability: George realizes (echoing Ecclesiastes) that man “must live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun’ [234]” (79). See Ecclesiastes 1:6, “The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits,” and 6:12, “For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”

6 In lines 23-34 of Prufrock, Eliot borrows from Ecclesiastes chapter three, especially lines 23, 26-29, and 31: “And indeed there will be time /[…] There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; / There will be time to murder and create, / And time for all the works and days of hands / […] / Time for you and time for me.” Ecclesiastes 3:2-4, and 8 look similar: “A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. […] A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” Furthermore, Eliot’s notes to The Waste Land acknowledge his debt to Ecclesiastes as early as the 23rd line of the poem: “And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief” (cf. 12:5). Another reference in The Waste Land to Ecclesiastes chapter twelve comes in line 30 – “I will show you fear in a handful
of dust” – which alludes to Ecclesiastes 12:7: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was.” B. C. Southam notes that line 65 in “Ash Wednesday,” the burden of the grasshopper “is a reference to Ecclesiastes xii, 5: ‘the grasshopper shall be a burden’” (227). Some of the rhythms and ideas from Prufrock reappear in Four Quartets even as early as the first three lines: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.” John Turlington encourages both of these parallels in his 1986 master’s thesis “The Music of Ecclesiastes 3 in T.S. Eliot’s ‘East Coker’ and ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’” That Eliot’s interest in Ecclesiastes spans across his Christian and pre-Christian poetry suggests Ecclesiastes’ position as a bridge text to and from Christianity. And the fragmented nature of Ecclesiastes made it especially attractive to pre- and post-Christian Eliot.

7 The identification of the speaker of Ecclesiastes as “Ecclesiast” comes from the Greek title for the book.

8 Updike claimed in an interview not to have recognized the allusion to Ecclesiastes until it was pointed out to him in a review: “It wasn’t until I read a review that I learned I had made that awful pun” (Conversations xii). This allusion – which we might term accidental – further illuminates the pervasiveness of Ecclesiastes in the twentieth-century. First, that Updike – who clearly has an interest in Ecclesiastes given the Ecclesiastes epigraph to his story collection Museums and Women (Ecclesiastes 3:11-13) – named his Episcopal priest after Ecclesiastes unintentionally suggests the book’s prominence in Updike’s subconscious. Second, reviewers were quick to recognize and to point out the allusion when Rabbit, Run was published in 1960.

9 I discuss the dating of Ecclesiastes later in this chapter in comparing economic circumstances in the time of Ecclesiastes composition and the late-nineteenth century.

10 Crenshaw’s observation applies equally to my thoughts on Ecclesiastes and to the thoughts of the writers I consider. While most of this project explores why late-nineteenth and twentieth-century US writers were interested in Ecclesiastes and how this interest contributes to their literary works, I am also invested in what I see as Ecclesiastes’ potential for correcting contemporary, unreflective understandings of Christianity. Too many Christian ideas in the United States currently allow for and sometimes even encourage perpetuating the status quo. At worst, some people in the US have co-opted Christianity to endorse exploitative capitalism and religiously motivated violence and discrimination. While Ecclesiastes probably cannot entirely correct these misuses of Christianity, it encourages questioning the status quo and reevaluating received wisdom. And, at its best, Ecclesiastes’ commitment to joy as the highest good should provide motivation for ensuring that all people have legitimate access to the ability to enjoy.

11 Ecclesiastes of course was a Jewish book before it was a Christian book and it has a specific Jewish history that sometimes parallels but also often diverges from its Christian history. Because of the more prevalent influence of Christianity on the history of US culture, I filter my focus on Ecclesiastes through its relationship to Christianity, but I do
not mean to undermine its relationship to Judaism or to suggest that these relationships are always the same.

12 Ecclesiastes’ denial of inherent meaning contrasts with most of the rest of the Old Testament, which claims to find inherent meaning in keeping God’s commandments.


