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I, Neely McLaughlin, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:

Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Christian Discourse in American Literature

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Abstract

I explore the nature of what has been identified as the “invisibility” of Christian discourse in American literary studies and seek to provide a way to talk about this often under-read discourse. Focusing on texts that address race because their participation in Christian discourse is particularly likely to be under-read, I turn to the discourse of emotion, specifically pride, shame, and guilt. In my introduction, I discuss the role of religion in literary studies and the academy more generally, showing how Christian discourse is read in primarily political terms. In chapter 1, I present my analysis of how this phenomenon occurs in the case of nineteenth-century African-American women’s spiritual narratives. I then read one such text, Jarena Lee’s *Christian Experience*, as an experiential theology of the innocent, a reading complementary to but distinctly different from the way the narrative is typically read. In chapter 2, I re-read William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* in spiritual terms, focusing on the nuances of pride shame, and guilt in a novel typically understood as an artistically inferior novel that constitutes a straightforward political statement. In chapter 3, I turn to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, a novel that itself overtly presents Christianity as a negative political force. I complicate this presentation of Christian discourse and suggest an alternative reading of the novel’s troubling conclusion as potentially resistant rather than capitulatory. I conclude by returning to the larger issue of the difficulty of reading Christian discourse in an academic context, a difficulty resulting as I see it from the explanatory aims of Christianity in conjunction with the mystery inherent within it.
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Table of Contents

Introduction: Considering the Challenge of Addressing Christian Discourse in Literary Studies          1

1. “Mere” rhetoric and the nineteenth-century African-American woman’s narrative:                              47
Exploring Jarena Lee’s Christian Experience

2. Re-reading Intruder in the Dust: Shame, guilt, pride and the spiritual realm 93

3. Honest ambivalence: Christianity and the emotional logic of Quicksand 131

Conclusion: The Incomprehensibility of Christian Discourse 174

Bibliography 182
Considering the Challenge of Addressing Christian Discourse in Literary Studies

“The important part which our moral affections perform in the active duties of life is another consideration in favor of making the religious condition of the heart an object of assiduous care in all education…Even in the capacity of legislator and judge, where the intellectual powers are so conspicuously employed, the dispositions of the heart which religion inculcates are also entirely indispensable” (15-16).

Charles White

“[T]he geopolitical events of the past decade and of the past three years especially have re-alerted us to the fact (we always knew it, but as academics we were able to cabin it) that hundreds of millions of people in the world do not observe the distinction between the private and the public or between belief and knowledge, and that it is no longer possible for us to regard such persons as quaintly pre-modern or as the needy recipients of our saving (an ironic word) wisdom.”

Stanley Fish

The relationship between literature and Christianity is fraught by the overlapping yet differing priorities and investments of religion and the academy. Charles White’s 1853 Essays in Literature and Ethics represents one set of ideas regarding the perpetually contested role of Christianity in the public realm, specifically focusing on literature. In the chapter entitled “Religion an Essential Part of All Education,” White makes the argument that religion should be central to education and public life. Fish’s 2005 “One University Under God?” from the Chronicle of Higher Education, a powerful and relatively public academic venue, represents a
very different influential understanding of the appropriate role of religion in the public square. Fish assumes that religion is rightly private and that academics recognize as much, while suggesting that the academy pay greater attention to the masses that fail to make such a distinction. While he believes that religion has no role to play in the development of knowledge, and clearly sees the “hundreds of millions” as erring in their understanding, he argues that academics ought to reconsider their understanding of religion.

Even as Fish is discussing the importance of the differing view of the role of religion in public life held by others, for him, at least, the argument in which White engages is over, and the academy is rightly essentially secular in its orientation. The existence of a religiously oriented segment of the academy in no way invalidates but rather by its very existence as a distinct entity clarifies the secular perspective of the academy as a whole. This secular perspective is clearly the view towards which Fish is most sympathetic as evidenced by the definition of knowledge implied when he writes of “the distinction between … belief and knowledge.” This understanding of the definition of knowledge inherently questions the appropriate role of religion in the academy. Religion is in an important way associated with belief. If knowledge in the academy is opposed to “belief,” then religion belongs in the private realm. Religion is thus in some sense implicitly outside the bounds of the academic project, and even potentially irrational. The concept of religious knowledge has no place in this conception.

Fish recognizes, however, that this understanding of the appropriate role of religion is, or may not be, dominant among the general public. In the context of constant competing narratives of the religious heritage and life of the country, the appropriate role of religion in America remains relevant. A Pew Research Center 2006 poll “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” speaks directly to this issue and supports Fish’s assessment of conflicting
views of what the right role of religion in the public sphere is: “Americans remain conflicted about what the right mix should be between religion and politics. The public, however, is more critical of what it sees as efforts by the political left to diminish the influence of religion in government and the schools than with attempts by conservative Christians to impose their religious values on the country” (12). Regardless of political affiliation, most respondents (69%) “decry efforts by liberals to limit religious influence in the public sphere” (13). Among Republicans, 87% hold this view and among Democrats, 60% do. Only 38% of Democrats who identify themselves as liberal hold this view. To a degree, responses predictably reflect political affiliation, but even a substantial number of self-idented liberal Democrats, a group that would seem more likely to be concerned about excessive religious involvement in the public realm, are, at least according to this major survey, far from committed to a rigorously secular public square. At the least, these results suggest that Fish is correct in his view that his own understanding of the public role of religion is not universal. The majority of Americans are, it seems, indeed uncomfortable with presuming that religion does not have an appropriate role in the public life of the country. While Fish’s observations indicate his belief that academia ought to take this phenomenon seriously, his own commitment to a secular public realm, and particularly a secular academy, is clear, as is his expectation that most of the academy will share his view.

Fish’s understanding of the nature of knowledge not only indicates his allegiance to a secular perspective but also defines knowledge in a very specific way that excludes religion from the knowledge formation project of academia. The matter of what constitutes knowledge is fundamental to the academy in general and underlies much tension between the literary academy and religious discourse. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard explores the matter of what is
understood to be knowledge in a discussion of the relationship between scientific knowledge and knowledge based in narrative. In his analysis, science deems narrative knowledge invalid because of a lack of scientific argumentation and proof (27). It is obvious that, from a religious perspective, scientific proof is not the primary determination of validity. The realm of religion is not in its essence scientific, materialistic, or rational. This is not to say that religion is against or completely disconnected from science, the physical world, and rational thought. Yet from a perspective that defines knowledge in what I will, following Lyotard and for the sake of convenience, call scientific, religious discourse cannot build knowledge, and any specific religious knowledge is inherently invalid, being of a discourse deemed unable to participate in knowledge formation by the discourse of science. The fact that the “knowledge” that religious discourse creates is in Fish’s schema not “knowledge” but “belief” suggests the pre-eminence of what Lyotard calls scientific knowledge in the academy more broadly. Although literary studies is not a scientific enterprise but rather a narrative one, it nevertheless often accepts the scientific conception of knowledge. In contrast, religious discourse does not privilege the rational and material, and does not prioritize or even necessarily interest itself in “proof.” Instead, it privileges revelation, recognizing it as a source of knowledge. Faith, or belief, explicitly disavowing the pre-eminence of empirical proof, is at the very least radically distinct from and potentially understood as fundamentally at odds with an academy that associates the rational, the material, and the empirical with knowledge. Since the interest of the academy is in building and shaping this knowledge, a discourse that does not accept its premises belongs elsewhere, in the private realm as Fish says. This fundamental difference in conceptions of knowledge shapes the relationship between literary studies and religion.
In addition to recognizing religion as fundamentally different, Fish’s comments clearly indicate the superiority of what he sees as the academic conception of knowledge, and the correctness of the view that belief is rightly private and knowledge rightly public. It is no wonder that when Fish identifies religion as the next “center of intellectual energy in the academy,” it comes with a warning that academia should be prepared for what he views as the rise of the Other. This religious other is an implicit threat, and near the end of “One University Under God?”, Fish names that which is at risk of displacement: “When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.” Fish not only recognizes religion as a growing area of focus but also as replacing three significant political areas of academic focus. The sense that religion is poised to take center stage in the academy at the expense of such concerns highlights an important aspect of the reason for the academy’s difficulty with addressing religion. Work based on an interest in some combination of race, gender, and class holds an important place in the academy. Casting religion as a replacement for these concerns suggests that the rise of religion is the downfall of a particular kind of political investment valued by much of the academy.

Indeed, a crucial component of the relationship between religion and the academy is that religion is associated with absolute moral views and the bad politics of an earlier time. If religion is the next “center of intellectual energy” in the academy, it is not playing this central role for the first time. White’s comments over one hundred and fifty years earlier indicate a vastly different understanding of the role of religion in the academy and in the world. Whereas Fish assumes a distinction within the academy between public and private, and conceives of religion as rightly belonging in the private sphere, White’s work represents the view that religion is central to the
academic enterprise and to public life. Though for White, religion is an integral component of all learning, he, like Fish, understands religion to be in some sense other than the rational or intellectual: Fish creates a contrast between religious belief and rational knowledge, and White, too, recognizes the realm of religion to be different from the “intellectual” and sees it as a matter of “the heart.” Both clearly understand religion as in some sense different from the rational and the intellectual. The implication of this language and thinking is an implicit opposition between emotion and intellect. White embraces this language and opposition, sees the distinct realms as complementary, and sees both as belonging in the public sphere. Although Fish does not here discuss the role of emotion in the academy overtly, his understanding of knowledge, rationality, and religious belief participates in an opposition of emotion with rationality or intellect. A crucial point of contention between Fish and White concerns the appropriate public role of something associated with belief and the heart rather than with knowledge and the intellect. Fish more than suggests that anything other than the rational belongs in the private realm. Fish’s understanding of public and private is that only intellectual, rational concepts, frameworks, and ideas belong in the public sphere of which the academy is a part. The difference between the two ways of thinking represented by Fish and White is not that one recognizes religion as in an important sense other than rational or intellectual while the other fails to recognize a distinction, but relates to what the two conclude based on this fundamental distinction.

Regardless of whether what makes religion different is thought to give it a uniquely important role in the academy or seen as an indication that religion is best kept at a distance, religion has certainly not been fully absent even in the secular academy. Obviously, discourse about religion enters into the academy in various ways, as Fish points out, yet as he also recognizes, studying religion does not mean engaging its concerns seriously: “This history of
religion has always been a growth industry in academe. … But it is one thing to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously. To take religion seriously would be to regard it not as a phenomenon to be analyzed at arm’s length, but as a candidate for the truth” (Fish, “One University”). Religion’s role is often as a specimen to dissected and understood but not as a way of thinking to be given intellectual consideration in itself. In Fish’s view, the reason for this distance is the way in which religious discourse perceives itself to be immune from rationality. Fish explains that religion understands itself to be exempt from “rational deliberation.” The academic response to ideas like religion that do not subject themselves to such deliberation is to “treat them as data…You teach the Bible as literature—that is, as a body of work whose value resides in its responsiveness to the techniques of (secular) literary analysis.” This distanced understanding of the kind of role appropriate for religion in the academy is implicit in literary criticism, which is itself part of public discourse rather than the private realm in which religion ought, in Fish’s view, be kept.

Thus though religion has consistently had a role in the academy, it is far from the central, guiding role that White envisions. The reasons for the shift away from the kind of thinking White represents become quite clear when considering the way in which his religious interests lead him to shape education. In regard to the study of literature, White’s focus, the centrality of religion dictates what should be read and sees moral education as the reason for reading literature. This idea is itself associated with a series of other ideas that the academy has, to understate the matter, interrogated: In a chapter entitled “A Pure and Sound Literature,” White illustrates this view and, as I see it, the reasons for its demise:

In all communities, especially in all free nations, young men, if correctly and liberally educated, are by far the most important citizens. They are quickly to be the most efficient
patrons of learning, the ablest friends of morals, the safest depositories of power… With a desire to contribute to their right education, I propose to them now a few thoughts on the value of a sound, pure literature. [emphasis in original] (99-100)

This passage has it all, from general condescension and elitism to patriarchy, a commitment to class hierarchy and the assumption that education improves behavior. It is a liberal humanism that is classist, sexist, and implicitly racist. Part and parcel of this unsavory set of ideas is the notion that certain literature is “sound” and “pure.” Appropriate emphasis on such literature would have the benefit of pushing aside the wrong literature, literature that White can apparently identify with ease and that would have a deleterious effect on the behavior of its readers. White’s comments illustrate the idea that the “right” literature, a “sound pure literature,” is a necessary component of the education of the elite citizen while he argues passionately against the “superficial and corrupt,” a literature “likened to poisonous plants, and to a deadly exhalation, which is to be supplanted and removed by works of sound and pure writers” (100). Identifying the wrong literature as “deadly” justifies the exclusion of whatever texts fail to inculcate White’s moral system. His intent would seem to be to diminish the threat represented by voices that do not reflect his own priorities and thus cement his own cultural power. Thus the view of religion as a central part of the academy is associated with rigid canonization and the conception of moral values as clear, as well as with bad politics. Understanding religion as the appropriate center of the academy is associated with ideas and behaviors that the academy has striven to move away from. Thus recognizing the potential of religious meaning to be the most significant category of meaning or the foundation based upon which people determine their actions in life is recognizing it as a threat.
This potentially threatening concept of religious thinking is complex. One matter of usage that is already evident is the relationship between “religious” and “Christian.” In the conversation about religion in the United States, “religious” often means or comes to mean “Christian.” As in the case of Fish’s article, for example, much of the discussion of religion and “God” could at least be referring to Judaism and Islam. Fish’s words about the public impact of religious belief could be a reference to 9/11 rather than the American response to 9/11, or he could be referring to both the “Muslim” terrorist attacks and the “Christian” response to them. His reference to the three years preceding the 2005 publication, however, emphasize the implicitly Christian response as the significant “religion” to which he refers. The more general category of religion is clearly revealed to have meant Christian, at least in some important way at certain crucial moments, when Fish references the Bible, the sacred text of Christianity. Such synecdoche is widespread, and I will participate in it to the extent that the discourse in which I am participating does so because to do otherwise is not feasible. Furthermore, my understanding of religion is here determined by my focus on Christianity. However, both the conflation of “religious” and “Christian” and the persistent failure to address it explicitly are significant. Christianity is not and has not been the only religion in the United States, let alone the world, and although I am here limiting my focus to Christianity, literary participation in religious thinking broadly conceived may be effectively approached in some of the same ways as well as in ways developed from attention to other religious traditions. Speaking as if “religious” means “Christian” has become a tool with which everyone from champions to detractors of Christianity shapes the conversation. Disentangling such language in pursuit of could correspond to clearer thinking or at least a more specific discussion, but except in rare cases, I will follow the usage of the texts I am engaging, and will indicate as much when I am specifically referring to religion.
broadly conceived. In general, I will refer to a basically but not uniquely Christian understanding of religion.

If it is clear that “religion” frequently means “Christian,” it is less clear what either the religious in general or Christianity specifically means. On one level, religion in general may be understood as institutional, as a way of organizing people. Yet religion and religious ideas are identified differently and can have very different meanings depending on who is identifying an idea, feeling, organization or institution as religious. The institutional aspect of religion is what could be described as the political manifestation of religious belief. The church as a bureaucracy is not the essence of Christianity, at least from most Christian perspectives. This realization or contention suggests three obvious approaches to the Christian understanding of the religious. First, religion has a personal, individual, specific understanding for individuals based on their own religious ideas, experiences, and beliefs. This approach focuses on what a person thinks about her own religion, how she feels about it, and what being religious means for her. Within one religion or even one denomination or congregation, there could be significant variation in this personal understanding of religion. Every religious person has some personal idea of what it means to be a religious person, though it may be unarticulated. A less idiosyncratic way of defining a religion is through creeds or statements of belief created by a religious group. Those who agree to the statement are considered part of the group. Overlap and terminological discrepancy could complicate matters. Finally, how those outside a group think or define the group, including their understanding of what unifies the group. What does the average person think it means to be a Christian? Obviously those outside any given group have the opportunity to define and understand the group in any number of ways regardless of how much they know about that group, and even more differences of opinion and terminology are likely to exist.
Finally, if the political is a way of understanding in terms of power in history, the religious is, broadly, a way of understanding in terms of a divine beyond history. Christianity specifically emphasizes faith in a particular God as that divine presence. The narrative woven by the political is a story of hierarchy, oppression, power structures, victims of circumstance, and subversion. Everything, including the religious, is understood as within this story. The narrative woven by the Christian version of the religious is a story of a creator God in whose hands the world rests, with its power structures, oppressors, and victims all part of God’s plan. The faithful believer in this loving, just, merciful, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God understands everything as within this story. A narrative makes sense of what it contains, and the way the political narrative does so is quite different from the way the religious narrative does so. The fact that both narratives conceive of themselves as totalizing means that each makes sense of the other, which unsurprisingly leads to tension.

Not only, then, does religion fit uncomfortably into the knowledge formation project of the secular academy, but it is also in some respects understood as in direct opposition to the commitments and priorities of that academy. Therefore, literary critical attention to texts that participate in religious discourse and the way in which that discourse is read and understood to signify is inescapably fraught. Some critics identify discomfort, even antagonism, in the relationship between American literary studies and the religious discourse in which American literature may participate. As a result, literary and Christian discourse, though they cover much of the same ground through shared concerns and themes, intersect too infrequently. Alternatively, their intersection may simply be the site of insufficient productive exploration. When discussion of Christianity and literature takes place in the literary academy, that discussion often fails to seriously engage with the concerns of Christianity. Scholarship does not direct
sufficient appropriate attention to religion per se, does not engage with the concerns and interests of religion, instead tending to engage in a kind of meta-discourse about religion. This discourse is invested in politics, relying on a language of cultural power and appropriation, and employs historical distancing. In part, then, my project is to consider the way in which religious discourse signifies religiously rather than politically.

**The problem of invisibility**

The importance of Christianity, or what is perceived as Christianity, in the culture of the U.S., is so widely acknowledged that it might seem an obvious subject of importance in the study of American literature, and on some level, it has been. Yet the uneasy relationship between the religious and a secular academy means that the question of whether literary criticism attends to Christian discourse, and what it means to talk about Christianity in American literature, is fraught. In “Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies,” Jenny Franchot’s influential 1995 essay in *American Literature*, she introduces the concept of the invisibility of Christianity in American literary studies. In Franchot’s analysis, “We have … produced very little work of interest on religion and American writing.” The concept of invisibility sounds as if it could refer to a complete lack of literary criticism addressing religion. In perhaps the clearest form of invisibility, religiously invested work may be minimally studied, the religious discourse in a text may be entirely overlooked, or scholarly work that addresses religious concerns may be generally ignored in other critical treatments of specific texts or authors.

Yet the issue is more complex than such an understanding would suggest. Reflecting an understanding of the religious as in some sense distinct from, or an alternative to, the political, she writes of American literary studies, “We are rich in studies that foreground gender, race, and
to a lesser extent, ethnicity and class,” and asks, “But where is religion? Why so invisible?” (834). The problem is not simply a lack of attention to the religious in literary scholarship, an oversight that might be easily remedied by awareness of religious cultural history or acknowledgement that texts contain Christian discourse. Rather, the problem is that important aspects of Christianity are invisible. Although some aspects of Christianity are addressed by literary critics primarily invested in the political, notably those aspects that fit comfortably within studies foregrounding language of power, appropriation, and the bureaucratic, institutional aspects of Christianity, literary scholarship struggles to consider other aspects of Christianity, particularly what may be called the spiritual, internal, and interpersonal aspects of faith. As scholars like Franchot and others who have taken up the metaphor of invisibility, notably Roger Lundin, assert, the fact is that the very nature of religion and its discourse poses a challenge for literary scholarship: While the religious is present in literary scholarship, the investments of religious discourse remain largely unaddressed. Thus Christian discourse suffers from what I call “visible invisibility” in American literary scholarship. Much literary criticism addresses religion in some way, but scholarly work deeply engaged with the religious in literature, as such, is rare, particularly in contexts that lend themselves to politically-oriented analysis.

Although with a different emphasis, Fish’s concern that the academy is not addressing religion with sufficient awareness is reflected in the work of scholars who have taken up Franchot’s characterization of religion as invisible in literary studies. In Franchot’s analysis, while religion is of interest in the culture at large, the literary academy has not embraced this concern. She implies that the academy’s lack of exploration of religion is a problematic avoidance: “[a] question facing American literary scholars at the turn into the twenty-first century is whether we want to persist in evading the larger culture’s religious concerns” (834).
Lundin explores this invisibility in his introductions to two collections devoted to the relationship between Christianity and literature, highlighting problems in that relationship. As Lundin puts it, one result or aspect of this invisibility is that religion is addressed insufficiently. In his introduction to the 2007 collection *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry*, he argues for a recognition of the importance of engaging with religion, claiming that “[h]owever we judge its role in our past or conceive of its place in our future, we cannot deny that religion has always been a voluble partner in the conversation of this culture” (xxii). He is concerned that differences in individual beliefs and unbeliefs blind the literary scholarly world to the importance of religion and cause literary scholarship to misread religion. Lundin emphasizes the energy and flexibility of the role of religion, urging us not to interpret it as a monolithic source of consolidated power: “Despite the stereotypes to the contrary, religion has more often been a dynamic force than a static power in American life, and from the beginning both its most passionate adherents and its most trenchant critics have recognized the powerful mediating role it plays in a prolific and ever-changing culture” (xxii). Whatever we believe, and whatever we think about the beliefs of others, it is a serious mistake not to take religious discourse seriously, as such, and to understand it as merely a distanced object of study.

Most broadly speaking, literary discourse tends to distance itself from the religious. Though their perspectives differ significantly, Fish, Franchott and Lundin see lack of personal investment in religion on the part of scholars as partially responsible for this distance. Fish speaks of the “us” and “we” of the academy who are virtually unable to comprehend the religiosity of the “hundreds of millions,” the religious masses. Lundin likewise sees academics as separated from religion. In his introduction to the 2007 collection, Lundin addresses the
relationship between literary scholars themselves and the religious asking, “How are we to explain the fact that so many academic observers of the literature of the United States have, in effect, expatriated themselves from one of their culture’s most vibrant and fascinating provinces?” (xi). Lundin says that religion is neglected in literary scholarship because literary scholars are not personally invested in religious beliefs. Quoting Franchot, Lundin explains: “Because intellectuals rarely regard as significant something they themselves neither practice nor process, the neglect of the serious study of religion in American literary criticism ‘may reflect how unimportant religion is in the lives of literary scholars’” (xi). While I do not disagree with the implication that literary scholars may be conspicuously unreligious, as I have suggested, this observation regarding the current relationship between the religious and the world of literary scholarship ought not be viewed as an explanation in itself. The notion that a tense relationship between literary scholarship and religion is due to the fact that scholars simply are not religious people ought not be allowed to obscure the complex reasons for the distance between the religious and the scholarly (in the context of literary study). Furthermore, scholars need not themselves hold religious beliefs in order to meaningfully explore the relationship between religion and literature. Yet it is significant that this personal distance, even antagonism, is mentioned repeatedly.

The tone or attitude of literary scholarship towards the religious indicates the complexity of the dynamic. Lundin is concerned by the atmosphere of antagonism surrounding the religious. When religious discourse is attended too, Lundin says, the atmosphere surrounding that conversation is troubled. Lundin discusses the atmosphere of scholarly treatment of religious material, saying that “we live in a period when the conversation about the role of religion in American life is too often marked by suspicion and acrimony” (xxi). He frames the essay
collection he edits as an attempt to “change the tone” of the conversation about American religious culture (xxi). This project is predicated on Lundin’s belief, presumably one shared at least to an extent by the scholars contributing to the volume, that something important is lost in that acrimony and suspicion. Exploring the nature of scholarly treatment of the religious will illuminate the complex causes and effects of this non-conducive atmosphere.

The amount of scholarship that discusses the religious in one way or another indicates that the so-called invisibility of the religious does not always rightly refer to a simple absence of scholarly interest. The notion of invisibility thus refers both to religion that is ignored and religion that is read as something else. The first case leads to relatively straightforward critical lapses: Criticism may ignore significant religious material, such as the symbolic baptism at the beginning of *Intruder in the Dust*, and in so doing miss the potential significance of theological framing. Or certain texts or authors with fascinating material when approached from a religiously attuned perspective may receive little critical attention. It is, however, essential to recognize that the difficulty is not simple scholarly obliviousness, something remedied by historical awareness and the ability to recognize Biblical allusions, although much work may be done in regard to such concerns. The more difficult aspect of invisibility, when religious material is attended to but not fully so, as in the case of the Christian discourse in nineteenth century African-American women’s narratives, presents a more complex dynamic. Here, religion is understood as in a sense the subject of, or subject to, another discourse. The primary discourse into which the religious is subsumed is the political, potentially operating in concert with historicization.

**The political, the historical, and the religious**
An understanding of the relationship between the political and the religious that casts the political as the larger signifying category through which religion is to be understood is influential and in some contexts dominant. This understanding reflects the thinking Fredrich Jameson makes explicit in *The Political Unconscious*. He establishes Marxist interpretation in opposition to various other interpretive frameworks such as “the ethical, the psychoanalytic, the myth-critical, … and the theological,” but not as “a mere substitute” for these approaches (10). It is instead “that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (10). His view of history as the horizon that cannot be transcended means that Christian discourse (and all other discourse) is to be understood from a political perspective. To say that the religious, or the literary for that matter, is always political, or ought or ought not be political, is to say that the political is the larger signifying category, and that both literature and the religious must always be understood in political terms.

Often, as argued and acknowledged in scholarship attuned to religion, religion is read via, and subsumed by, political discourse. Franchot’s comments indicate her recognition that invisibility is at least in part a matter of prioritization. The issue is not simply that religion is not mentioned in literary studies but that the idea is not sufficiently “foregrounded” to produce “work of interest on religion.” That work may be interesting and may address religion, but the work signifies not in regard to religion but to some other idea of interest. The ideas that Franchot sees literary studies as foregrounding – gender, race, ethnicity, and class – are richly illuminated while religion, though potentially present, is “invisible.” Essentially, then, religious discourse is
read in other terms, terms that Franchot here sees as political in orientation, with the result that the political is foregrounded. As Franchot puts it:

Literary theory has… tended to marginalize interest in institutionalized religion and the more private regions of the ‘interior life’ as naïve unless those regions are subordinated to the domain of linguistic representation or to the critiques of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault. In the wake of these thinkers, religion … has become that which inhibits, transmutes, or enables political change but is hardly ever an achievement those priorities take precedence over the social. (834-5)

In literary academia, critics may implicitly see the political as the justification for literature and literary study. Post-colonial, feminist, queer, and ecological projects are assumed to be worthwhile, even good, typically on their own implicitly accepted merits. The political is also explicitly valued and protected: Andrew Gibson argues that, for the past 30 years, “however questionable the justification for the scholar’s work, the justification for the critic’s, at least, is clear: it is political” (2)¹. In this context, a critic like Judith Butler can simply state in “Ethical Ambivalence”: “I’ve worried that the return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics” (15). She has no need to explain why an “escape from politics” would be bad. This kind of assumption that the political is inherently good is widespread. Ethics, morality, and religion can form a sort of un-holy trinity of power, oppression, repression, and manipulation – in other words, bad politics. The hope seems to be that by casting politics as the largest signifying category, all of this trouble can be avoided. Thus politics becomes comfortable, valid, valued, and embraced in much literature scholarship, and religion becomes invisible.

Historically-focused work can focus on the religious as such in a way that politically focused work cannot. Even so, as Fish alludes to, historical distancing can contribute to a certain

¹ He goes on to say, in his 1999 book, that this is changing.
kind of invisibility of the religious. While the idea that some scholarly work interested in religion subsumes the religious with the political thereby rendering the religious invisible is overtly acknowledged in the scholarship, I will make a further distinction here that is less widely considered, between historical accounts focused on bringing attention to the religious climate in which a given text was written and scholarship that is intellectually engaged with concepts fundamental to religious discourse, or that illuminates the literary participation in religious discourse. Although historical awareness and serious attention to the concerns of religious discourse are consonant projects, the ability to distinguish between them is both logical and useful. Scholarly work deeply engaged with the historical context of narratives may not necessarily be interested in theoretical engagement with religious matters. Making this distinction allows for an accurate analysis of the relationship between the religious and the scholarly, and in so doing identifies another aspect of the way in which religious discourse may be rendered invisible. For in scholarship that is historically driven, ideas and themes crucial to religious discourse may be rendered invisible even when the historical phenomenon of religion is being overtly discussed.

To clarify, I will briefly illustrate the way in which religion is subsumed by political and historical discourse. While there are many texts that completely subsume the religious and demonstrate little to no interest in matters of religious significance, numerous instances of which I will address in the course of specific readings, I focus here on more complex texts, those that do not merely treat the religious as grist, for these are both comparatively more interesting and more illustrative. The first, Rebecca Styler’s 2007 “A Scripture of Their Own: Nineteenth-Century Bible Biography and Feminist Bible Criticism” in Christianity and Literature is both historically grounded and interested in the religious lives of women writers. In this article, Styler
argues that nineteenth-century women’s biographies of female biblical characters were, for some women, a “powerful source of self-fashioning,” allowing women to appeal to the Bible as liberatory (82). The significant point about this approach is that in it, identity and religion are both inherently highly politicized. In focusing on the political usefulness of Bible biography, Styler argues that the genre was understood as appropriately “practical” rather than “theological” and was thus deemed appropriate for women (67). She makes the additional point that this genre allowed women not only to focus on the small percentage of the Bible that is about women but also gave these biographers the chance to explore the lives of whichever women they found most useful and to ignore general statements that limited women (71). Essentially, then, religion is here understood in terms of its historical role and political potential while the religious significance of Bible biography for a female writer does not seem to be at issue. Also absent in this kind of work is the personal spiritual importance of the religious writing of women and the contribution of their work to the cultural conversation surrounding Christianity. In that the obvious investment of the article lies in historically contextualizing religious work and drawing attention to the political utility of the Christian Bible, in the course of a religiously engaged text, the article serves as an illustration of the way that the religious signifies politically and historically.

Whereas Styler’s article evinces little interest in religion itself, Richard Forrer’s 1986 *Theodices in Conflict: A Dilemma in Puritan Ethics and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, though older, is a particularly worthwhile case to consider because it is overtly and deeply interested in ideas important in religion. Yet in addition to a historical focus, the book is reliant on political language, through which it in a sense prioritizes the political over the religious. Characterizing his project in his introduction, Forrer writes that “[p]erhaps one of the
more controversial, or at least more variegated, areas in Puritan studies is that which treats the relationship between Puritanism and the emergence of the American literary tradition” (1). He says that studies of this relationship have taken many forms, “themes,” “paradigms,” and “modes of experience,” among which his own is to take its place:

Another possible approach, the one employed in this study, is to demonstrate how Puritanism gives rise to particular models of the cosmos which established culturally prescribed ways for relating to the world, how these models are challenged within the Puritan tradition itself, and then how these models are subsequently appropriated by such writers as William Dunlap, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville as a means for comprehending and evaluating the social, moral, and religious conflicts… (1)

This study announces its interest in a significant religious concept, Puritanism, and its influence as well as the literary treatment of that concept. Its other interests are historical and political, and despite its overtly religious focus, the way in which the introduction talks about the religious is via highly and persistently political language. In saying that the Puritan models are “appropriated” by the writers, the text is relying upon and thereby invoking a politicized focus. The religious becomes, in this sentence, “a means for comprehending and evaluating” conflicts, the first modifier of which is, notably, “social.” There is a way in which any intellectual model, theological or not, is a “means,” but nevertheless, the politically-oriented language subsumes the religious in a significant way in this passage in that it casts political discourse as the signifying discourse. The fact that this treatment of the religious is situated within a text with an unapologetically religious focus indicates the depth of the political tendency of literary scholarship.
A final case, Gregory S. Jackson’s 2009 *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism*, comparatively less political, less literary, and more historical, discusses the importance of critical acknowledgement of the importance of religious cultural context: “Recent criticism could only construe late-nineteenth-century realism as a secular development by overlooking homiletic narrative strategies that sought to concretize the abstract consequences of eternity in vivid encounters in the material world” (24). His thoroughly researched readings of religious cultural context resituate narratives and lead to religiously attuned readings of specific texts and what is known as American Realism. A major underlying issue in Jackson’s approach as characterized by his introduction is the matter of what constitutes knowledge. Jackson does not focus on this crucial issue, but it is at times fully visible, as when he considers a realm of understanding or of reality that is outside of the senses or rational comprehension (10, 30) and when he addresses revelation. In his work, Jackson takes on the issue of a spiritual realm of reality in order to suggest that critics must take it seriously in order to understand American literature. He implies but does not discuss the tension between a perspective that takes the spiritual seriously in itself and one that sees it as significant only in other terms.

This final, most historically focused critical case shows the particular limits of primarily historical readings of the religious. While Jackson is seriously invested in the religious, his historical focus means that he is nevertheless working with religion as a historical artifact. Jackson is concerned that we cannot understand current social debates that relate to religion if we cling to a persistent misunderstanding of religious cultural history. In regard to literature, this misunderstanding is particularly important, according to Jackson, but his interest in and therefore his readings of literature are at the service of religious cultural history. Religion is a phenomenon, as Fish might say. Thus although a historical focus facilitates an understanding of
aspects of the religious that may be lost in politically focused work that is perhaps not attuned to religious history, there is a consonance of the political and the historical that allows the discourses to work in concert such that religion remains an object to be understood in political terms. An important aspect of the religious remains invisible even when the religious is approached as a historical phenomenon.

To cast the political as the inevitable umbrella under which all else, including religion, rightly falls is to make an implicit argument that the political ought to be the privileged lens through which other concepts are understood. The secular academy tends to see Christian discourse through such an already political lens. Essentially, when this dynamic is unnoticed, the political is unconsciously privileged, to misappropriate Jameson. Recognizing this dynamic and its logic at work in literary studies suggests the ways in which readings may be limited or skewed. In response to this dynamic, I approach Christian discourse in literature from a perspective that assumes a different understanding of the relationship between the political and the religious.

One possibility is to simply reverse the roles of the political and the religious. Yet the relationship between religion and literature suggests that approaching literature from a perspective that is focused primarily on religion would be severely limiting. Ernest Rubinstein’s philosophically oriented study of this relationship carries an implicit warning:

If the relationship between religion and literature, broadly conceived, is … ambivalent, then the relation itself most naturally allies with literature, which channels that quality more easily than religion does. Perhaps the lesson is that literature inhabits the space between religion and literature more comfortably than religion can … Literature is more attuned than religion to the duplicities of life. (xiii)
This analysis points toward a confidence or decisiveness about the religious that makes it likely to instrumentalize literature. Literature, with its conduciveness to ambivalence, its attention to “duplicities,” its “negative capability,” is perhaps itself ambivalent and duplicitous in a way that religion is not. To address religious discourse in literature from a perspective that focuses primarily on the religious is to risk missing this complexity.

To acknowledge the possibility that literature has the capacity for an ambivalence, for a kind of complexity that is readily obscured by totalizing discourses such as the religious, is to point towards the need for an alternative way of conceiving of the relationship between the political and the religious. Rather than casting the political as the largest signifying category and religion as coming under its purview or vice versa, the political and the religious can be understood as distinct signifying categories that overlap. This formulation suggests that while their discourses and concerns overlap, aspects of their discourses and concerns are also distinct. Thus there are aspects of the religious that will not be addressed by approaches that are primarily political in orientation, even if those approaches are brought to bear on Christian discourse.

