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# Re-conceptualizing the Bible Belt : Southern spirituality in the novels of James Wilcox.

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RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE BIBLE BELT:  
SOUTHERN SPIRITUALITY IN THE NOVELS OF JAMES WILCOX

By

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B.A., University of Montevallo, 2007

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ABSTRACT

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE BIBLE BELT:  
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Ashton L. Moats

April 12, 2010

The following paper is a discussion of religious themes in the novels of James Wilcox, a contemporary Southern author. Through closely examining four of Wilcox's nine novels (along with excerpts from a few others), this project explores the ways in which Wilcox displays the postmodern state of contemporary Southern culture and its effects upon the religious climate of this region. Incorporating a number of literary and religious scholars, in addition to observing some of the ties between Wilcox and Flannery O'Connor, this thesis serves as both an introduction to an author who has not received a great deal of scholarly attention and an investigation of his notions of contemporary Southern Christianity and the ever-changing identity of the Bible Belt region.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tula Springs, Louisiana, is a quaint and obscure town just south of the Mississippi border, north of Lake Pontchartrain. Once a significant branch of the logging industry, the city has now become obsolete and offers little to draw in the outsider, save for a single, captive alligator—one of the town’s tourist attractions. And although this peculiar locale seems an unlikely setting for literary inspiration, James Wilcox sees it as just that—perhaps not so surprisingly, given that Tula Springs finds its origins in Wilcox’s imagination.

Wilcox, a Louisiana native and accomplished novelist, has received little of the scholarly acclaim that his body of work seems to merit. While scholars such as William Dowie, Charles Pastoor, Scott Romine, and Hugh Ruppensburg have made substantial contributions to a critical corpus, these few articles (only two of which have appeared within the last ten years) remain Wilcox’s only scholarly recognition. For this reason, I hope to create a project that will accomplish several goals: My first aim is to (re)introduce Wilcox into a discussion of contemporary Southern fiction and to demonstrate the points at which Wilcox’s conception of Southern culture converges with that of Flannery O’Connor, a significant influence on Wilcox’s work. I will also examine some of the central threads that intertwine to produce what John Lowe has described as the “oriental rugs” that are Wilcox’s intricate plots and to explore the many ways in which Wilcox’s renderings of the fictional Tula Springs reflect the realities of

contemporary Southern identity, including what I would call the cultural hybridity that has become so characteristic of this region. Perhaps most importantly, I will analyze the religious principles that permeate the lives and decisions of Wilcox's primary characters, who all attempt, in their own ways, to embrace Christian tradition as a means of normalizing themselves within Southern contexts; in fact, these characters' espousal of Christian morality in exchange for cultural acceptance is a central concern in Wilcox's artistic assessment of the modern day South. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate Wilcox's melding of perceived Southern backwardness with Southern Christianity—two uniquely interdependent aspects of Southern identity that have informed popular notions of the South but are not always accurate assessments. As Charles Reagan Wilson has observed, "A civic religious tradition has shaped a regional identity, tying together the cultures of Christianity and self-conscious 'Southernism,' sometimes causing Southerners to blur the lines between the two" (238). My project will attempt to establish Wilcox as a Southern author who

see[s] in the sometimes dramatic spiritual phenomena of the South glimpses of a spirituality that is an anchor in a global world that is connected but often anonymous, materialistic, superficial, and dysfunctional – a breeding ground for spiritual question, with the South a major spiritual landscape of imagination. (Wilson 252)

Through comically unhinged characters who, because of their Southern home, must reconcile their assumed Christian allegiance with an increasingly postmodern region, Wilcox provides his readers with a fresh perspective of the contemporary South—a South that cannot be adequately marked as distinctly Christian or unrefined.

Born in 1949, Wilcox spent the majority of his adolescence in Hammond, Louisiana. John Allison notes that Wilcox's "religious heritage is rife with tensions"

because he was “surrounded by Baptists” in the public schools he attended and because his parents subscribed to different denominations (469). His mother, Marie Wilcox, was a devoted member of the Roman Catholic Church and brought up her children in this tradition, while James H. Wilcox, his father, was Methodist. Wilcox published his first short story, “Mr. Ray,” in the January 1981 issue of *The New Yorker* and has gone on to publish several other short stories and nine novels, the most recent published in 2007. According to Allison, “Wilcox attributes his love for literature to his mother, an avid reader who encouraged her children to explore books” and “identifies [Flannery] O’Connor’s short stories as an influence on his writing, noting that they gave him the courage to write novels” (469).

Flannery O’Connor, in an essay entitled “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” writes, “The image of the South, in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged. The writer must wrestle with it, like Jacob with the angel, until he has extracted a blessing” (*MM* 198). Most would agree that O’Connor did, indeed, obtain her “blessing” in writing. She has long been praised for her mastery of dark humor and irony, both enhancing O’Connor’s already deep understanding of the South and its afflictions. Matchless in her creation of utterly depraved, yet almost sympathetic, characters, O’Connor designs an environment in which spiritual turmoil is consistently a central player in the lives (and deaths) of its inhabitants. The same could be said of Wilcox’s work, and this focus upon spirituality is, perhaps, these two writers’ strongest connection.