14 Brown writes, “The first verse, in particular, has been read in various ways, some suggesting that the sage is encouraging investment in maritime trade, while others take the verse as exhorting charity. The latter sense seems more in line with apparent Near Eastern parallels, as well as with the history of interpretation. Compare, for example, the Egyptian proverb “Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it” from “Instruction of Anksheshonq” (101); Seow writes, “The verse is not about foreign investments, but liberalilty” (335); and Goethe, “Was willst du untersuchen, / Wohin die Milde fließt! / Ins Wasser wirf deine Kuchen; / Wer weiß, wer sie genießt! [Why do you want to find out where charity flows! Throw your bread into the water—who knows who will enjoy it?]” (West-östlicher Diwan chapter seven, qtd. in the English in Bartholomew 336).

15 See especially Ecclesiastes 9:7-10: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest. Whosoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave.”

16 Camus, wrongly in my opinion, tries to deflect this comparison of his work with Qoheleth’s. Discussing Don Juan, who Camus sees as an absurd hero, he claims, “It is quite false to see in Don Juan a man brought up on Ecclesiastes. For nothing is vanity to him except the hope of another life” (70). Given Camus’s emphasis on denying the afterlife in this quotation and elsewhere, it seems likely that he was unaware of Qoheleth’s own rejection of an afterlife consciousness. Had Camus known Ecclesiastes better, I doubt he would have rejected the comparison. This suggests that Camus doesn’t know Ecclesiastes well and, consequently, that Camus’s similarities with Ecclesiastes depend predominately on the spirit of the times rather than on any kind of direct influence from Qoheleth.

17 On another philosophical note, it’s worth noting that Jean Baudrillard, in his 1981 book-length essay Simulacra and Simulation, intentionally misattributes his epigraph to Ecclesiastes: “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact
that there is none. The simulacrum is true. –Ecclesiastes” (1). This quote doesn’t appear in Ecclesiastes; Baudrillard made it up himself. By attributing it to Ecclesiastes, he suggests that, like Qoheleth, his essay works from the assumption that there is no inherent or ultimate truth, other than the truth of the “simulacrum” or the truth that “all is vanity.” Baudrillard recognizes that Ecclesiastes saw this truth 2000 years before him and sends him a nod of acknowledgment across the centuries.

18 Kristeva coined the term intertextuality; however, in Desire in Language, she acknowledges her indebtedness to Bakhtin’s work: “an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (qtd. in Allen 38).

19 Machacek sees a close relationship between the traditional study of allusion and Kristeva’s original use of intertextuality: “Scholars who study allusions would do well to acknowledge how the recognition and interpretation of a verbal echo are culturally mediated and do not automatically occur in a transhistorically stable and predictable fashion. The fact that allusion is culturally mediated also means, however, that the rejection of allusion by cultural studies has been unnecessary. Indeed, poststructuralism and new historicism only stand to benefit by readmitting the study of allusion” (534).

20 Allen summarizes Barthes primary influence on the development of intertextuality: “As Barthes reminds us, the very word ‘text’ is, if we remember its original meanings, ‘a tissue, a woven fabric’ (Barthes, 1977a: 159). The idea of the text, and thus of intertextuality, depends, as Barthes argues, on the figure of the web, the weave, the garment (text) woven from the threads of the ‘already written’ and the ‘already read’. Every text has its meaning, therefore, in relation to other texts” (5-6).

21 Eco illustrates the reciprocity of the relationship between books in the voice of his character Adso from The Name of the Rose: “Until then I had thought each book spoke of things, human or divine, that lie outside of books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves […], an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another” (286, my emphasis). An alluding text tries to say something new using a source text as a catalyst, but the source text, when recalled in a reader’s mind or when reread in response to the allusion, can add to the conversation in the full complexity of its original artistic presentation.

22 Ecclesiastes 9:11.

23 Ecclesiastes 5:10.

24 Ecclesiastes 1:5.

25 Ecclesiastes 1:10.

26 Ecclesiastes 3:5.
Notes to Chapter Two

1 Ecclesiastes 9:11. Notably, each of the three writers considered in this chapter drew at some point from Ecclesiastes 9:11: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Qoheleth’s emphasis in this verse on the world’s unpredictability and unfairness appealed especially to naturalists.