Texts involving both political and religious discourse are clearly quite susceptible to skewed readings and thus in need of re-reading from this alternative perspective. In the case of literature that addresses race in some way, the tendency to read Christian discourse as secondary to political discourse is pronounced, and that discourse is often lost in political discourse. The very nature of the religious means that, as Franchot writes, “Religious questions are … peculiarly subject to silencing – whether through an outright refusal to inquire or through translations of the invisible into the vocabularies of sexuality, race, or class” (840). Race is thus easy to approach in political terms using political “vocabularies,” while religion is particularly difficult to address. Texts that address in some way both race and Christianity, then, are particularly susceptible to
readings in which Christianity is understood in political terms. Often, particularly in the context of overtly political contexts, talking about Christianity means talking about the political function or potential of religion, as, for instance, talking about the way Christian rhetoric is employed by the marginalized. Even when talking about Christianity means talking about a historical phenomenon, the valence is often quite political. The result is a limited understanding of Christian discourse and reading tendencies that do not account for aspects of the texts that participate in that discourse. Although the relationship between the religious and the political is not always conceived in quite the same way, the political tends, to varying degrees, to subsume the religious even when the religious is overtly addressed. The problem is not with politically oriented readings per se but with the fact that the scholarship becomes imbalanced: Aspects of the religious that are not well addressed in the context of a primarily political approach are neglected or unnoticed. Although literature addressing black / white relations in the U.S. is an important avenue through which discussion of the religious enters literary studies, the way in which we tend to read much of this work is particularly subject to such limitations. The religious content of such texts, then, is particularly susceptible to being under-read.

The nature and values of religious discourse and those of scholarly discourse are neither distinct enough to avoid the potential for interference nor consonant enough to diffuse the potential for tension. In essence, the religious per se becomes invisible in literary scholarship because and to the extent that it is tremendously challenging to talk about in the literary academic realm without talking about it as something else, notably the political. In a sense, then, the “problem” is that the religious becomes unspeakable. In a sense it is, as Franchott writes, “silent,” or perhaps more accurately, “silenced.” It is present enough in literary discourse, speaking out, as it were, but it is not heard as religious per se. To hear religious discourse,
literary criticism tends to transpose it. Shifting the metaphor from sight to sound suggests the need for an alternative discourse, a way of talking about the religious that allows it to be heard as such and thus facilitates serious engagement with its concerns. Since the aspects of the religious that tend to remain invisible or not discussed are, not surprisingly, those aspects that situate the religious in opposition to the rational, exploring the potential of the discourse of affect to read the religious is particularly appropriate. This alternative discourse provides a vocabulary and thereby an alternative way of thinking about the religious.

**Emotion as an alternative discourse**

The reason for the tendency to read Christian discourse in primarily political terms is due to a discomfort that is fundamental and illusive relating as it does both to naturalized assumptions about knowledge, meaning, and truth, and to differing perceptions about the appropriate relationship between the religious and the political. If politically oriented readings are based on an understanding gestured towards by the catch-phrase “the personal is political,” a focus on emotion suggests an inversion. Focusing on emotion is thus both an alternative to reading Christian cultural discourse in terms of political significance and complementary to it. The emphasis on the discourse of human feeling and behavior can be characterized as interior, personal, concrete, and experiential rather than public, institutional, bureaucratic, and abstract. A focus on emotion illuminates not so much the role of religion as religious experience and a fuller picture of religion in the text. Emotional discourse provides a framework through which to approach Christian experience and the role of emotional experience in texts that address Christianity. This framework provides an opportunity to read Christian discourse that is distinct from the historical project of demonstrating that at one time people were interested in particular
ideas and from an interest in reading religious concerns as secondary to political ones. To complicate the inevitability of political framing, and in response to the challenge of talking about Christianity as other than a primarily political matter, I turn to the rhetoric of emotion, a discourse both complementary and alternative to that of the political. It constitutes a way to talk about, and thus make visible, aspects of what might be broadly conceived as Christian content that are susceptible to under-reading. Reading Christian discourse in terms of emotion allows for a different kind of engagement with religiously significant concepts, illuminates the participation of literature with those concepts, and deepens our understanding of the literature.

The discourse of emotion is pertinent to religion and to literary scholarship, and it offers a way of reading, a way of talking about and understanding, literature that does not privilege the political. This multifaceted discourse of emotion facilitates readings attuned to emotional nuance. I focus here on pride, shame, and guilt, powerful motivating emotions that have widespread significance and a particular resonance in a Christian context. Considering the dynamics of pride, shame, and guilt illuminates aspects of Christian discourse that are minimized or lost in politically oriented readings. Attention to emotional nuance responds to the difficulty of talking about Christian discourse because that difficulty is in part due to the experiential, emotional aspect of Christian discourse. Furthermore, the discourse of emotion allows for the reading of that in Christian discourse which is other than rational as emotional rather than as irrational.

Christian discourse distinguishes itself through a language and logic that are difficult to address. Approaching Christianity as emotional acknowledges an important aspect of the otherness of religion, the way in which it is not essentially rational, while at the same time avoiding the oversimplifying critique of religion as irrational that enables the unwarranted
dismissal of its concerns. This framework is interdisciplinary, drawing on language and thinking
prominent in psychology and cultural studies as well as theology. Since literary studies struggles
to address aspects of Christianity, these other fields provide a meaningful way of talking about
Christian discourse. While I am not attempting a complete integration of the psychological and
the literary, or a theological project, the work of scholars interested in emotion from a variety of
perspectives establishes a context for my work and facilitates it.

The very language of faith indicates how alien Christian discourse is from the rational.
The so-called “leap of faith” implies that at the edge of the cliff to which rationality can take us
all, the faithful are to set aside intellectual considerations and cast themselves into a chasm.
Language and passages that seem to defy logic reinforce this idea. One of the most prominent
definitions of faith, or religious belief, in the Christian Bible highlights this issue: “Now faith is
the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (NASB Heb. 11:1).
Certainty about an invisible hope is a different kind of certainty than certainty about an
empirically verifiable item or concept. Such certainty may seem paradoxical, optimistic and
delusional, and belief without evidence gullible and foolish, even to a believer and certainly to a
skeptic. Other aspects of Scriptural language can clarify the different “logics” at work in the two
realms. For instance, Christian discourse without hesitation or explanation describes the
“invisible” as “clearly seen” in the language of a mainstream translation of its most important set
of texts: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and
divine nature, have been clearly seen … ” (Rom. 1:20 NASB). These instances concern matters
central to Christianity: salvific faith and the nature of God. This kind of religious language is
indicative of the aspects of religion that are particularly difficult for literary study to address.
Broadly speaking, it is difficult for academic discourse to determine how to address religious
discourse as such, with the result that the individual experience of belief is an aspect of Christian discourse that is under-read, or “invisible.” Understanding Christian experience as emotional rather than as irrational allows for a rational, intellectual treatment of those aspects of Christian discourse that are notably under-read in political-oriented work.

Christian discourse poses a challenge to literary scholarship because it may be recognized as difficult to talk about in an intellectually responsible manner. In arguing that lack of awareness of religious cultural history causes insufficient attention to Christian discourse, Jackson identifies the challenge of dealing with that aspect of Christianity that he calls “religious experience:”

This focus on the intellectual and orthodox histories of American Christianity is understandable, for it is not easy to talk about religious experience, much less to strike a balanced critical perspective, a measured tone, about a subject popularly invested with emotional fervor and ideologically yoked to the moral (and biblical) imperative to reject anything lukewarm’ (Revelations 3:16). (281)

Intellectual and historical matters are easier to talk about than personal, relational, and emotional ones. Political realities are easier to talk about than the beliefs that people might hold. Jackson’s analysis gestures towards the importance of emotion, affiliating it with the religious. He specifically recognizes the emotional significance of Christian experience and identifies it as particularly difficult to address in a scholarly manner. Invoking emotionality in the context of Christian belief here, even suggesting the importance of emotional fervor for the believer in referring to Revelation 3:16, Jackson seems to understand the emotional as importantly other than the intellectual. While Jackson’s comments may indicate a concern that the emotional could be a liability in its otherness from the intellectual, it is this quality of emotional discourse that
makes it a particularly effective framework for addressing those experiential, non-intellectual aspects of Christian discourse that typical intellectual discourse struggles to address. Jackson’s analysis of the reasons for the under-reading of Christian discourse suggests the appropriateness of reading Christian discourse in terms of emotion.

If its connection to belief is part of what makes Christianity difficult to address in literary criticism, that connection also suggests the affinity between religion and emotion. Rather than approaching religious belief as a manifestation of irrationality, which supports its exclusion from academia and rational public discussion, religion can be effectively approached through its emotionality. Such work refocuses readings of religious discourse on the affective, experiential, interpersonal, internal, and bodily. While a political perspective emphasizes historical, cultural realities as the signifying shapers of human experience, Robert C. Fuller emphasizes a different, more fundamental kind of materiality: the body. With an emphasis on biology, he addresses the connection between religion and emotion in “Spirituality in the Flesh: The Role of Discrete Emotions in Religious Life.” In his view, the importance of culture in regard to religion does not negate the individual’s emotional experience of religion, and he sees emotion as thoroughly intertwined with the religious: “There is no such thing as emotion-free religiosity; our brains and nervous systems are wired in such a way that we always bring vital needs and interests to our evaluation of and response to, the surrounding environment” (46). Indeed, a relationship between religion and emotion has been widely recognized, by those with varying perspectives on the value of the religious. Historically, as Fuller notes, “Emotion has long been a central topic in the study of religion. Critics and defenders alike have implicated emotion in the genesis of religious belief and behavior” (25). Because religion is recognized as being inter-related to emotion, a literary critical approach that focuses on this aspect of religious discourse is a suitable
counterpoint to the tendency to read Christian discourse in terms established by political and historical concerns.

According to Fuller, that kind of focus evident in the literary realm is also evident in religious studies, where, he argues, current approaches exhibit a shift from universalizing tendencies toward what he understands as the constructivism dominant in postmodern thought. It is Fuller’s project to explore what he sees as the excesses of this tendency, and given that the dynamic he is responding to is prevalent in literary studies, the pertinence of Fuller’s approach is clear (26). Fuller’s way of talking about religion in terms other than the external, cultural terms of politically-oriented work is to shift toward the discourse of embodied affect. He enacts this shift by situating the biological as an alternative to the cultural:

[T]he vast majority of contemporary studies that investigate the embodied nature of religion still dwell almost exclusively on what Gluckich calls ‘cultural consciousness’ and demonstrates almost no awareness of ‘biological fact.’ It is for this reason that recent scientific and social-scientific studies of discrete emotions are of particular relevance to contemporary theory in the study of religion (28).

In Fuller’s analysis, even much scholarly work that interests itself in embodiment is primarily interested in the cultural, a political and historical matter, rather than the physical. Of particular significance for my project, Fuller, as a result of his shift towards embodiment, is able to achieve a concreteness, a specificity, in his approach. He suggests talking about religion by talking about emotion and argues that the body is a crucial element of religion, despite the power of culture in religion: Human thought and feeling are structured by what our bodies are like and how they function in the world.
We cannot think or feel just anything, only what our embodied brains permit. And thus although it is true that religion is a prime instance in which culture exerts considerable sovereignty over biology, truly interdisciplinary understandings of human spirituality must nonetheless include an appreciation of the bodily substrates of human spirituality.

(27)

While none of these observations mean that cultural realities are insignificant, they do suggest a critical awareness of the significance of physical reality. Human experience is as Fuller puts it “structured” by the body, and our state of being in the world is bodily. Thus the human body’s role and significance is not to be missed, even in a context that makes evident the power of culture. Fuller argues that religious studies has much to gain by attending to the study of emotion in science and social science (28). His analysis of the relationship between the two fields clarifies an important aspect of what it can mean to read religion in terms of affect rather than politics: To read religion via affect is in part to explore the rhetoric of embodied emotion in literary texts.

While Fuller’s analysis of religion and emotion focuses on biology, the body, brain and nervous system, and environmental influence, other scholars working from a theological perspective, or overtly taking up religious concerns in other contexts, take different approaches to the relationship between emotion and religion. This work is more interested in the cultural aspect of religion but is nevertheless focused on the relationship between the emotional and the religious. What distinguishes work like Andrew Sung Park’s From Hurt to Healing A Theology of the Wounded and Virginia Burrus’ Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects is that it effectively addresses aspects of Christianity elided by predominantly politically-oriented readings by exploring emotion. Park theorizes both individual and collective emotions of both victims and oppressors within a theological context, advocating forgiveness as a route to healing.
for the individual and the community. Burrus explores and complicates shame’s role, nature, and significance in the Christian tradition. This work assumes the theological importance of emotion, and explicitly addresses Christianity in emotional terms.

Scholarship that is not itself theologically invested also contributes to the discussion of religion and emotion by participating in the development of emotional discourse. This material, in a sense grounded in social science, ranges widely, establishing a multi-faceted conversation complementary to literary discourse. Thus, for the literary theorist, the burgeoning field of emotion study in the realm of psychology, and its role in cultural study more broadly, has useful knowledge to offer. The possibilities of the application of emotion studies within literary studies are many, and such work could find its way into readings of literary texts through work that is itself based upon studies in psychology. Yet the risk of relying on second-hand, filtered understandings of emotion is oversimplification and misunderstanding, so in order to develop a framework more attuned to specificity and nuance, I will consider psychological literature, where studies explore, define, characterize, and categorize emotional response as this work forms the foundation of meaningful discussion of emotion. Work in the field of psychology develops definitions of specific emotions and discusses the relationship between emotion and behavior, proposing theories of pride and distinguishing between shame and guilt. This comparatively scientific and observational work provides the foundational specificity needed to address those aspects of religious discourse that are most difficult to talk about.

I will also draw on other work related to emotion that, in various contexts, participates in emotional discourse and illuminates the role of emotion. Such work approaches emotion from a variety of perspectives, fleshing out and complicating the psychological perspective. Among the most important of these texts for my work is Evelin Lindner’s *Emotion and Conflict: How*
Human Rights Can Dignify Emotion and Help Us Wage Good Conflict, which explores the role of emotion in human relations on a large scale, in response to Lindner’s concern that our movement toward equal dignity must be approached with understanding of the emotional dynamics involved (xii). This approach reinforces emotion’s centrality to how people and societies interact. Considering emotion sociologically, Lindner considers the significance of the dynamics of emotion. A prominent example of such work is Sara Ahmed’s The Cultural Politics of Emotion, which contextualizes basic understandings of specific emotions, considering the interplay between political and emotional realities. She analyzes the rhetoric of emotion, the way emotion is perceived and deployed culturally, and the embodied nature of emotion. Although Ahmed discusses pride, she does not fully address its psychological complexities, let alone considering the potential cultural embeddedness of psychological definitions of pride. Linguist Anna Gladkova, on the other hand, critiques the prevailing understanding of pride in psychology by addressing the significance of language and culture in regard to how emotions are understood. In “A Linguist’s View of Pride,” she argues that the prevailing understanding of pride in psychology is anglocentric. Michael Morgan also interrogates the prevailing thinking in psychology. Focusing specifically on the ethical potential of shame, Morgan argues in On Shame that shame can be a useful emotion in promoting ethical behavior rather than causing paralysis. Combined with the observational analysis provided by the social sciences, such work illuminates the nature and potential of emotional discourse as a framework through which to address Christian discourse by facilitating attention to emotional nuance, the implications and dynamics of emotion, and to the role of that nuance in literature.

Work grounded in the field of philosophy has brought emotional discourse to bear on literature effectively, approaching various texts with a focus on emotion, but differing
assumptions and priorities in philosophy and literary studies, including about the nature and role of literature, separate this work from literary studies. Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum are the foundational figures in this field. In his introduction to *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty clarifies the role of literature in moral philosophy: “Physics is a way of trying to cope with various bits of the universe; ethics is a matter of trying to cope with other bits. Mathematics helps physics do its job; literature and the arts help ethics do its. Some of these inquiries come up with propositions, some with narratives, some with paintings” (xliii). The clear decisiveness of Rorty’s empowering yet condescending justification of literature is paradigmatic. Literature serves as a means towards ethical speculation. This understanding of literature is instrumentalizing, subordinating literature to ethics such that it creates a gap between the treatment of literature in literary studies and in moral philosophy. From the perspective of such philosophers, literature is of interest because of its potential to be of service in moral philosophy.

Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* is a quintessential and fundamental text in the field. Gibson, writing about ethical criticism, comments on the role of literature in this kind of philosophical work: “For Nussbaum, too [as for Rorty], literature is a primary vehicle for ethics in a post-philosophical age” (8). Literature becomes an avenue for understanding human nature, provides examples of working through philosophical questions, shows how people might act in a given situation, and illustrates the results of such actions. In this philosophical tradition and focusing primarily on emotion, Jenefer Robinson’s *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* explores character, genre, and various aspects of interpretation. In her introduction to part II, she writes: “My main goal … [is] to clarify with respect to the works … that do emotionally engage us how emotion enters into our interpretation of these works, how we learn emotionally from them about human nature and
human motivation, and *how emotion manages and guides our responses* to them through the manipulation of form” (her emphasis 102-103). Robinson’s approach emphasizes readerly emotion. Her interest is in the interpretive role of readerly emotion and in the potential of literature to educate readers, as well as in the role of emotion in reader response. The scope of her work means that she addresses emotion in a wide range of issues and from a variety of perspectives. Although work of this kind participates in a conversation about emotion and literature, such work tends to be less vested in the literary texts it discusses.

From a literary studies perspective, this philosophical approach to literature seems outdated, yet it suggests important ways in which emotional discourse can be effective as a framework through which to approach literature. One aspect of the theoretical commitments of this work is that the understanding of literature it expresses is exemplified by the conception of literary characters as people: “Understanding characters in great realistic novels such as Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is relevantly like understanding real people and understanding real people requires *emotional* understanding, not just a dispassionate grasp of their character and motives” (Robinson 105). The reason that literature is so useful for the moral philosopher is that it provides a detailed, accessible character that readers are able to understand, perhaps better able to understand than real people since realistic fiction provides access to its characters unlikely to be matched in reality. Essentially, the interests of such approaches to literature seem to return to an old liberal humanist view that literature is essentially, or at least ought to be, a force for moral good (or something to be criticized for its moral failure). Gibson’s analysis of the role of this kind of philosophical approach to literature within literary studies is concise and accurate. He explains:
Rorty and Nussbaums [often] are reminiscent of the liberal humanist tradition of novel criticism. The emphasis on concretion or particularity in the novel is very close to being Leavisite…. [T]hey appear to turn away from later theory to an earlier tradition…. [to page 9] Rorty and Nussbaum’s effective sense of the novel and the ethics of fiction is rather pre-structuralist. The philosopher may feel that he or she is on new ground. Most literary theorists or critics will not. (8-9)

The approach to the relationship between emotion and literature evident in moral philosophy may “feel” out of date from a literary critical perspective. The matter of detail and concreteness is indeed central to much of Nussbaum’s work. In contrast to the abstract, rule-oriented philosopher, she embraces a “practical” philosophy that supports turning to literature as a source of specificity and concretion: “The commitment of Aristotelian practical wisdom to rich descriptions of qualitative heterogeneity, to context-sensitive perceiving, and to emotional and imaginative activity has already suggested to us that certain sorts of novels would be good places to see the good of this conception fittingly expressed” (*Love’s Knowledge* 84-85). In this context, an important value of literature is that it is able to depict and explore the world of emotion, often an internal realm that can be inaccessible.

The potential of an approach to literature that considers the way in which emotions are experienced and perceived is highlighted by this philosophical work, and literary studies is poised to adopt aspects of its approach. Is it impossible, though, for literary studies to participate in the interest in the relationship between literature and emotion? The kinds of tendencies evident in moral philosophy may be an inevitable risk to the kind of reading attuned to emotional nuance that I pursue. Yet an approach grounded in literary study is distinct from that taken in moral philosophy. Literary studies does not share the philosophical desire to treat texts as reality. I thus
contextualize my study of emotional nuance within an awareness of texts as such. This matter of emphasis has important implications: Since I do not look to literature as a way of illustrating abstract concepts, but rather consider what an attention to emotional nuance reveals in texts, texts do not have to be chosen based on how well they illustrate a given concept. As Nussbaum says, “certain sorts of novels” are particularly useful as illustrations. A literary orientation does not necessitate such choices; furthermore, the pay-off is a reading of a text not the clarification of a principle. Thus a focus on emotional concretion, specifically on the nuances of pride, shame, and guilt, stands to benefit literary studies by facilitating more balanced, complete readings of texts with Christian discourse.

Emotional discourse provides an alternative to the kind of political discourse prevalent in literary studies: Essentially, in that the study of emotion addresses human motivations, relationships between individuals and groups, and the specific nature and implications of specific emotions, it thereby suggests a way of reading framed by such concerns. Since the way we talk about things matters, reading foregrounding different terms opens up avenues of literary exploration, facilitating conversation about literature addressing race and Christianity that does not cast a particular understanding of the political as the inevitably signifying category. The emphasis on the discourse of human feeling and behavior can be characterized as interior, personal, concrete, and experiential rather than public, institutional, bureaucratic, and abstract. A focus on emotion illuminates not so much the role of religion as the significance of religious experience or the role of emotion in a text with Christian discourse. Emotional discourse provides a framework through which to approach Christian experience and the role of emotional experience in texts that address Christianity. Specifically, I focus on pride, shame and guilt, as they have particular resonance in the Christian story.
Pride, shame and guilt

In a Christian cultural context, religious texts, history, and subcultures shape the valence through which pride, shame, and guilt are understood. Pride, shame, and guilt are theologically complex, but a basic cultural understanding of these terms as religiously inflected is widespread, albeit malleable and varied. Literary texts participate in this larger cultural religious conversation. They shape it, are shaped by it, and contribute to it. Pride, shame and guilt have specific resonance in a Christian cultural context. Such other emotions as humiliation, rage, and gratitude, and other religiously and emotionally inflected phenomenon such as repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are similar avenues ripe for consideration. To focus on pride, shame, and guilt is necessarily to minimize other compelling emotional and religious concepts. The practical necessity of prioritization means selecting a beginning, or perhaps an end, in the midst of a set of overlapping, non-linear cycles. This process of bringing order and meaning to complexity and chaos is one thing that narrative does, and since I am after all exploring Christian discourse, I have chosen to focus on the emotional “beginning” of the Christian narrative of the human experience. The nature and role of pride, shame, and guilt in the Christian story is such that to begin elsewhere is to begin in the middle. Pride, shame, and guilt are foundational in the Christian story and in it are understood as the beginning point of the human story.

Pride is, in the Christian story, the beginning point of human experience. Understanding pride in this way emphasizes the Christian understanding of humanity as fallen and in a fallen world. It also emphasizes disobedience to God. Although there is a degree of debate about details, the understanding of the human condition as fallen is a foundational aspect of the basic Christian story of mankind. The Christian story begins with pride leading to sin, or the sin of
pride, the result of which is shame. The relationships between these states of feeling are evident: Adam and Eve, in paradise, feel good about themselves. Though they are naked, they are not ashamed (Holy Bible, Gen. 2:25). Then, in disobeying God, they sin: They eat the fruit that God has told them not to eat. Afterwards, they cover their bodies with leaves and hide from God (Holy Bible, Gen. 3:7-8). Setting themselves against God through their disobedience, Adam and Eve realize that they do not want God to see who they are: naked disobedient shamed sinners. In what is widely recognized as a typical manifestation of shame, they try to hide from God. After this sin, they are banished from paradise into the world. This fallen, sinful world is a place of both hubristic and authentic pride, both appropriate and inappropriate shame and guilt.

The human condition is of shame and guilt that proceed and accompany conviction of sin, recognition of the need for repentance. The Christian story of the human condition is that because of the sin of pride, evident through disobedience, humanity is mired in shame and guilt until repentance and God’s forgiveness enable reconciliation with God the father through the sacrifice of the Son. A crucial aspect of the Christian conception of the circumstances in which humanity finds itself is that human effort cannot unite sinful mankind with God. The human condition remains one of shame and guilt, and all are in a state of sin (Holy Bible, Eccles. 7:20, Rom. 3:23). The logic of this situation is that if reconciliation between God and humanity is to be achieved, the debt owed by humanity because of sin must be discharged. This sinfulness is inherent sin, part of the human condition, and not simply a reference to specific sins that individuals might commit. Since mankind cannot make up for sin, guilt is inescapable. The way out of this state of sin is through the Son of God who redeems humanity from its fallen state by taking human sin upon himself and dying in order to reconcile humanity and God. Romans 5:19 explains: “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so
through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (NASB). The Son, as divine and thus without sin and guilt, is able through the sacrifice of himself to make full atonement, fulfilling the law: The Son is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 NASB). Through repentance and forgiveness, sinful humanity can move from a state of pride, shame, and guilt to reconciliation with God. More broadly, these emotions pertain to attitude, behavior and self-conception. They address experience and function in relationships between individuals and communities. In a Christian context, pride, shame, and guilt are the emotional lot of humanity as fallen.

While Christianity is an important cultural influence on our understanding of these emotions, psychology establishes the basic framework for pride, shame, and guilt. All are referred to as self-conscious emotions. The identification of pride, shame, and guilt as self-conscious emotions means that they are recognized as both fundamental and complex. As a result, even this foundational, definitional discussion of these emotions becomes quite complicated. There is, however, a kind of basic understanding of pride, shame, and guilt that forms the background of the conversation surrounding them. Essentially, pride is understood as feeling good about the self. It is typical in Western psychology to divide pride into two basic categories: authentic pride, which is associated with self-esteem and motivation and is viewed as positive and beneficial, and hubristic pride, an overweening pride associated with excessive regard for the self, arrogance and a negative attitude towards others. Shame and guilt are inextricably intertwined negative feelings about the self. The clearest distinction between them is that while shame is feeling bad about the very self, guilt is understood as a response to behaviors. Although this explanation is necessarily an oversimplification, the understanding it reflects has tremendous influence on the way in which these emotions are understood.
Part of the complexity surrounding pride, shame, and guilt results from the difficulty of pining down emotion. A discussion of emotion must acknowledge that there are a variety of views about what emotions are. Through a series of questions in *Emotion and Conflict*, Lindner illustrates the complexity of emotions and the variety of ways they are understood:

What are emotions? Are emotions cultural or biological or both? Perhaps they are nothing more than constructs of folk knowledge? Or are they merely bodily response, nothing but hormones, skin conductance levels, and cerebral blood flows? … Why do we have them? What functions do they serve? … Are there universal emotions across cultures? … Are they rational? … To which actions do emotions lead? Is there an automatic link between emotion and action? (11)

The causes, the effects, even the very nature of emotion is not completely clear, let alone such concerns as why emotion exists or what it means that humans are emotional. The very complexity of emotion is what gives the conversation about emotion richness. The relationships between biology and culture, the body and the mind, motivation and behavior are not clear or simple. Together, the multiple ways in which emotions can be addressed and understood present a picture of the experiential and cultural elements of the way we as humans have sought to understand ourselves and our interactions through what we call emotion.

The most fundamental disagreement relates to whether emotions are best understood as cultural constructs, or as evolutionary and biological. Differences in approach have been, and continue to be, a source of disagreement. To a degree, both sides have been acknowledged to have a point, and Lindner’s analysis, the tension between biological and cultural approaches has

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2 For an excellent overview of the conversation surrounding emotions, see Lindner’s subsection entitled “What are Emotions” (3-24).
dissipated: “Evolutionary theorists are now regarded to be right when they claim cross-cultural similarity in (primordial) emotion, and social constructivists are accepted as being equally right, when they highlight cultural variation in the use and functions of (elaborated) emotions in human societies” (19). Yet the fact that emotion is both biological and cultural, and can be understood as containing categories does not mean an end to differing perspectives and points of emphasis. The matter of the categorization of emotions as universal is an important one, with evolutionary psychologists interested in emotions as innate and broadly recognizable. There is a distinct lack of agreement regarding determinations of which emotions are universal and how they are to be identified, however. Lindner includes a table with fourteen different lists of “basic” emotions. Obviously even among those who understand basic emotions as universal, there are a variety of viewpoints. Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robbins, who espouse a Darwinian view that is interested in emotion as biologically based and thus universal, identify the basic emotions as “anger, disgust, happiness, fear, sadness, and surprise” (“Emerging Insights” 147). These basic emotions have, as Tracy and Robins write, “distinct, universally recognized, nonverbal expressions” (“Emerging Insights” 147). Those emotions that they categorize as self-conscious emotions, including pride, shame, and guilt, on the other hand, are comparatively “more cognitively complex” (“Emerging Insights” 147). Pride, shame, and guilt are feelings and attitudes with physiological elements and related to behaviors. The complexity of these self-conscious emotions relates to their self-referentiality. They involve self-perception, including perception of how the self relates to and is viewed by others.

The relevance of culture thus becomes inescapable in analysis of such self-conscious emotions. The pertinence of culture gives rise to questions and disagreements about the relationship between universality and ethnocentrism involved in even research based on
evolutionary biology. Approaches that emphasize the biological and those that emphasize the universal thus overlap. At the same time, they present not merely different views of categorizations and definitions, but potentially different understandings of specific emotions.

Linguist Anna Gladkova, for instance, questions the prevalent understanding of pride as divisible into authentic and hubristic categories in “A Linguist’s View of Pride” based on her analysis of the failure of this categorization to map onto Russian language and culture. Her critique suggests that the cultural bias of evolutionary psychologists results in culturally specific understandings being treated as universal. Emotional discourse is made up of an array of contributions based on differing assumptions, including contributions reflecting the perspectives of specific subcultures. There is only a semblance of stability. Pride, shame, and guilt are themselves not fully stable concepts. They are complex and nuanced. Literature participates in the larger cultural conversation about those concepts as well as employing them. Christian discourse is also an important contributor and participant. My project here is to explore how a focus on the overlap of emotional discourse and Christian discourse illuminates literature.

I consider texts in which the Christian discourse has often been understood in political terms, specifically texts involving blackness in America. In chapter 1, I illustrate how a focus on emotional discourse provides a balance to politically-oriented readings by considering criticism of nineteenth century African-American women’s religious narratives and reading Jarena Lee’s 1849 Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel. I explore the emotional, experiential aspect of the text’s Christian discourse, a component of the work invisible when critical scholarship focuses on religion as “mere” rhetoric, inauthentic and performative, employed as a clever persuasive strategy that is only significant as a political maneuver divorced from the experience of religious belief.
In chapter 2, I read William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* through a focus on pride, shame, and guilt. The novel is uncomfortably Modernist and typically read as an overt political statement. Compared to such other Faulkner novels as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, *Intruder in the Dust* is recognized as less experimental and interesting. *Intruder* has suffered from being characterized as a political pot-boiler with an incoherent plot and cast as literarily and politically inferior. Yet the novel is deeply invested in the emotional life of its focalizing character Chick Mallison. I re-read the novel with a focus on emotional nuance. Faulkner’s interest in Southern history and in the pride, shame and guilt of the white community means that his work seems to invite such a focus, despite the lack of overt exploration of Christianity. Yet the role and significance of Christianity in *Intruder in the Dust* is important if not necessarily evident. The early symbolic baptism scene and the gesture towards repentance as the novel wraps up its convoluted and confusing plot presents a fundamental aspect of the Christian narrative in a positive light by virtue of its potential to provide hope. Reading the novel’s participation in Christian discourse through a focus on the nuances of pride, shame, and guilt suggests an alternative way of understanding the novel’s focus and trajectory.

In chapter 3, I focus on Nella’s *Quicksand* through an emotional framework. A Harlem Renaissance novel focused on black female identity and experience, *Quicksand* is as focused on the interior life of its central character Helga Crane as *Intruder* is focused on the vicissitudes of Chick’s emotional experience. Yet because Larsen is an avowed atheist and Christianity in *Quicksand* is political in nature and function, it might seem an unusual novel for me to include in this study. But it is precisely this quality of *Quicksand* that makes it an interesting challenge to test the range of my approach to Christian discourse. Focusing on pride, shame, and guilt in the novel illuminates the unrecognized complexity of Christian discourse in *Quicksand*. I read
Larsen’s vision as fully and fundamentally ambivalent, a “nervy assault” (a term borrowed from Larsen biographer George Hutchinson) on all forms of simple categories and distinctions. Here, I read the novel through a focus on the nuances of pride, shame and guilt, which reveals the complexity of even the novel’s vision of Christianity.

Lee’s narrative, Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* and Larsen's *Quicksand* approach many of the same issues regarding race and identity. Each is readily and frequently understood in political terms, and as a result, aspects of these texts have fallen through the cracks. But each participates in Christian discourse, though in very different ways. Reading these texts with attention to emotion, specifically a focus on pride, shame, and guilt, illustrates the potential of emotional discourse as an alternative framework through which to consider a variety of literary texts.
“Mere” rhetoric and the nineteenth-century African-American woman’s narrative:

Exploring Jarena Lee’s Christian Experience

The intersection of race and Christianity in nineteenth-century African-American women’s narratives was and continues to be provocative, in part because of the simultaneously liberatory and oppressive potential of Christianity. From a twenty-first century vantage point, such narratives may seem particularly suited to politically-oriented readings due to the overlap of political and religious discourses in the narratives. But while literary criticism shows a distinct tendency towards political readings, little attention has been paid to the religious significance. A notable exception is Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-century African American Women, in which Joycelyn Moody identifies a lack of attention to religious significance in the scholarship as inspiring her own work. She considers this scholarship in a preface that justifies her work and in turn inspires mine:

Sentimental Confessions argues for an appreciation of the holy women’s narratives because – not although – they are holy texts. Many scholars and archivists have effectively demonstrated that the Christianized autobiographies of early Africans and African Americans fulfilled a variety of political strategies. That valuable scholarship need not compel us to discount or disdain the import of the Christian discourse. I have written Sentimental Confessions because I am pained by the anti-spiritual context in which early black holy women’s writings are generally read, when they are read at all. … I believe that to overlook, to ‘read around’ the spiritual dimensions present in these books is to neglect an essential and vital aspect of them. … Any person who values literature
Moody’s determination to give under-appreciated African American women’s spiritual narratives their due means attending to what the texts themselves indicate an investment in, notably spirituality. Moody’s study identifies not an anomalous or random politicizing tendency but a systemic and ongoing focus on a particular kind of political reading at the expense of attention to the spiritual explorations of the narratives. I share Moody’s belief that Christian discourse matters in the texts and argue that the texts matter as significant contributions to Christian discourse. Thus Christian discourse here is not best understood as “mere rhetoric,” a phrasing that dismisses the spiritual significance of Christian discourse by implying that rhetorical strategy is distinct from and insignificant in comparison to a text’s true purpose.

In this chapter, I begin by analyzing criticism of nineteenth-century African-American women’s religious narratives to illustrate the nature and extent of the tendency to read Christian rhetoric as only a useful political maneuver for deployment on behalf of the oppressed before turning to Jarena Lee’s *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel*. African-American women’s religious narratives are typically read as a group rather than with specific, individualized attention, which indicates and contributes to the tendency to see such narratives as illustrations of an idea rather than as complex and significant texts in their own right. I have selected Lee’s narrative as a practical matter, not because other narratives are less worthy of attention. I will approach her narrative through an emotional framework as discussed in my introduction in order to illuminate aspects of her Christian discourse that are lost in politically oriented readings.
Part I: Criticism

Reading minority discourse

Christian discourse is, in the context of nineteenth-century African-American women’s narratives, susceptible to being read as “merely” rhetorical, as only a persuasive political strategy, rather than as meaningful participation in Christian discourse itself. In the context of this politically-oriented literary analysis, minority discourse is particularly likely to be understood as inextricably political because of what Moody describes as the “intrinsically revisionary” nature of African-American texts (51). In her analysis, this revision is based on working creatively with genre: “Because of the social and rhetorical construction of racial identity and the difference it posits between African Americans and others and the racism it has wrought, African Americans generally do not—cannot—write in English without transforming existing genres or developing new ones” (51). This transformative, revisionary quality of African-American work is often identified in African-American approaches to Christian discourse, which are identified as revisionary and therefore as political. The logic of this point is evident but need not support the conclusion that all African American Christian discourse is therefore best read from an exclusively or primarily political perspective, or the idea that political revision is separate from religious discourse.

The fundamental reason that African American texts usually receive politically-orientation attention becomes fully evident in Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd’s “Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse” which addresses the relationship between the concept of “minority” and the political. The very concept of “minority” is dependent on “position,” specifically, as they explain, “a subject-position that can only be defined, in the final analysis, in ‘political’ terms, that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation,
political disfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses” (11). If the very notion of minority is by definition a political concept, integrally associated with a political orientation, it might seem that minority texts must be explored in political terms. JanMohamed and Lloyd do not explicitly make this argument but they do embrace political prioritization. By virtue of analyzing “minority” as politically defined, minority discourse becomes that which must be read in political terms. Indeed, the definition of “political” JanMohamed and Lloyd provide here suggests precisely the kind of focus that nineteenth-century African-American women’s narratives have invited.

