Salvaging Identity through Questioning Faith: Christian Women Writers and the 20th Century Church

Hannah Bell

The Church is often scrutinized for its patriarchal ideology. Specifically, women have had to negotiate their relationship with their faith when confronted with institutionalized limitations on their leadership, sexuality, and subjectivity. This project explores the relationship between women and the church in the twentieth century through the novels and memoirs of women writers who have a documented relationship with the Church. This project seeks to answer the questions: how do these women represent the church in their writings? And what is the significance of these representations? I approach these questions through the lenses of education, love and law, and cultural difference and assimilation.

Education

Both Muriel Spark and Mary McCarthy reflect on the importance of the encouragement they received at the Christian schools they attended. Engaging their memoirs, I consider how Spark and McCarthy construct their identities as writers through their religious experiences. In particular, I explore how Spark's conversion to Christianity and , in contrast, McCarthy's decision to break from the Church informed their understandings of themselves as well as the literature they produced.

Love and Law

In *The Color Purple* and *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, Alice Walker and Jeanette Winterson engage and reconstruct the Church's definitions of love and law. In both works, love and law are presented as competing concepts. The writers show how this binary understanding places limits on their female characters and the interpersonal relationships they pursue. Winterson and Walker deconstruct the Church's patriarchal ideologies in order to posit a symbiotic relationship between love and law that allows their characters to maintain their faith in God while disavowing its limitations.

Cultural Difference and Assimilation

Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker are both interested in telling stories of marginalized groups within American history. In *Tracks* Erdrich tells the story of Native Americans on a reservation in North Dakota and Walker's *The Color Purple* centers around African Americans in the south. These two novels explore the relationship between these marginalized groups and the Christian Church. They examine both negative and positive effects of the Church on the culture and specifically on women within these minority cultures.

This project engages a larger conversation about the relationship between women and the Church in the twentieth century that extends into our contemporary moment. My analysis speaks to the reality that women today experience as they come up against institutionalized boundaries that place limitations on their domestic, social, and professional lives.

I would like to thank Norwich University's Office of Academic Research for the opportunity to pursue my project and my mentor, Dr. Woodbury Tease.