2 Qoheleth describes his failed test of pleasure in Ecclesiastes chapter 2. For more on this test, see the “Basic Tenets and Ecclesiastes’ Unorthodoxy” section of my introduction.

3 This theme also appears in the character Hardman Pool in London’s 1916 story “The Bones of Kahekili”: “We are wise, but the wisdom is bitter” (On the Makaloa Mat 70).

4 While no character describes Larsen in terms of Nietzsche, London foreshadows The Sea-Wolf’s interest in Nietzsche in its very first paragraph: “I scarcely know where to begin, though I sometimes facetiously place the cause of it all to Charley Furuseth’s credit. He kept a summer cottage in Mill Valley, under the shadow of Mount Tamalpais, and never occupied it except when he loafed through the winter months and read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer” (9).

5 Largely due to social circumstances, Lily also cannot productively incorporate Ecclesiastes into her life and eventually overdoses on sleeping medication.

6 Calvinism, while based in part of the ideas of the sixteenth-century, French theologian John Calvin, was originally a pejorative term applied by Lutherans and includes the thoughts of several Christian reformers. Calvinism broadly understood has also undergone cultural shifts in meaning in the last four hundred years. I intend for my brief summary and discussion of Calvinism to chart only the most influential, and consequently rather basic, ideas of the Calvinist tradition. Predestination generally refers to the idea that humans are destined to either salvation or damnation and cannot change their lot. God’s autonomy means that God simply does what God wants, sometimes inexplicably from a human perspective. And the Protestant work ethic applies to the importance of hard work for living a Godly life.

7 I suspect “question” is a typographical error and that Richards intended the word “quotation.” However, though the quotation from Ecclesiastes is not in fact a question, before the semicolon Qoheleth at least implies a question – why is the race not to the swift, bread to the wise, etc. – to which he responds after the semicolon – because time and chance happen to everyone.

8 After hinting that Algarice authored both texts, Glasgow identifies him as the author explicitly: “He walked home rapidly, unlatched his outer door, and entered his study. Going to his desk, he took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and, unlocking a drawer, drew out several manuscripts, which he glanced over with a half-humorous expression.
One was the manuscript of the volume of addresses he had lately published, the other of the articles which had appeared in the pages of the *Scientific Weekly*. They were both in his handwriting" (288).

9 The paragraph leading up to the Ecclesiastes reference reads, “The crushing of the crowd grew terrific toward the last. The men, in keen pain from the blasts, began almost to fight. With the pitiless whirl of snow upon them, the battle for shelter was going to the strong” (221). Crane paves the way for the allusion by referencing “the race” earlier in the story at the end of this description of the men waiting for shelter: “There were men of undoubted patience, industry and temperance, who in time of ill-fortune, do not habitually turn to rail at the state of society, snarling at the arrogance of the rich and bemoaning the cowardice of the poor, but who at these times are apt to wear a sudden and singular meekness, as if they saw the world’s progress marching from them and were trying to perceive where they had failed, what they had lacked, to be thus vanquished in the race” (217-8).

10 Crane would likely suggest that Christians take similar care not to deflect needed social reforms in response to Jesus’ beatitudes: for example, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5); “Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled” (Luke 6:20-1). Crane would prefer that hungry people be filled now on earth rather than in some delayed future. In fairness to Qoheleth, most of his comments on poverty are descriptive rather than prescriptive: he acknowledges that poverty exists in the world – “If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter” (5:8) – while at least hinting that it would be better for people to address suffering on earth even if he doesn’t see it currently happening: “So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter” (4:1).