Although JanMohamed and Lloyd are themselves using a political framework and demonstrate commitment to what is in an important respect an unproblematized political approach to minority discourse, they provide a pertinent warning to critics. First, they issue a reminder of the complexity of two distinct vulnerabilities of minority discourse:

Since the dominant culture occludes minority discourse by making minority texts literally unavailable … and, more subtly, by developing an implicit theoretical perspective which is structurally blind to minority concerns, one of the first tasks of a re-emergent minority culture is to break out from such ideological encirclement. In such an endeavor, theoretical and archival work of minority culture must always be concurrent and mutually reinforcing. (8)

Here, the authors express an awareness of the tremendous influence of the priorities of the dominant culture on critics, as self-aware and reflective as they might be. This influence is not fully escapable and is systemically bent towards creating and building ways of meaning and understanding that reify the dominant culture through a self-fulfilling process that renders that
culture ever more dominant. This domination process circumscribes minority discourse.

JanMohamed and Lloyd caution critics to be aware of the influence of the dominant culture:

Since we, the critics of minority culture, have been formed within the dominant education apparatuses and continue to operate under its (relatively tolerant) constraints, we are always in danger of reproducing the dominant ideology in our reinterpretations unless we theoretically scrutinize our critical tools and methods and the very categories of our epistemology, aesthetics, politics, etc. (10)

This reverberating warning does not explicitly address the risks of a political framework and, in fact, the authors do not express concerns about such a framework. It does, however, address both critical situatedness as a limiting “ideological encirclement” and the need to “scrutinize” even the “very categories of our … politics.” The first warning includes a clear suggestion. But if recognizing the circumscribing effect of critical situation is relatively simple, it is not necessarily an easy or fully possible task. The second iteration of the warning is a reinforcement of an earlier point that “theoretical reflection cannot be dispensed with” if critics are to avoid casting minority discourse as “the mere marginal repetition of exotic ethnicity” (8). In order to make archival work matter, so that texts do not become significant only as examples of a given theoretical principle, a particular theoretically savvy self-awareness is crucial. To “theoretically scrutinize … the very categories of our politics” is for JanMohamed and Lloyd the “task of re-evaluation of values.” While for them, this task remains within a primarily “political” project, according to their own formulation of “political,” their warning of the need for a cautious approach based on awareness of critical point of view suggests that critics should be careful about the limitations of their own political orientation(s).
Such an application of their warning is further indicated by the concluding thanks that concludes JanMohamed and Lloyd’s piece, the introduction to a special issue of *Cultural Critique* that includes essays from a conference held at the University of California, Berkeley. These words of appreciation constitute another aspect of warning, one that is particularly subtle and particularly pertinent to my project: “Finally, we must fully and unhesitatingly embrace the paradox that the conference on ‘The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse’ could not have taken place without the generous support of (dominant) institutions” (12). This remark illuminates the importance of the academy as itself an influential cultural force with values that shape those working within it. In the context of minority discourse, one of the crucial values, one embraced by JanMohamed and Lloyd and the vast majority of the critical conversation surrounding minority texts, is a prioritization of the political. Their identification of “economic exploitation, political disfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination” (11) as the political terms appropriate for talking about minority discourse reflects and reinforces the critical tendencies evident in criticism of nineteenth-century African-American women’s narratives. Nevertheless, JanMohamed and Lloyd’s theorization of the study of minority discourse establishes a useful foundation. It suggests a flexibility of approach, an investment in exploration, an awareness of critical tendencies, and an attention to the specificity of texts.

This tendency to look at minority discourse through a political lens is fostered and compounded in the case of nineteenth-century American work by the evident political value of Christian discourse in the nineteenth-century United States. The contested role of religion in the abolition movement in the nineteenth century means that religious discourse was very much present in the public realm, and indeed the nature of religion and the cultural significance of Christianity in the nineteenth-century U.S. clarifies the political use to which Christian rhetoric
can be put. Both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists claim biblical authority for their respective stances. Women used their socially approved status as spiritual household guides as the foundation from which to comment upon and otherwise engage in the public sphere, including the great issue of the day: slavery. Black women like Lee could use Christian discourse to establish the credibility, legitimacy, and authority of their public voices. In African American narratives in general, Christian discourse serves a wide variety of roles. Christian belief is used as evidence of one’s fitness to participate in society (see *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Solomon Bayley’s “A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley, Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware, North America”), but it is also used in the justification of violence (see Nat Turner’s *Confessions*). Although Christianity is instrumentalized in such readings, the contradictory political potential of the religious provides politically-oriented readings a sense of complexity and richness. Consequently, the limitations of readings that understand the religious in explicitly political terms are less likely to be identified. Because the rhetorical potential of Christian rhetoric is undeniable, and because of discomfort with the non-“rational” aspects of Christian discourse, politically-oriented readings that understand Christian discourse as “mere” rhetoric, a clever stratagem, are common.

**Interrogating critical tendencies**

While taken individually, politically oriented approaches to nineteenth-century African American women’s narratives are explanatory and illustrative, aspects of Christian discourse that do not fit comfortably in a primarily political approach are too often lost. The way the relationship between the political and the religious in nineteenth-century African-American women’s narratives is understood becomes clear in analyzing Gregory S. Jackson’s comparison
of typical white and black theologies in *The Word and Its Witness*. Here, Jackson identifies the tendency of black evangelicals to unify religious and political claims:

Black spiritual vocabulary … systematically differed from white in employing the biblical tropes of liberty literally rather than metaphorically…For black evangelicals, even those freeborn, bondage to sin and bondage in servitude—poverty or slavery—were, if not one and the same, sufficiently similar in a racially divided nation that physical servitude often meant a life of coerced sin: lying to avoid punishment, stealing to eat, Sabbath-breaking to labor, and casuistry to justify need and supply real want. (122)

The relationship between the spiritual and the political is not just close; the two are intertwined, with religious freedom from sin and material freedom potentially equated. Just as a literal interpretation of freedom is politically significant, so too is an insistence on metaphorical interpretation, for to see spiritual freedom as metaphorical may be to see it as not incompatible with physical bondage. In typical black theology, then, the “freedom in Christ” promised in the Christian Bible to believers is political freedom. Jackson explains that “in spiritual journals, as in black sermons, the term ‘jubilee’ came to signify not just the Resurrection, but emancipation” (122). When Jackson says that jubilee “came to signify” emancipation, the implication is of a prior naturalization of an understanding of religion as always metaphorical, as not literal, not political, that is itself of obvious political value. While Jackson is not committed to a primarily political approach, his analysis does indicate the basic dynamics of the foregrounding of the political. Essentially, political reality and important aspects of a Christian belief system are thus interrelated in typical black theology. This interrelationship has come to be misunderstood in a fairly specific way in readings of African-American Christian narratives: In criticism of this work, religious language is political language, and religious concerns are political concerns. All
concerns are read as primarily political and religious investment is likely to be understood as signifying politically but not religiously, being read in terms neither of theology nor of personal religious experience.

A pronounced political orientation, one that tends to instrumentalize Christianity, is often assumed in all but the most theologically-oriented work. At its most basic, this study of nineteenth-century African-American texts understands Christian discourse in terms of its potential political significance. In his influential discussion of Christian discourse in nineteenth-century African-American autobiography in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiographies of the Nineteenth-century*, William Andrews discusses the conventional use of the salvation rhetoric of Christianity in terms that illustrate the naturalization of an understanding of Christian discourse in terms of the political. Pre-Civil War autobiography was, according to Andrews “chiefly distinguished by its rhetorical aims,” aiming to illustrate that whites and slaves were “brothers” and that the black narrator was credible (1). At this time, he explains, even northerners and southerners against slavery tended to see slaves as morally degraded (3). The rhetorical application of Christianity in this context is obvious as black writers participate in Christian discourse to portray themselves as morally engaged, knowledgeable about and subscribing to such socially desirable qualities as sharing a belief system, a moral code, and even such desirable attributes as being forgiving and obedient. Andrews’ analysis of African American autobiography indicates the view that the Christian discourse in such work is present because of the potential of that discourse to give the writer cultural power.

Post-1865, the year of full emancipation, according to Andrews, “the crucial themes of identity and veracity underwent much revision” (1). As a result, in Andrew’s analysis, there was increased openness to less standard elements of identity in later autobiography (1). Nevertheless,
Christian rhetoric remains prominent for some writers. The political potential of Christian discourse, and thus the tendency to read it in political terms, is not limited to pre-1865 African American narratives. Religious themes, appeals and allusions are still prominent features of much post-bellum nineteenth-century African American writing. According to Carolyn A. Haynes in *Divine Destiny: Gender and Race in Nineteenth-Century Protestantism*, the large—and increasing—membership of women, African Americans, and other non-whites in Protestant churches in the nineteenth century, combined with a Christian interest in increasing literacy among these populations, means that much writing from these populations after the Civil War remains invested in Christian rhetoric (Haynes xii-xiii). In Haynes’ analysis, such work is “infused … with Christian rhetoric and Protestant ideals” (xiii). Haynes identifies the challenge of responding to the resulting Christian aspect of the nineteenth-century texts: “These facts have caused contemporary scholars to face a nettlesome challenge: how to address, explain, and analyze the prevalent and at times clearly willing use of Protestant rhetoric and ideology during the nineteenth century by the very people who may have been most victimized by it” (xiii). Haynes’s here recognizes the complexity of the role of Christian rhetoric in the work of nineteenth-century minority writers and herself responds to what she identifies as the “fashionable trend in scholarship, and particularly … American literature, either to view Protestantism as a purely debilitating or a merely utilitarian force, or, to ignore its presence and effects altogether” (xv). In contrast to this skewed scholarship, Haynes herself seeks to re-read Protestant rhetoric. In this endeavor, however, her work remains essential political in its project. What she does in her approach is to consider writers who have “combined Protestantism with a progressive social agenda” (xv). This combination is particularly potent for minority writers as well as white women because of the cultural power of Christian discourse, and as a result, the
role of Christian discourse in this later nineteenth-century work remains significant. Since “women, African Americans, and other non-whites” are the very people who are most in need of the cultural power available through the use of Christian discourse, the ready applicability of politically oriented readings continues even with the increasing flexibility of post Civil War discourse.

This prominent role of Christianity in nineteenth-century African American narrative is widely recognized, typically in the context of critical scholarship that shares Andrew’s focus on the political utility of Christian discourse. The characterization of the religious rhetoric of African American writers in Andrews’ influential work is particularly clear. Discussing African-American use of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, he situates religious concerns in a political framework, assuming that nineteenth-century African American narratives do not participate in Christian discourse so much as use it for political purposes. Andrews analyzes African-American uses of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, writing: “The misreading of these texts in Afro-American autobiography is much more than an act of cultural commentary or moral criticism” (14). Andrews characterizes this misreading as a revisionary project of “self-creation” (14). The word “misreading” is noteworthy. Andrews’ interest is in the revisionist nature of Afro-American use of texts that are crucial to an oppressive society. Andrews’ point regarding the revisionary nature of the use of religious rhetoric is interesting, but his analysis is limited by rhetoric that assumes that the Bible and the Declaration of Independence are in fact oppressive and thus that to understand these texts as liberatory is to engage in “misreading.”

On a theoretical level, this perspective, though interested in revisionary readings, grants credence to dominant interpretations of the Bible (and the Declaration of Independence). Rather
than characterizing all uses of the Bible as “uses,” Andrews specifically identifies the liberatory references of African American writers as “uses.” This approach has a paradoxical effect in terms of the African American writer. Although it seeks to empower African American writers, focusing on their narratives’ participation in Christian discourse as misreadings for a political purpose sets narrow limits for those very writers by neglecting to address the potential religious significance the Bible and particular theologies could have for the writers.

Although Andrew’s *To Tell A Free Story* is clearer in its perspective than many other critical texts, the assumptions it makes about nineteenth-century narratives are typical. Often, as in Andrews’ case, language that treats Christian discourse in terms of politics assumes rather than argues for the primacy of political concerns. SallyAnn H. Ferguson, in her introduction to *Nineteenth-Century Black Women’s Literary Emergence: Evolutionary Spirituality, Sexuality, and Identity*, refers to the political use of Christian rhetoric as a matter of course. She writes, “Maria Stewart and Jarena Lee … instinctively fortified their black female identities by successfully negotiating Christianity’s ethical morass in antebellum America” (xxviii). This formulation suggests that it is not Christianity that is significant, but rather the writers’ ability to negotiate the religion’s questionable ethics. Christianity is here approached not as a belief system, a religion to be believed or doubted, or as something of significance to a writer’s life experience, but rather as a challenge that is also an opportunity. Stewart and Lee are in this reading simply understood to be establishing cultural power for themselves via their ability to participate in Christian discourse while the idea that what they do might be read in terms other than the political, might have religious significance is lost. That Ferguson assumes rather than seeks to support this interpretation reflects that this prevalent perspective is often taken for granted.
A potentially more religiously-attentive approach is taken by Laurel Bollinger’s “‘A Mother in the Deity’: Maternity and Authority in the Nineteenth-Century African-American Spiritual Narrative” overtly addresses the relationship between the religious and the political in such a way as to establish room for each that is not in the realm of the other: “antebellum spiritual narrative[s]…, often by itinerant preachers writing both to account for their spiritual experiences and to justify their public actions, reveal in telling ways the intersections between faith and power, religion and politics” (357). Though Bollinger’s own perspective is obviously invested in the political work of these writers, her work acknowledges the religious as a significant entity in its own right rather than treating it as of interest exclusively in its political potential. While acknowledging the “restrictions on their authority to speak publicly” that black women operated under in the nineteenth century, she also contextualizes such women in a religious context, noting that, “like many women of faith before them, [nineteenth-century black women] found in their spiritual experiences well-springs of power greater than the silencing forces arrayed against them” (357). Her language is obviously steeped in the political, but makes an effort not to subsume the religious into the political. It situates these women in a line of believers and uses the word “faith” on its own terms, albeit in the context of an obviously politically-attuned context of “power” and “forces.”

Nevertheless, the focus of Bollinger’s article is political in nature, as it is an exploration of black female cultural authority to speak. For instance, regarding Maria Stewart, Bollinger concludes: “As with itinerant preachers, religious experience (including mystical visions) offers Stewart a partial justification for speakerly authority” (361). Her reading of Stewart focuses on the way that Stewart justifies her political engagement via Christianity, casting herself as a Mary called upon to give birth to the (literal) word. Bollinger characterizes this approach as a “revision
of biblical material” (364). Bollinger also employs political terms in explaining that her radical tendencies are balanced by “conventional language and theology” (365). Though Bollinger does not fully subsume Christian discourse into political discourse, her project is to analyze the political use to which nineteenth-century black women put Christianity. The aspect of Stewart’s work that does not get addressed in this kind of reading is, once again, the potential spiritual, personal, or theological significance of Christianity.³

Since Bollinger’s project is so obviously political, the systemic nature of the primarily political framework is not as clearly evident as more religiously invested criticism can illustrate. Although her stated interest in the religious is greater than Bollinger’s, Katherine Clay Bassard, author of two books on African American women’s narrative and religion, also reads the religious via a political emphasis. The title and introduction of *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women’s Writing* suggest both the religious focus of the text and its investment in the political nature of the religious. In her introduction, referring to the relationship between religious conversation and political engagement in Maria Stewart’s work, Bassard says: “The sense of a dialogue between metadiscursive realms—between different ‘worlds,’ we might say—for the purpose of both self-empowerment and communal political engagement informs this book” (4). While her formulation of the spiritual and the political as “realms” in “dialogue” reflects a dual interest, or an interest in the intersection of the two “worlds,” the “spiritual” of Bassard’s title is always already primarily political. The way in which the spiritual world signifies is through the inherently political “self-empowerment” and “communal political engagement.” Thus the spiritual world is of interest in that it has implications for the political world. What is invisible here is exploration of the spiritual world’s spiritual significance for a writer like Stewart.

³ Bollinger also analyzes Rebecca Cox Jackson’s journal.
Bassard’s 2010 study *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible*, moves towards such a project. Here, she focuses on various ways of reading the Bible and considers its impact on women who write about it. Still, her approach remains political in orientation. She writes in her introduction, “As my title *Transforming Scriptures* indicates, black women’s historic encounters with the Bible were indeed transformational as they [black women] both reshaped and were shaped by the scriptures they appropriated” (1). The idea of the Bible having a spiritually transformative effect on the women writing about it suggests the potential of Christian discourse to matter for these women on a spiritual level. In other words, Bassard demonstrates an interest in approaching religious discourse as significant in a religious, spiritually transformative way. However, the primacy of the political is evident in the rhetoric of “shaping” and the power play implicit in the word “appropriated,” which is also notable because it emphasizes the utility of the Bible. Although Bassard’s introduction clarifies her interest in identity and representation, she emphasizes utility in characterizing her text as “the first sustained treatment of the use of the Bible by African American women as an important feature of their literary self-representation” (1). This characterization of the relationship between these writers and the Bible as “use” emphasizes the political utility of Christianity: African American women are read as employing the scripture for a rhetorical purpose, to establish their literary identities, a phrase that suggests a potential gap between an authentic self and a represented self.

Although Bassard’s perspective contextualizes the religious within the political, as I see it, she is on the right track. She is concerned about the potential of missing important aspects of the work she studies. Her interest in bringing both the historical and the theoretical to bear suggests the particular importance of a balanced critical treatment of nineteenth-century African American women’s discourse (*Spiritual 5*). Broadly speaking, Bassard is concerned, as am I,
about skewed or imbalanced critical tendencies. Specifically, she sees minority discourse as particularly vulnerable both to being read without attention to the theoretical and to being read as merely illustrative of a theoretical concept of interest to later critics who are inattentive to the constraints inherent in the situation of the writers. Although Bassard’s interest in acknowledging the limited “range of available signs” suggests her interest in political readings of the religious—as presumably the religious is one of the few “signs” available and ought thus be read as political—Bassard draws attention to the vulnerable position of the narratives she studies and addresses the importance of a balanced reading. She also suggests that part of what can provide balance to this kind of theoretical focus is attention to history. Currently, these narratives are receiving scholarly attention, but they are susceptible to being cast as mere evidence of theoretical concepts. To avoid the danger Bassard warns against, specifically in this case of seeing such narrative as more evidence of the rhetorical utility of religious discourse, of the cleverness of black writers in employing the religious in such an effective way, scholarly discourse requires the counterbalance of the historical. While Bassard’s reference to the “archival” suggests perhaps a different notion of the nature of the historical counterbalance to the theoretical, her caution is well-taken.

Again and again, this literary critical discussion situates the religious within a political framework, the religious is framed in terms of the political, in terms of use, liberatory energy, of oppressiveness, of empowerment and disempowerment, and of appropriation. Spiritual significance and personal experience of religion is lost in the midst of political interests. This loss is arguably of particular importance in regard to historically marginalized work, as Moody indicates and as suggested by Janmohamed and Lloyd and by Bassard.
Reading nineteenth-century African American women’s religious texts with only a particular and partial kind of attention to their participation in Christian discourse is a mistake. As well as simply not fully attending to their participation in such discourse, a primarily political approach runs the risk of engaging in a kind of condescension or even condemnation of the work of writers when it does not clearly align with the political framework of the critic. Despite sensitivity to the potential significance of religious belief, Richard J. Douglass-Chin’s *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists* exhibits this kind of narrow understanding of the way in which African American women’s spiritual narratives can participate in Christian discourse. Throughout, the scholar’s own political orientation is pronounced. He writes, “I examine the ways in which the evangelists employ discourses produced by socioeconomic determinants such as race, gender, and class to create a complex black female narrative economy with its own unique figurations and forms” (3). Identifying race, gender, and class, the political triumvirate, as the framework for responding to explicitly religious narratives clarifies the primacy of political concerns over religious ones.

Nevertheless, Douglass-Chin does declare an interest in Christianity, asking in regard to the reading of secular and Christian writers together that Kimberly Rae Connor undertakes in *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African-American Women*, “[H]ow do Truth and Jackson operate as African American visionaries in a manner that the secular Jacobs cannot?” (8). He recognizes the potential of religious belief to have a kind of personal, motivating significance. Of Sojourner Truth, he writes, “It is a strong belief in God and the power of resistance, maintained against the derision of her mistress, that drives Truth to legal action” (186). In recognizing the power of personal religious belief to motivate political action, Douglass-Chin addresses religion as something that signifies in a personal way. He also indicates
awareness of the significance of the writer’s choice to participate in an older religious style, when the secular contributions of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs inspired more popularity, asking, “What did the living of a deeply spiritual life and the writing of a spiritual text mean to these [black evangelist] women in terms of preserving an African American worldview that valorized the immanent power of the divine?” (16-17). Yet this awareness of Christian discourse, not to mention a “spiritual life,” as a choice with significance is both always situated within the primarily political framework that Douglass-Chin overtly establishes and specifically associated with a perspective that understands degree of commitment to Christian discourse as political capitulation. For Douglass-Chin, traditional African religion is a powerful and subversive spirituality, whereas Christian spirituality is inevitably associated with acceptance of white hegemony. He explains, “As eagerly as the narratives of Hammon, Marrant, Gronniosaw, and Equiano embrace Christianity and the trappings of whiteness, Belinda reject them” (24-25). Christian belief is reduced to one of the “trappings of whiteness” in spiritual narratives. Not only is it a mere “trapping,” stripped of meaning, but it is one that constitutes political failure.

Elaw and Lee seem to fall into this category of those who “embrace” Christianity too much. In chapter two of Preacher Woman Sings the Blues, “Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw: The Beginnings of African American Women’s Christian Autobiography,” Douglass-Chin writes that they “situate themselves within the parameters of a polite, Westernized, Christian identity” and explains that as a result the narratives “follow the formula of the early American Puritan spiritual narrative and the autobiographical examples of famous Methodist figures” (33-34). He characterizes their work as “assimilative,” (34) and, quoting Andrews, says that the women “demonstrate … a universalizing and depoliticizing trend common in black spiritual life-writing
of the nineteenth century, in which ‘the conventional image of the pilgrim for Christ usurps the persona of righteously indignant African’”(36). Though not stated explicitly it is clearly implied that this depoliticization is a mistake, an avoidance of the appropriate politicization that Elaw and Lee ought to be embracing because of their minority status. This kind of assumption constitutes an imposition of critical priorities. Building upon Andrews’ established thinking, Douglass-Chinn seems to assume uncritically that African American writers of spiritual narratives ought to be primarily political in their orientation. To cast their Christian identity as significant at the expense of their racial identity implies that Christian belief is an unfortunate error or avoidance of responsibility or capitulation. Being black is at odds with being Christian, and a black Christian writer like Lee cannot but slight either racial or religious identity. Douglass-Chin’s understanding of the kind of participation in Christian discourse that it is possible for African American women to engage in is limited.

Timothy Powell’s review of *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues* indicates just this sort of concern about what happens to the spiritual narratives read from such a perspective:

To equate Christianity with “the trappings of whiteness,” … fails to do justice to the integrity of the black church or to this fundamentally important form of early African American writing. It simply does not seem fair, in the final analysis, to judge these devout, church-going African American women by how well they conform to the figure of the “blues bad preacher woman” (646).

As Powell suggests, the critical framework has become a standard against which to judge the narratives themselves. If the degree of a narrative’s commitment to Christian discourse is to be understood as corresponding to its degree of political weakness, political prioritization is having a severely limiting effect on the way in which these religious narratives are understood. The
result is that African American spiritual narratives become illustrations of a theoretical approach at the expense of the narratives themselves, precisely the sort of fate that JanMohamed and Lloyd are particularly concerned with in regard to minority discourse. Giving previously marginalized texts appropriate attention means carefully avoiding imposing current cultural critical tendencies upon nineteenth-century African American narrative, especially if a judgment of some kind, of writer or text, is to be made. In addition to pointing out this problem, Powell’s critique suggests that more fully understanding these narratives’ participation in Christian discourse means reading in terms of religious context.

Establishing religious context

Consider for instance the possibility that an African-American writer might believe that the Bible holds religious as well as political significance: The assumption that the way in which Christian discourse signifies is exclusively political would be profoundly disempowering for the writer who does not share that assumption. One might even call such readings misreading: Do we wish to assume that the “proper” use of the Bible is an oppressive interpretation? Perhaps some nineteenth-century African-American writers felt that their interpretations were as valid as those of anyone else; perhaps they had religious beliefs and saw those beliefs as guiding their political investments, or even subsuming them; perhaps they were concerned with the spiritual significance of particular theologies. It is only appropriate to balance consideration of these narratives by focusing on religion.

The religious cultural context of the nineteenth century is not today’s context, and the very fact that critics typically read Christian rhetoric as such a powerful tool in nineteenth-century America suggests that such rhetoric had an important cultural role as something other
than a mere political tool. It makes little sense that Christian discourse would have been used by
the many people participating in it exclusively in a cynical way for persuasive purposes having
nothing to do with religion. In The Word and Its Witness, Jackson provides a historically focused
analysis of texts invoking pilgrimage, establishing and emphasizing religious context and thus
illustrating a way of focusing on the religious significance of religious discourse. He notes that
lack of historicity has skewed the criticism, which neglects to recognize adequately “how
nineteenth-century itinerant evangelicals, especially among the poor or disempowered, re-
oriented existing paradigms of migration, reading the hardships of their journeys within the
context of the Christian-pilgrimage template” (117). Directly addressing the problem of
ahistorical criticism, Jackson employs a historical approach that sees Christian discourse,
specifically what he calls the “Christian-pilgrimage template,” as tremendously influential in
nineteenth-century America. In his analysis, awareness of historical context suggests the
religious as an appropriate primary framework through which to understand work that is both
politically and religiously significant. Thus he establishes the religious context in which
nineteenth-century African American narrative comes about:

This revivalist movement combined with the iconoclastic energies of the Revolutionary
era to open up new avenues for women and African Americans in the forum of public
worship. Taking advantage of the political populism emerging from the Revolution,
evergicals were united in their distrust of social hierarchy and jealous of the least
liberty, and for two generations, this impulse led to new social freedoms to the
disempowered. Evangelicalism offered particular solace in a world dominated by poverty
and suffering. (120)
In Jackson’s analysis, the historical context, religiously and politically conceived, suggests a role for the religious as important not just because of its political potential but in its own right. In contextualizing Elaw’s and Lee’s narratives as religious, he sees them as fitting within a literary lineage of spiritual narratives: The Methodism of the Second Great Awakening set the stage for “charismatic speakers like Elaw and Lee” (120). Specifically, he situates spiritual autobiographies as spiritual narratives rather than as evidence of the political importance of religious discourse or the political investments of their writers: “Spiritual autobiographies like Elaw’s reveal this unbroken genealogy between seventeenth-century spiritual narratives and their eighteenth and nineteenth-century offspring” (118). Douglass-Chin too identifies the influence of these earlier narratives, but whereas for him such a connection suggests a writerly capitulation of political interest for a mistaken participation in Christian discourse, Jackson understands this connection as suggestive of the appropriateness of reading Elaw’s and Lee’s works in a religiously attuned context.

Jackson’s language reveals his very different approach to religious discourse: “[T]he typology that African American evangelicals enacted helped them envision how their experience transcended history. In so doing, they transformed themselves by reframing, within a narrative of salvation, conventional proslavery readings of biblical narratives that depicted African Americans as a spiritually debased and culturally degraded people” (123). It is significant that Jackson here sees their reading as a “rereading” not a misreading. He does not naturalize an oppressive reading of the Bible, nor does he cast the African American treatment as a “use.” When Jackson states, “This typological rereading also transmogrified the conventional white Southern view,” the African American reading is not “incorrect” but simply “different” (123-4). Instead of assuming that writers are or ought to be primarily interested in political concerns,
Jackson’s focus on religious history leads him to argue that the texts transcend a political framework by invoking a spiritual one, and that the writers presented themselves as changed by participating in Christian discourse. Rather than instrumentalizing Christian discourse for political ends, the writers are understood as contributing to religious cultural history and as themselves “transformed” by their engagement with the Bible. The distinction between political and religious prioritization is clear. Jackson understands political history as transcendable by religious belief. He illuminates what is often an implicit contrast between a primarily political approach that sees history as untranscendable and totalizing, and an approach that sees the religious as a distinct category not best understood through a political lens. Jackson himself goes even further in his claim that the religious is conceptually larger than the political.

This is not to say that focus on religion is a complete dismissal of the political investments and ramifications of the narratives. Black liberation theology constitutes an understanding of the relationship between Christianity and political concerns that is both fully theological and deeply political. Black liberation theology responds to the perception of conflict between being black and being a Christian that is explicit in Douglass-Chinn’s work and often implied elsewhere. Not coincidentally, this theology emphasizes experience just as African-American nineteenth-century religious narratives do, and this theology forms an important theoretical context of nineteenth-century African American women’s religious narratives. In And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology, Diana L. Hayes begins by defining theology before defining Black Theology in such a way as to emphasize experience:

A universal definition of theology has, historically, been that of Anselm: ‘Theology is faith seeking understanding.’ If we accept this as a basic premise, then the contemporary efforts of African Americans in the United States, and people of African ancestry
throughout the world, to articulate their faith in a manner and style as well as from within a context that is consistent with their own lived experience should be understood as theology in its most classical understanding. (1-2)

Hayes establishes an understanding of theology that accommodates Black Theology’s interest in connection between religion and life. Nineteenth-century spiritual narratives are certainly exploring this relationship between religious beliefs and lived experience. Such narratives address abstract, immaterial beliefs and concrete, real individual experience, including the impact of beliefs on how an individual lives and experiences life. Nineteenth-century African American women’s spiritual narratives are experiential and personal, and they are theology. Reading them as theology, as contributions to the pursuit of understanding faith, specifically understanding what it means to have a faith “from” an oppressing other, to have faith in a life of struggle, is inevitably different from reading them as political texts that use religion.

Anthony G. Reddie, who argues that black theology is inherently about liberation and therefore does not require the additional word “liberation,” identifies the idea of a conflict between Christian religious belief and (leftist) political investment as troubling and false in his 2008 study *Working Against the Grain: Re-Imagining Black Theology in the 21st Century*. He explains that, growing up within a progressive secular educational system and a conservative Christian church, he felt a “sense of this dichotomous struggle” (3-4). His own theology brings together what he characterizes as his Marxist thinking with his belief in a Christian God. On the one hand, “Black theology … draws sustenance from Marxist forms of analysis and an accompanying emphasis upon structural and materialist change for all” (6); on the other, the leftist struggle is in need of help because it is not sufficiently inspiring. He sees religion as providing the “numinous quality of the inner dynamics of spirituality that would inspire people
to want to commit themselves” (7). What this understanding of Black theology does is situate politics and religion not as opposing modes of thought, understanding, or prioritization, but as necessary complements. Specifically, it brings the particular politics associated with minority discourse within a framework that seeks to contribute to Christian discourse.

Womanism brings the experience of gender into consideration. Womanism, based on Alice Walker’s term “womanist” coined in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, is a black feminist liberation theology. In *Introducing Womanist Theology*, Stephanie Y. Michem explains, “womanist theology is the systematic, faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women’s religiosity. Womanist theology is based on the complex realities of black women's lives. Womanist scholars recognize and name the imagination and initiative that African American women have utilized in developing sophisticated religious responses to their lives” (ix). This theology is focused on experience and rooted in the identity of African American women. Kelly Brown Douglas and Cheryl J. Sanders explain the term in the introduction to a series of essays collected in *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*: “Womanist signals an appreciation for the richness, complexity, uniqueness, and struggle involved in being black and female in a society that is hostile to both blackness and womanhood” (9). A womanist theology is a theology developed from within African American women’s experiences. This late-twentieth-century concept names something that Lee and other nineteenth-century African American women’s religious narratives are engaged in: an experiential Christian theology. In “Black Women in Biblical Perspectives: Resistance, Affirmation, and Empowerment,” her contribution to the volume, Cheryl Sanders writes of the narratives of Lee, Elaw, Julia Foote, and Amanda Berry Smith, “In each case, the Bible is cited repeatedly as a key to understanding the events of their early lives, their
experiences of conversion and sanctification, and their preaching” (124). Recognizing the Bible as a text through which these women come to terms with their own life experiences situates the narratives as part of religious discourse. This contextualization of these narratives informs my approach, particularly my interest in experience as theology.

My interest is in considering nineteenth-century African American women’s religious narratives as meaningful participation in Christian discourse through the telling of an individual’s story. Reading such discourse through a focus on emotional discourse constitutes a point of emphasis that sheds a different kind of light on the texts. My project is neither primarily political nor a theological project. It is simply adopting a context and concerns suggested by theology, and does not disavow the availability of cultural power through references to Christian ideas, language, and texts. Neither is it an attack on the political investments or goals of those writing these narratives or of critics interested in the political interests of the texts. My approach seeks to bring theology to bear in an attempt to step out from the “ideological encirclement” JanMohamed and Lloyd see minority discourse as susceptible to. Focusing on the emotional terms of Christian discourse is a new way of focusing on the category of Christian discourse, reading such narratives as something other than a clever use of Christian rhetoric, and foregrounding the participation of the narratives in religious experience and belief.

In other words, the aspects of Christian discourse rendered invisible in primarily political approaches are those that address Christian discourse as indicative of the nature, role, and importance of religious belief. Personal relationship with God, faith, and individual religious experience are not thoroughly addressed in a primarily political context. Furthermore, in literary studies, the significance of the participation of African American women’s spiritual narratives in religious discourse is essentially unnoticed. In response, I turn to emotional discourse, an
experiential discourse well-suited to illuminate the spiritual significance of these narratives by providing a way of addressing individual religious experience as a lived theology.

**Part II: Lee’s experiential theology**

**Conversion story as emotional experience**

To explore the Christian discourse of a narrative and thus the value and usefulness of my framework, I now focus specifically on Jarena Lee’s 1849 *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*. Nineteenth-century African American women’s narratives are often read as a group of texts; I believe that attention to individual narratives is warranted. It allows for more specific and nuanced attention. Here, I explore the experiential aspect of the narrative’s Christian discourse by exploring the nuances of guilt, a central emotion in Christianity that features prominently in Lee’s narrative.

While I use the term “narrative” to describe Lee’s work, I also use the term “story” in order to emphasize my interest in understanding Lee’s work as the literary work of telling a story. A story develops meaning differently than an essay. A story can be a theology, but it is not a treatise. Attention to emotion in Lee’s story reveals important ways in which the story she is telling is the story of a Christian life and the story of coming to understand a life in the context of Christian faith. Such attention shows the story to be a contribution to Christian discourse through coming to terms with one’s experience by giving that experience narrative form, making it tellable to others and meaningful to one’s self. Here, Lee makes sense of her life story through the Christian story and in so doing, participates in Christian discourse, shaping it as her story is shaped by it. Lee’s narrative creates and shares a Christian understanding of her life; and in understanding her life as a Christian life, Lee shares her vision of what such a life can be.
Through telling her story, Lee takes on significant Christian matters such as inherent sin, forgiveness, salvation and sanctification, and female leadership in Christianity. She frames her life story in spiritual and emotional terms.

The way Lee understands her experience through her story, and transmits that understanding through the telling of it, is her contribution to Christian discourse. The over-riding theological concern of Lee’s narrative is an attempt to understand her life experience within a Christian theology. Much Christian theology focuses on people as perpetrators of wrongdoing. Yet Lee’s story is the story of one to whom wrong is done. I see her theology as closely related to what Andrew Sung Park calls a “theology of the wounded.” Lee is, in Park’s term, wounded, and she is not a perpetrator of wrongdoing, but she is a sinner. However, whereas Park’s focus is on hurt and healing, Lee’s primary interest is in innocence. Lee accepts the human condition as fallen, and she is not absolved from her sin simply because she is wounded. Thus she is both innocent and not innocent. The tension inherent in Lee’s acceptance of her status as a guilty sinner because she is human, and her experience of life as sinned against is the foundation of her theology.