11 Marston LaFrance, like many critics, describes Billie’s death in terms of chance and life’s contingency: “The oiler is killed by mere chance, a death which could have come to any of the others with exactly the same significance in context. […] Crane’s tale after the fact documents the human position in an unfeeling universe where man’s presence is an accident” (62-3). Anthony Channell Hilfer sees in this contingency Crane’s critique of Christianity and Darwinism: “Billie’s death is an irony doubly directed at both Christian and Darwinian providence, given that he seems not only the most altruistic of the men in the boat, the one for whom divine providence should look out, but also the fittest who should come out ahead in what Darwin called ‘the great and complex battle of life’” (253). As I’ve discussed in my introduction, Ecclesiastes – while largely compatible with each – also rejects both mainstream-Christian and Darwinian options for making absolute sense of the world: “there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and […] the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” (Ecclesiastes 7:15, 9:11). Crane himself, of course, alludes directly to the second of these Ecclesiastes verses.
Notes to Chapter Three

1 Ecclesiastes 5:10.

2 Other sources provide additional evidence for Wharton’s pervasive religiosity. Laura Rutland charts the use of religious language and religious practices in Wharton’s novel Summer, and Terry Thompson follows the allusion to the biblical Sarah in Wharton’s short story “All Souls.” Wharton’s novel The Valley of Decision also alludes to the Old Testament; this title comes from Joel 3:14. Lee includes in her record of Wharton’s library, books on Christian saints and doctrines, religious symbolism, Asian religions, the Book of Common Prayer, “and her Bible, much marked” (668).

3 Candace Waid, Cynthia Wolff, and most readers addressing the reference see at least something of this negative / positive dichotomy operating in Wharton’s allusion to Ecclesiastes.

4 Also consider these lines from The Rubáiyát: “Lo! Some we loved, the loveliest and the best / That Time and Fate of all their Vintage prest, / Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before, / And one by one crept silently to Rest. […] Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, / Before we too into the Dust Descend” (lines 81-84, 89-90).

5 Ecclesiastes consistently exalts enjoyment. Also see verses 3:12-13, 22, 5:18, 8:15, and 9:7-9.

6 The book of Ecclesiastes presents a theistic philosophy that is at best agnostic toward, always skeptical of, and usually hostile to the reality of an afterlife consciousness. William P. Brown, in his Ecclesiastes commentary, explains simply, “for Qoheleth there is no life after death” (122). See also Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 and 9:2-5.

7 Robinson created the categories “old Old New York money” and “new Old New York money” to emphasize the two distinct mentalities in wealthy New York high society: “Possessors of the ‘old’ old money are concerned primarily with preservation – of their capital itself and the goods it has bought them – whereas speculation and consumption are the key words describing the economic habits of the ‘new’ old money” (343). Robinson contends that these economic positions have parallels in the sexual marketplace as well, to which I will return.

8 Gerty considers Lily’s social resistance proof of her superiority: “The fact that her life had never satisfied her proved that she was made for better things. She might have married more than once—the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence—but when the opportunity came she had always shrunk from it” (155-56).

9 In fact, the novel presents Gerty so negatively that readers might wonder whether Wharton would perhaps like to endorse Gerty’s life from a moral standpoint, but – as a wealthy woman herself invested in comfort and beauty – cannot endorse Gerty
aesthetically. Such a realization contributes to the conclusion that Wharton gives Lily no options other than successful navigation of the soul-crushing marriage market. But Lily, of course, also finds this option unviable.

10 William and Henry maintained a close relationship throughout their lives, but it wasn’t without contention. William resented Henry’s acceptance into the Academy of Arts and Letters (Brooks 179), and he wrote a particularly hostile letter to Henry in 1905 after reading *The Golden Bowl*: “Why won’t you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, or psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in style” (qtd. in Brooks 179). Still, their lifelong interaction indicates the continued presence of religious ideas in Henry’s life.

11 The KJV slightly mistranslates this verse to lessen its unorthodoxy. The NRSV, for example, reads, “Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward?” (3:21). Like James in his 1915 essay, Qoheleth means to express his uncertainty over “whether” or if the human spirit in fact goes upward. James could have felt the unorthodoxy in this verse given other Ecclesiastes verses against afterlife consciousness, including 9:5, “the dead know not any thing,” and 9:10, “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

12 Bryan Berry – whose essay I discuss below – highlights James’s religious interest in multiple texts. In addition to *The Golden Bowl* and “The Alter of the Dead,” Berry sees religious references in James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903), and *The Ambassadors* (1903) (36–7). Berry also discusses “Is There a Life after Death?” more sympathetically than Kaplan: after suggesting the possibility that ‘artistic consciousness’ might exist after death, “James confesses that his ‘desire’—not his ‘belief’—is that this consciousness will continue to draw sustenance from its source after the death of the physical body” (36).

13 Kress, in her book *The Figure of Consciousness*, sees a similarity in the way Wharton and James present consciousness in these two novels: “Like the mind reading that constitutes consciousness in *The Golden Bowl*, Wharton’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel [*The Age of Innocence*] shows a communion of minds” (135). Millicent Bell’s *Edith Wharton and Henry James* outlines the most notable plot similarities in the two novels, specifically regarding the methods by which Wharton’s May Archer (née Welland) and James’s Maggie Verver secure their marriages in the face of their husbands’ infidelity (294).

14 Further parallels can be seen in Fanny Assingham’s description of Charlotte and Amerigo’s original love affair, which sounds much like the way Wharton would later describe the early love of Lily and Selden: ‘‘Well, to begin with, that of their neither of them having the means to marry. If she had had even a little – a little, I mean, for two – I believe he would bravely have done it.’ After which, as her husband but emitted an odd vague sound, she corrected herself. ‘I mean if he himself had had only a little – or a little
more than a little, a little for a prince. They would have done what they could’ – she did them justice – ‘if there had been a way. But there wasn’t a way, and Charlotte, quite to her honour, I consider, understood it. He had to have money—it was a question of life and death. It wouldn’t have been a bit amusing, either, to marry him as a pauper—I mean leaving him one. That was what she had – as he had – the reason to see.’” (76-77). Amerigo’s wife Maggie Verver sees Charlotte in the same situation Lily would later find herself after being dismissed by Bertha Dorset: “She’s in Brittany, at a little bathing-place, with some people I don’t know. She’s always with people, poor dear – she rather has to be; even when, as is sometimes the case; they’re people she doesn’t immensely like’” (156).

15 Other readers also address, but quickly abandon, the Ecclesiastes allusion. For example, Edgar Dryden’s essay “The Imp of the Perverse: Metaphor in The Golden Bowl” glosses the biblical symbolism as adding primarily to “the uncertainty that marks the flow of figure in The Golden Bowl and gives the novel such a perverse energy” (122); Paul Grimstad’s “Pym, Poe, and ‘the golden bowl’” leaves Ecclesiastes after the second paragraph to concentrate on Edgar Allan Poe’s influence on James; and Brenda Austin-Smith’s “The Counterfeit Symbol in Henry James’s The Golden Bowl” only mentions Ecclesiastes through a reference to Jennifer Gribble’s “Value in The Golden Bowl,” which also leaves aside Ecclesiastes after noting that Fanny Assingham calls the bowl evil. Irena Auerbuch Smith’s “The Golden Goal: Toward a Dialogic Imagination in Henry James’s Last Completed Novel” – though it stops short of reading The Golden Bowl through an Ecclesiastes lens – establishes that the Ecclesiastes allusion operates more broadly than generally understood: “The celebrated sixth verse in chapter twelve of Ecclesiastes (“Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken”) has by now attracted so much critical attention as the possible inspiration for the title and central image of Henry James’s The Golden Bowl that it has almost entirely eclipsed other, less spectacular but certainly no less interesting verses” (172). My analysis considers these other “no less interesting verses.”

16 Poe’s reference in “Lenore” also has the golden bowl breaking, but like several of the other texts to which the bowl may refer, Poe borrows the image originally from Ecclesiastes.

17 Because the consummation takes place offstage, it is difficult to say for sure after which scene Amerigo and Charlotte actually first have sex while married to the Ververs. They could have consummated their affair after the scene in one of Amerigo’s rooms where they call the idea of an affair “sacred” and then, at least with a kiss, “passionately sealed their pledge” (255). However, following the implication of Charlotte’s later pinning, “These days, yesterday, last night, this morning, I’ve wanted everything,” and Amerigo’s response, “You shall have everything,” I place the consummation during their cathedral tour in Gloucester (293).