The classic believer’s journey moves from sin and victimization of others to salvation and right treatment of others; the importance of guilty in this journey is clearly to motivate improved behavior. Lee’s primary experience as a believer is from sin and victimhood to salvation and healing. Exploring the role and nature of guilt in her story reveals her theology of the innocent. After briefly introducing her early life and situation as a seven year old “servant maid” to a “Mr. Sharp,” about sixty miles away from her parents, she clarifies that this life story is a spiritual life story, writing, “My parents being wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God, had not therefore instructed me in any degree in this great matter” (3). The early drama of Lee’s
story, and the significant starting point of her life as told in her narrative, is her conversion, and
the early part of the narrative is her conversion story. Approaching her conversion narrative in
terms of its emotional discourse is hardly a bold venture given Lee’s traditional engagement in
sentimentality. As Moody writes of Lee, “the sentimental pedagogy used by the traditional
spiritual autobiographer depicts her radical conversion from a sin-sick soul using a heart-
wrenching representation of her transition from sin to sorrow to salvation” (52). Lee’s narrative
is framed in traditional, emotionally engaged, and overtly emotionally engaging, discourse. It is
about the emotional experience of her conversion to Christianity, an experience that she, as a
preacher, hopes others will share. Her “sentimental pedagogy” invites her readers to join her in
her emotional, spiritual journey and invites them to undertake a journey of their own. The
emotionality of the narrative is central to its contribution to Christian discourse, and central to
the way she writes about her experience. Even the more abstract, doctrinal matters central to
denominational differences are explored through her personal responses and interactions. Lee
addresses Christianity by writing about its role and manifestation in her life, and in turn her
presentation of her emotional experience is shaped by her participation in Christian discourse.

The narrative addresses the emotional dynamic of salvation beginning with Lee’s feeling
of guilt. After explaining that she had not been raised as a Christian, she establishes her pre-
conversion state through storytelling. She had lied about having done a particular assigned task
to do. As a result of this lie, she is convicted of her guilt: “At this awful point, in my early
history, the Spirit of God moved in power through my conscience, and told me I was a wretched
sinner. On this account so great was the impression, and so strong were the feelings of guilt, that
I promised in my heart that I would not tell another lie” (3). Lee attributes her feeling of guilt to
awareness caused by the Spirit of God, not to having broken a set of external rules. Furthermore,
her promise is a personal promise in her heart, not an external promise made to avoid the imposition of an external penalty. The identification of her heart as the “location” of the promise also specifically reinforces the emotional rather than a logical rationality. She does not “decide in her head” but “promises in her heart” to be truthful in the future. Thus the crucial realization of her status as a sinner is expressed in terms of her feeling of guilt.

This key passage invokes guilt in a specifically Christian context that emphasizes personal spirituality. Guilt is understood to be caused by “negative evaluation” of one’s actions, as Lee’s guilt is caused in this passage by her lie (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 21). Guilt is also motivational and, in contrast to shame, “appears to be the more adaptive emotion, benefiting individuals and their relationships in a variety of ways” (Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 26). The adaptive quality of guilt combined with its connection to specific behaviors means that guilt is often associated with behavioral change, with improving one’s behavior in order to escape and avoid feelings of guilt. The logic of guilt is that because individuals do not want to feel guilt, they will modify their behavior so as not to warrant it. Lee makes explicit the connection between the behavior that causes her guilt, her lie, and her commitment to modifying that behavior. Here, Lee’s guilt not only serves its typical motivational role but also plays a specifically Christian role.

Focusing on guilt reveals that Lee’s guilt is disproportionate to her telling of an innocuous, even positive, lie. Far from being morally reprehensible, Lee’s lie is a potential subversion of an oppressive system and therefore something to be admired rather than criticized. Such an interpretation, however, has no place in the context of Lee’s conversion story. However, the narrative is cautiously specific in the way in which it shows Lee to be guilty of wrongdoing: “Not long after the commencement of my attendance on this lady, she had bid me do something
respecting my work, which in a little while after she asked me if I had done, when I replied, Yes – but this was not true” (3). Lee lies to Mrs. Sharp, but Mrs. Sharp is not wronged. The passage does not indicate that she is even aware of Lee’s lie. This passage thus avoids the common idea that Christianity is beneficial because it will make Lee a better, more honest worker, or will serve to reinforce Lee’s fitness to participate in society by emphasizing moral behavior. In context, Lee’s lie does not make her to be an unsuitable member of society, someone in need of the positive moral guidance that religious belief could give. She does not need the check on selfish, bad behavior that guilt, being understood as central to such responses as “empathy, altruism, and caregiving,” provides (Tracy and Robins, “The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach,” 4). At this key point, the narrative averts attention from potential political ramifications and firmly directs attention on the spiritual realm: Lee is not guilty before Mrs. Sharp or human society but before God.

The lie serves as a crucial indication of Lee’s status as a sinner before God. Yet, as an illustration of sin, lying about having completed a task is, particularly for a seven year old removed from her parents and made to work, something less than a dramatic indication of human depravity. The innocuousness of the lie reinforces the understanding that, even in her disempowered state, Lee’s spiritual life is an important and personal matter. Because of her lack of social power, Lee is in an important sense an inevitable victim of the people around her, but in a Christian context, even as an “innocent,” she is guilty. Lee is not merely an innocent victim but, as indicated by her guilt, an agent fully capable of sin. What matters in this story is not the possibility of wronging another person, one who has surely and inevitably wronged her more. Lee’s storytelling explores how it could be that someone whose primary experience of life is as an innocent victim can also be a guilty sinner. The innocence of her lie both clarifies that the
context in which Lee is working is in an important sense a religious one by focusing on her relationship with God and clarifies her theological position that all, even the young, disempowered, and innocent like Lee, are sinners.

Her guilt inspires a desire to change, but that change is not complete simply by virtue of the desire. Instead, Lee complicates the typical, adaptive, motivational quality of guilt by presenting herself as entering into a period of “conviction” being aware of her sinful state (as evidenced by her lie) but not yet having been freed of her guilt by God (3). Lee does not wish to remain in a state of sin, and she promises to avoid future behavior that might cause her to feel guilt. Yet she cannot successfully modify her behavior, although this failure is indicated not by the telling of another lie but through the invocation of the common yet complex Christian concept of the hardening of the heart. She explains, “But notwithstanding this promise my heart great harder, after a while, yet the Spirit of the Lord never entirely forsook me, but continued mercifully striving with me, until his gracious power converted my soul” (3). Lee’s hardened heart is indicates that she is not able to avoid guilt. Her failure to avoid the guilt that she feels after her promise not to lie is presented not as a behavioral failure but as a spiritual one expressed in the emotional terminology of the “hard heart.” This language directly references the Bible. The hearts of unbelievers are at times referred to as “hard” or “hardened.” One prominent example is that the heart of Pharaoh is said to be hardened such that he will not let the people of Israel go (Ex. 11:10). While theological debates can center on individual human agency as it relates to the hard heart or on predestination, this passage does not pursue that essentially undecidable and abstract question. Instead, it emphasizes the emotional experience of the period during which Lee describes herself, in religious terms, as being “under conviction.” This story shows that all, including Lee, are fallen sinners unable to save themselves from guilt before God.
The story thus illustrates the concept of inherent or original sin, the cause of guilt earned not by an individual’s behavior but by an individual’s very existence as human. This idea is encapsulated by the verse: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 NASB). The concept of inherent sin is a specifically Christian way of understanding and explaining human feeling and experience. This specifically Christian guilt reinforces the sermon that Lee cites as moving her closer to salvation. The “great accomplishment” of her conversion begins with the preaching of a Presbyterian minister. Lee writes: These were the words, composing the first verse of the Psalms for the service: “‘Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin, Born unholy and unclean. Sprung from man, whose guilty fall Corrupts the race, and taints us all.’ This description of my condition struck me to the heart, and made me to feel in some measure, the weight of my sins, and sinful nature” (3-4). Emphasizing the emotional experience of guilt and its role in Lee’s understanding of Christian belief, Lee describes herself as “struck to the heart” by an awareness of her sinful state. Guilt relates to specific actions and people feel guilty when they recognize their behavior as bad, but, after the lie, Lee is “struck” but by the action but by her inherited guilt as a human being. Reading this passage with an attention to the nuances of guilt indicates Lee’s defense of the Christian concept of original sin, a defense given credibility and power by the illustration of her own experience of guilt. As Lee’s story illustrates, Christianity offers conversion, the acceptance of Christ, as the way out of the guilt that accompanies inherent sin.

**Doctrine**

The organization of the narrative associates Lee’s conversion with her discovery of a church and doctrinal tradition. Her story explores and expresses her theology, including her
perspective on differences between the doctrines, codified theological positions, of Calvinist and Wesleyian tradition. She encounters these doctrines through her interaction with the Presbyterian church, which is in the Calvinist tradition, and with Methodism, which is in the Wesleyan tradition. The solid, orderly Presbyterian church, while Democratic in structure and emphasizing the individual believer’s connection to God, a Protestant tradition sometimes referred to as the priesthood of the believer to distinguish it from the Catholic understanding of the priest as an intermediary figure, is not one in which Lee’s emotional, visionary style fits comfortably. The denomination is named for its system of organization and as the entry on Presbyterians in *American History Through Literature 1820-1870* puts it, “Presbyterians shun appeals to the emotions from the pulpit; the flamboyant, the ostentations, and the loud are anathematic to the Presbyterian tradition” (Leon 920). Lee, who is engaging an emotional sentimental pedagogy and will immediately upon her conversion be proclaiming with flamboyance, implicitly criticizes aspects of Presbyterian doctrine and supports her own Wesleyan understanding in the telling of her story.

In comparison to Wesleyian thinking, the Calvinist tradition of the Presbyterian church places greater emphasis on God’s sovereignty, with a related commitment to the doctrine of predestination, the doctrine that God in his sovereignty predestines some to salvation and others to perdition. To a critic, this so-called “double predestination” may suggest that Jesus’ sacrificial death cannot be for all as some are destined not to be redeemed by it, which in turn could suggests a minimal role for the gospel message of salvation in the Calvinist tradition because the presentation gospel might promote the idea that anyone could of her own free will choose God. Underlying such concerns is the potential for conflict between human free will and divine sovereignty. Lee’s presentation of her experience with the Presbyterian church in her conversion
narrative is critical. Lee does not present a logical critique in response to Calvinistic Presbyterian doctrine with its emphasis on sovereignty, but her introduction of the Presbyterian church is implicitly critical and prepares for Lee’s eventual commitment to a Methodist church. After her introduction of a Presbyterian minister’s words, Lee feels convicted but does not know what to do and ends up contemplating suicide. She attributes the idea of suicide to Satan and says, “the unseen arm of God … saved me from self-murder” (4). The Presbyterian minister has emphasized human guilt quite effectively but singularly failed to provide Lee with any hope of moving beyond guilt through conversion, the acceptance of Jesus as having taken away her guilt. This story shows Presbyterians failing to proclaim the gospel. While from a Calvinist perspective, sovereignty would not be understood as rightly limiting the proclamation of the gospel, Lee’s story shows Presbyterian doctrine having negative consequences.

Her experience Calvinist emphasis on sovereignty as harmful, as it nearly leads as it nearly leads to her suicide. A connection between Calvinist doctrine and suicide is not unprecedented: When, in 1842, Reuel Keith, a moderate Calvinist Episcopalian, killed himself, some speculated that his Calvinism was responsible: “When he [Keith] fell into a depression in 1840 and took his own life, the rumor circulated that his doctrine was to blame” (Holifield 241). Lee’s story supports this suggestion. After hearing the words of the Presbyterian minister, Lee is fortunately saved by God from a suicide attributable not only to Satan but implicitly abetted by Calvinist Presbyterian emphasis on guilt and neglect of the hope of salvation. Through her story, Lee, who will soon find, convert in, and approve of the African Episcopal Methodist church, sets up a distinction between two significant doctrinal traditions: One that nearly lead to her suicide and the other that lead to her salvation.
After sharing her experience with the Presbyterian, Lee summarily dismisses Catholicism. The mention of living with a Catholic is religious in its significance but does not seriously engage in Catholic religious tradition and doctrine. She writes:

From this place I soon went a few miles into the country, where I resided in the family of a Roman Catholic. But my anxiety still continued respecting my poor soul, on which account I used to watch my opportunity to read in the Bible; and this lady observing this, took the Bible from me and hid it, giving me a novel in its stead – which when I perceived, I refused to read (4).

In the story of Lee’s search for a church, Catholicism is not by any means a serious contender, though the fact that a woman in the Catholic home prevents Lee from reading the Bible reflects a common criticism that Catholics lack interest in reading the Bible and certainly shows Catholics as inhibiting Lee’s spiritual quest.

Next, she encounters a pastor from the English Church, a man who “first preached Methodism in America” (4). The rejection of this church is based on a lack of connection with the people of the church: “it appeared that there was a wall between me and a communion with that people, which was higher than I could possibly see over, and seemed to make this impression upon my mind, this is not the people for you” (4). The Christian interpersonal connection implied by “communion” is missing in this church, and, in a display of a likely critique of Methodist doctrine, Lee presents her concern that she could not “abide by such strict rules not even one year” (4-5). But this critique of Methodism is presented to be rebutted, and Lee finds, through the sermon of the Rev. Richard Allen, founder of the African Episcopal Methodist church “the people to which my heart unites” (5). The problem with the English Methodist church is not the rules of Methodism but racial difference. She will convert under
Allen, finding her church home within the black Methodist church. She writes, “From the day on which I first went to the Methodist Church, until the hour of my deliverance, I was strangely buffeted by that enemy of all righteousness – the devil” (5). This struggle with the devil is presented quite differently than her Satan-inspired near suicide following the Presbyterian sermon. Here, in this Methodist Church, the interpretation of her struggles is that Lee is so close to God that she comes under particular spiritual attack.

She also relates her experience of the” blessings of sanctification,” a specifically Methodist religious experience (8). Sanctification is being and becoming holy onto God. Whereas early American Calvinism held that in order to have a legitimate claim to be saved people had to demonstrate through their way of living that they were in fact converted, Wesleyian thought held that people could, in the phrase of Harold K. Bush, “instantaneously commit to God” and thus saved without corresponding changes in lifestyle (53-54). In Wesleyian thought the instantaneous commitment is “justification” and is accompanied by “sanctification,” in which the individual is saved through living a holy and right lifestyle (Bush 54). Lee spells out this journey from conviction to justification to sanctification, writing that in the period of sanctification, she “found there yet remained the root of pride, anger, self-will, with many evils, the result of fallen nature” (9). Upon praying for sanctification, she has a dramatic experience, saying “‘The Lord has sanctified my soul!’” (10). This distinct sanctification experience illustrates a doctrinal distinction between Methodism and Calvinism.

The chronology of this narrative is not fully linear but is in part thematic, and in the first telling of her conversion, Lee uses finding a religious community, a denomination and church, as an organizing principle. In this story, finding God is also finding Christian community. In “Testimony and prophecy in ‘The Life and Religious-Experience of Jarena Lee,’” Susan J.
Hubert addresses the importance of Lee’s connection to her particular church community. In religious studies, Lee’s narrative has been read as part of the tradition of spiritual autobiography, an approach that Hubert sees as missing the awareness of African and African-American communal life. She writes, “it [Lee’s narrative] is both testimony and prophecy, and speaks from and to a particular faith community” (45). In telling her conversion story, Lee also tells of her search for a community, not only a black religious community, as Hubert emphasizes, but a Methodist one. In addition to specifically identifying denominations and churches, in this section Lee presents a common critique—one she refutes—concerning Methodism’s many rules. The climax of her conversion corresponds to her discovery of African American Methodism. The significance of this thematic organizational approach is reinforced and clarified by the fact that, after the first telling of the drama of her conversion, Lee turns back to the time leading up to her salvation, addressing other aspects of that time.

Forgiveness

In the church of the Rev. Richard Allen of the African Episcopal Methodist Church, Lee converts. Her conversion journey reaches its culmination as a response to a particular sermon, one that emphasizes the heart, and presents this Methodist church and minister as the agent of her salvation. In this conversion account, her theology of innocence becomes clear:

[M]y soul was gloriously converted to God, under preaching, at the very outset of the sermon. The text was barely pronounced, which was ‘I perceive thy heart is not right in the sight of God,’ when there appeared to my view, in the centre of the heart, one sin; and this was malice against one particular individual, who had strove deeply to injure me, which I resented. At this discovery, I said, Lord I forgive every creature. That instant, it
appeared to me as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers’ ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow from my sight – when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead. (5) Lee has already been engaged in extensive spiritual struggle, beset by a guilty conscience from the telling of the lie as a child and aware of the Christian understanding of the existential guilt of inherent sin. Yet up to now, her heart is not right with God. The reason for this separation from God is her sinfulness, now specifically indicated by the failure to forgive someone who wronged her. This matter is central to Christianity, a religion that asks its followers to treat those who act against them in a counter-intuitive and potentially unethical way. In the well-known “Sermon on the Mount” in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and forgive those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-45a NASB). In this passage, forgiveness of those who have wronged the believer is a distinguishing aspect of Christianity. Human forgiveness of others takes place within the context of God’s forgiveness of humanity.

The Lord’s Prayer, a prayer that Jesus supplies when asked by his followers how to pray, often repeated in Christian contexts, illustrates this connection. The prayer makes an explicit connection between God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness that Christians are to offer to those who have wronged them: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” it states (Matt. 6:12 NASB). Within Christian discourse, these words as well as the words of the dying Jesus—“‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’”—are a prominent aspect of the context in which Christian forgiveness functions (Luke 23:34 NASB). Jesus’ forgiveness reference is particularly significant in its implication that the wrongdoers do
not make amends or even know that they are in need of forgiveness. Lee’s narrative of forgiveness parallels this particular Biblical example: The perpetrator who has sought to harm her does not even feature in the narrative. Instead, the focus of this passage is, as in the case of Lee’s early sin of lying about having completed some work, the relationship between Lee and God.

Lee’s conversion story shows forgiveness of others as central to the individual’s relationship to God. However, while the role of forgiveness in Lee’s conversion might at first seem to be a simple illustration of the dynamic from the Lord’s Prayer of forgiving and being forgiven, the passage is a complex partial reversal of that dynamic. The lack of attention to the potential interpersonal role of forgiveness is in this context significant due to the paradoxical nature of forgiveness, which can be both beneficial to and harmful for the forgiver. Being forgiving is often associated with psychological well being. Christianity promotes being forgiving, numerous psychological studies laud forgiveness as essential for the mental health of the victim. Mejed Ashy, Andrea E. Mercurio, and Kathleen Malley-Morrison suggest that forgiveness is associated with “positive…orientation:” “the more positive the orientation, the greater the likelihood of viewing apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation as valuable, desirable, and achievable following perceived transgressions” (17). Yet being forgiving can be not only counter to an individual’s evident self interest but also more broadly problematic.

Exploring a major critique of forgiveness in “The Doormat Effect,” Laura B. Luchies, Eli J. Finkel, James K. McNulty, and Madoka Kumashiro note that being forgiving might diminish victims’ sense of their own human dignity. They explain: “Because failing to stand up for oneself is likely to decrease one’s respect for oneself and one’s sense of certainty about oneself and one’s values, forgiving can sometimes diminish one’s self-respect and self-concept clarity”
(734). Their analysis of the potential inappropriateness of forgiveness and the effect of being forgiving on the victim emphasizes the responsibilities of the perpetrator to warrant being forgiven. They provide a simple calculation: “If perpetrators signal that a continued relationship will be safe and valuable for their victims, then forgive; if perpetrators do not signal [by offering something such as an apology or amends 736] that a continued relationship will be safe and valuable for their victims, then do not forgive”(735). In this analysis of forgiveness, victims like Lee who have been given no signal from the perpetrator ought to suffer psychological consequences if they are forgiving. They write, “To the extent that individuals adhere to this if-then rule, they should experience high self-respect and self-concept clarity, but to the extent that they do not adhere to this rule, they should experience low self-respect and self-concept clarity” (735). The idea that being forgiving in some circumstances at least can be harmful to the forgiver is connected to the interpersonal significance of forgiveness, an approach to forgiveness that Lee’s narrative rejects. Much as her story of her lie refuses to participate in a theology of subjugation, in which Christianity makes people easier to control and likelier to adhere to a set of codes that benefit the powerful in society, her story of conversion participates in a theology that refuses to understand forgiveness as a way out for wrongdoers. Yet whereas earlier, in regard to the lie, the story did not allow for the justification of the lie in order to subvert power structures, here, Lee engages in a dramatic reversal.

The perpetrator in Lee’s story has offered neither apology nor amends. There is no indication of attempted behavioral change, let alone repentance, the concept in Christianity that implies not only recognition that one has done wrong but a turning away from sin. Lee’s perpetrator seems to be precisely the kind of perpetrator that ought not be forgiven, certainly not from the perspective of the victim. Yet Lee forgives, reflecting Christian theology, and she does
not suffer consequences from doing so. Instead, in her moment of forgiving, she experiences the glory of God and soon begins to proclaim aloud, during the church service. Her moment of forgiveness is the moment in her narrative during which she first presents herself as achieving a form of self-hood that she lacks heretofore in the narrative: a voice. In her narrative, Lee frames forgiveness as between victim and God rather than between victim and perpetrator and in so doing presents a theology of forgiveness that focuses on the well-being of the victim.

The profound reversal at the heart of Lee’s theology of innocence is embedded here. Lee as the convert would be the primary sinner in a traditional conversion story. Having focused extensively on her feelings of guilt in the time leading up to her conversion, at the moment of Lee’s conversion is a moment of forgiveness of someone who “strove deeply to injure [her]” rather than a moment that emphasizes Lee’s sinfulness. The passage mentions Lee’s “malice” but does not dwell on it or address the consequences of that malice either on Lee, the perpetrator that she held malice towards, or God. She acknowledges her sin of malice, but she is neither the primary guilty party nor is her guilt and thus need for forgiveness emphasized. Instead, in the moment of her salvation, Lee herself forgives. The key moment of forgiveness in this conversion is not God forgiving Lee but Lee forgiving others, not only the specific individual mentioned but “every creature.” Lee’s story of forgiveness is not about Lee as a sinner being forgiven by God, but about Lee as a victim and her forgiveness of others. The emphasis of this passage is on Lee as freed from victimhood rather than guilt.

Although she has clearly presented her theological view that even as an innocent victim, she is a guilty sinner in need of salvation, Lee’s focus in telling of her conversion reverses that emphasis. This is a major contribution to Christian discourse, which has a tendency to focus on people as sinners—rather than as sinned against. Lee accepts the Christian concept of inherent
sin, but this doctrine does not lead her to focus on the depravity of all as sinners. Instead, she focuses on her life experience as a guilty sinner who is also an innocent. Her guilt is the guilt all humans have vis-à-vis God. In her relationships with others, though, she is not guilty but innocent. The tension of Lee’s life experience directly produces her theology, a theology that is also her story.

**Sacred speech**

In Lee’s narrative, sin is a problem of the heart, conversion is associated with forgiveness of others, and salvation is a dramatic experience. At the “instant” of her forgiveness of others, Lee experiences salvation as depicted by a metaphorical experiential vision of God’s glory and gains a voice. Her “whole person” experiences freedom from sin, which is depicted as garment replaced by the glory of God. Heightening the drama with a sense of haste, she writes: “That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet and declare that God, for Christ’s sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul” (5). She gains the temporary “power to exhort sinners, and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of Him who had clothed me with His salvation” (5). Her conversion experience, although personal, is also publicly shared, in the context of a church service. At this time, “the minister was silent” giving Lee the opportunity to speak to those present.

This initial incident points toward the call to preach that Lee experiences four to five years after her experience of sanctification. “[T]o my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which said to me, ‘Go preach the Gospel!’” (10). Lee is reluctant, saying “‘No one will believe me’” (10). Although it will be some time before she is officially recognized due to skepticism about female preachers, Lee becomes a preacher and the majority of the narrative chronicles her experience going from
place to place preaching the gospel. Lee presents her role as preacher as the defining role of her life in this narrative. To be a preacher is not just to be a Christian. In a Christian context, preaching is a specific category of speech. To be a preacher is not to be just a public speaker, although as a preacher Lee speaks in public. Lee draws attention to the emotional significance of the call to preach. This calling is central to her life and the telling of it: the majority of her narrative chronicles her travels as a preacher. Understanding Lee as a black woman preacher rather than as a public speaker who happens to engage in Christian discourse is crucial to reading its participation in Christian discourse.

From a Christian perspective, being a preacher is responding to a divine call. In *Weary Throats and New Songs*, homiletics professor Teresa L. Fry Brown explains, “Proclamation is sacred speech differentiated from public speaking” (17). Brown’s study focuses on African American women who have pursued “The inner quest to answer the call of God” in spite of all manner of obstacles (25). The call to preach is internal and individual. For many African American women, enacting this inner quest is challenging because of the obvious external obstacles identified by a political focus on the effects of racism and sexism. Lee’s struggle to be recognized as a preacher legitimately called by God is not only a political struggle for recognition as one whom God has called but is also a personal spiritual struggle.

In its content, preaching is about God and the people of God: “It centers on who God is, what God requires, when God acts, where God is, how God operates and why God does what God does in the lives of all of God’s people,” Brown writes (17). Yet all sorts of texts and people could talk about who or what God is or does. The distinguishing feature of preaching is that it is not just about God, it is also of God. The divine involvement of the Spirit in the call to preach and in preaching distinguishes preaching as sacred speech. To preach is to be a conduit for God,
an intermediary of God’s. Brown clarifies the significance and distinct role and nature or preaching, writing:

I define preaching as the verbal or nonverbal communication of the inward manifestation of a command by the Holy Spirit to relate to others something about God’s … purpose, and power in one’s life and in the lives of all humanity. To proclaim means to affirm, denounce, declare, herald, profess, voice, illustrate, and inspire through articulating one’s thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about God. (17)

The voice of the preacher is not the voice of God, but it is inspired by the Spirit of God. Brown emphasizes the inner component of preaching, as well as focusing on the role of the preacher’s own “thoughts, beliefs, and feelings” in preaching. This personal sense of God becomes something more than personal when the Spirit inspires the preacher to share it, but the individual’s sense of God is inextricable from preaching. In a Christian context, “The proclaimer is not operating on her own agenda but is empowered by the Spirit of God in prayer, preparation, composition, delivery, and feedback … Proclamation is a moment-by-moment, God-breathed, God-anointed, God-appointed, God-led, God-sanctioned, and God-controlled activity” (17-18).

Being a preacher is being empowered by the Spirit during the moment of preaching and surrounding that moment. Preaching is inextricable from the inner spiritual life of the preacher and is thus an emotionally significant endeavor. For Lee, to be a preacher is life-defining. In her historical analysis of early black women preachers, Brown writes, “There was an ‘anyhow’ in the gift of preaching. There was a dialectic balancing of the weary throat and the new song. Preaching, teaching, and writing God’s word made the journey worth the struggle” (16). As evidenced by the extensive chronicles of travel and financial and health problems, Lee’s life journey is full of trouble, but she remains dedicated to her call to preach.
Conclusion
This self-published narrative, both a means of financial support and a text designed to encourage readers to convert to Christianity as she does, is also a work of theology. Her autobiography is essentially a spiritual autobiography, beginning with conversion and ending with an extensive chronicle of her experiences as a black woman traveling and preaching in the mid-nineteenth century. Through making a narrative of her life, Lee presents her understanding of God.

Recognizing the narrative’s spiritual significance complements and deepens an understanding of the narrative as politically liberatory. In writing an experiential theology developed and shared through her life story, Lee is an early contributor to black theology. Her narrative gestures towards the much later recognition of womanism as a field of study. Lee clearly undertakes the project of womanism, in Michem’s words, “faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women’s religiosity” (ix). Lee’s story is a deeply spiritual contribution to Christian discourse.
Re-reading *Intruder in the Dust*: Shame, guilt, pride and the spiritual realm

*Intruder in the Dust* (1948) is a mystery. It is the story of a murder and the story of a near-lynching. It is, according to the 1962 front cover of the Signet paperback edition, “The superb novel of murder and violence in a small southern town by one of America’s greatest writers.” According to the back cover, it is an “explosive story of an arrogant old man who faced death rather than relinquish his identity… and a young boy who broke the law to save him” (ellipses in original). It is a bildungsroman. It is a political novel often understood to illustrate what Carl Dimitri calls Faulkner’s “apparent need to make direct statements on social and political issues” (11). Because of this ostensible political directness, it is also, arguably, a failure, “a novel for which American Faulkner critics tend to apologize” (Moreland 61). While *Intruder* is many things to many readers, it is not read in spiritual terms.

In this chapter, I present the case for a new conception of *Intruder* as a spiritual novel resonant with the themes of Christian discourse. I begin by introducing and then complicating the critical dynamic surrounding *Intruder*. Criticism of the novel, when it does not dismiss *Intruder* as bad genre fiction, is typically interested in it as primarily political, often understanding it as a clear manifestation of Faulkner’s politics. Genre expectations associated with popular and politically interested work perpetuate readings of *Intruder* that obscure important complexities of the novel. This critical context establishes the need for my reading, one that attends to the spiritual significance of the novel by considering its emotional logic. Focusing on shame, guilt, and the desire for pride in *Intruder* illuminates aspects of the novel that remain under-read, and casts the novel not as a straightforward statement about racial politics but as a complex and complicating exploration of race that signifies in spiritual terms.

**Introducing *Intruder* and its critical dynamic**

*Intruder in the Dust* is the story of a young white boy, Chick Mallison, coming of age in the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha County developed in Faulkner’s fiction. In the first section of the novel, Chick, the nephew of lawyer Gavin Stevens, has a formative encounter with Lucas Beauchamp. Lucas’s mother
was black, but his white father, who was once his master, has left him property. When he ventures into
town to pay his property tax, he wears, in an obvious presentation of his status, a high-quality, old-
fashioned suit and brings his watch-chain and his also outdated gold toothpick. It is on his own turf,
however, literally and figuratively, that Chick first encounters Lucas. Out hunting, Chick has fallen into a
stream, and, after he has clambered out, Lucas leads him to his own home, dries his clothes, feeds him,
and refuses to be paid back, either with coins during the initial encounter or later, when Chick repeatedly
sends gifts. The scene in which Chick offers Lucas the coins in his pocket is the opening framing scene of
the novel. Though not the most dramatic occurrence of *Intruder*, it preoccupies Chick throughout and
precipitates the rest of the action.

Some four years later after the coin scene, Lucas is arrested for the murder of Vinson Gowery, an
incident that begins the middle section of the novel. Here, Chick at last seems to have the opportunity to
Lucas back. What follows is the sensational part of the novel: murders, midnight reburials, and the
substitution of corpses. Chick and Miss Habersham, an older white woman, set out to prove Lucas’s
innocence with the assistance of Chick’s black contemporary Aleck Sander. They succeed in doing so and
in preventing the townspeople from lynching Lucas, and the novel concludes with a brief third section
featuring a second coin scene paralleling Chick’s early offer of coins to Lucas. In the much-discussed
conclusion, Chick demonstrates his developing perspective, Gavin earns Faulkner a fair amount of
criticism by contributing a voluble conservative Southern response to the progressive Northern ideas of
the civil rights era, and Lucas carefully pays Gavin, partly in small change, for the “expenses” of his legal
defense. These framing scenes about race and money dominate the first and last sections of the novel and
serve as bookends for the mystery plot that constitutes the middle section.

The mystery plot that forms the body of the novel is generally accepted as a muddled and absurd
failure. The logic of this plot is open to question, as occurrences seem justifiable only because they add
drama. As critics have consistently noted, if *Intruder* is a murder mystery, it is an ill-executed one. As
Donna Gerstenberger writes in “Meaning and Form in *Intruder in the Dust,*” the novel is “too often
dismissed as a propaganda-bearing tract, thinly disguised as a not very clear murder mystery,” one that is
“bizarre and apparently insoluble” (223). As Gerstenberger’s comment indicates, if the mystery plot of *Intruder* is a failure, the politics of the novel are often understood to be even worse. The scenes that frame the mystery plot, crucial interactions between Chick and Lucas that establish and explore its interest in race, are typically understood as expressing bad politics. Specifically, *Intruder* is widely understood to be criticizing the progressive politics associated with the North in the civil rights struggles of the late 1940s. The political critique identified in these framing sections elicits politically oriented criticism often focused specifically on economic concerns. It is on these political themes that most criticism of *Intruder* focuses.

On one level, the reason for this judgment that *Intruder* is an artistic and political failure is simple. Faulkner’s racial politics invite critics to read *Intruder* as a political statement. As Masami Sugimori notes, “Most of [the] scholarship has treated *Intruder in the Dust* as a kind of political novel and thus focused on Faulkner’s personal attitude toward contemporary Southern race relations and how this attitude manifests in his narrative” (1). It cannot be surprising that *Intruder* is thought to reflect Faulkner’s extra-literary commentary on race. In many essays, speeches, and letters, he addresses the civil rights struggle, weighing in on this contentious contemporary issue. One of his most notable contributions is a public letter published in *Life* magazine on March 5, 1956 as “A Letter to the North: William Faulkner, the South’s foremost writer, warns on integration—‘Stop now for a moment.’” In this letter, Faulkner explains his position, which he describes as in the “middle,” between those southerners who support segregation and the liberal North that seeks to end it: “I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration. First from principle. Secondly because I don’t believe compulsion will work” (51). This letter makes clear Faulkner’s support of gradualism, the position that the goals of the civil rights movement should be pursued slowly and cautiously. Before, Faulkner was willing to be criticized by southerners because he believed both that he was “helping” the South and in “the simple incontrovertible immorality of discrimination by race” (51). Now, with the South under attack from powerful northern progressives ignorant of the culture and people of the South, Faulkner urges caution and attempts to explain his southern perspective:
The Northerner, the liberal, does not know the South... He assumes he is dealing with a simple legal theory and a simple moral idea. He is not. He is dealing with a fact: the fact of an emotional condition of such fierce unanimity as to scorn the fact that it is a minority and which will go to any length and against any odds at this moment to justify and, if necessary, defend that condition and its right to it. (52)

Faulkner’s understanding is that the situation is both morally and legally complex and that a legal response to an emotional situation will not produce the peaceful change that he desires because the white South needs time to acclimate to changing realities. The Southerner needs “space” to realize that he “faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure; a moral condition which not only must be cured but a physical condition which has got to be cured if he, the white Southerner, is to have any peace” (52). In this letter, Faulkner declares his political allegiances, revealing both why he might once have been recognized as progressively anti-racist, due to his stance against segregation, and why he has generally come to be understood as morally and politically retrograde, due to his stance against integration.

Faulkner’s racial politics and how they are understood shapes the way his novels are read. When Intruder’s treatment of race is understood to be straightforward, the kind of clear political statement that he made in “Letter to the North,” rather than complicated by novelistic features such as character, narration, point of view, and plot, that treatment is understood to be a reflection of the conservative views Faulkner expresses elsewhere. As Richard C. Moreland writes of Intruder, “this is a novel in which Faulkner’s fiction comes closest to some of his most embarrassing public statements about current political controversies” (61). Many critics of Intruder reflect this idea, and in general, for this novel, being read in political terms means being read as outdated and simplistic in its politics. If Intruder is in fact simply a fictional version of Faulkner’s “Letter to the North,” or something very like it, then the novel ought to be fairly uncomplicated. Yet Intruder is in its way a complex, confusing novel, and focusing on it through the lens of Faulkner’s extra-literary political statements is reductive.
Approaching Intruder as its author’s uncomplicated political exposition has critics. In *Faulkner on the Color Line: The Later Novels*, Theresa M. Towner identifies the question of Faulkner’s views on race as a significant force behind Faulkner criticism, one that she identifies as a distraction, stating that, “the question ‘Was Faulkner a racist?’ is not only unanswerable but also a kind of hermeneutic red herring” (122). Faulkner’s views on race, once seen as an example of “the best of the humanist’s impulse toward social equality,” now tend to be seen as “sometimes benighted, sometimes outright deplorable racialism, [or] racism,” as Towner puts it in her interrogation of the shift in how Faulkner’s racial views are typically understood (120). Towner takes a less popular position, writing, “I am well aware that my contention that Faulkner would have us take careful aim at color-struck racial ideology runs counter to prevailing commentary on the writer’s own racial beliefs and behaviors” (119). Far from condemning Faulkner as a racist, Towner sees him as arguing against racist ideology. Interestingly, Towner seems to believe that the reason others see Faulkner as a racist is that they have a negative view of his fiction. Referencing Carother’s “Rhetoric,” she argues that “criticism tends to read Faulkner’s public commentary (and nowadays his biography, too, I’d add) as evidence for whatever view of the fiction criticism is promulgating at the time” (120). The idea that critical interpretation of his fiction determines how Faulkner’s biography and other statements are construed is compelling, but the critical dynamic is more complex, for it is also the case that interpretation of Faulkner’s politics drives critical interpretation of his fiction. Since the current tendency is to understand the author as at the very least part of a historical moment imbued with views in hindsight recognizable as racist or racialist, understanding Intruder as a “direct statement” on race casts the novel as both stylistically and morally retrograde.