18 Though James would have been unaware of it, Kate Chopin’s story “The Storm” – which Chopin wrote in 1898, but which wasn’t published until 1969 – provides an
analogy. In Chopin’s story, two former lovers consummate an affair during a thunderstorm and then return to their spouses in good humor and generosity. The story ends with Chopin’s sincere commentary: “So the storm passed and everyone was happy” (561). As it does for all of the characters in “The Storm,” Amerigo and Charlotte’s adultery results in an overall improvement to Maggie’s life.

Yeazell develops this point eloquently: “Maggie repeatedly projects herself into the consciousness of her rival. Indeed, The Golden Bowl may offer no more eloquent defence of the lovers than the impassioned speech, late in the novel, by which she mentally gives voice to the other woman’s silent anguish. ‘Ours was everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness,’ she imagines Charlotte saying; ‘and if it was to have no meaning […] why was I myself dealt with all for deception? why condemned after a couple of short years to find the golden flame – oh the golden flame! – a mere handful of black ashes?’ (567)” (xx).
Notes to Chapter Four

1 Ecclesiastes 1:5.

2 While I appreciate the unifying effect gained by thinking of Cane as a short-story cycle, I prefer calling Cane a hybrid novel to more immediately acknowledge Toomer’s use of multiple literary forms, which include poetry, dramatic elements, and a novella in addition to its stories.

3 Hemingway presents a similar argument in his novel Death in the Afternoon: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water” (192).

4 Qoheleth repeats this same sentiment in Ecclesiastes 8:14: “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous.”

5 An explicit parallel exists between Jake’s insomnia and that of another Hemingway protagonist, the older waiter in Hemingway’s 1933 short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” The waiter’s prayer to nada and nothingness culminates – like Jake’s ineffectual search for meaning in a relationship with Brett – in insomnia: “What did he fear? It was not a fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. […] Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it's probably only insomnia. Many must have it” (291).

6 Jake repeats his suggestion that Brett stay with him – this time indefinitely – a few pages later at the beginning of their evening with Count Mippipopolous: “Couldn’t we live together, Brett? Couldn’t we just live together?” (62). Given their passion for and attraction to each other, Jake’s recommendation that they live together despite their inability to have sex – which could relate to Ecclesiastes 9:9: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest” – may provide the best course of action for the hapless pair. However, as Hemingway demonstrates in the rest of the novel, and as Brett points out in her response, they still wouldn’t exactly live “joyfully.” “I don’t think so,” Brett responds, “I’d just tromper you with everybody. You couldn’t stand it” (62). Jake’s feeble, “I stand it now” (62), indicates a source of present and future difficulty for their relationship.
In addition to the following scene inside the cathedral, Jake draws attention to his interest in Catholicism, cathedrals, and monasteries at several other points in the narrative. These include his arrival with Bill in Burguete: “away off on the shoulder of the first dark mountain was the gray metal-sheathed roof of the monastery of Roncesvalles. ‘There’s Roncevaux,’ I said” (114); an afternoon with Bill and their friend Harris in the monastery: “Harris was there and the three of us walked up to Roncesvalles. We went through the monastery” (133); philosophizing with Bill after fishing: “‘Listen Jake,’ he said, ‘are you really a Catholic?’ ‘Technically’” (128-9); during multiple walks with Brett in Pamplona, specifically before she asks him about Romero: “Behind were the trees and the shadow of the cathedral, and the town silhouetted against the moon” (186); and in a conversation with Brett, Jake acknowledges: “I’m pretty religious” (213).

Qoheleth argues consistently against lasting gain given the reality of death: “I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me” (2:18). In the same vein, Qoheleth observes that money in itself cannot satisfy: He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (5:10).

Job accuses God of causing his suffering: “Job answered and said, Oh that my grief were throughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up. For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me” (Job 6:1-4). Like Job, Kabnis feels that he has a right to challenge and curse God: “God is a profligate red-nosed man about town. Bastardy; me. A bastard son has got a right to curse his maker. God… Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night’s beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. […] He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes. “God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty” (Cane 83). God answers Kabnis in a way similar to the way God answered Job, by emphasizing the complex beauty of the world and Job/Kabnis’s inability to explain it: “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? […] Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty” (Job 38:1-4, 40:9-10). Neither Job nor Kabnis can “array [himself] with glory and beauty” and so each – at least partly – retracts his accusation. Job acknowledges God’s omnipotence: “Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing” (42:1-2). Kabnis begrudgingly acknowledges the world’s beauty: “dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty” (83). Qoheleth on the other hand – while exceedingly interested in critiquing traditional wisdom and recognizing the hard realities of existence – avoids directly challenging God: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:2).
Genesis 9:20-27 records the so-called curse of Ham, which is really a curse of Noah on his son Ham, the father of Canaan, for looking at his nakedness. The operative curse, which has been used to justify slavery, comes in Genesis 9:25-27: “[Noah] said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.”

Albert Schweitzer’s 1906 Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung, translated in 1910 as The Quest of the Historical Jesus, reveals that most researchers focusing on the historical Jesus made Jesus in their own image. Schweitzer’s work suggests that researchers, like O’Reilly, are likely to continue this trend. While understandable – who doesn’t want to be like Jesus? – this reality forcibly shows the need for constant self, social, and biblical reflection if Bible readers are to keep the Bible from lying.

Genesis 15:7 offers a fairly representative verse: “I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.” Arguments that expose promised-land metaphors as motivations for colonization and expansion include Steven T. Newcomb’s Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2008) and Steven Salaita’s The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2006). Newcomb’s book especially considers how this continues to exist in US property codes and how it plays out in legal land disputes.

Though set twenty years later in 1944, Ann Petry’s novel The Street – which I consider in the next chapter – provides a powerful description of the difficulties facing black men searching for employment: “The women work and the kids go to reform school. Why do the women work? It’s such a simple reasonable reason. [...] The women work because the white folks give them jobs – washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven’t liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally it gets to be too late for some of them. Even wars don’t change it. The men get out of the habit of working” (388-9).
Notes to Chapter Five

1 Ecclesiastes 1:10.

2 A twenty-first-century reminder of the persistence of this mentality in the United States can be seen in the social-media reaction to a 2014 post-game interview given by black, Seattle Seahawks NFL player Richard Sherman. Sherman loudly and aggressively proclaimed himself the best cornerback in the NFL in response to a question from a white woman, reporter Erin Andrews. For his response – undoubtedly loud and prideful, but not aggressively directed in any way toward Andrews – Sherman was called a thug and the n-word throughout social media. While several, largely racial, factors contributed to the immediately negative view painted of Sherman – a former Stanford University student who graduated with a 3.8 GPA – the backlash was due not least to the visual appearance of a strong, aggressive black man talking loudly next to a very white woman.

3 On the same point, when Weak Knees expresses dismay at an Italian chief giving away his delicious recipe for free, Jubine hypothesizes the chief’s mentality in anti-capitalistic terms of communal joy: “Jubine made a sound of derision, ‘Then he’d of had to come to the United States, that is if he was going to be a spaghetti millionaire. And he’d of spent so much time worrying about his income tax, and his labor problems, and the shortage of salt port and the shortage of mushrooms and the high cost of everything that he wouldn’t be able to sleep at night for worrying. And all that worry would give him little sore places in his stomach and he wouldn’t even be able to eat his own spaghetti any more. But he passes the receipt along and a lot of people eat his good spaghetti and they’re grateful to him and he can eat anything he wants to, and he gets in his big soft bed every night and goes straight to sleep, because there’s nothing in his life to give him nightmares—no CIO, no shortages—’” (84-5).

4 Bullock himself recognizes this reality when he arrives at his home after speaking with Jubine: “We live like millionaires, he thought, got to have a maid and a cook and a cleaning woman and God knows what else” (46). Despite being able occasionally to admit Jubine’s point of view, Bullock continues his lifestyle of abundance throughout the novel. Petry herein suggests the difficulties of adopting a new code of behavior for people – white or black – wrapped up in the capitalistic system of increase.