The idea of reading Faulkner’s fiction as evidence of authorial politics is an old one and not without critics. In an indication of the critical battle lines, Cleanth Brooks warns in the preface of 1978’s *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* that readers ought not depend upon the work that contains the “most explicit expositions of Faulkner’s ideas” to determine what Faulkner “‘really believed’” (xii). Brooks’ statement that “Faulkner, like most other artists, speaks his deepest truths when he speaks as an artist fully caught up in his art,” rather than when he may seem to be most direct, is both a
pertinent warning and indicates that Brooks, at least, identifies critics as assuming that some of Faulkner’s texts are “explicit expositions” (xii). The kind of caution Brooks promotes clearly had opposition in the 1970s and runs counter to criticism of *Intruder* that reads the novel in political terms.

While often associated with a positive or generous interpretation of Faulkner’s politics, hesitance to equate author and fiction is not necessarily a defense of Faulkner. In their introduction to *A Gathering of Evidence: Essays on William Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust*, a 2004 compilation, Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway distinguish between Faulkner’s politics and the novel not to defend Faulkner but to argue that *Intruder* is more politically enlightened than its author. Of *Intruder*, they write, “the novelist can theoretically be greater than the man, and it is important in this instance” (xi). Readings like this one, that focus on the complexity of the novel rather than its ostensibly simple politics, while not necessarily a defense of Faulkner, do function as defenses of *Intruder*.

The recognition that *Intruder* is not quite as simple as it might seem is even evident in Moreland’s reading. Although he writes as if *Intruder* were a clear political statement, he acknowledges that the novel is not completely straightforward when read as a political project. He explains, “It [Intruder] is perhaps Faulkner’s most obviously dated and positioned novel; it wears its somewhat incoherent politics on its sleeve” (63). On the one hand, *Intruder* is Faulkner’s most “obviously dated and positioned” political novel; on the other, its politics are “incoherent.” Although Moreland does not acknowledge the contradiction between characterizing the novel as a clear political statement and recognizing that its politics are not in fact clear, his work indicates that he recognizes, on some level at least, that the novel may not have a clear political agenda but may be more complex.

I believe that that the supposed simplicity of both the novel and the critical dynamic surrounding it are deceptive. Has *Intruder* come to be understood as not only clearly political but clear in its political point because of Faulkner’s political statements? The critical fortunes of *Intruder in the Dust* are inseparable from the larger conversation concerning not only Faulkner’s political views, but also the powerful idea that his late work is political and artistically inferior, which is itself related to Faulkner’s finances and the financial success of *Intruder*. 
Faulkner’s ouvre is divided into periods by critics, and Faulkner’s late work, including *Intruder*, is supposedly distinct from, inferior to, and more political than Faulkner’s great works. The novel broke a six year stretch in which Faulkner published only a handful of short stories and falls in his late period in both approaches to periodization that Dimitri addresses in “Go Down, Moses and *Intruder in the Dust*: From Negative to Positive Liberty.” According to Roland Végső’s reading of the nature and importance of periodization throughout Faulkner criticism, the late period ranges from 1948 to 1962, placing *Intruder* in that category. Even before the publication of the novel, in 1945, the idea that Faulkner was in decline was being established (Végső 85). Faulkner’s work was being categorized and evaluated in terms of its suitability for literary canonicity in such a way as to critically undermine *Intruder* from the start. *Intruder*’s chance of being accorded the kinds of readings that his major works of the 1930s receive has always been limited, and the novel seems destined to be perceived as inferior. As Végső writes, “As the argument goes, the early Faulkner was not yet fully in control of his artistic powers, while the late Faulkner was already past his prime. This late period is usually condemned for its didactic moralizing, abstract oversimplifications, rhetorical excesses, and its repetitious nature” (85-86). Since *Intruder* is understood as late Faulkner, reading the novel as didactic does not require justification. Neither does characterizing it as inferior.

The timing and circumstances of the *Intruder*’s publication are partially responsible for the idea that the novel is virtually political propaganda. In a reading that illustrates this point and builds upon typical assumptions about the novel, Joe Karaganis focuses on the relationship between authorial politics and *Intruder* in “Negotiating the National Voice in Faulkner’s Late Work.” He argues for “reading Faulkner’s political ideas from the forties onward as the impetus for the evolution of his narrative technique” (99). From his perspective, *Intruder in the Dust* marks a shift from chiefly literary to chiefly political concerns: “[T]he complex negotiation of form and content that epitomized Faulkner’s modernism was subordinated to his programmatic exposition of the ethical and political dilemmas of the contemporary South” (99). Erik Dussere, in a similar and typical critique, displays little generosity: “*Intruder in the Dust* has generally been read as a politically and stylistically retrograde text, one that fails
to achieve the radical insights into race of Faulkner's novels written during the 1930s” (43). Dussere analyzes *Intruder* in economic terms, showing its rejection of the Northern logic of debt-repayment, which he sees as a moral failing of Faulkner’s. This analysis identifies Faulkner as a Southern apologist in the civil rights struggle, arguing that the liberal progressive North ought to stay out of Southern race relations. Karaganis and Dussere both make a point of situating the novel as an example of Faulkner’s late period and understand its treatment of race to constitute a straightforward contribution to political discourse.

I believe that the circumstances surrounding the publication of *Intruder* are viewed as evidence supporting the idea that Faulkner’s later work is distinct from and interior to his widely respected earlier work. *Intruder* has suffered from being categorized as political, low art genre fiction, a pot-boiler. Faulkner is understood to have written *Intruder* quickly and easily, as a lucrative break from implicitly more challenging and worthwhile literary endeavors. Taking this view in *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*, Lawrence H. Schwartz’s writes: “In January 1948, Faulkner dropped work on the fable and began writing a short detective novel that he was sure he could complete. It was *Intruder in the Dust*. Faulkner finished the manuscript in April but wanted to delay in order to sell segments of the novel to magazines for additional income” (61). Schwartz’s interest is not in *Intruder* as a novel but rather in its publication, and his analysis of the pre-publication history of the novel focuses on the potential sales success of the novel. Schwartz writes: “Submitting to the praise and entreaties of his editors and publishers, Faulkner agreed to early publication of the novel. On April 27, 1948, [Random House partner Bennet] Cerf wrote a one-page ‘reader’s report,’ noting that despite minor trouble spots *Intruder in the Dust* should be printed without substantial revision and publicized as a major release” (62). A film version of the novel gave Faulkner $40,000 through an MGM contract (62). Did the early success of the novel, particularly its sales and movie contract, brand *Intruder in the Dust* as low art entertainment? *Intruder* was certainly different for Faulkner: It was contemporary, obviously political, and a sales success (62-63). In my analysis, even now, when the idea of a clear distinction between low and high art has been thoroughly problematized, the initial success of the novel, the public buzz
associated with the movie contract, Faulkner’s lack of financial security in the years before the novel’s publication, and the financial benefit he derived from it have continuing unwarranted influence on the quantity and nature of the literary critical attention the novel receives.

From its successful beginning, the politics of *Intruder* were controversial. As Schwartz writes, the novel was immediately recognized as timely and political: “[I]n addition to the publicity surrounding the making of the movie, the book was also controversial. Far more political than earlier Faulkner novels, it confronted the issues of southern racism and justice at a moment when the problems and tensions of the civil rights movement in the postwar era began to simmer” (62). Whether the novel’s interest in contemporary political issues means that it is didactic or presents a unified political view, let alone whether that political view is admirable or reprehensible, may remain open for debate, but categorizing the novel as artistically inferior and politically engaged has meant that reading the novel in political terms has come to seem virtually inevitable.

**Complicating the politics of *Intruder***

The ostensible simplicity of the politics of *Intruder* is based upon two distinct indexes of Faulkner’s views. The clearest way in which *Intruder* is thought to state Faulkner’s politics is through the character of lawyer Gavin Stevens, an apparent gradualist and political windbag. Christopher C. De Santis illustrates this view, referencing *Intruder* as a clear indication of Faulkner’s insistence that white southerners must be the agents of the change needed in the South, and writing that “Gavin Stevens, Yoknapatawpha County’s infamous lawyer from *Intruder in the Dust*, [is] perhaps [the character who] best represents Faulkner’s position” on race (13). Gavin defends a Southern political perspective throughout the novel, providing clear statements. For instance, he argues: “Someday Lucas Beauchamp can shoot a white man in the back with the same impunity to lynch-rope or gasoline of another white man; in time he will vote anywhen and anywhere a white man can … But it wont [sic] be next Tuesday. Yet people in the North believe it can be compelled even unto next Monday by the simple ratification by votes of a printed paragraph” (151-152). Gavin, whose words take up a disproportionate amount of space
in the novel, is invested in his conservative political views and is sometimes understood to be Faulkner’s mouthpiece.

Others criticize this approach, including Ticien Marie Sassoubre, who observes that “[a]ccounts of *Intruder in the Dust* tend to bog down in discussions of Gavin Stevens’s gradualism with respect to desegregation, ignoring much of the rich and nuanced text in a narrow focus on the extent to which Stevens voices Faulkner’s own view” (186). Sassoubre’s critique implies that *Intruder* is more complex than the criticism of it would suggest. Likewise, in his reading of *Intruder*, “The Community in Action,” Brooks comments that “many readers are quite certain that Faulkner admires Gavin Stevens, regards him as a kind of projected image of himself, and means to use him as his mouthpiece” (1). While not unequivocal in his defense of *Intruder*, which he finds unnecessarily complex and nonsensical in terms of its plot, Brooks sees this reading of Gavin as an interpretational error and his own reading of the novel is, not coincidentally, generous. Firm in his insistence that the novel not be read as a “tract,” he reads it instead as Chick’s coming of age story (10). When Gavin’s politics are taken as an indication of Faulkner’s, the novel is understood as clearly a primarily political and politically conservative text.

Gavin’s point of view is taken as one major indication of the novel’s politics, and the characterization of the novel’s black characters, particularly Lucas, is the other. For instance, Clark Keith, noting that the novel consistently rejects opportunities to move beyond stereotype and explore black subjectivity, writes, “*Intruder in the Dust* abounds with episodes that could potentially free Lucas and his Black counterparts from predictable stereotypes. However, Faulkner usually loses his capacity for more detailed analysis and opts for the hackneyed and the clichéd” (75). A more generous assessment of the characterization of Lucas, one that damns by faint praise, is Dimitri’s in “*Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust*: From Negative to Positive Liberty.” He credits Faulkner with making “a sincere attempt at challenging cultural stereotypes,” though one that “[v]arious critics … find … to be almost irredeemably flawed” (17). While Dimitri’s reading is carefully balanced and generous in its approach to the novel, he remains committed to understanding *Intruder* as an example of Faulkner’s “late period,” work Dimitri describes as “characterized by a turn from a modernist aesthetic to an aesthetic of engagement” (12). His
interpretation of Lucas reflects his focus on the novel as overly didactic and out of date, a statement of its author’s politics.

While Gresset and Samway do not defend Faulkner’s politics, they oppose the common view that *Intruder*’s presentation of Lucas is simplistic and an indication of authorial politics. They understand Lucas as a character “who emerges in many seemingly contradictory ways as an important literary figure” in the essays that make up the compilation they are introducing (xiii). Reading Lucas as a complex and significance character rather than a stereotyped one, they write: “Faulkner the novelist … had to create the Negro more then he received him ready made” (xi). Their reading of Lucas supports their view that the novel is more politically complex than its author.

Taken as whole, critiques that focus on the supposed simplicity of the characterization of Lucas tend to suggest that there is something problematic about featuring a complex white character in a novel about race. The unspoken logic suggests that, at the very least, disproportionate attention is going to the white perspective in *Intruder* because there is a complex white character, or at least having black characters be less complex than white characters is problematic. It is possible that ethical concerns about exploiting black characters and culture as “background” for a white protagonist underlie such critiques. Although this position is worth more careful consideration, it is beyond the scope of my reading here; and if it is problematic to create insufficiently complex black characters, it is likewise problematic to conclude that race is only worth exploring through blackness, which is another possible implication of critiques of *Intruder* based on the interpretation that Lucas is insufficiently complex as compared to Chick.

Whiteness studies responds to the implication that focusing on race via whiteness is troubling, proposing increased attention to whiteness as a race and to white characters as raced. As Jay Watson explains in his introduction to *Faulkner and Whiteness*, whiteness studies is “a critical [emphasis in original] effort to lure whiteness out of hiding (it hides in plain sight) and to place it in crisis” (ix). Exploring whiteness in terms of race in Faulkner’s fiction shifts the focus in *Intruder* from how Lucas is characterized to the character of Chick. This is the kind of focus suggested by Thadious M. Davis in “Race Cards: Trumping and Troping in Constructing Whiteness.” She writes: “I am suggesting that one
measure of Faulkner’s enormous literary achievement is his construction of race as central to his fiction, to his representation of characters, specifically his construction of white characters and whiteness, and to the metaphorical power of his language struggling with an interrogation of what it means to be white” (177). This theory suggests that critics attend to Faulkner’s white character’s attitudes and experiences regarding race, a subject for which *Intruder* provides ample material. Davis, however, dismisses *Intruder* in a parenthetical aside as a reiteration of themes Faulkner addresses with greater nuance elsewhere: “In the aftermath of *Go Down, Moses* [Davis’ focus], except for its polemical rewriting and rediscovery in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner turned from the race binary in the construction of whiteness, to class dynamics as it inscribes white raciality” (176). Davis’s identification of whiteness as of interest as a topic of “fresh conversations” in Faulkner studies suggests further study of *Intruder in the Dust* (177). Yet Davis falls into a common dismissal of the novel, characterizing it as “polemical” and therefore implicitly not worth exploring, in contrast to *Go Down, Moses*, the novel to which she gives her attention.

It is true that *Intruder* directly engages with the politics of race, and the idea that the novel constitutes or contains a “direct statement” about race has unfortunately come to seem inevitable due to the larger critical context of Faulkner studies and often leads to dismissal of the novel. The idea that *Intruder* is a mass-market product designed to provide Faulkner with financial security bolsters the interpretation of the novel as a retrograde political statement. This thinking combines with the assumption that the novel is didactic and political, and in turn with the recognition or hope that society has become more enlightened in its racial views since Faulkner’s time. A popular novel is unlikely to have been a challenge to the political sensibilities of the masses, making it an appropriate index of the views of its historical moment. The extensive debate about Faulkner’s racial politics may be influenced by a hope among critics that progress has been made in terms of racial politics. Perhaps it is not so much the novel itself but a desire for distance from the racial views of the past, in this case as represented by Faulkner, that drives readings of *Intruder* as a clear political statement that is mired in the limitations of its historical context.
Turning to a spiritual framework: baptism into shame and guilt

Clearly, *Intruder* is not typically considered in terms of its participation in Christian discourse, yet reading the novel in spiritual terms offers new insights into the complexity of the text. Although not overtly theological, the novel is a spiritual novel, contributing to Christian discourse by exploring in a concrete way the spiritual logic of what Christianity understands as the fallen condition of humanity.

Reading *Intruder* as spiritual reveals that, to an extent, *Intruder* itself establishes a theological framework, most obviously by means of specifically Christian references, including a symbolic baptism that sends Chick, the character who is the central consciousness of the novel, on a journey of increasing awareness of what Christian discourse calls sin. More subtly, approaching the nature and role of shame, guilt, and pride in *Intruder* through a spiritual lens re-illuminates the novel. The novel is not from this perspective a political novel supporting a political solution, but a spiritual novel gesturing towards the possibility of repentance. Directly engaged with issues of the day, the novel explores political concerns within a context established by a spiritual scope. In my reading, Chick’s lost pride and the realization of his shame and guilt in connection to his role as a member of the white community occurs within a context in which the primary interest is not economic policy, or even race relations more generally, but in the spiritual towards which the novel gestures.

The importance of Chick’s guilt is immediately clear. *Intruder* begins with Chick waiting in the town square. He has heard the news that Lucas has killed a white man and is waiting for the sheriff and Lucas. Having arrived before anyone else, Chick is eager to be at the scene. At the same time, he does not wish to appear eager:

It was just noon that Sunday morning when the sheriff reached the jail with Lucas Beauchamp though the whole town (the whole county too for that matter) had known since the night before that Lucas had killed a white man.

He was there, waiting. He was the first one, standing lounging trying to look occupied or at least innocent, under the shed in front of the closed blacksmith’s shop across the street from the
jail where his uncle would be less likely to see him if or rather when he crossed the Square toward the postoffice for the eleven oclock [sic] mail. (3)

This passage introduces both guilt and shame. Guilt is clearly invoked through the naming of its opposite: innocence. Chick’s desire to look “at least innocent” indicates that he believes himself to be guilty. What matters is not what Chick is doing but how he feels about it. The passage indicates the role of shame by moving beyond simply describing Chick’s behavior and attributes a very specific motive to it: Chick expects his uncle Gavin to come by, and he does not want to be seen. Shame is integrally related to exposure and concealment, the very concepts Chick’s motives in the introductory passage emphasize. As Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “[S]hame feels like an exposure – another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful – but it also involves an attempt to hide” (103). Chick feels exposed and so tries to be inconspicuous and make his presence at the scene appear to be incidental: These attempts at mark his emotion as shame.

This scene introduces both shame, with its focus on the self, and guilt, with its focus on behavior. Thus while guilt in this passage calls attention to Chick’s behavior, identifying the presence of shame suggests that the self, not merely behavior, is at stake. Though she notes the complexity of the relationship between shame and guilt, Ahmed accepts and makes the typical distinction between them: shame is the awareness that the very self is understood as bad while guilt is rooted in recognition of having behaved badly. She explains, “In shame, more than my action is at stake: the badness of an action is transferred to me, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been ‘found’ or ‘found out’ as bad by others (105). The result is the power and interior focus of shame. Shame is about the very self. As Ahmed puts it, shame is “bound up with how the self feels about itself” (103). This connection to the self inherent in shame is not purely abstract. In being about the self, shame is of the body. The desire for concealment applies to the body and to the shame itself because being seen to be ashamed is itself shaming. Virginia Burrus explains: “Shame is an emotion of which we frequently seem deeply ashamed” (1).

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4 The difference between shame and guilt established in psychology is the basis for the work of cultural critiques such as Ahmed’s: “Shame involves a negative evaluation of the global self; guilt involves a negative evaluation of a specific behavior” (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 21. See also Tracy and Robins 13).
shame, and shame is potent, involving the internal self in a more fundamental manner than guilt does. Recognizing Chick’s behavior in this instance as an indication of shame shows the way the novel is focusing on Chick’s identity. In this passage, Chick is revealed to be the shamed subject. He wishes to hide, and he is not merely guilty of doing something wrong; he is also a character who, from the moment he is introduced in the novel, is struggling with himself, with a feeling of badness that is more integrally connected to his identity than mere behavior. This scene illustrates the importance of interior space in the novel and suggests a level of significance other than that of action. The self and how it is perceived are inextricably linked with identity: *Intruder* is concerned not only with what characters do but also with who and how they are.

The third paragraph begins to explain Chick’s presence in the square and leads to the story that explains his shame and guilt. Chick is determined to be at the scene because of his personal connection to Lucas. The paragraph begins: “Because he knew Lucas Beauchamp too—as well that is as any white person knew him” (3). This relationship, loosely speaking, is based on what at first might seem to be an insignificant incident. Four years ago, Chick “had eaten a meal in Lucas’ house” (3). Due to its significance for Chick, this unusual occurrence fuels Chick’s determination to be at the scene despite his desire not to be seen there. The story of Chick’s past interaction with Lucas is Chick’s justification for his presence and the explanation for his shame.

Chick’s presence in the square is the indirect but inevitable result of the symbolic baptism that lead Chick to Lucas’s house four years earlier. This baptism is the incident that brings Chick into contact with Lucas and thereby initiates him into an awareness of his shamed state. While crossing a creek on a rabbit hunting trip, Chick falls in and is immersed in the icy water below: “[A]ll of a sudden the known familiar sunny winter earth was upside down and flat on his face and still holding the gun he was rushing not away from the earth but away from the bright sky and he could remember still the thin bright tinkle of the breaking ice and how he didn’t even feel the shock of the water but only of the air when he came up again” (5). This is not an intentional baptism, not part of a religious ritual, but the symbolism of the dunking is evident both because Chick attributes importance to it and because of what happens
afterwards. Baptism is the act of immersing or sprinkling the believer in or with water. It represents or
enacts (depending on theological perspective) death to the old sinful self and the beginning of a new life
in Christ through his resurrection. A Romans 6:4-5 in the Christian Bible, explains, “[A]ll of us who have
been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death…[W]e have been buried with Him
through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so
we too might walk in newness of life” (NASB). Chick indeed begins a new life after his dunking, but his
baptism is inverted in that, rather than beginning a life of freedom from sin, it initiates Chick into
awareness of sin. Faulkner’s lyric description emphasizes the significance of his fall into the creek and the
loss of the old world Chick has previously inhabited. This moment is one that Chick still remembers
clearly four years later as it is to this incident that his mind turns while considering his presence in the
square waiting for Lucas.

Struggling in the water, Chick is knocked down by the pole that a hunting companion extends
towards him. It is at this dramatic moment that Chick meets Lucas, although then, Lucas is “just a voice:”
‘Get the pole out of his way so he can get out’ – just a voice … [C]limbing out now, [t]hat was
when he saw Lucas Beauchamp for the first time because you didn’t forget Lucas Beauchamp;
gasping, shaking and only now feeling the shock of the cold water, he looked up at the face which
was just watching him without pity commiseration or anything else, not even surprise…not
arrogant, not even scornful: just intractable and composed … [T]he man turned, speaking not
even back over his shoulder, already walking, not even waiting to see if they heard, let alone were
going to obey: ‘Come on to my house.’ (6-7)

Lucas’s power in this meeting is evident and unquestioned. That he is introduced in Intruder in the Dust
as a voice has particular resonance in a Christian context. One of the most well-known and significant
baptisms in Christianity is that of Jesus by John the Baptist. Chick is clearly no Jesus, for whereas Jesus
sees the heavens open, Chick falls away from the “bright sky.” Yet, like Jesus, Chick hears a voice. Just
after Jesus is baptized, a voice speaks: “and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘You are My beloved Son,
in You I am well-pleased’” (Mark 1:11 KJV). The voice speaks to Jesus as his Son, thereby identifying
itself as the voice of God the Father. The introduction of Lucas as a voice not only reinforces the
baptismal nature of Chick’s adventure in the creek, but also casts Lucas in the role of God. Indeed, during
the event, Lucas is implacable and in control. He calmly takes charge of the situation, simply knowing
that Chick will follow him. Chick, who does not yet realize much about the new awareness that he is
entering into, responds to Lucas, with only a token protest that Lucas ignores.

The context in which the baptism is presented in the novel clarifies its role in Chick’s life.
Although the telling of the baptism closes the scene in the square, the baptism is the beginning of the
story both because it initiates Chick’s relationship with Lucas, a relationship that leads to Chick’s
presence in the square, and because it is the first event in Chick’s life that the novel relates. Waiting in the
square for Lucas to appear with the sheriff after being arrested for murder, Chick turns to his first meeting
with Lucas as the explanation for his reluctant, shamed presence. That first meeting is endowed with a
significance to be reinforced when the reader eventually learns that when Chick is in the square, thinking
back on his relationship with Lucas, he is about to commit himself to helping Lucas’s cause. Though he
does not yet fully recognize the degree of his own commitment, his presence in the square shows that it is
inevitably already made because of Chick and Lucas’s past, as the immediate recounting of the history of
their relationship indicates. The position of the baptism suggests its significance as the starting point from
which the events and themes of the novel develop.

Chick’s error and his shame

The symbolic baptism leads directly to Chick’s offering of coins to Lucas, the opening framing scene of
the novel. Here, Chick’s initiation begins in earnest. The scene distills the racial theme of the novel and,
directly or indirectly, instigates the entire plot. While shame is an important emotion for Chick in the
passage discussed above, only in this scene do the circumstances concerning Chick’s shame and guilt
become clear. After his creek baptism, Chick follows Lucas to the house he shares with his wife Molly.
Having had his clothes dried at the Beauchamp’s fire and eaten their food, Chick is ready to leave.
Gathering the money he has with him into his hand, he prepares to pay Lucas, and then, realizing what his mistake, he is ashamed:

[Chick] extended the coins: and in the same second in which he knew she would have taken them he knew that only by that one irrevocable second was he forever now too late, forever beyond recall, standing with the slow hot blood as slow as minutes themselves up his neck and face, forever with his dumb hand open and on it the four shameful fragments of milled and minted dross until at last the man [Lucas] did something that at least did the office of pity.

‘What’s that for?’ the man said, not even moving, not even tilting his face downward to look at what was on his palm: for another eternity and only the hot dead moveless blood until at last it ran to rage so that at least he could bear the shame: and watched his palm turn over not flinging the coins but spurning them downward ringing onto the bare floor, bouncing and one of the nickels even rolling away in a long swooping curve…[T]he man didn’t move, hands clasped behind him, looking at nothing; only the rush of the hot dead heavy blood out of which the voice [Lucas’s] spoke, addressing nobody (16).

This tense framing scene of Intruder makes explicit the significance of shame in regard to Chick’s relationship to Lucas and the embodied nature of shame. As Ahmed writes, “When shamed, the body seems to burn up … Shame consumes the subject and burns on the surface of bodies that are presented to others” (103-104). Chick’s shame before Lucas is palpable. This passage foregrounds this bodily element of the experience of shame consistently in its descriptions of Chick. The drama and physicality of the scene are only emphasized by its stifling sense of paralysis: Chick’s body is frozen in shame forever, hand out. His paralysis exposes him, shaming him in Lucas’s eyes.

Given the internal orientation of shame, the idea that shame requires a shaming witness may seem counter-intuitive, yet shame is understood to necessarily involve more than just one subject. Shame thus involves not only the self but the self’s relationship to others. Burrus declares the public nature of shame, writing that “[s]hame is typically viewed as a quintessentially public affect” (2). However, as Ahmed notes, the fact of another’s presence is not in itself sufficient: “[I]t is not just anybody that can cause me
to feel shame … Only some others can witness my action such that I feel ashamed” (105). The nature of shame is such that the witness of shame must be an other that in some sense matters to the subject.

Although Chick offers the coins to Molly, who would have taken them, the passage virtually ignores her. In this passage, Chick is clearly ashamed. Equally clearly, the enabling witness is Lucas. The way shame works in this scene establishes the significance and nature of the relationship between Chick and Lucas.

Chick’s shame results from his assumptions about what his whiteness and Lucas’s blackness mean. As he is preparing to leave Lucas’s home, Chick’s instinct is to provide payment for the services he has been rendered and thus avoid being in debt to Lucas. This offer of coins is a refusal of Lucas’ humanity. Although Lucas does not quite offer the intimacy and trust of friendship, he does invite Chick into his home and treat him as a guest in a gesture of respect and equality. In offering him coins, Chick seeks to commodify the interaction rather than accept the gift of Lucas’s hospitality. Although Chick attempts to convince himself otherwise, he recognizes that the “initial error, misjudgement” that led him to offer the money in his pocket “had been there all the time, not even needing to be abetted by the smell of the house …” (13). Chick has identified the smell as “that unmistakable odor of Negroes,” so it is clear that his error is based upon his assumptions about black people (11). Because Lucas is black, Chick instinctively avoids treating him as an equal, let alone a superior, and thus treats him as a servant to be repaid for services rendered with the coins he happens to have in his pocket.

Since shame is based not on actions but on sense of self, shame has a communal quality as Chick’s shame indicates. As Tracy and Robins explain: “[T]he self can, and often does, include collective self-representations” (“The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach” 12).

Chick’s whiteness is not his alone, and it is his identity as white that causes his shame. Chick’s shame is not only individual shame but collective in nature: He feels shame as a member of the white community. Three years later, Chick encounters Lucas, who seems to have no particular interest in Chick, and reflects on the lessening intensity of their relationship:

He would see him again of course… but that would be all: the one no longer the man but only the ghost of him who had ordered the two Negro boys to pick up his money and give it back to him;
the other only the memory of the child who had offered it and then flung it down, carrying into
manhood … that old once-frantic shame and anguish and need not for revenge, vengeance but
simply for re-equalization, reaffirmation of his masculinity and white blood. And someday … the
shame and anguish would no longer be a thing remembered and recallable but merely a breath …
(25-26).

The shame he feels is bound up in his identity as white. Chick’s error has tormented him for three years
and it has undermined his sense of who he is as a white man. The idea of revenge in the passage suggests
that Lucas has wronged Chick, but the passage rejects this idea by turning to the more positive identity
development of “re-equalization” and “reaffirmation.” His whiteness is the part of Chick that has caused
the shaming event, so it is Chick as white who is ashamed. Further, whiteness itself is shamed: When
Chick’s white self takes on the “badness of the action” in shame, Chick’s whiteness becomes in a sense
bad and shameful. Through Chick, Intruder presents the very self as implicated in the race-based
problems that beset the world of the novel. Chick’s obsession—and he is certainly obsessed—with this
incident is not simply concern over one mistake but concern that he, through no fault of his own, is
flawed.

Chick’s shame has spiritual implications. Intruder presents Chick as inherently in error through
his attitudes and assumptions about race. The novel explores a specific manifestation of the inherent sin
of Christian discourse. His understanding of race is warped such that he is “inherently” in the wrong
because of his inherited identity as white. Inevitably, that error will be made manifest. The specific racist
error Chick makes is one he was born to make. Thus Chick’s story constitutes an enactment of the
abstract concept of inherent sin. Chick’s shamed response to the realization of his shamed state echoes the
fall of Adam and Eve in the Christian story, who, upon realizing that they are naked, are full of shame and
hide from God. Chick too, upon recognizing his sin, is full of shame. Bodily shame is racialized through

5 See the chapter on Lee for an introduction to this concept.
6 While some have understood Christianity to be focused on guilt rather than shame, shame is tremendously
important in Christian discourse. Burrus critiques the idea that shame is Eastern compared with guilt as Western, an
idea that casts Christianity as replacing shame with guilt (in Mediterranean culture). She points out that this
Chick’s shame. His recognition that because he is white he is inherently in error resonates in the context of Christian discourse. *Intruder* explores the specific manifestation of Chick’s inherent sins—his racist thinking and behavior. Thus the novel, while not explicitly addressing religious issues, explores and contributes to that discourse. The scope of this exploration is greater than the individuals involved: Chick’s racist assumptions and behavior are not merely one twelve year old boy’s ignorant error but an illustration of the error-ridden nature of humanity.

The novel further suggests a broad scope, one that transcends the specific political concerns of the day, by interrogating the adequacy of economic modes of response. The first hint of Chick’s uneasiness with his behavior is his realization that rather than just offering the half-dollar he has originally chosen, he chooses to add another twenty cents, offering “all he had” (15). The sense in which Chick is offering “all he [has]” is, of course, an economic one, and Lucas’s rejection of that repayment leaves Chick ashamed, having realized that his attempt to re-frame the relationship by offering his token payment of coins is in some sense inappropriate. Thus the scene suggests both the impossibility and inappropriateness of economic repayment. In so doing, this crucial scene illustrates the inadequacy of the economic framework. As Dussere’s discussion of debt in *Intruder in the Dust* effectively establishes, symbolically, the failure of this exchange signals the inadequacy of the Northern, monetary debt repayment model in the context of the novel. The scene introduces a skepticism of economic response, one generally recognized by critics as a politically conservative critique of the political response of economic payment supported in the North. The implication of this scene transcends such interpretations, however. Money as a response is not merely inadequate but is itself an error, a direct result of Chick’s racist assumptions. Far from being an attempt to make up for past wrongdoing, economic response is Chick’s attempt to assert and feel good about himself. The novel thus questions the efficacy and motivation behind economic redress.

distinction is problematic in its cultural assumptions as well as in some respects incoherent and characterizes Christian tradition as “a theological tradition that remains to this day marked by its shameful shame of the flesh” (xii).
This highly skeptical treatment of monetary redress indicates an authorial political position widely criticized for its conservatism. The novel is not simply focused on the political question of economic redress. In showing money to be the wrong currency, *Intruder* suggests that a financial focus is too narrow for a full understanding of reconciliation. As John B. Hatch writes in “The Hope of Reconciliation: Continuing the Conversation,” “One cannot put a price tag on healing collective psychic wounds or restoring a society’s virtue. Indeed, guilt, shame, and resentment are moral [his emphasis]” (261). A focus on the potential of monetary repayment is a hallmark of the particular kind of politics that often comes to the fore in literary criticism surrounding race, but as Hatch implies, it has oversimplifying potential. Offering money to one who has been victimized by a society should not be understood to rightly eliminate either the “resentment” of the victim or the “guilt” and “shame” of the society.

*Intruder* does not seek the simple answer but rather, through the context of its treatment of economic redress for moral wrong, engages in subtle critique. Money is not a meaningful response, and Chick is filled with shame and guilt rather than with the oblivious pride that would have been the logical emotional result had his monetary offering been accepted. If Chick’s money had done what he intended it to do, he would have been spared the painful self-realization that is the novel’s subject. He would have been spared shame, and his pride would have remained intact. He would, at no cost to himself, have been able to erase the small debt that he recognized himself as owing to Lucas. Lucas’ rejection of Chick’s coins is also significant. Because Lucas has no interest in the type of recompense Chick offers, Lucas forces Chick to recognize a far greater debt. Lucas’ response to Chick’s offering prevents Chick from settling into his previous unaware state. Instead, through the failure of money to accomplish what Chick had hoped for, money itself becomes a symbol of shame. In his memory, Chick distills the entire shameful incident into the “round hard symbol of the coin,” a “monstrous heatless disc which hung nightly in the black abyss of the rage and impotence” (20-22). In the opening framing scene of the novel,

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7 Hatch promotes monetary response but acknowledges the limitations of such response. His understanding of reconciliation includes but is not limited to financial concerns.
"Intruder" declares its skepticism of an economic framework by presenting the giving of money as a selfish act.

**Chick’s guilt and his gifts**

What Chick had carelessly offered as a way to discharge what he recognizes as a debt to Lucas has instead revealed to Chick that the debt he owes Lucas is greater than he can repay. Chick spends the rest of the novel attempting to pay back this debt, first by giving gifts to Lucas. While shame is not associated with positive changes in behavior, guilt is a classic motivator of behavioral change. Guilt helps people respond appropriately to others, can improve relationships, and is, as a moral emotion, central to such responses as “empathy, altruism, and caregiving” (Tracy and Robins “The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach,” 4). If analysis of shame indicates "Intruder’s" interest in the white community as at fault, consideration of guilt indicates its interest in how the white community should respond to being at fault. Chick does not simply wish to hide in shame; he wishes to alter his behavior in such a way as to change their relationship.

It is clear to Chick after Lucas spurns his offering of coins that money does not have the capacity to repay his debt or assuage his guilt. He then engages in a gift-giving competition. Dussere effectively identifies this gift-giving as a specifically Southern response. He sees Faulkner’s novels as casting "slavery and its aftermath as a historical debt, owed by whites to blacks” and identifies "Intruder" as the “crucible” in which Faulkner explores contrasting Northern and Southern responses to desegregation (37). He identifies Chick’s gift-giving as part of a tradition of Southern honor, arguing, “the material and ideological differences between the American North and South, specifically the tradition of honor, by which Southerners have differentiated themselves culturally from the North and the Federal government” are crucial in the novel (1). Debts of honor, unlike Northern business debts, exist between social equals and must “be discharged in order to maintain … the system of [Southern, aristocratic, male] honor” (39).