5 Abbie – who throws Camilo into the street naked and cold based on her own social expectations, which she mistakenly takes for a moral vision of the world – falls into the same trap that she accuses her fellow churchgoers of falling into. By not considering the Bible’s emphasis on either agapic love (the Gospels, Acts) or romantic love (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), Abbie moves away from the Bible and banishes her adopted son’s lover to the streets. Petry encourages all religious people – like Abbie claims to be – to consider the entire Bible, not just the parts that match their views. In fairness to Abbie, she does undergo a transformation at the end of The Narrows when she recommits to Christian charity through her promise to raise J. C. Powther.
Though they disagree about the tools of social criticism, both Ann Petry and Richard Wright recognize the dangers of the American Dream mythology. In his 1937 autobiographical essay “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” Wright also treats the Dream satirically. When his first boss asks him if he’d like to learn the company trade in addition to running errands, Wright responds enthusiastically: “I’d like it fine, sir,” I said, happy. I had visions of ‘working my way up.’ Even Negroes have those visions” (4). Wright crystalizes his critique at the end of this section when he’s run out of the job by two jealous white coworkers who threaten him with violence after he asks them questions about learning something valuable about the job they were doing.

Franklin influenced and continues to influence the American Dream through his ideas on being a self-made man: as recently as December 6, 2013, The Good Men Project, an online forum, ran Tim Goessling’s essay “I Lived a Day According to Ben Franklin’s Schedule and It Changed My Life.” While Franklin’s presentation is more nuanced than some interpretations of the self-made man – he acknowledges, for example, that good fortune aided hard work in his success – the mythology surrounding the self-made man certainly has had, and continues to have, the kinds of dangerous effects Petry outlines in The Street. This is especially true for people who haven’t had as much good fortune as Franklin had, or – to Petry’s point – people who weren’t white men.

While I don’t fully attempt it here, a consideration of how and why Ecclesiastes’ influence recedes in US literature after the 1960s would make for an interesting study. My discussion in the epilogue points to some directions a more complete analysis might take, reasons for which include the advent of postmodernism and the rise of the Christian Right – with its endorsement of literal-minded fundamentalism – in the United States. While it doesn’t make a specific claim for why Ecclesiastes’ influence recedes, John Updike’s 1960 novel Rabbit, Run provides a visual symbol of this shift. Similar to Petry, Updike mourns Ecclesiastes’ lack of influence on midcentury-US lives. But unlike Petry, who laments her characters’ lack of exposure to Ecclesiastes, Updike suggests that even if a person knows about Ecclesiastes, he may still fail to incorporate it positively into his life. Rabbit, Run tells the story of Harry Angstrom running away from his social obligations as a father and as a husband, trying to make up for his flight, and ultimately running away again after impregnating his mistress and contributing via negligence to the drowning of his child. Harry forms a close relationship with Episcopal priest Jack Eccles who, though Updike claimed not to have realized the pun until he read about it in a review, advocates many of Ecclesiastes’ views. However, Eccles proves ineffectual. Updike symbolizes this ineffectuality when the priest tries and fails to run after the much faster Harry. Eccles cannot catch Harry or help him to live a more satisfying life. Despite Eccles’ friendship and advice, Harry neither fulfills his social obligations nor finds happiness outside of his restrictive social role. While Eccles is a likable character and the person Harry trusts most, Updike suggests in Rabbit, Run that not even this most modern of biblical books is productively influencing people like Harry.
Notes to the Epilogue

1 Ecclesiastes 3:5.

2 See the biographical information on these writers in the chapters dedicated to them, specifically Lee on Wharton, Grimes on Hemingway, Goodman on Glasgow, and Berry on James.

3 Many biblical scholars agree with bringing a reverently skeptical approach to the Bible. Paul Ricoeur, for example, advocates a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which includes a “double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience” (70). Ecclesiastes, an exemplar of reverent skepticism, lends biblical justification to this reading style.
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