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8 This distinction is widely but not universally accepted. In *On Shame*, Morgan makes the argument that shame is or can be a moral emotion.
9 For a basic discussion of guilt as an emotion see Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 26.
This analysis clarifies the economic politics of *Intruder*, a novel that directly engages the relationship between Northern repayment and Southern honor, gift-based repayment. Gavin Stevens articulates the Southern perspective, an unfavorable view of the Northern monetary repayment model, declaring, “That’s what we are really defending: the privilege of setting him free ourselves: which we will have to do for the reason that nobody else can since going on a century ago now the North tried it and have been admitting for seventy-five years now that they failed” (100). Despite Gavin’s words, *Intruder*’s exploration of the Southern gift-giving response is no more an endorsement than its exploration of the Northern, economic response.

Understanding Chick and Lucas’s engagement in a gift-giving relationship in the context of Southern honor explains the significance they attribute to an exchange that might appear ludicrously insignificant, comprised as it is of such items as tobacco and molasses. Chick knows that he has been the recipient of Lucas’s hospitality and sees that fact as a victory for Lucas: “Lucas had beat him, stood straddled in front of the hearth and without even moving his clasped hands from behind his back had taken his own seventy cents and beat him with them” (17-18). Chick clearly perceives his relationship with Lucas as a competitive one and recognizes Lucas’s refusal of the money as an act of equality or even superiority. Chick must discharge this debt of honor in order to establish equilibrium. After “losing” the first round, Chick saves his money in order to send Lucas and Molly cigars and snuff for Christmas (22). Although with this gift he has technically discharged what he had originally understood to be his debt, though only temporarily as it turns out, he knows that he has not re-established his honor. He realizes that his Christmas gifts “merely discharged (with double interest) the seventy cents; there still remained the dead monstrous heated disk which hung nightly in the black abyss of the rage and impotence” (22). The extent of his debt is becoming clearer to him. Despite giving his gift, he knows that he is still at a disadvantage and saves his money for a floral dress for Molly over the winter (22). Even so, he is not free from what he characterizes as his “grief and shame” (22). In the fall, upon learning that Lucas has sent him a gallon of sorghum molasses, he “cried almost” (22). Even his unsatisfying “victory” has been snatched away. Thinking through his options, Chick realizes that returning the molasses would only
further empower Lucas. When Lucas responds to his gifts not by receiving them and thereby acknowledging Chick’s gift as equalizing but by responding with gifts of his own and thereby asserting that Chick must remain in his debt, Chick acknowledges his failure.

The conclusion of this southern gift-giving competition is that Chick comes to the recognition that he cannot determine how to discharge his debt: money and gifts—the northern and the southern responses—have failed. The obviously representative nature of Chick and Lucas’s relationship and interactions are not important merely as between two individuals but as between Chick as white and Lucas as black. In attempting to consider his actions and their results, Chick as white is faced not with an isolated action and its consequences but with the white community’s actions, past and present, and their consequences. Chick’s failure is thus an index of the failure of white society.

Politically focused criticism of Intruder is focused on seeing the novel as a rejection of Northern policy and an endorsement of a conservative Southern response to the historical debt of slavery. However, Chick’s persistent failure indicates that, in the context of the novel, neither white response to the wrongs of the past is sufficient. Chick’s guilt due to the unpayable nature of his debt shows that Intruder’s focus is not the policy question of whether a Northern or Southern response would be appropriate but on the inadequacy of both responses. In highlighting this inadequacy, the novel interrogates the sufficiency or appropriateness of political response. A political perspective looks at problems and solutions in political terms. In Intruder, if the problem of the past is a political problem, there is no solution. Because both political solutions entertained in the novel fail, the novel suggests that the problem is not a political problem susceptible to a political solution. It is, instead, a spiritual problem, and if it is susceptible to a solution, that solution will be a spiritual one.

**Spiritual scope and the mystery plot**

Chick’s failure has a spiritual dimension. When his gift giving attempt fails, Chick acknowledges that the situation transcends his understanding as well as time, reflecting that “whatever would or could set him free was beyond not merely his reach but even his ken” (23). Chick cannot pay Lucas back, and here,
Chick acknowledges not only his inability to succeed in repaying Lucas but also his inability to determine how to go about attempting to repay him. Chick’s understanding of the world and his situation is too limited for him to be able to figure out what he should do in the face of the failure of his past attempts. When Chick discovers that he cannot figure out how to respond to the situation in which he finds himself, he gives up on repaying Lucas.

His recognition that his understanding is incomplete is in itself a response of some import theologically. This acknowledgement of the fact that he cannot discharge his debt himself and indeed cannot even understand what sort of repayment might be called for is significant specifically within a Christian context because a key tenet of Christian theology is that the sinner cannot make full restitution for sin. Although repayment does not become insignificant in such a theology, repentance replaces repayment as the end goal of the sinner. A crucial part of this spiritual process is conviction, the acknowledgement that one is a sinner unable to make up for one’s sins. Chick’s recognition of his own error and insufficiency is on an emotional level important, in a sense paralleling the theologically significant recognition of one’s own inability to pay back one’s debt. Although he has failed, Chick has made spiritual progress.

Four years after his creek baptism and his shameful offering of coins, and a year and half after his recognition that giving gifts to Lucas is not a solution, Chick describes himself as “free” and explains the reason for that freedom through a reference to the Christian New Testament (23). He reflects on the three times he has met Lucas, and he expects no more drama or intensity from their future such encounters. Chick believes that as time passes, his shameful offering of coins will continue to fade into insignificance, as will Lucas’s role in the incident. In Chick’s own analysis, “He had turned the other cheek and it had been accepted. He was free” (26). Chick’s reference to turning the other cheek is from a passage often called “The Sermon on the Mount” recorded in Matthew 5 in which Jesus says, “‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever claps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shift, let him have your coat also’” (Matthew 5:39-40 NASB). Here, turning the other cheek is a
forgiving response to an aggressor, paralleled in the passage with giving even more to the one who would take one’s shift. This reference casts Chick as a forgiving victim of Lucas. Yet Chick has not been a victim but a perpetrator, shamed, guilty, and in need of forgiveness. If anyone is in a position to turn the other cheek, it would seem to be Lucas.

This reference highlights the kind of inversion that is at play in the novel’s exploration of gift giving. The way in which Chick can be understood to turn the other cheek is that he has at last allowed Lucas to give to him. For Chick and Lucas, giving gifts becomes an act of power and self-assertion, while receiving them is an act of generosity and sacrifice. Turning the other cheek here is not a forgiving act towards an aggressor but an act of sacrificial acceptance and absorption of the power of another. Chick has developed enough spiritually to be able to acknowledge his own inadequacy and to accept Lucas’s power, but his inversion of the concept of turning the other cheek suggests that, in spiritual terms, he is not repenting. In casting himself as turning the other cheek, Chick perceives and presents himself as the Christ-like forgiver rather himself repenting and seeking forgiveness.

Though he has not reached the point of repentance, Chick, having turned the other cheek, has come to accept his legacy of shame and guilt, at least to an extent. He is not content, however, and at the point at which the narrative catches up to the chronological present of the novel, Chick, guilty and ashamed, is waiting in the square for Lucas to arrive with the sheriff. Lucas has been arrested for the murder of a white man, Vinson Gowrie of Beat Four. Lucas’s situation is bleak. The Gowrie family is not expected to let the law run its course, and not even Chick doubts Lucas’s guilt, though he is deeply disturbed at the prospect of Lucas being lynched by a mob of Vinson’s family and friends (see 31-33). Lucas’s original plan is to avoid the whole situation by riding his horse out of town until about midnight, rest his horse for some hours, and then ride back into town (40). Instead, he goes to the square and becomes involved in attempting to prove Lucas’s innocence.

Up to this point in the novel, Intruder is in my analysis a clear illustration of the inevitability of Chick’s failure. Chick’s offer of coins is a dramatic failure that compounds his debt as well as forcing him to recognize that he is indebted, and his subsequent gift giving attempt, obviously unsuccessful, leads
Chick to give up. In the middle section of the novel, however, success might seem to be within reach for Chick. Here, he takes on the seemingly impossible and tremendously significant task of attempting to prove Lucas’s innocence when Lucas has been set up as the murderer. If he is able to save Lucas’s life and Lucas’s honor, he will have rendered Lucas a great service, one that could potentially allow him to repay his debt. This section of the novel is the mystery plot. It is typically ignored in the criticism of those who read the novel through the lens of politics and are thus more interested in the opening and closing sections of the novel in which political matters are prominent. I believe, however, that considering the mystery in the middle of the novel clarifies the spiritual scope of the novel by showing the inevitability of Chick’s failure.

Chick has given up and believes, or tries to believe, that he is free from Lucas’s power. He has learned something. Almost, it would seem, as a reward for this growth, Chick is provided with an opportunity spectacular and significant enough to suggest the possibility of success. As Lucas is taken through the crowded square to the jail, he turns to Chick and says, “‘You, young man … Tell your uncle I wants to see him’” (44). Chick accompanies Gavin to the jail to see Lucas, at which time Lucas attempts to hire Gavin to do an unspecified job for him. Gavin, assuming Lucas’s guilt, instead takes on the role of defense lawyer (59). As they leave, Chick and Lucas engage in an unspoken exchange. Chick understands Lucas’s expression as a “mute patient urgency” (64). Providing Gavin with the pretext of taking Lucas the tobacco that he had requested, something Gavin plans to do the next day, Chick returns to the jail, where he claims to be returning to get something he forgot. Lucas is waiting for him. “‘Go out there and look at him,’” Lucas says (66). Lucas’s gun is a forty Colt, not the gun used to kill Vinson. To prove Lucas’s innocence, Chick will ride his horse out in the middle of the night and dig up a body, at risk of being caught by the lawless and angry Gowrie clan (67-68). Lucas is asking for something significant, a service that would seem to allow Chick to regain the upper hand in the relationship.

Even in the midst of his success in at last helping Lucas, Chick is failing to assuage his guilt and reinforcing rather than eliminating his shame. It is clear that this interaction will not make up for the past. Lucas has pointedly disavowed friendship and instead sought to hire someone to accomplish this task.
(59). To Chick, Lucas says, “‘I’ll pay you’” (66). Chick realizes that he is not being given an opportunity to pay Lucas back:

He wasn’t even thinking anymore *So this is what that place of meat and greens is going to cost me.* … [He] heard Lucas saying something to him not because he had eaten the plate of greens and warmed himself at the fire, but because he alone of all the white people Lucas would have a chance to speak to between now and the moment when he might be dragged out of the cell and down the steps at the end of a rope, would hear the mute unhoping urgency of the eyes. (67)

Since Lucas is asking Chick for something, it might seem that Lucas is being forced to accept Chick’s help, thereby allowing Chick to eliminate his debt, reestablish his honor, and assuage his guilt. This possibility is undercut both by Lucas’s insistence on payment and by the circumstances of the mystery in which Lucas and Chick are now involved. The large debt of racial injustice that Chick’s shameful coin offering reveals is being dramatized. It is because of this injustice that Lucas is forced to appeal to Chick, so Chick cannot attain any particular credit for being able to hear what Lucas has to say and acting upon it. He is simply taking on the job of clearing Lucas’s name: “Lucas … was not asking a favor, making no last desperate plea to his humanity and pity but was even going to pay him provided the price was not too high” (70-71). Lucas does not seek a favor or even an act of friendship but to hire someone. Thus Chick does not have to do Lucas a favor or to establish himself as a friend but to take on a job. Lucas frames this interaction in his own terms just as he controlled the coin scene and the gift exchange.

This is the beginning of the mystery plot that forms the middle of the novel. The novel as a whole must encompass this life and death mystery that focuses on right and wrong, justice and vengeance. Although he will fail, Chick must act. Later, considering why he had to go out in the middle of the night and dig up the grave that supposedly contained Lucas’s victim, he concludes that it was necessary “to do it to preserve not even justice and decency but innocence” (114). Lucas’s innocence and Chick’s are interdependent. Proving that Lucas is innocent is the way in which Chick must seek innocence for himself and his community. Though Chick himself does not feel innocent and though he does not see his community as innocent, he acts to prevent the unjust lynching that would make his community even more
guilty. The specter of lynching obviously raise the stakes of the novel. The mystery plot focuses the novel on innocence and guilt, in the case of *Intruder* not by pursing the guilty in order to exact punishment and thereby reestablish social equilibrium, but by seeking to establish innocence and thereby prevent social guilt. The absurdity of the details of the novel’s mystery underscore the absurdity both of vengeance and of the idea that social equilibrium is accessible.

Trying to clear Lucas’s name is the least Chick can do. It is of course also the most he can do, and even so, it will not assuage Chick’s guilt or eliminate his debt. In the mist of his efforts, Chick recognizes the inevitability of continued failure:

[H]aving realised its sheer hopelessness. … he now recognised the enormity of what he had blindly meddled with and that his first instinctive impulse—to run home and fling saddle and bridle on the horse and ride as the crow flies into the last stagger of exhaustion … —had been the right one … it seemed to him now that he was responsible for having brought into the light and glare of day something shocking and shameful out of the whole white foundation of the county which he himself must partake of too since he too was bred of it. (135)

Rather than responding to the acceptance of the hopelessness of shame by hiding, Chick has undertaken to find out the truth and help Lucas. The result of his attempt to assuage his guilt, however, is exposing the shame of the white community and thereby himself. Chick’s attempt, like his offer of coins and his gift-giving, serves to reinforce his indebtedness rather than allowing Chick to pay his debt. The mystery plot shows Chick to be trapped in the hopelessness of failure even in his success at proving Lucas’s innocence.

In the spiritual terms of Christian discourse, the significance of Chick’s inadequacy becomes evident. In the context of Christian spirituality, guilt is a result of sin, and people are not capable of making up for their sin. This understanding of the human condition means that in a Christian context, a crucial role of guilt is to bring individuals to the realization that they are not, by themselves, able to make up for wrongdoing. Guilt is thus an important emotional experience and way of understanding the world that leads to recognition of the need for repentance, acknowledging that one has done wrong and turning
from that wrongdoing. In this context, guilt is important not just as a motivator of behavioral change, but because it is an emotional signal that people are, as sinners, inadequate and unable to make up for sin. In Christianity, unassuageable guilt shows the human need for a forgiving, redemptive God.

In Intruder, even before subsequent events indicate the unassuagable nature of Chick’s guilt, Chick frames his guilt in spiritual terms. In the crucial framing scene during which Chick offers Lucas coins, Chick’s realization that he is “forever now too late, forever beyond recall” suggests not the possibility of repayment but the persistence of Chick’s guilt. The concept of eternity suggested by “forever” implies a framework that transcends time, as a spiritual framework is able to do. His invocation of eternity and clear recognition that nothing he can do will make up his debt do not preclude attempts to pay his debt, but on some level, he knows that he will fail. Although Chick immediately classifies his failure as eternal, he continues to try, through gift-giving and then through his successful attempt to clear Lucas’s name in the mystery plot.

The recognition of the inevitability of failure that plays such a prominent role in Christian spirituality and in Intruder contrasts sharply with the hope of success often implied by the solutions of political discourse. Whereas in the terms of political discourse, Intruder explores northern and southern responses and thereby evaluates economic response, in spiritual terms, Intruder explores the sinner’s struggle with shame and guilt. Economic debts can, theoretically at least, be repaid, but in Intruder, repayment is unattainable. In the novel’s terms, Chick’s debt cannot be repaid because it is less like an economic debt and more like a spiritual one.

**The possibility of pride and of repentances**

If Chick had been able to succeed, he would have been able to attain pride. In showing that even in his success, Chick fails, the mystery plot shows shame and guilt to be Chick’s inescapable legacy. In Intruder, Chick’s success does not signify as success because he cannot make up for the past. Christian theology provides repentance as the appropriate path for the wrongdoer, a response that is meaningful even when wrongdoing cannot be made up for. Through Intruder’s establishment of a situation
distinguished by persistent failure and the utter inability to make up for the past, the novel participates in that discourse. Although the novel does not embrace Christian theology, its interest in transcending the failures of political responses and establishing a spiritual context means that the novel participates in, contributes to and partakes of Christian discourse. Part of its contribution is to show the need for a response that is able to transcend the limitations of the political responses that fail in the novel. More significant, perhaps, is its establishment of a situation in which even Chick’s best effort is insufficient.

In its presentation of the Chick’s inability to escape his shame and assuage his guilt, Intruder forecloses the possibility of pride for Chick. When Lucas rejects his money, Chick is plunged into a shame that he comes to accept. This shame and his acceptance of it potentially lead to pride, as Burrus and Ahmed both suggest. In her discussion of confession, a religiously inflected acknowledgement, Burrus sees shame as implicated in absolution for the shamed perpetrator. She writes, “it is as if the very suffering of shame audaciously promises to atone for the shameful thoughts or acts exposed” (112). Ahmed sees apology in much the same way that Burrus sees confession. Apology is, she writes, a way for a perpetrating group to be “cleansed through its expression of shame” (35). Thus she posits a path from shame to acknowledgement of shame, to pride, and she implicitly argues that this path is morally troubling (Ahmed 101, 107-113). The pride that Ahmed condemns here, although she does not discuss the distinction, at the very least shares much with what psychologists classify as hubristic pride: “I’m proud of who I am” (Tracy and Robins “The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach,” 14). Its emotional opposite is shame, with its connection to identity. Because of Chick’s guilt, he does not simply accept his shame in a way that would allow him to shift readily from acknowledgement of shame to pride. Thus his guilt inhibits the response to shame of a retreat to hubristic pride.

Likewise his acceptance of his shame in the end prevents him from access to authentic pride. Authentic pride, “I’m proud of what I did,” is the emotional opposite of guilt, with its connection to behavior (Tracy and Robins “The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach,” 14). Authentic pride is the logical response to having assuaged one’s guilt through successful behavior.
modification. If Lucas had accepted Chick’s money, Chick would not have experienced shame. If Lucas had accepted Chick’s gifts, Chick would have earned authentic pride. Later, Lucas does ask Chick to help prove his innocence, but even this circumstance does not turn out to give Chick the opportunity to earn authentic pride. Instead of achieving pride, Chick comes to a fuller realization of his shame and that of his white community. Having recognized his shame, he also recognizes that his actions to assuage guilt have not been sufficient. Thus his shame forecloses the possibility of achieving authentic pride through behavior.

Together, then, shame and guilt work in *Intruder* to prevent pride, and Chick remains unsatisfied. His perspective after the people in the town know that Lucas is innocent indicates as much. Chick wants the people who gathered to lynch Lucas to get Lucas some tobacco. Gavin, earlier articulating the Southern response in what seems to be a defense of it, now interrogates Chick’s desire for Southern gift-giving: “‘Was that what you wanted? … the can of tobacco? That would have been enough?’—Of course it wouldn’t. Which is one reason why Lucas will ultimately get his can of tobacco; they will insist on it, they will have to … since what sets a man writhing sleepless in bed at night is not having injured his fellow so much as having been wrong’”(194). In essence, Gavin argues in this passage that the white community will attempt to repay Lucas, will virtually force him to be repaid, in order to attempt to assuage its own guilt. What they do will be for their own selfish reasons, and regardless of how much they do, it will still not be enough for them to achieve the pride that they are pursuing. Gavin is not arguing that Lucas does not deserve some tobacco, or even that Lucas should not receive some sort of economic compensation or what are essentially worse than meaningless gifts. He is, however, acknowledging that what the white community does is for its own benefit. Gavin critiques Chick’s motivation to see Lucas receive a gift and thus the entire gift-giving response. This critique easily becomes lost in the midst of Gavin’s long-winded pontification. Yet Gavin is here the vehicle for a theoretically sound identification of the desire to feel good about the self as a prime motivation. It echoes Ahmed’s concern that apology for wrongdoing is in essence a move on the part of the perpetrator to move from shame to pride.
Pursuit of positive self-regard is potent. Like Chick, the people will be motivated by guilt to change their behavior, and like Chick, they will try to return to oblivious, positive self-regard by giving gifts to Lucas. These gifts are essentially a means of achieving pride at Lucas’s expense, a way to pretend that they have made amends. But in Gavin’s view, they realize that their enterprise is, again like Chick’s, doomed. Gavin questions Chick’s desire to see the people give Lucas tobacco, arguing that such a gift would not be sufficient, as Chick’s experience has already illustrated, and that in any case, the people will eventually force their gifts on Lucas in order to attempt to make up for their error and thereby regain their dignity. He says they know that “they have got to spend the balance of their lives doing it” (195). Nothing the people can do, no amount of gift-giving, will assuage their guilt. They will not be able to reassert their dignity. But the idea that their motive, and Chick’s, is positive self-regard fundamentally interrogates response to the realization of having done wrong.

Though it may not be as obviously tawdry as the monetary focus embraced by the North, even the Southern response, gift-giving, is not efficacious or moral. It too is a pursuit of pride. While Gavin indicates that no gift will ever be enough, Chick goes further, identifying the guilt of the white people in the town and its consequences: “They were running from themselves. They ran home to hide their heads under the bedclothes from their own shame” (198). Gavin then agrees, positing flight and murder as the only alternatives (198). Earlier, however, Chick has suggested a third alternative: “They reached the point where there was nothing left for them to do but admit that they were wrong. So they ran home” (192). The white community could have admitted that it was wrong but does not do so, and Chick has trouble clearly distinguishing between their failure to apologize and their failure to attempt to give Lucas a gift. Reflecting on the situation, Chick says, they “ran, fled not even to deny Lucas but just to keep from having to send up to him by the drugstore porter a can of tobacco not at all to say they were sorry but so they wouldn’t have to say out loud that they were wrong” (191). Chick recognizes that the people aimed not only to avoid giving Lucas a gift, but also to avoid acknowledging their error. However, Chick here conflates apology with the equalizing gift of Southern tradition, becoming entangled in the problem of unpayable debt. Thus while Intruder is a spiritual novel that gestures towards repentance, it does not
disentangle that option or explore repentance as a response to wrongdoing, specifically to unpayable racial debt.

Though the novel does not even fully explore repentance, it does examine and attempt to work through the complex relationship between guilt, inadequate behavioral response, and potentially significant emotional response. Specifically, the novel is concerned with the potential to avoid the moral behavioral change potentially associated with guilt. Discussing his attitude toward the people gathered in the town who did not do anything for Lucas upon discovering that they had been wrong, Chick and Gavin have a typically Faulknerian crucial but imprecise discussion:

“Look-----“ and [Chick] stopped but as always no more was needed:

“Yes?” his uncle said, then when he said no more: “Ah, I see. It’s not that they were right but that you were wrong.”

“I was worse,” he said. “I was righteous.”

“It’s all right to be righteous,” his uncle said. “Maybe you were right and they were wrong. Just don’t stop.”

“Dont stop what?” he said.

“Even bragging and boasting is all right too,” his uncle said. “Just don’t stop.”

“Dont stop what?” he said again. But he knew what now. (205)

This passage begins after an extended internal passage in which Chick considers his connection to the white community and slides afterwards into a concrete discussion of who is doing what next. One crucial element of this exchange for my purposes is the emphasis on action. Chick has at this point gone to great lengths to uncover Lucas’s innocence. He has done what no one (white) would have been expected to do. This fact is clear in the novel, reinforced by a conversation Chick overhears concerning Lucas, at risk of being taken from the sheriff and lynched. One man suggests that the sheriff will defend his prisoner Lucas against the potential lynch mob. The other says, “A nigger murderer? Who in this county or state either is going to help him protect a nigger that shoots white men in the back?” (40). Chick “had heard it all before,” has been raised in this environment, and knows that he is a representative of his races (40).
has also expressed his dismay about the behavior of the gathered white crowd after Lucas’s arrest. While the novel is conspicuously silent regarding what Chick is not to stop, it is not farfetched, I think, to suggest that he is not to stop at what he has done. He is to keep on behaving in the way that he has, not to succumb to a feeling of “righteousness,” a religiously inflected form of pride, and not to give up and run away in shame.

Conclusion: emotional, moral, and political complexity

The novel as a whole is grand in scope and clearly spiritual. Not only does the novel encompass Gavin’s grandiosity, it also invokes a discourse that makes sense of “forever” and understands what is beyond Chick’s “ken.” The novel employs language that itself invokes a theological framework. Consider, for example, the language of Chick’s acceptance of communal white guilt, tentatively suggesting a way out of the debt he has to an extent recognized: “One shame if shame must be, one expiation since expiation must surely be” (204). Chick uses the terms “expiation” and “expiated” four times in this passage, terms that evoke Christian discourse. “Expiation” is “The action of expiating or making atonement for (crime, etc.).” Chick has already recognized that he cannot figure out a way to achieve expiation, but his hope for successful atonement remains. One definition suggests religion as a possible source of success: Expiation is “The action of averting portended evil by religious means.” The verb form suggests, “To pay the penalty of”; “To make amends or reparation for” (Expiate). Finally, an “expiator” is “One who expiates or makes satisfaction (for sin)”. The word “expiation” carries specifically religious resonance. If the political means of money and gifts cannot make amends, Christian discourse has a response: In a Christian context, Jesus is the expiator and makes amends for the sin that people cannot make up for. Chick’s attempts at reparation are not adequate, because in that he is a Christ figure, he is an all-too human one. Christian discourse addresses human inability to achieve expiation, and the language of Intruder evokes that discourse. The theological overtones and, more broadly, the transcendent scope of Intruder form the context in which the novel is addressing the issue of race relations.
Reading *Intruder* as a spiritual novel shows the way in which the novel is not about race but about sin. Shame, pride, and guilt are the central emotions of *Intruder*. Exploring their nature and function in the novel illuminates the novel anew. What has gone wrong is not merely a matter of an incident, not Chick’s offering of his coins and not even slavery. The presence and role of shame in the novel indicate the novel’s exploration of deeper, identity-based errors and problems: The problem cannot be confined to something the white community has done that it can make up for having done, but who the white community is. Here, the importance of the novel’s treatment of guilt becomes important. In that it explores both racial guilt and racial shame, *Intruder* both acknowledges the shameful and attempts to address the issue of how to respond to that acknowledgement. In that the novel does not present an argument for what precisely that response should be, it avoids over-simplifying the problem of the fraught state of race relations in the community and forecloses the possibility of pride. Thus the emotional logic of the novel recognizes the risks of smug, self-righteous pride. Reading *Intruder* as a spiritual novel by focusing on its emotional core illuminates the text as posing and exploring responsible questions rather than engaging in the inevitably oversimplifying project of answering them.

While its gesture towards confession and repentance might seem to be a suggestion that Christian discourse offers a way out of shame and guilt and back to pride, on another level, Christian discourse is less sanguine about the prospect of atonement than political discourse is about the prospect of achieving justice through economic means. Whereas economic reparation is often viewed as meaningful within a political framework, from the perspective of Christian discourse, the question of what reconciliation “costs” becomes a far less answerable question. It is clear enough to say that reconciliation should not be cheap and reconciliation should constitute something, but what ought it constitute? For Ronald W. Walters in *The Price of Racial Reconciliation*, which supports the cause of reparations, a financial goal, or at least a goal cast in financial terms, the answer is clear: money. He provides a list of “wrong answers” when in another context he refers to “petty methods of redress, such as calls for cross-cultural dialogues, symbolic apologies, and memorials and museums – forms of what Eric K. Yamamoto calls ‘cheap reconciliation’” (4). The potential appeal of such “cheap” modes of response is obvious. The potential of
successfully making up for moral failure, for evil that has been perpetrated, offers a much desired hope. Though often accepted as something other than such a petty method, because of the significance of economic reality, economic modes that privilege the economic as primary, have a strong potential to cheapen evil. It is all too easy for economic reality to seem more fundamental than any other conceivable concern, yet the commodifying effect of economic conceptualizations is obvious and pernicious. For all that money can buy, the illusion that it can right wrongs ought to be readily identified as dangerous. While political discourse often fails to recognize these problems, implicitly identifying economic response as the appropriate path to justice, in the context of Christian discourse, the limited potential of monetary justice is clear.

The novel partakes of and contributes to Christian discourse but does not explore or embrace it completely, despite its baptism scene, language that resonates in Christian discourse, and, most significantly, its gesture towards a spiritual realm. The participation of the novel in Christian discourse does not constitute an embrace of confession or repentance, the theologically prescribed response to being in the wrong. Considering the role and nature of shame, guilt, and pride in the novel, however, shows it to be what I characterize as a cautious, even reluctant, interest in confession or repentance as a response to inherited shame and guilt that cannot be assuaged. The caution evident in this exploration works towards a way out of shame and guilt that does not lead to pride. As Burrus writes of the nature of confession in Christian discourse, “Its aim may be framed as the nostalgic recovery of a fantasized wholeness yet it manifests as an abysmal and salvific brokenness. It opens onto a shame from which there is no escape but that may, as Levinas intuits, itself provide a path of escape that remains necessarily uncharted”(13). This novel is not a “Christian” novel, but its very failure to explore confession and repentance fully is significant in its confirmation of the unchartability of the territory that it gestures towards.
Honest ambivalence: Christianity and the emotional logic of *Quicksand*

If anything is unequivocal in Nella Larsen’s vision in *Quicksand*, it would seem to be the depiction of Christianity. This episodic novel tells the story of Helga Crane, an alienated, intelligent young woman with a black father and white mother, as she seeks to develop a sense of agency and to find a place in the world. The church and Christianity represent and illustrate what is wrong with the society in which Helga struggles. It is typical to understand the interracial heritage of Larsen and her semi-autobiographical heroine as a cause of ambivalence towards racial categories, and thus to identify the novel as a critique of the culture that traps mixed race women. It is not typical to attend to the complexity of the Christian discourse of *Quicksand*.

Instead, *Quicksand*’s depiction of religion is read as a clear condemnation. Dramatically illustrating this tendency in his powerfully titled “No Means Yes: The Conversion Narrative as Rape Scene in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand,*” Michael Lackey writes, “Larsen dramatizes the religious conversion as a gang rape” (73). Less evocatively but with equal clarity regarding *Quicksand*’s understanding of Christianity, Qiana J. Whitted explains that the novel’s heroine Helga “struggles against the asphyxiating pulls of domesticity and religious tradition,” characterizing her marriage to a preacher as “the black woman’s tortured capitulation to Christian moral standards” (83). Similarly, Ann Douglas interprets the novel as a story in which Christianity is incompatible with Helga’s selfhood and her conversion is the death of all hope. She writes, “Helga has vague religious longings, but religious experience here is only self-betrayal” (83). The overt presentation of Christianity is negative throughout the novel,

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10 In *A Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s,* she writes of Helga, “Converted to evangelical faith in a storefront Harlem church, she marries a preacher and moves to the Deep South, where she produces an unending series of babies—this from the woman who believed bringing more black children into an America that didn’t want them a sin—and loses forever the self she never found” (83-84).
particularly in its conclusion, in which Helga enters into a miserable marriage to a preacher. The symbolism attached to Christianity is perhaps an even clearer indication of the function of Christianity in *Quicksand*. For instance, Helga’s return to New York after years in Copenhagen is “pass[ing] from the heavy solemnity of a church service to a gorgeous carefree revel” (214). This illustration is not an argument about the church but presumes that the church is rightly taken as constricting. Although characterization of a church service as solemn may not be a condemnation of Christianity per se, the contrast here obviously favors the “gorgeous” and “carefree” over the “heavy.” Christianity is ugly and an imposition on those who come under its sway. This passage assumes and encapsulates the novel’s presentation of Christianity as essentially unappealing, constraining, and harmful.

As such, it illustrates the attitude towards Christianity and atheism that Lackey identifies with Larsen in *African American Atheists and Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith*. He contrasts a despairing, implicitly white atheism with the positive approach to atheism available to African Americans who recognize God’s nonexistence as a cause for joy rather than despair. Of Larsen and the other subjects of his study, he writes:

> [F]or African American atheists, who have witnessed how the God concept has been used to justify the biological and intellectual inferiority of people of African descent, God’s death does not lead to existential despair. On the contrary, … atheism is cause for rejoicing, since it effectively divests the dominant political powers of their most powerful weapon against culturally designated inferiors. (3)

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11 Lackey’s approach is political in its orientation, as he clearly states in his introduction, writing, “I ultimately focus on the African American atheists’ particular critique of the sociocultural dynamics of faith. It is my contention that African American atheists were best able to shed the most light on the political function of the God concept to sanction overt and covert forms of violence and abuse” (9).
Quicksand’s assumption of the Christian church as the foil for the freedom, happiness, aesthetic appeal and lightness available beyond its bounds suggests the novel’s participation in what Lackey characterizes as a joyous African American atheism.

Lackey reads the religious discourse of Quicksand via politics in a way invited by the text. Specifically, Quicksand obviously understands Christianity as a negative political force, focusing on what Lackey calls “the political function of the God concept” (9). Although Lackey argues that the thinkers he writes about would not “consider the God concept an inherently evil idea” but rather “an empty signifier, a semiotic vacuity that political powers can easily control and exploit,” he, like his subjects, understands religious expression in the world to be, essentially, about power (1). If, as Lackey believes, Larsen would argue that “[a]bolishing the God concept would certainly not eliminate a politics of oppression, … but it would divest the dominant power of its most effective weapon for enacting its political agenda,” then Larsen’s vision of Christianity might seem to be both fully political and unequivocal (1).

Although I agree that Quicksand presents Christianity as an inhibiting, oppressive political force, in my reading Larsen’s vision in the novel reveals itself to be essentially ambivalent, complicating even her view of the Christianity she so obviously condemns. While Larsen seeks to hold an oppressive Christian society responsible for the victimhood of its heroine Helga Crane, her honest ambivalence means that she is not fully committed to this idea. I begin by addressing the critical dynamic surrounding the novel, one that, in my analysis facilitates oversimplification of the novel’s vision of religion. I both illustrate and begin to complicate the novel’s overt presentation of Christianity by addressing Helga’s view of it prior to her conversion near the novel’s conclusion. Then I turn to a consideration of the nature and role of
pride, shame, and guilt in the novel. Analysis of these emotions illuminates the widely unrecognized ambivalence of the novel’s religious discourse.

**Critical expectations**

One aspect of these expectations relates to Larsen’s participation in the Harlem Renaissance. Reading Larsen’s atheism as joyous is appealing not just because *Quicksand*’s overt presentation of Christianity is negative but also because it aligns Larsen comfortably with what Houston A. Baker, Jr., identifies as the sense of celebration that historically complicated the relationship of the Harlem Renaissance to Modernism. In reacting to the marginalization of the Harlem Renaissance, Baker’s analysis almost requires participants in the movement to have a sense of celebration. As Baker writes in his influential 1987 *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, “[T]he ‘Harlem Renaissance’ has frequently been faulted for its ‘failure’ to produce vital, original, effective, or ‘modern’” work, a judgment based on the acceptance of white modernism as establishing a standard unmet by black writers (xiii). Larsen is among those writers Baker lists as being faulted for failure to “sound ‘modern,’” and Baker’s defense of the Harlem Renaissance implicitly functions as a defense of Larsen (xiv). Yet his view that black writers require defense because they do not reflect the values of a modernism that is essentially white does not apply to Larsen. Providing little room for Larsen’s perspective, Baker distinguishes black modernism from white modernism, writing:

Modernist ‘anxiety’ in Afro-American culture does not stem from a fear of replicating outmoded forms or of giving way to bourgeois formalisms. Instead, the anxiety of modernist influence is produced … by the black spokesperson’s necessary task of
employing audible extant forms in ways that move clearly up, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery. (101)

This idea of upward movement reflects Baker’s sense of the Harlem Renaissance as “an intensely successful act of national self-definition working itself out in a field of possibilities constructed by turn-of-the-century spokespersons” (72). The upward movement and possibility so crucial to the creative project of the Harlem Renaissance constitutes a jubilation that may seem to have precluded its participation in the sense of loss of Modernism, with its privileged questions about the human condition in the face of instability (see Baker 3-7). Though this distinctly positive tone might be understood to render Harlem Renaissance work as failing in its own Modernist enterprise, Baker’s analysis allows Black Modernism to define itself, to be Modernist and yet to take a kind of joy in racial identity. Rejecting Christianity becomes Larsen’s way of jubilantly rejecting the past; moving away from Christianity becomes moving away from slavery.

The idea that Larsen’s vision embraces an upward trajectory at the expense of Modernist alienation is not self-explanatory. In general, Baker’s conceptualization of the Harlem Renaissance as a racially specific modernism encompassing a distinct positive trajectory poses a problem for Larsen. Echoing this narrative of the Harlem Renaissance as a time of upward movement, Ann Douglas specifically addresses the fact that Larsen’s perspective does not quite fit. In Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s,¹² she recognizes “Harlem optimism” as a distinguishing characteristic of black modernism¹³ (89). In identifying the reason for this optimistic perspective as the cultural possibility of Harlem itself, a place where, in Alain Lock’s

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¹³ The thread of Christianity runs through Douglas’s analysis. In her introduction, she explains, “[M]any people today do not consider religious expression a crucial arena in a society’s life. We do well to remember that neither the Victorians nor the moderns shared this appraisal. I myself believe that America’s identity was, and is, at bottom, a theological and religious one” (7).
words, New Negros could experience “the finding of one another,” Douglas points towards a reason for Larsen’s failure to reflect Harlem Renaissance jubilance (qtd in Douglas 90). Did Larsen not experience this “finding of one another”? Certainly Larsen’s tone and attitude are not widely understood to illustrate optimism. In this context, Douglas addresses Larsen’s Quicksand specifically, writing that this “taut and mournful” novel “with its echoes of [T.S. Eliot’s] The Waste Land” was not “taken as representative,” even by Larsen herself, in the way that Eliot’s epic poem was identified as “the crucial text of the day” (90-91). As Douglas presents it here, the attitude and tone of Quicksand have more in common with white modernism than with the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance.

In this critical context, unequivocal rejection of Christianity might seem to take on particular significance in regard to Larsen because in most respects her vision does not align with the narrative of the Harlem Renaissance as celebrating an upward trajectory. From Lackey’s perspective, atheism could provide the jubilance that would allow Larsen to participate in this upward movement. Joyous atheism as a connection to the Harlem Renaissance, however, is problematic. While rejection of spiritual meaning is a quintessential aspect of white modernism, the spiritual perspective of the Harlem Renaissance is less clear. Douglas, whose work is particularly interested in American Christian discourse, considers its intersection with matters of race in modernism. Though “the New Negro found no more answers with God than his white peers did” (83), in Douglas’s analysis, the Harlem Renaissance attitude towards Christianity is distinct: “it’s writers were concerned primarily not with the loss of Protestant theology, like their white peers, but with the legacy of black religious experience in its widest sense” (94). Douglas does not believe that most Harlem Renaissance writers were “worshippers of the stripped structures of fact ‘terrible honesty’ purported to lay bare” (94). The phrase “terrible honesty,”
part of the title of Douglas’ book, is borrowed from Raymond Chandler and signifies a particular ethos that Douglas defines writing, “the primary ethos of all the urban moderns was accuracy, precision, and perfect pitch and timing. It was an ethos the white moderns labeled ‘terrible honesty’ “ (8). Douglas’ analysis implies that in typical white modernism, hope and meaning are delusions, and specifically that religion is a “structure of fact” recognized as providing nothing. Douglas believes that, with some exceptions, black moderns are not committed to this point of view. Larsen is of course one of those exceptions. In terms of Larsen’s view and presentation of Christianity, she is more closely aligned with white modernism because she fully embraces the religious consequences of a “terrible honesty” that means recognizing spiritual meaning as delusion.

At issue is the nature of Larsen’s atheistic vision. Does Quicksand show Larsen’s atheism as the “joyous” African American atheism of Lackey’s reading or as an alienated, pessimistic “white” atheism? Considered in light of Lackey’s perspective, in Quicksand Larsen articulates a potential upward movement, a movement away from Christianity. Recognizing her rejection of religious meaning as an optimistic step, as Lackey does, allows Larsen’s vision to fit within the progress narrative of black modernism. In this analysis, black modernist atheism like Larsen’s frames her honesty as optimistic in its unequivocal rejection of Christianity and is thus substantively different from a white modernist atheism.

I believe, however, that Larsen’s ambivalence extends even to her atheism. Her vision of religion in Quicksand is both optimistic and pessimistic, partaking both of jubilance and of a despairing sense that divesting one’s self and society of the potential for religious meaning is not a cause for celebration. In addition to the large scale concerns of movement and period, the nature of Larsen’s vision in Quicksand is clearly intertwined with interpretation of her
biography, which complicates her relationship to the Harlem Renaissance and underscores her radical ambivalence. Larsen’s interracial heritage shapes her perspective, and her eventual disappearance from the artistic project and culture of the movement seems to constitute a certain discomfort, skepticism, or even rejection of it. Given the semi-autobiographical nature of *Quicksand* and the scarcity of evidence the famously secretive Larsen left for posterity, it is both inevitable and problematic that her vision in her fiction is understood through the lens of her biography. Keguro Macharia sums up this critical dynamic, writing, “Helga’s travels are so similar to Larsen’s that critics and biographers routinely supplement Larsen’s life with details from the novel, and vice versa” (255). The difficulty of verifying certain aspects of Larsen’s life strengthens the appeal of fitting her life and fiction into a critical narrative. There are obvious parallels between Larsen’s skeletal biography and the life of *Quicksand* heroine Helga Crane, but fact and fiction overlap in a more complex way than has often been recognized.

Thadious Davis’s 1994 *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled*, recounts Larsen’s biography as the life story of a tragic mulatto, a reading that has ramifications for interpretations of Larsen and of *Quicksand*. Davis might be referring to Helga when she writes, “Denied access to the social and economic opportunities available to her white, immigrant relatives, she entered the world of African Americans, where she functioned without the resources and protection of family” (4). Davis attributes to Larsen aspects of Helga’s life and emotion, drawing speculative and problematic parallels between author and character. Davis writes, for example, “The paternal legacy that she carried out of Chicago was the emotional baggage of familial rejection and color consciousness, and her maternal legacy was emotional ambivalence toward women and African Americans” (4). This understanding may be an accurate

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14 Macharia’s “Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*” builds from Hutchinson’s 2006 biography of Larsen to address black nativism.
understanding of Helga’s life and relationship to her mother, but it is not appropriate to apply it to Larsen. This particular conflation of character and author is significant because *Quicksand*’s refusal to simply celebrate Baker’s “national self-definition” is here understood to be a result of her white mother’s rejection of her. This reading of Larsen’s biography purports to understand the inner workings of her life and facilitates a particular kind of confident analysis of *Quicksand* as the tragic mulatto story, a story of alienation and isolation, while *Quicksand* in turn supports an understanding of Larsen as a tragic figure.

Interrogating this received wisdom through a meticulously-researched and compelling 2006 biography *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson argues that reading Larsen’s life as evidence of the tragedy of her interracial heritage is reductive and distracting. Hutchinson writes of reading Davis’s biography, “I recognized a pattern not atypical of the way children from interracial families had often been misunderstood and –there is no other word for it – pathologized. … Her novels supposedly allowed Larsen to discharge her feelings of violence against her mother and to achieve a precarious stability through identification with her black father” (3). Hutchinson argues that Larsen’s relationship to her white mother, though inevitably fraught by the color politics of the time, has been misunderstood. Expectations concerning Larsen’s life have contributed to an interpretative dynamic with unfortunate ramifications for *Quicksand*. As Hutchinson argues, “The pattern of rationalization for Larsen’s unusual self-positioning and perspective on race resonates with tendencies in the interpretation of her novels and effectively neutralizes her nervy assault on the institution of race as such” (4). A specific related interpretational problem that Hutchinson notes is that Larsen’s “ambivalence toward the black bourgeoisie and the rhetoric of race pride [is] attributed to internalized racism” (3). A careful approach to Larsen’s biography not only clarifies
the ways in which *Quicksand* is—and is not—autobiographical, but, more importantly, recontextualizes Larsen’s vision. Specifically, as Hutchinson puts it, her “ambivalence” constitutes a “nervy assault” rather than an indication that she is a tragic figure alienated from her self.

Reading Larsen as a tragic figure writing a semi-autobiographical novel about another tragic figure in *Quicksand* fosters certain genre expectations for the novel. *Quicksand* is understood as a kind of naturalist novel, resulting in an emphasis on the power of circumstances that neglects the complexity of Helga and minimizes her responsibility. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl Wall sees Larsen’s heroines as more complex than “the tragic mulattoes of literary convention” in that they “subvert the convention consistently,” but she draws on Davis’ biography consistently and is committed to reading them as tragic figures (88-89). Wall argues, “The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self definition” an impossibility she discusses in relation to the life of their “enigmatic” author (89). The tragic mulatto narrative is imposed on Larsen and on Helga, in a mutually reinforcing way. The tragic mulatto is a victim of society, and when Helga is understood in this way, her complexity is lost. In particular, the tragic victim is primarily an object, rather than a subject, and her responsibility cannot be fully attended to, while societal forces are understood as worthy of blame. Acknowledging the tendency to read Helga as a victim at the mercy of her society, Kimberly Monda writes in “Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand,*” “Most critics today read Helga’s tragic end as a powerful criticism of the social forces that conspire against her achieving a fulfilling life.” The responsibility lies not with the individual in such a narrative but with the powerful society that exerts itself against its victims. When *Quicksand* is understood as a naturalist novel with a tragic mulatto at its center, Christianity’s most important role is as one of these “social forces.” From
this perspective, Christianity is an awful and immutable power that exerts itself, inexorably destroying Helga, the hapless naturalist heroine, at the mercy of a malevolent society. The idea that Helga is tragic figure supports and the overt critique of Christianity in the novel combine to obscure the ambivalence of Larsen’s vision of religion.

It is clear that Helga is oppressed by the Christian culture she inhabits, and her oppressed status means that she operates within a narrowly circumscribed world that limits her agency. Is someone working with so few choices culpable? If Quicksand is read as a naturalist novel featuring a tragic mulatto, it will be understood to answer this question definitively, but reading the Christian discourse of the novel via emotion illustrates its exploration of competing imperatives regarding the attribution of responsibility. This exploration plays out as a conflict between holding Christianity responsible for the ills of the society that makes Helga’s life in some sense impossible, and attributing responsibility to Helga herself. By considering the emotional logic of Quicksand, my reading shows the Christian discourse of the novel to be far more complex and ambivalent than scholars and critics have recognized.

**Christianity at a glance**

Although it is not until the final section of the novel that religion assumes a prominent role, the negative role of Christianity is established immediately and overtly in Quicksand. As the novel opens, Helga has decided that she does not fit into the culture of Naxos, the southern, Tuskegee-inspired educational institution at which she is teaching. There is an important element of religious critique in the sense of dissatisfaction and alienation that Helga experiences. Thinking over the visit of a white preacher who had preached at Naxos earlier that day, Helga “shuddered” (2). She recalls:
He spoke of his great admiration for the Negro race … He hoped, he sincerely hoped, that they wouldn’t become avaricious and grasping, thinking only of adding to their earthly goods, for that would be a sin in the sight of Almighty God. And then he had spoken of contentment, embellishing his words with scriptural quotations and pointing out to them that it was their duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water. And then he had prayed. (5-6)

This passage establishes the negative role of Christianity as a political tool of oppression. Here Christian discourse is invoked by a dominant cultural figure in order to reinforce his own power. The way in which this dynamic works is clear. If, according to Christianity, what matters is the world to come, improvement of one’s earthly position is ungodly. This argument is a standard politically oppressive understanding and use of Christian discourse, and it is obvious that Helga recognizes it as insidious.

Helga’s displeasure is not merely or even primarily with the preacher’s reprehensible views, but with the response it receives: That Naxos embraces this repressive Christianity, an indication of all that is wrong with the institution. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Helga’s levels of response are clarified: “Sitting there in her room, long hours after, Helga again felt a surge of hot anger and seething resentment. And again it subsided in amazement at the memory of the considerable applause which had greeted the speaker just before he had asked his God’s blessing upon them” (6). The reference to “his God” indicates that the preacher’s God is not the God of a black woman like Helga. While Helga’s response to the preacher’s views is potent, even in memory, her reaction to the positive response of the audience to the preacher is even more powerful. Helga recognizes that the response given to the repressive message of the preacher is astonishingly inappropriate, and this inappropriate response is more than Helga can
bear. It inspires her impulsive departure from Naxos. In accepting this God, the community of Naxos accepts its own oppression. This link between Christianity and white repression will become still more prominent in the final section of the novel.

More subtly, at the beginning of *Quicksand*, Naxos’s embrace of Christianity is associated with the institution’s commitment to ugliness and the related idea that Helga’s love of beauty is sinful. The novel opens with Helga in her “attractive room,” which is described in rich detail (2). Her room’s beauty sets it apart as an individual haven in the midst of the conforming drabness of Naxos. Naxos has an “air of self-rightness,” a religiously inflected phrasing, that makes it ill-suited for “a pretty … girl” like Helga (12). She has spent most of her money on beautiful things for her room, and has been condemned for it in religious terms: “it was this craving, this urge for beauty which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos –‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ her detractors called it” (14). Helga’s aesthetic sensibilities are understood as essentially sinful. To those committed to the Christian dutiful drabness of the Naxos aesthetic, appreciation for beauty indicates pride and vanity, to them signs of worldliness.

The matter of aesthetics is of particular significance in regard to clothes, which are important means of self-expression and self-definition. Hutchinson finds a biographical connection, explaining, “Larsen had been told not to return [to Fisk] after she was involved in a student rebellion against dress codes and social restrictions on girls” (6). In his analysis, “A woman’s ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing would always signify, in Larsen’s fiction, her freedom and personal agency” (41). Indeed, at this point in the novel, Helga sees the unappealing aesthetic and dress code of Naxos as indicative of the school’s systemic attempt to exert control over its inhabitants. As Helga waits outside the principal’s office to
inform him of her impending departure, she looks at the women working there, reflecting on their Naxos-approved style of dress:

Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts – “Bright colors are vulgar” – “Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people” – “Dark-complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red.” (38 1928)

Helga rebels against what she sees as this rigid ugliness while attempting not to offend the Naxos sensibility:

Helga Crane loved clothes, elaborate ones. … [A]lthough she had affected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of the dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. … Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades. (39-40 1928)

Helga values beauty and seeks to embrace it in her clothing as a means of self-expression. Naxos seeks to squash that self-expression in order to further its goal of promoting and projecting respectability. As Kimberley Roberts points out in “The Clothes Make the Woman: The Symbolics of Prostitution in Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem,” Helga “seems perpetually on the verge of being mistaken for—code for becoming—a prostitute” (111). In Roberts’ analysis, the novel shows that Larsen is interested in clothing and style, and depicts “a world where color counts,” whereas the world of fashion was valued neither by New Negro movement leaders who “maintained the importance of strict sexual mores for the
betterment of the race” (109) nor by Baptist church women who had a “focus on straight-laced manners and morals” (110). In *Quicksand*, Helga’s clothes threaten Naxos, an institution that reflects New Negro willingness to limit women’s freedom in an effort to promote respectability. Christianity is clearly on the wrong side of this clash between beauty and freedom, on the one hand, and drab, controlling respectability, on the other.

As the school’s aesthetic position signals and constitutes part of its power structure, Helga’s rejection of that position is significant. Roberts contends that, “through the semiotics of clothing Larsen voices her resistance to … a totalizing system” (112). To Helga, beauty is important, and clothing is especially important. If she sees her clothing as significant, so do others. “The disapproval she incurs due to her dress,” Roberts points out, “seems equal to an attack against her morality” (113). The importance of aesthetics in *Quicksand* means that the association of Christianity in *Quicksand* with an unappealing, restrictive aesthetic constitutes a serious critique of Christianity. In this initial opposition, Christianity is on the side of ugliness and control, a religion seeking to stamp out all that is appealing and to control female sexuality. This is a Christianity that Helga, embracing beauty not only in her room but also in her clothing, firmly rejects.

When Helga leaves Naxos, she goes to Chicago. Her attitude towards and interaction with the church there complicates the simple critique evident in the opening. Up until the end of the novel, Helga recognizes her own limited interest in religion, but upon her arrival in Chicago, she evinces interest in the church as a source of social acceptance. Though the institutional role of the church reinforces the political force of Christianity, Helga’s attitude towards the church is more complex than might first appear. It is clear that she is interested in religion only as a site of the kind of social interaction she desires:
Helga Crane was not religious. She took nothing on trust. Nevertheless on Sundays she attended the very fashionable, very high services in the Negro Episcopal church on Michigan Avenue. She hoped that some good Christian would speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly if she was a stranger in the city. None did, and she became bitter, distrusting religion more than ever. (73-74)

Faith and religious belief receive no mention. Helga is not going to church to worship God. If Helga expects little from the church, she receives less. Her hope for positive social interaction is not fulfilled. Of course it is not just any church that Helga chooses to attend; she is in pursuit of a connection to a “fashionable” church, an indication that what she is seeking is not just social interaction but high class social interaction. She wants to be accepted by those she deems of significance, the fashionable. The particular form of Helga’s religious interest indicates that her reason for going to church is social rather than spiritual. For Helga, acceptance from this group is the hoped-for cure for the alienation that has followed her from Naxos to Chicago.

On one level, this episode simply reinforcing *Quicksand*’s presentation of Christianity as a powerful cultural force. However, Helga’s purpose in attending church and her reaction to her experience there subtly complicate this understanding. Although the episode concludes with a disappointment that could hardly be better calculated to squash Helga’s ambivalence, its presentation of Christianity admits of a more nuanced view of Christian belief than does the novel’s opening. Helga’s purpose in going to the church is a social one, but her attitude towards Christianity is specific to religious belief in a somewhat paradoxical way. She does not hold religious beliefs, but she seems to expect the others in attendance to be there for higher, if more naïve, reasons than her own, as indicated by the way in which her view of religion becomes increasingly negative when her fellow church-goers fail to welcome her. Helga’s disappointment
suggests that although she sees Christian belief as a foolish mistake, she expects good Christians to engage in positive, welcoming behavior, and indeed hopes that they will do so. Even if she thinks their belief system is in fact primarily a tool of political oppression, she attributes genuine belief to her fellow church-goers and associates that belief with good behavior. If the presentation of Christianity in Helga’s interaction with the Chicago church is critical of hypocrisy, at the same time, it indicates that, despite her experience with Christianity at Naxos, she sees Christian believers as being particularly likely to welcome her or having a particular potential, or perhaps responsibility, to do so.

This view of those she identifies as Christian believers indicates a surprising ambivalence toward Christianity on Helga's part. At Naxos, Christianity is only an oppressive force, and Helga expects nothing positive from its adherents. The Christianity of the Naxos community is represented by its positive response to the politically oppressive preacher, a response that troubles Helga immensely and precipitates her departure, and by politically significant aesthetic of repressive respectability. In this context, the fact that Helga has positive expectations, or at least hopes, from the Chicago church-goers serves to complicate what has been a purely negative presentation of Christianity. Having essentially fled from Christian believers, it is odd that, alone in a new city, Helga should choose to seek out people she identifies as believers. She could look for a welcome in a religiously neutral context or seek a place likely to attract others who, like herself, believe that Christian belief constitutes acceptance of an oppressive lie. If she were a fully committed, joyous atheist, with a completely negative view of the function of Christianity in the world, there would seem to be little reason for her to seek a welcome in a church and little justification for her disappointment in the result. After this disappointment, Helga might be expected to lose any ambivalence that somehow survived the rigors of the oppressive
Christianity of Naxos. Indeed, it is not until the final section of the novel that Helga again returns to church.

**Helga’s emotional life**

By focusing on the nuances and ramifications of pride, shame, and guilt in Helga’s emotional experience, I seek in this section to illustrate how Larsen’s ambivalence encompasses even her presentation of Christianity in the novel. The fraught relationship between shame and guilt, emotions both distinct and intertwined, is crucial to Helga’s conception of her identity. That a shamed person often feels unwarranted guilt complicates matters, but does not negate a distinction that is significant in Helga’s case. Helga experiences shame because of who she is, but she also experiences guilt. This guilt might seem to be unwarranted because Helga has little opportunity to be a perpetrator of wrongdoing and thus earn guilt. If that were the case, her feeling of guilt would merely indicate the close relationship between guilt and shame. However, I argue that Helga has pride to feel guilty about.

Exploring the complexity of pride enables and reveals ambivalence in *Quicksand*’s presentation of Christianity. Helga is proud, and she is guilty because of her pride. At the same time, she struggles to develop the pride necessary for selfhood. She has both too much pride and not enough pride. As that sense of exultation that accompanies success, pride may be the reward for effort and hard work. It can thus be positive, appropriate, and motivational. Western psychology identifies this form of pride as authentic. Authentic pride, the emotional opposite of guilt, is based on having done something worth being proud of; it is an appropriate feeling associated with self-worth and the satisfaction of a job well done. Because Helga is shamed, she needs this pride, as pride is “frequently understood as the emotional antidote to shame” (Burrus
42). In contrast, hubristic pride is excessive, unwarranted, perhaps the building up of the self at the expense of others or based on an unearned bit of luck. Hubristic pride, the emotional opposite of shame, is a positive feeling about the self that has no legitimate basis. It may also invoke comparison: The tilt of the head that says “I am worthy” may imply “I am more worthy.” Because of this dark side of pride, it may be deemed socially or morally unacceptable, as it typically is understood to be in Christian discourse. On the other hand, a sense of proper pride may also refer to appropriate dignity, in contrast to having “no pride,” which is likely to be an insult, an accusation of debasement. The conflicting characterizations of pride, reflected by the distinction between its authentic and hubristic manifestation, is at the heart of Quicksand and, as I will argue, has particular relevance with regard to the function of Christianity in the novel.

Helga’s reflection on the sermon she hears at Naxos at the beginning of the novel indicates the importance of and relationship between pride, shame, and guilt. Contemplating the positive response to this sermon is part of Helga’s inspiration to flee from Naxos. After having decided to leave, she reflects in a crucial passage on the reasons for her sense of alienation from the community of the school:

Always she had considered it a lack of understanding on the part of the community, but in her present new revolt she realized that the fault had been partly hers. A lack of acquiescence. She hadn’t really wanted to be made over. This thought bred a sense of shame, a feeling of ironical disillusion. Evidently there were parts of her she couldn’t be proud of. The revealing picture of her past striving was too humiliating. (16-17)

This ambiguous passage shows Helga to be already engaged in internal conflict about her sense of selfhood. Realizing that she did not in fact want to become someone who could truly be part of the community, she develops a “sense of shame.” Does she think that she should have been
willing to accommodate herself to the community? Does she feel guilty for her failure to do so? Or does her assessment of “past striving” as “humiliating” suggest that she feels guilty not because she did not want to accommodate herself but because she tried to do so? Her lack of “acquiescence” points to “parts” of her that she “couldn’t be proud of.” And yet, her “past striving,” her effort to become part of the community, is “humiliating.” The paradoxical way in which this passage weaves its strands together makes it difficult to determine the logic of the relationship between Helga’s emotions. The result is a not unrealistic sense of Helga’s self-discovery with its attendant conflicts. Helga is culpable and shamed in multiple conflicting and interlocking ways. She is to blame because she did not fully desire to be assimilated, because she attempted to be assimilated, and also because her attempt failed; and she is shamed by her recognition that she resisted being “made over” even as she made an effort to fit in with the community. She is guilty and ashamed, in a series of inextricable ways. Knowing she feels ashamed, Helga is unable to distinguish between shame and guilt. She knows that the fault is partly her own and faults herself for her refusal to acquiesce, or for having previously laid all of the blame on the community, or for both.

Helga knows that she is experiencing shame, but the result of this recognition is more complex than it might at first appear to be. Helga’s recognition of shame might be expected to compound the feeling of shame that Helga experiences because shame is itself shameful. As Virginia Burrus writes, “Shame is an emotion of which we frequently seem deeply ashamed” (1). Furthermore, Helga’s flight might appear to be an effort to hide in response to this growing shame. However, to understand her flight as purely an attempt to escape shame does not take into account the fact that she has become increasingly self-aware since her decision to separate herself from the uncongenial atmosphere of Naxos. Her inspiration to flee the stifling institution
seems to be motivated not just by a desire to hide in shame but also by a potentially empowering self-knowledge. In “‘Too High a Price’: The ‘Terrible Honesty’ of Black Women’s Work in Quicksand,” Jessica Labbé sees Helga as empowered in this passage, writing, “Helga’s realization of a ‘lack’ within herself ultimately liberates her because it means that she has achieved some amount of self-realization, which revives her sense of power. … Helga’s ‘lack of acquiescence’ is an open refusal to submit and consent to the dominant ideology of Naxos” (94). Rather than spiraling into greater and greater depths of shame, Helga is revitalized, asserting herself in fleeing Naxos. She cannot flourish where she is, and she becomes willing to depart the relative safety of the Naxos community in pursuit of a more conducive atmosphere. The motivation of Helga’s flight is complex: She seems not simply to be fleeing in shame but leaving Naxos in pursuit of self-definition. However, the idea that Helga is, as Labbé writes, “ultimately liberated” at this point is undercut by subsequent developments.15 At this point in the novel, she understands her choice as between two bad options: She can either be made over, giving herself up to conceptions others have concerning her, or she can reject connections and the community, pursing self-definition. That she understands herself as having a choice to make is an indication of her agency.

Applying Burrus’ analysis of shame to Quicksand suggests one way that shame could be freeing while also addressing why Helga’s liberation is illusory. In general, feelings of shame are understood to prevent connections between people by “disrupt[ing] individuals’ ability to form empathetic connections with others” (Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 26). Yet in this passage, Helga begins to understand both herself and her society to be at fault. In this sense, her shame provides a potential to connect with others. Burrus writes of this possibility: “Shame arises

15 Though Labbe emphasizes Helga’s liberation here and elsewhere in her article, implicitly admits as much by acknowledging ways in which Helga is not in fact liberated.
where we humans both honor and overflow our limits, where we recognize the limits of autonomy – where we observe, with no little alarm, the spreading stain of our mutual implicatedness” (4). Helga realizes that she is implicated along with the Naxos community. Helga’s shame is part of her realization that she, too, is implicated and part of a community of implicated others. In allowing her to recognize that she and her community share a common humanity, shame empowers her. However, rather than accepting the “limits of autonomy,” she seeks to distance herself from the entire situation. As a result, her liberation is far from “ultimate.” To the extent that Helga accepts her nascent recognition of shared humanity, she is empowered by her shame and thus liberated, but her liberation is tenuous because she rejects her shame and seeks to escape it in pursuit of autonomy.

Helga’s empowerment is limited by her refusal of shame, but to the extent that she is empowered, she must be a responsible subject. Warranted guilt that justifies blame must come because of choices.16 Thus if Helga’s guilt is warranted, it indicates her status as a subject. Complicating this analysis, the passage foregrounds the fact that Helga’s options are limited. Perhaps she does not have enough agency to warrant guilt and is experiencing guilt simply because of its close relationship between shame and guilt. For Helga, empowerment necessarily brings with it guilt, and in the passage, it is her guilt that leads to her shame, not the other way around. Here, early in the novel, Helga’s empowerment is necessarily accompanied by the potential for guilt, but the degree of Helga’s culpability is not clear. She discovers that she has not wanted to connect with other people, but perhaps she must avoid such connections because to connect with others could undermine the possibility for her to achieve an appropriate sense of her self. Though she is unable to continue to simply blame the community for her inability to fit

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16 As Katherin A. Rogers writes in a discussion of human responsibility in Anselm, “in order to have the sort of robust and valuable freedom which could merit praise and blame, the created agent must have open options,” that is choices (6).
in properly, when she becomes self-aware enough to see that her attitude and interracial heritage prevent her from becoming part of the community, she is filled with shame. Her identity is intertwined with her interracial heritage and corresponding—to an extent—lack of family and social connections, themes developed later in the novel. An early passage reveals the attitude that the Naxos establishment has towards her:

Her own lack of family disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. … Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t ‘belong.’ (19)

This perspective has been identified as a sign of Larsen’s tragic mulatto perspective. In my analysis, it is significant in its critique of the values of what the passage identifies as “Negro society.” It is a critique of the values and restrictions of a community that does not accept Helga, an outsider who is able to recognize the faults of a class-conscious black community committed to respectability. In order to belong to the larger community, an individual must already belong to a smaller family community, which Helga does not. In this regard, Helga’s story certainly has elements of the tragic mulatto story. She has been abandoned by her black father and rejected by her white mother. She is always out of place. As Monda notes: “Larsen dramatizes her heroine’s double alienation: If a black woman’s relationship self is determined by, first, the sense of connection with her mother and, second, the ‘weness’\(^{17}\) of a black identity … then Helga’s efforts to gain access to her subjectivity appear doomed from the start, because she lacks both of these traditional sources of communal identity” (29). Because Helga’s options are so limited,

\(^{17}\) Monda here draws on Alice R. Brown-Collins and Deborah Ridley Sussewell’s terminology in “The Afro-American Woman’s Emerging Selves.”
shame is far more central to her experience than guilt. She may be responsible for rejecting community, but she is not responsible for her community’s rejection of her. In my reading, *Quicksand*’s critique of the dominant social dynamic of this “Negro Society” is less an indication of authorial self-hatred than a critique of the class values of Naxos. Helga is a tragic figure, shamed, alienated and unaccepted, but she is also a proud social critic, excluded from the “weness” of black identity and thus in a position to critique it.

Though her pride is not new, her shame is. Sustained by her pride, she remained at Naxos despite deep dissatisfaction with the institution. Upon recognizing her shame, though, she flees. Although Helga’s flight seems empowering at first, resulting from self-knowledge and leading to a new life, it also remains a response to shame. Shame does not occur in isolation but relies upon a witness (as discussed in chapter 2) and is thus associated with hiding from the enabling witness. Helga’s continual flights are attempts to hide from others that she perceives to be the witnesses necessary for the dynamic of shame. Recognizing the relationship between shame and flight illuminates Helga’s behavior throughout the novel. Her continual flights suggest that her self-knowledge at Naxos is not ultimately liberatory. She flees from Naxos in the South to Chicago, from Chicago to New York, from New York to Denmark and back to New York, and finally, into marriage and an attendant Christian community in a small southern town. Helga’s continual flight seems frustratingly pointless. It is obvious, even to Helga, that flight is essentially ineffectual, as her dissatisfaction is fundamentally internal, a point emphasized by the obliviousness of the witnesses from whom Helga flees. These witnesses are not required to accept or even recognize their role. That Helga conceives of those around her as witnesses of her shame is what matters. The fact that Helga’s life is characterized by continual flight from whomever she happens to encounter reinforces the fundamental role of shame in her life.
Although her dawning self-knowledge spurs Helga’s departure from Naxos, bringing a close to the first episode of the novel, the new life into which Helga enters is one of struggle with pride, shame, and guilt. In the Naxos episode, the idea that Helga’s self-realization liberates her seems to have great promise. It is soon undercut, however. There is no community anywhere of which Helga can become a part. If her circumstances are perpetually unfree, the only way in which she can be understood to be liberated is internally, in her own self-conception. Helga does not behave like a woman content in her own self-conception, however. Her emotional life reveals her to be deeply troubled by who she recognizes herself to be. She brings her sense of shame with her. Labbé argues otherwise, contending “that Helga ‘hadn’t really wanted to be made over’ suggests that she has a defined sense of the self with which she is, in fact, satisfied” (94). She does not provide textual analysis in support of this position, but concludes: “this comment [the passage in which Helga realizes her own “lack of acquiescence”] makes clear her burgeoning pride and certainty in her own identity, though Larsen problematizes this status throughout the novel” (94). In my analysis, such a reading seriously overestimates the degree to which Helga is ever with her sense of self. Even in the context of the self-reflection regarding her crucial “lack of acquiescence,” Helga is full of self-doubt.

Helga does not settle into the self-assurance of authentic pride. Instead, what Helga realizes in her reflection is that, if she is to be in a community, she cannot achieve selfhood, but if she chooses to reject communal participation in order to pursue selfhood, she is guilty. This dynamic is indicative of the impossibility of achieving self-hood in community for Helga. Labbé herself identifies this particular theme in Quicksand as a crucial aspect of Larsen's participation in both literary modernism and the New Negro Movement. In her analysis, the novel shows “the marked impossibility of coexisting individual and communal identities” (82-83). Recognizing
that she is trapped by this dynamic, Helga flees. This circumstantial limbo has emotional consequences for Helga. From this perspective, the “problem” is not Helga but the world she is forced to inhabit. As Labbé writes “At the intersection of race, gender, and class within the context of modernism, Larsen's characters are doomed to inhabit the margins—ghostlike—constantly betwixt and between worlds” (90). To understand Helga’s emotional state as the result of the relationship between her context and her identity as a black or interracial woman is to cast Helga as a victim of circumstance.

In that Helga’s pride is authentic pride, the dignified sense of self worth necessary for her agency, her status as a victim of circumstance is reinforced, and Christian thinking is victimizing. The pride necessary for selfhood is, via Christianity, the cause of Helga’s guilt and shame. On this level, *Quicksand* understands Helga to be trapped by Christianity on two related but distinct levels. First, from a political perspective as discussed earlier, it is in the Christian community of Naxos that Helga is unable to have the authentic pride necessary for selfhood without also become culpable. Christian thinking is a politically oppressive force exerted against black or biracial women like Helga. Second, from a more philosophical perspective, Christian thinking is responsible for the very idea that agency implies culpability. While in Christian discourse, pride is a sin, *Quicksand* shows Helga’s pride to be positive, even necessary, to a healthy sense of her self. Because of Christianity, pride is not a virtue as it could otherwise be, for the very pride necessary for the agency of fully realized selfhood brings with it the guilt of culpability. In this sense, Christianity is clearly at fault for casting necessary pride as a sin, for making people feel guilty for pursing agency. In support of this reading is the fact that the novel opens with the emotional experience of the Christian fall: At first, Helga is oblivious, innocent in a sense. But in order to develop her selfhood, she must accept responsibility. In pursuing agency,
she enters a world of shame and guilt. She remains driven by these emotions to the novel’s tragic end. Thus, the logic of the novel is that because of Christianity, Helga cannot achieve selfhood without guilt, is always already shamed, and cannot have both her necessary authentic pride and participate in community.

Yet a fuller consideration of pride shows that the presentation of Christianity in *Quicksand* is not unequivocal. If Helga’s shamed and guilty life is hardly appealing, neither is the life of oblivious pride that is Helga’s before her recognition of shame. No reading of the critique of Naxos in the opening episode suggests that Helga was contented there. Furthermore, I believe that in *Quicksand* Larsen's is ambivalent both about the extent to which Christian thinking is to blame for Helga’s situation because of her race and gender, and about whether Christian thinking is the cause of a relationship between agency and guilt, or whether it is simply an explanation of that relationship. The novel reveals this ambivalence by contesting the degree to which Helga’s inability to have a healthy sense of herself and participate in community is the result of systematic, institutional forces and the degree to which Helga is herself responsible.

Whereas the guilt that accompanies Helga’s pursuit of authentic pride indicates that her difficulty with self-conception is a result of a victimizing Christian society, Helga’s hubristic pride locates responsibility in her as an agent. Such pride is inherently troubling in terms of its effect on the proud subject’s relationship to others. Being unearned and overweening, Helga’s pride prevents her from valuing others appropriately. Rather than valuing others because she values herself, in valuing her self, Helga devalues others. Her inability to muster sympathy for the frailties of others is part of what isolates her. The people who surround Helga are not all oppressive, evil, bad, malevolent people, and there is a way in which Helga “ought” to be able to connect to these people without losing her self-hood, despite their imperfections because she is
not perfect either. Her pride precludes such connection. Therefore, Helga is not only an innocent victim but also responsible for her attitude towards others.

The dual nature of her pride is dramatically illustrated in Denmark, where pride causes Helga to be susceptible to flattery and leads to degradation but also comes to her rescue. Staying with her aunt and uncle, who use her as a kind of cultural capital, Helga is to serve as a lure for fashionable Danish portrait painter Axel Olsen with her exotic beauty. She immediately realizes that, to those around her, she is “[a] decoration. A curio. A peacock” (160). Yet she participates in the performance, even enjoying it: “she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. Against the solid background of [her uncle] Herr Dahl's wealth and generosity she submitted to her aunt's arrangement of her life to one end, the amusing one of being noticed and flattered” (163). Her pride in her beauty and desire to receive attention means that she is willing to serve as an object of desire for others. For a time, she is happy with this way of life because it feeds her pride: the experience is “intensely pleasant to her; it gratified her augmented sense of self-importance” (163). In contrast, thinking of her past in America undermines her pride because of its association with shame: “Never could she recall the shames and often the absolute horrors of the black man's existence in America without the quickening of her heart's beating and a sensation of disturbing nausea” (181). To think of life in America is “too humiliating, too disturbing” and she avoids such memories (165). In choosing pride over recognition of the shame that is forced upon her, Helga is unable to recognize the folly to which she is succumbing. Her pride delays her recognition of the insidiousness of the exoticization and objectification that are her lot in her new world.

In her second year in Denmark, Helga becomes increasingly dissatisfied, and eventually, she recognizes that she is being degraded. At this point, her recognition of pride and shame
together keep her from accepting the view that others have of her as an object. At a performance with Olsen, watching “the cavorting Negroes on the stage,” Helga “felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget” (183). In reflection, Helga comes to the realization that she has not in fact been able to keep that “something” successfully “hidden” from those around her, and that the admiring attention she has received is the very objectifying exoticization that the performers are receiving: “it became quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had?” (184). Recognizing her shame, the truth of the way she has been treated, she feels shame.

At this point in the narrative, Olsen proposes marriage to Helga. Prior to this, she had believed that “her origin a little repelled him,” and “mordantly personal pride and sensitiveness” had prevented her from pursuing a more intimate relationship (186). Olsen had previously insulted her by suggesting “something less—and easier” than marriage (186-187), and feigning unawareness of his insult, she had continued to take advantage of his attention. In this regard, her pride protected her from Olsen's interests. Is this a triumph of Helga's pride, an indication of her ability to maintain her dignity and make use of a man who has sought to use her, or is it a further degradation motivated by her proud desire to be “envied by others” because she is in Olsen's company? (187).

Although her desire to be envied suggests that she is still susceptible to pride, she is on the way to asserting her dignity. She begins to think of returning to America, a land previously associated only with a shame she sought to forget. When Olsen proposes, “where before she would have been pleased and proud … , she was now truly surprised” (189). He admits his prior
insult, compounding it in proposal that is itself insulting. He explains that he “cannot hold out against the deliberate lure” that is Helga (192), and tells her that marriage to her will be “an experience” (193). When she responds by moving away from him with “something suddenly wild in her face and manner,” he goes further: “you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I” (193-194). She realizes that she will “pay” for her rejection of him, and wonders whether the price will be “all that she'd had,” all the flattery, attention, and happiness (195). Nevertheless, she asserts that she is “not for sale” (195). In explaining her rejection, she suggests that Olsen might “come to be ashamed” of her should they marry. This phrasing reinforces the positive role of Helga’s pride, which motivates her rejection of Olsen’s degrading offer of a marriage that would secure her access to beautiful things and envious attention (196). At last, Helga's dignified pride has manifested itself and prevented her from being the “prostitute” Olsen takes her to be. Rather than embracing the objectification of her role, she refuses it. This refusal at least in part precipitates her departure from Denmark. As she leaves, she acknowledges that the country has “given her so much, of pride, of happiness, of wealth, and of beauty,” a reflection that suggests that her time in Denmark has fostered in her a sense of the positive pride of self-worth while also referencing the very things—wealth and beauty—that she loves almost enough to allow herself to be utterly degraded (209). Thus this episode presents Helga’s pride as both healthy and positive, and as the cause of her degradation.

An analysis of *Quicksand*’s presentation of Helga’s pride, shame, and guilt indicates the novel’s ambivalence regarding her level of responsibility. The novel depicts Helga as a victim of repression and shame who, because of her circumstances, cannot attain dignified pride without being an outcast; it also depicts her as a guilty and responsible subject, beset by the temptation of
a pride that undermines rather than enables her selfhood. Hubristic pride and shame are counterparts in that both are unwarranted, whereas authentic pride and guilt are counterparts as warranted or earned emotions. Helga’s ability to have earned pride brings with it the ability to have earned guilt. Because in my reading of Quicksand, the novel depicts this understanding of pride, shame, and guilt, Helga must be guilty, even though she is also a victim whose experience of shame is central to the novel.

The nuances of pride, shame, and guilt in Quicksand show that the novel is part of a conversation regarding how responsible a victim of circumstance can be. This is a question with theological significance, particularly with regard to Calvinism. In Douglas’s analysis, Calvinist theology is of greater interest to white than black moderns because of the emphasis it places on inherent sin. She explains, “Calvinism, with its emphasis on preordained sin, did not speak to black Americans as forcibly as it did to white ones; the sins of the nation did not lie at their door” (92). I believe, however, that Calvinism does speak to the black American experience, as discussed in chapter 1 with regard to Jarena Lee’s narrative. In my analysis, Larsen too addresses an important aspect of Calvinism. White moderns may inherit the sin of slavery, as Douglas suggests, but the question of how inhered sin can be laid at the door of those without agency is particularly applicable to the black American experience. That theologically weighted question is embedded within Quicksand as it is in Lee’s narrative. Whereas Lee, an avowed believer in Christianity, engages directly with the theological significance of the question and shows how a victim can also be a sinner, Quicksand, the work of an avowed atheist, makes a less clear contribution. The novel both casts Helga as a victim of the sovereign God of Calvinism, and thus as not responsible for her circumstances, and explores Helga’s agency and responsibility despite those circumstances. Larsen’s contribution is Helga’s life experience, which concretizes a
question that is deeply theological and at the heart of much controversy surrounding Calvinist
theology: If people don’t have any choice, any agency, how can they have any responsibility?

I believe that Larsen is more interested in asking this question than in answering it. In
*Quicksand*, she explores blaming the concept of a sovereign God for the ills of society. But her
vision as expressed in the novel is too ambivalent to commit to the clarity of this thinking, which
minimizes individual agency and responsibility as Calvinism has the potential to do. Naturalism
shares this potential. Rather than committing to a vision in which individuals are objects, victims
of a Calvinist sovereign God or the immutable forces of a society shaped by the concept of God,*
*Quicksand* indicates an ambivalent vision.

The novel explores two quite different understandings of the role of the Christian story.
One blames Christianity, identifying it as the cause of a troubling relationship between agency
and responsibility that complicates Helga’s status as a victim, while the other understands the
Christian story as an explanation rather than a cause. *Quicksand* seems to accept that Helga
cannot be simply a victim of shame if she is to be allowed to have the agency she must have as a
human being. The novel thus illustrates a paradoxical empowerment: In order for Helga to be a
fully realized subject, she has to have the opportunity to be guilty. This understanding of the
human condition is aligned with the Christian narrative’s understanding of humanity as
responsible agents, guilty by virtue of always already having chosen sin through pride. Through
its overt critique of Christianity, the novel situates the blame for this situation in Christian
thinking. Thus the novel presents Christian thinking as fundamentally disempowering and
oppressive because it refuses to allow full subjecthood without guilt. Here, the paradox of
empowerment and guilt, of responsibility and subjecthood, is caused by Christianity. Yet the
emotional logic of pride, shame, and guilt in the novel suggests ambivalence on this point. Helga
is a complex individual—a victim and a perpetrator. She is not merely an object to be acted upon by others, but is capable of wrongdoing.

Conversion and capitulation?
At Naxos, Helga believes that she can either leave or be made over by her community. First, she tries leaving. When her first flight does not work, she keeps moving from one place to the next, an approach that does not liberate her. Eventually, in the concluding section of the novel, she tries something new. In the end, she might seem to have made the choice to be made over: she sacrifices herself to become part of a community. Understood in this way, the conclusion undercuts my reading of the first episodes. Focusing on the novel’s emotional logic, however, suggests a different approach to the conclusion. In my reading of the conclusion, Quicksand, explores a third choice, one Helga implicitly disregards at Naxos: She can seek to influence the community.

Helga’s potential capitulation begins with her return to New York after rejecting Olsen. Soon thereafter, she converts to Christianity. In so doing, she seems to turn her back on the pursuit of selfhood in which she has long been engaged. One hymn sung in the church at which she converts makes this point explicit. The hymn includes a progressive refrain of the self’s response to God. In the first refrain, the proud self and responds to God, “All of self and none of Thee.” The next response is, “Some of self and some of Thee.” The final response is, “Less of self and more of Thee” (249). This hymn clearly opposes “self” and God. If someone is too invested in herself, she will reject God; hence belief in God means less commitment to the self. In converting, Helga implicitly says “Less of self and more of Thee.”
The incident that precipitates Helga’s conversion is her humiliation at the hands of Dr. Anderson, the one-time head of Naxos who has now married Helga’s friend Ann. Meeting in a hallway at a party, Helga and Dr. Anderson kiss passionately. Helga, expecting and desiring that his suggestion that they meet is the initiation of an affair, is shocked when at the meeting, he apologizes for the kiss instead. Helga is crushed by the “sure knowledge that she had made a fool of herself” (244-245). Her pride stung, she attempts to escape the feeling by taking a long walk in a storm. Wet, exhausted, and hungry, she ends up at a storefront church. The symbolism is obvious enough: people turn to religion because of desperation.

This is not a fashionable church, but against Helga’s will, she is enthralled. The church is filled with “wild, ecstatic fury” (251). People are “swaying and clapping their hands, shouting and stamping their feet” to “frankly irreverent” music (250). Unlike the previous churchgoers Helga has encountered, these welcome, attend to, and pray for her (248-252). At first, she barely notices what is going on around her. She becomes “contemptuous” and “entertained” before becoming horrified, but even the “horror” keeps her from leaving (252-253). Conversion is something that happens to Helga. Against her will, her detachment and revulsion give way: “a curious influence penetrated her” and, weak due to not having eaten enough, she cannot “escape” (253). This language invites Lackey’s understanding of Helga’s conversion as a rape. What is significant for my purposes is the emphasis put on Helga’s extreme passivity and utter lack of choice. Falling in her weakness, she converts: “And in that moment she was lost—or saved” (254). Afterwards, she is “still half-hypnotized,” a description that emphasizes her lack of agency (257). A conversion could hardly be more passively depicted. Helga not only makes no decision to convert—she does not even think about such a possibility—but she converts against her own active attempt to flee. From a theological perspective, the vision of conversion depicted here is
fully committed to a sovereign God who saves and damns according to his pleasure, and the idea of free will in choosing to turn to God has no place. In this scene, Helga seems to be at the mercy of a God she will soon cease to believe in. Though Helga’s conversion is against her will, and though she rejects God later, her conversion is in some sense irrevocable.

Helga’s conversion may be unconscious and unwilling, but she follows it up with a deliberate choice to pursue marriage to the preacher, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, who walks her safely home following her conversion. Helga tried pursing self-definition, at the expense of community and connections. This path did not bring her fulfillment. Now, she tries the other alternative: acquiescence through marriage. Reflecting on her choice to marry, she characterizes it as “a chance at stability, at permanent happiness, that she meant to take” (260). At this point, though she is hopeful that her new God will watch out for her, she also resolves to marry: “She meant, however, for once in her life to be practical. So she would make sure of both things, God and man” (260). The connection between marriage and conversion is evident here.

In “‘A Loveless, Barren, Hopeless Western Marriage:’ Spiritual Infidelity in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Alice Walker,” Whitted, observing that Christianity and marriage are intertwined in *Quicksand*, writes that the “intersection of marriage and religion in Larsen’s narrative and, specifically, the means through which the protagonist’s unwillingness to abide by the conventions of the former (marital institutions) signal an aversion to the customs of the latter (religious institutions)” (83). If, as Whitted understands it, refusing marriage is an indication of rejection of Christianity, then Helga’s pursuit of marriage indicates acceptance of it. Indeed, Helga’s “lack of acquiescence” is enacted in her refusals to marry. Breaking her engagement with James Vayle upon leaving Naxos and turning down Olsen’s proposal in Denmark are among her most self-defining actions. Her acquiescence must therefore take the form of
marriage. Her marriage is an indication of her acquiescence, and it is no coincidence that this acquiescence is to a Christian preacher and thereby to Christian thinking.

For many critics, the conclusion of *Quicksand* is understood as a weakness of the novel and a sign of Larsen’s artistic failure. The limitations of Larsen’s political situation are typically held responsible for the conclusion’s failure. According to Deborah E. McDowell in her introduction to a joint edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, “Critics … have consistently criticized the endings of [Larsen’s] novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), which reveal her difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly” (xi). She notes that “Larsen shared this problem of unconvincing endings with her black female contemporaries, Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston” (xi). For McDowell, the “unearned and unsettling” quality of these conclusions is a result of the “demands of literary and social history” under which Larsen and others wrote (xi). McDowell sees political circumstances as calling for troubling, capitulatory endings of the novels of black female writers at this time.

Perhaps critics who see the conclusion as capitulatory expect *Quicksand* to be a tragedy because they understand the novel as a naturalist novel striving to show its heroine as a victim of her society. Or critics might interpret the novel’s conclusion as troubling or unsuccessful because of the powerful limiting circumstances under which its author wrote, circumstances that then serve to justify the interpretation of the conclusion as artistically failed. This is a particular kind of political reading supported by what *Quicksand* suggests is Larsen’s overt interest in showing the circumscribing power of Helga’s social situation. It is appropriate for the novel to bear witness to the realities Larsen presumably sought to reveal. Interpreting the conclusion as inconclusive and inexplicable yet inevitable because of the author’s situation allows critics to condemn *Quicksand*’s conclusion as artistically inferior while crediting her with inadvertently
triumphing by writing a novel that itself serves as a real-world argument in favor of the point made through the story about the power of circumstances. Yet the provocative, potentially failed and ambiguous conclusion is also an indication of tensions and ambivalence within *Quicksand*.

Read in terms of the emotional logic of the novel, the conclusion of the novel is capitulatory is less clear than it might seem. It is true that marriage as a capitulation to Christianity is the logical outcome of the novel’s exploration of the power of a malevolent Christian culture. If Helga is read as the victim of a naturalist novel, one particularly interested in Christianity as a negative cultural force, she has lost her will, and the conclusion is capitulatory. From this perspective, her emotional motivation is to assuage her guilt. She finally accepts that her pride, equated with her pursuit of agency, is something that she ought to feel guilty about. In response, she converts and marries in an attempt to assuage that guilt. The logical conclusion of her guilty realization that she does not want to “fit in,” to whatever degree it might or might not be misplaced, is an attempt to change her behavior to mitigate her sense of guilt.

Through her marriage, Helga chooses the acquiescence she has long refused, and sacrifices herself in approved Christian fashion. As Whitted writes of the self-sacrificial black woman, “the valorization of black women’s self-sacrifice” is “a notion propagated within communities of faith” (81). Indeed the other women in Helga’s new Christian community in the South seem to embrace self-sacrifice. Wall’s reading of *Quicksand*’s conclusion illustrates this view of Helga as self-sacrificial victim. She writes, “When it [Helga’s journey toward self discovery] ends with Helga mired in poverty and hopelessness, the victim seems willing to accept the blame” (96). In this reading, at the end of the novel Helga accepts her guilt and attempts to assuage it by sacrificing herself. Helga is condemned to death as a Christian woman, a death to which the logic of the novel seems to drive inexorably. From this perspective, it would
be fair to say that in *Quicksand* Christianity condemns black women to death. Pride, shame, and guilt are the end-point. The picture at the end of the novel is dark and hopeless, and Helga's acquiescence to marriage and Christianity is a dismal capitulation. She gives up on the pride necessary for selfhood. When Helga responds at last to the prodding of guilt, converts to Christianity and marries, she is dead—first to herself in losing her understanding of her identity, and then, soon enough, literally as well. If Helga accepts all responsibility for her problems and sacrifices herself in this way, her circumstances have triumphed over her and *Quicksand* is rightly understood as capitulatory.

Still, I believe that the emotional logic of the novel is more complex, such that Helga’s final move may be read as a resistant martyrdom. Helga is a guilty subject who recognizes her guilt, but she is also, perhaps more obviously, a shamed victim who has run out of options. The relationship between shame and guilt is, finally, not fully delineated, in the novel or out of it. Although at times shame and guilt can be neatly distinguished, as Burrus writes, “The work of historically minded philosophers of ethics suggests … that shame and guilt cannot be simply separated, much less opposed, in the analysis of either ancient or contemporary cultures” (6). *Quicksand* seems to come to the same conclusion. In Helga’s case, the inextricability of the emotional experiences of shame and guilt evident at the beginning of the novel remain. Whether her motivation in the final sections of the novel is to assuage guilt or embrace shame is not, finally, a question that the novel answers.

A reading of Helga’s decision to marry reveals that her marriage is at least not clearly attributable to guilt. Helga understands her decision to marry as a last desperate gamble for the happiness that her pursuit of agency has failed to provide. Recognizing the Reverent Mr. Pleasant Green’s susceptibility to her as an attractive woman, she begins to consider the
acquiescence of marriage in terms that indicate that her marriage, far from being an attempt to make up for the error of her ways, is a move that she makes because she feels that she has exhausted her other options. She is desperate and isolated, but even so, she sees the possibility of marriage as alarming: “After all, there was nothing to hold her back. Nobody to care. She stopped sharply, shocked at what she was on the verge of considering. Appalled at where it might lead her” (258). She pursues marriage in spite of this attitude because her only other option is a return to “the clear bareness of her own small life and being, from which happiness and serenity always faded just as they had shaped themselves” (259). Helga, bitter because in the past she has been able to attain things but not the elusive state of happiness she has long desired, sees marriage as her last best hope: “Things, she realized, hadn’t been, weren’t, enough for her. She’d have to have something else besides. It all came back to that old question of happiness. Surely this was it” (259). She asks herself, “Was it worth the risk? Could she take it? Was she able? Though what did it matter—now?” (260). Even when she asks these questions, her mind is already made up. Although she recognizes that “[t]here [is] … no getting around” the cost of attaining happiness and entertains a doubt of “her ability to retain, to bear, this happiness at such cost as she must pay for it,” she moves forward (259). Helga knows that her marriage is an acquiescence to the role established for her by a Christian society, and “she willingly, even eagerly, left the sins and temptations of New York behind her to, as [Rev. Green] put it, ‘labor in the vineyard of the Lord’ in the tiny Alabama town where he was pastor to a scattered and primitive flock” (263). Having no reason not to take the risk of attempting to seize happiness through the acquiescence she has long avoided, she gives up on her pursuit of agency and determines to marry.
Insofar as Helga remains motivated by shame during this time, she does not sacrifice herself through her marriage but engages in a resistant martyrdom. Shame drives her behavior throughout the novel, clearly motivating her repeated flights. Helga begins to accept her shame. If her departure from Denmark is both a flight from the shame she has experienced there, it is also a return to and acceptance of the shame forced upon her in America. Her desperate marriage, too, is a flight from shame, and an acceptance of the shame forced upon her. If she cannot achieve happiness by fleeing shame in pursuit of the authentic pride of selfhood, perhaps she can achieve happiness by giving herself up. Having struggled throughout the novel to develop agency, Helga’s decision to try another option can be understood as protesting the impossibility of the task of self-definition. Helga undertakes marriage not because she recognizes her past refusal as a mistake but because she realizes that her other option, continual flight, leaves her in isolated unhappiness. It does not work. Discovering that flight from shame is not a solution, she embraces this shame instead. The positive potential of such an embrace is central to Burrus’ work. She explains, “Perhaps that is the point: at its most productive, the performance of a shamed and shameless identity opens up hitherto closed spaces, challenges prevailing assumptions, and thereby creates new social and political possibilities” (43). Helga’s eventual acceptance of the shame that is forced upon her constitutes a challenge rather than a capitulation.

Even if Helga’s conversion and marriage are read as capitulatory, her final choices after her marriage has failed are—when understood as a response to shame—not indicative of self-sacrifice but as transcendent triumph. Helga’s attitude toward death as an act of revolt against a culture that places her in an untenable position constitutes a decision to embrace shame completely as a resistant move, introducing the possibility of transcendent embrace of shame. Soon after the birth of her short-lived third child, Helga, who is seriously ill in bed, rejects
Christianity: “With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself. She couldn’t she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew that He didn’t exist” (291). Recognizing Christianity as a delusion, she wonders, “How could ten million black fold credit when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction?” (292). Her primary concern, though, is for her children who will be forced to grow up despised in “this vicious, this hypocritical land” (292). Still extremely ill, she spends much time sleeping, and when she is told that her newborn has “closed his eyes and died,” she too rests, but she does not intend to give up: “On hearing it, Helga too had just closed her eyes. Not to die. She was convinced that before her there were years of living. Perhaps of happiness even. For a new idea had come to her” (293). At this point, Helga has the sense of optimism that is associated with her flights from situations that have disappointingly only brought her from one shame to another. She wants to live. She contemplates, concluding that Christian belief among black Americans is the fundamental reason for their problems (297). Helga makes a resistant choice that includes even the possibility of death. When her nurse says, “‘You’ve got to get strong, you know,’” Helga is “in full agreement. It seemed hundreds of years since she had been strong. And she would need strength. For in some way she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or –she would have to die” (298). Here, Helga understands even her potential death as a resistant move. Previously, she understood death to be something that would “reduce her … to unimportance and nothingness” (244). Now, she sees it as a choice of last resort. It is significant that she seeks to regain her strength. If all she wants to do is escape, she could try to die then and there. Instead, she wants to become strong so that she can act, even if that action is death.
This path is the path of a resistant agent, not a self-sacrificial victim. She will die if there is no other escape, because to return to her previous state is “Not to be borne. Again” (298). At this point, she recognizes the pattern of flight that she has been engaging in. She identifies the need to escape from a suffocating reality as much like what she felt at Naxos, in New York, and in Copenhagen (298-299). Her plan is to leave her husband and the impossible life she leads with him (299). She cannot, however, bear to leave her children (301). The challenge is “almost hopeless” (301). She holds on to the hope that she will be able to determine a feasible solution, but upon her recovery she becomes pregnant again. This information comes in the novel’s final sentence: “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (302). This ending is enigmatic, ambivalent. But given Helga’s resolution to die if necessary, the fact that, despite her hope, her situation has proven to be impossible makes her pregnancy sound like a death knell.

Larsen’s ambivalence results in a conclusion that has both capitulatory and resistant potential. As a guilty agent, Helga may be understood as triumphing over the very demands of selfhood through an embrace of the abjection of shame. This conclusion might be seen as an ironic send-up of Christian martyrdom, which is, like shame, foisted unevenly upon the powerless. The emotional logic of the novel, however, suggests that though Larsen resists the political power of Christianity, her understanding of human pride and earned guilt is aligned with that of Christianity, implying that even victims of society are guilty agents. This approach to Quicksand might suggest that the novel shows Larsen’s inability to fully escape Christian thinking, or it might suggest that Larsen accepts some aspects of Christianity’s understanding of “human nature” even though she is otherwise critical of Christianity and sees Christian thinking
as harmful. The first option focuses on the novel as a reflection of the religious climate of its time and place, and the second on the individual power of the author to comment upon that time and place. To whatever extent *Quicksand* has the potential to function as a critique rather than a reflection of its context, its vision of Christianity indicates conscious ambivalence.

**Conclusion**

My reading here implicitly counters politically-framed interpretations of the novel that can tend to condescend to Larsen. In Hutchinson’s view, “a popular consensus about race and identity” has been maintained “at the expense of her reputation—although, to be sure, this was sincerely intended as a compassionate gesture” (4). In her reading of *Quicksand*, Dorothy Stringer illustrates Hutchinson’s point. She reads Helga’s conversion, marriage, and childbearing as “acts of self-negation that reinstate the very sexual and racial oppression so assiduously denied by her earlier urban and middle-class existence” (19). This interpretation supports Stringer’s characterization of Larsen as a political failure due to “fatal lapses into conservatism” (4).

Stringer’s statement is particularly clear but her perspective is shared by many. My interest here is to provide not a definitive reading of the novel but an alternative one that approaches the novel in new terms. Reading *Quicksand* with attention to the complexity of the novel’s presentation of Christianity through attention to the nuances of pride, shame, and guilt, I have foregrounded an aspect of the novel’s complexity that has typically been overlooked. By illuminating ambivalence in an aspect of the novel that has been thought of as unequivocal, my approach suggests an atypical understanding of the novel’s ambiguous and provocative conclusion. In so doing, it works to balance a body of scholarship that has, by oversimplifying the presentation of Christianity in *Quicksand*, oversimplified that conclusion.
Conclusion: The Incomprehensibility of Christian Discourse

My aim with this project to illuminate aspects of texts that are lost when Christian discourse is read solely as a form of political discourse. By exploring the nuances of pride, shame, and guilt, I have suggested alternative readings to texts that have typically been understood in political terms. The readings I offer are not intended to be definitive, but rather to balance tendencies in the critical scholarship that privilege political concerns. Still, however successful my approach has been in enabling such readings, it is limited by Christian discourse’s persistent resistance to comprehension in the context of literary studies.

As I see it, the reason for this resistance is essentially two-fold. Christian discourse resists comprehension because as a discourse it both eliminates mystery and retains mystery as its core. As algebra writes a specific unknown as $x$ or $y$, Christian discourse takes the mystery and gives it a name, allowing for exploration and the development of what, within Christianity, constitutes knowledge about the unknown even without full understanding of God.

Christian discourse eliminates mystery in that it functions as a master narrative, a narrative that purports to explain all other narratives. For instance, if political discourse tends to hold that history is, as Jameson puts it, the “untranscendable horizon,” that is, the ultimate explanation, Christian discourse posits that God is beyond history (10). For Jameson, that “untranscendable horizon” is a Marxism, a particular understanding of history that Jameson sees as the perfect fusion of history and theory (14). This distinction between political and Christian discourse indicates the differing assumptions made within each discourse. The Jamesonian Marxist political discourse based on the assumption that history cannot be transcended is ill-suited to come to terms with aspects of Christian discourse, with its founding assumption of a
God beyond history. As a master narrative, the Christian story is not explanatory in terms of a master narrative that sees history as untranscendable. Because Christian discourse functions as explanatory but not explainable within the terms of discourses such as the political, Christian discourse puts itself beyond their explanatory power. Alluding to this quality of Christianity, Stanley Fish implicitly criticizes it for seeing itself as immune from “rational deliberation” (Fish, “One”). Christianity is based on assumptions that render aspects of it incomprehensible in the terms of other discourses with differing assumptions. Thus, being “immune” from other discourses because it posits an unexplainable God as the ultimate explanation, Christian discourse eliminates mystery.

This analysis echoes Ernest Rubinstein’s argument, addressed in my introduction, that religious discourse is not ambivalent enough to address literature (xiii). He writes that “literature … channels that quality [ambivalence] more easily than religion does,” suggesting that the “relationship between religion and literature, broadly conceived, is … ambivalent” and thus ill-suited to being read through the un-ambivalent lens of Christian discourse (xiii). As Rubinstein writes, literature can have a “sustained ambiguity that chastens the Christian hope to speak univocally” (7). Literary discourse is not one of unequivocal positions. It remains ambivalent even in its own terms, unlike Christian and political discourse, which make statements that, within their respective contexts, are unequivocal. As Rubinstein believes, in that Christianity eliminates mystery, it is not well-suited to attend to the ambivalences of literature. I provisionally accepted the view that Christian discourse eliminates mystery and is thus likely to both have a reductive effect and be unable to address the inherent ambivalence of literature. As a result, in order to avoid reducing literature to the state of being an illustration of a religious idea, I did not establish Christian discourse as a privileged lens.
Instead, I take on what I see as the eminently literary task of illuminating new aspects of Christian discourse through the use of the discourse of emotion. I have focused on literature regarding race, which is particularly likely to have been read in political terms. While, indeed, the personal is political, the political is also personal. Christianity as a cultural power, an institutional force, and a historical artifact is already well addressed in political terms. I have focused on illuminating Christianity as personal. In the context of American literature in which Christianity and race are prominent, a personal focus on the religious element of the text is new. In focusing on the nuances of pride, shame, and guilt, I have turned to emotional discourse in order to translate from the incomprehensible language of belief some of what I see as unaddressed in political language.

Although in this project I have provisionally accepted the idea that Christianity eliminates mystery and thus have not established a Christian lens, I see Christianity as retaining mystery at its core. Christianity may provide comprehension, but it is not the kind of comprehension that eliminates ambivalence. In my view, in that Christian discourse centers on mystery, it is eminently ambivalent and thus has an affinity with literature.

American Catholic fiction writer and critic Flannery O’Connor, whose selected nonfiction is not incidentally entitled *Mystery and Manners*, is a prominent proponent of this view, writing, “It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind. … The mystery … is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery” (124). A story works, in O’Connor’s analysis, when a character’s gesture “somehow [makes] contact with mystery” (111). Such a gesture is “unlike any other in the story” and, as O’Connor’s understanding of mystery is a Christian one, the gesture must “be on the anagogical
level, that is the level that has to do with Divine life and our participation in it” (111). For her, literary success depends on “contact” with the very mystery that is at the heart of Christian discourse. O’Connor’s interest in human participation means that the character’s crucial gesture must indicate human free will. She writes, “Even if he [the genuine novelist] writes about characters who are mostly unfree, it is the sudden free action, the open possibility, which he knows is the only thing capable of illuminating the picture and giving it life. So … it is the free act, the acceptance of grace particularly, that I always have my eye on as the thing which will make the story work” (115). This “acceptance of grace” is a mysterious and specifically Christian concept. O’Connor’s stories illustrate how her characters come to “accept their moment of grace” (112). While she does not indicate that all good stories must be about grace, this concept is central to her own work, and a character’s unique gesture, a free act that makes contact with divine mystery is necessary for literary success.

While this focus on mystery may create affinity between literary and Christian discourse, it also makes the intersection of these discourses particularly susceptible to incomprehensibility. Where the ambivalence of literature and the mystery of Christian discourse intersect, the interpretive choice seems to be between incomprehension and reduction. Total comprehension eliminates ambiguity. If rendered fully comprehensible, ambivalence will not signify as such but will be reduced to signifying unequivocally in a different discourse.

In a recent *The New York Times* article “Has Fiction Lost its Faith?” writer and editor Paul Elie contends that “Christian belief figures in literary fiction in our place and time … as something between a dead language and a hangover.” Although his focus is on the recent literary fiction, his analysis reflects my sense that, in the world of American literary academia, Christian discourse is difficult to address. In America today, according to Elie, “the Christian who was
born here is a stranger in a strange land.” In this post-Christian context, “if any patch of our
culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature.” His title asks “Is belief believable?” and
his answer is that, at least in the context of American literary fiction, it is not. He believes that
the “novel of belief [is] gone.” Instead of working to “make belief believable,” as O’Connor put
it, Elie sees today’s writers “writing fiction in which belief acts obscurely and inconclusively.”
Elie then turns to literary fiction in which belief figures, saying that, even in Marilynne
Robinson’s *Gilead*, which features “[t]he most emphatically Christian character in contemporary
American fiction,” belief is “set in the past, concerned with … clergy[men], … a family matter,
animated by social crisis.” Elie’s implication is that depicting belief in this way, literary fiction
ends with the question “Is belief believable?” when it ought to begin with that question.

It is worth asking what believable belief would look like in fiction. What would
characterizations that make belief believable consist of, and to whom ought the characterization
be believable? My sense is that the failure lies neither in bad writing nor in the unwillingness of
writers to take up the challenge of depicting belief; rather, it is inherent in the language of belief.
As Elie suggests when he refers to the language of belief as a “dead language” in literary fiction,
writing about Christian discourse in American literary studies is a translation project. As such, it
is not a simple matter of substituting one set of terms and ideas for another. The language and
ideas of Christian discourse cannot simply be stated in the terms of another discourse. The
unbelievability of belief is inextricable from the unbelievability of the language of belief. Where
Christian belief itself is baffling and off-putting, its language serves as an unpleasant reminder of
yesterday’s indulgence. The language of Christian belief is not simply unused in literary fiction
but, more importantly, un-useful except perhaps as an enigmatic symbol or warning. Those
concepts that religious language seeks to express are left unexpressed, or at least uncomprehended, even when religious discourse is used.

The most significant challenge for literary scholars in addressing Christian discourse is that it resists comprehensibility and thus remains unbelievable, centered on mystery. When Elie refers to this mystery, he makes what I take to be an unwarranted distinction. He identifies the problem as a lack of information about the characters’ beliefs. He writes of these characters: “[W]hen I close the books their beliefs remain a mystery. Not in the theological sense – a line going off the grid of cause and effect; a portal to the puzzle of existence. I just don’t know what they believe or how they came to believe it” (4). For all its apparent reason, this distinction misses a central point. It is surely not a coincidence that characters’ beliefs are a “mystery” when their beliefs concern what is “in the theological sense” a mystery. Insofar as beliefs are intrinsically “off the grid of cause and effect,” or in Fish’s words “exempt from rational deliberation,” they will resist rational comprehension.

Elie suggests that fiction that in order to make “belief believable,” novelists must do reveal two things: first, what characters believe and, second, how they came to believe it. Yet I doubt that knowing precisely what a character believes would in fact make Christian belief believable, given the centrality of mystery in Christian discourse.

While a creed can provide some insight into or explanation of belief, it cannot make belief fully comprehensible because belief pertains to what is, theologically, a mystery. The Book of Common Prayer, which includes services used in the Episcopal Church and widely accepted creeds of Christianity, includes the Nicean Creed, which provides a statement of belief that might seem to explain what its adherents believe. It begins: “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen” (358).
Beginning with beliefs about God the Father, it goes on to address specific beliefs about God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When it is repeated in a service by a congregation, the creed functions as an affirmation of faith. It also functions as an enumeration of what the believer believes, but its explanatory function is limited, as the next section illustrates: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God form true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father” (358). This statement is an attempt at explaining the Christian understanding of the trinity, the way in which God is both one and three (God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit). It says that Jesus is both the son and one with his father. Though the creed may clearly list such beliefs, the mysteriousness of the whole concept is arguably clearer than the concept itself.

I do not believe that a fictional character with a clearly stated list of beliefs works to make belief believable. Belief remains a mystery and does not become logically comprehensible, despite creedal statements. Such statements only serve to clarify within the context of Christian discourse and do not make belief believable in other discourses. It is not the enumeration of a character’s beliefs that could make belief believable in fiction. As I see it, Elie’s second point, that a novelist can make Christian belief more tangible by showing how a character came to believe, is far more compelling. A narrative account of how a character wrestles with faith can do more to make “belief believable” than any number of creedal statements, which as instances of Christian discourse, are only explanatory within a Christian context. I also see it as more compatible with the ambivalence of literature.

In my view, the question of what belief means and does, for individuals and within communities, is at the intersection of literature and Christianity. The ability of the discourse of emotion to illuminate interiority and its personal yet communal structure mean that it is a
discourse well-suited to explore this question. In Rubenstein’s terms, the discourse of emotion
“channels” the ambivalence of literature and the ambivalence of the “relationship between
religion and literature [which is] ambivalent” (xiii). The discourse of emotion is able to
illuminate the nuances and complexities of the intersection of Christian and literary discourse
and does not tend to reduce literary ambivalence to unequivocal significations of the central
point of the discourse of emotion. Insofar as both literary discourse and Christian discourse are
discourses of mystery, their intersection is not something to be comprehended but a mystery that,
in O’Connor’s words, “a novel … can only be asked to deepen” (115).¹⁸ Through the discourse
of emotion, I have in this project sought to reveal and explore the ambiguities and mysteries of
this intersection.

¹⁸ O’Connor’s statement refers to the mystery of human freedom, specifically the mystery of free will as it pertains
to Christian belief.
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