In another of her essays about Southern fiction, O’Connor muses, “I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-



haunted” (MM 44). And just as her stories are teeming with allusions to this Christian haunting, so are Wilcox’s novels, which portray a multitude of characters who, even in their diversity, engage in a common struggle with the South’s Christian ghosts. I do not wish to suggest that O’Connor and Wilcox are linked merely by their shared investments in Catholicism; while this parallel is significant, I see a broader correlation between the two authors, one that involves a wider scope of Southern spirituality. Wilcox, like O’Connor, displays an array of confused characters who all, regardless of their respective backgrounds, must come to realize their dependence upon/ standing with a higher power. In his insightful reading of Wilcox’s first novel, *Modern Baptists*, Charles Pastoor traces the “moments of grace” that are present throughout the book. The phrase, “moments of grace,” was coined by O’Connor in her discussion of her most famous short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (MM 112). O’Connor describes the expression as “some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies....The action or gesture...would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it” (MM 111). Pastoor maintains that “the characters in *Modern Baptists* experience such moments throughout the course of the novel...thus winning costly but meaningful victories” (212-13). However, this spiritual quality penetrates each of these writers’ works not only to yield profound meaning, but also to produce an effect for which both authors are known—comedy. And while O’Connor and Wilcox construct very different brands of humor, the means of this construction are similar, in that both authors depend upon the simultaneous declaration of and perplexity about religion that have characterized the South for many years.

Of course, one of the most significant elements of Wilcox's fiction to be considered in any discussion of the Southern identity that his work portrays is the town of Tula Springs itself—the backdrop against which we are able to understand Wilcox's depictions of Southern spirituality. In this project, I hope to more closely examine Tula Springs as a heterogeneous and postmodern landscape upon which Southern identity is simultaneously performed by outsiders and evaded by (some) natives. This concept is especially significant to my theoretical endeavors because it will allow me to explore the postmodern features of Tula Springs that are inextricably tied to Wilcox's engagement with religious themes and how they reflect a similar condition in the town's religious climate.

Wilcox consistently creates characters who are almost too realistic to be likable. One aspect of the main characters with which many Southern readers can empathize is a preoccupation with spiritual matters and, more specifically, religious affiliation. Wilcox takes on a number of religions and faiths in his novels. The title of his first novel (*Modern Baptists*) is enough to suggest, first, that its author is concerned with faith in some way and second, that the work will specifically address the Baptist denomination, as it certainly does. Oddly enough, *Modern Baptists* may sound like a familiar phrase, even to one who has never read Wilcox, because it is phonetically suggestive of the familiar collocation, *Southern Baptists*. And throughout this first novel, Wilcox questions the validity of either label, as neither (in the case of Tula Springs, at least) are titles for a group of genuine believers; rather, the "Baptists" of Tula Springs are most of all concerned with following (or not following) a moral code that is probably grounded more

in Southern tradition than in any religious text. So *Modern Baptists*, through its portrayal of Southern Christianity, ends up taking on questions about Southern identity.

Similarly, Wilcox's second novel, *North Gladiola* (1985), follows the spiritual journey of Ethyl Mae Coco, a middle-aged housewife who converted from the Baptist denomination to Catholicism when she married her Italian (and Catholic) husband and moved to Tula Springs from Mississippi. Throughout this novel, Ethyl Mae's identity depends upon two inextricably bound components—geographical origin and religious affiliation. These same essential identificatory elements can be traced through *Modern Baptists*, along with Wilcox's two most recent novels *Heavenly Days* (2003) and *Hunk City* (2007). For this reason, my thesis will focus primarily on these four novels, as they are the most pertinent to understanding Wilcox's religious characterization of the contemporary South.

Furthermore, all of Wilcox's novels seem to equate Christianity to a status symbol—a subject position that one must necessarily claim if he or she is to be culturally intelligible and accepted. For most of Wilcox's primary characters, to label oneself as *Christian* is inherent in their Southernness. And while some question their faith, obtaining a “true” Christian belief is still the final goal. Yet the terms of this faith, I will argue, often seem to be driven by a desire for social approval as opposed to a supernatural change of heart. For the characters of these novels, faith is not simply about hoping in a day when one will leave the material world and spend eternity with God in Heaven. Rather, the Christian faith becomes a means of maintaining an acceptable social status and avoiding the vague possibility of eternal punishment; hence, faith becomes an insurance policy of sorts.

By addressing the theme of religious capital that is so central to Wilcox's body of work, I hope to show a connection between the religious aspect of Southern identity and its supposed "otherness" in relation to the rest of the country. Within Wilcox's artistic framework, the Southern is inherently antithetical to sophistication and aesthetic taste. Of course, some characters resist this compartmentalization. One Tula Springs native (and expatriate), for instance, makes a habit of drinking martinis—a drink that one certainly does not associate with the rural South—in order to establish herself as a "cultured" figure; however, she is not able to completely separate herself from her Southernness because she drinks these martinis from a jelly glass (*Modern Baptists* 141).

Using examples such as this one, I will show that Wilcox's aesthetic seems, at least in part, to hinge upon this tension between Southern backwardness and non-Southern sophistication. The inhabitants of Tula Springs are constantly trying to reconcile their own Southernness with their grander life ambitions. But Wilcox vehemently resists any notion that Southerners are, by nature, unrefined; even his most simplistic characters entertain deep, philosophical questions and ideas. They are also not static in their identity, as they typically undergo profound transformations of self. This theme of identity change/ self-realization is, in fact, another crucial component of Wilcox's larger project, as it is not only significant for the individuals in his works, but also to defining (at least in a broad sense) Southern identity.

## CHAPTER I

### TULA SPRINGS, LA: WILCOX'S OWN YOKNAPATAWPHA COUNTY

Tula Springs, the setting for seven of Wilcox's nine novels, is obviously a key component to understanding Wilcox's work. As John Allison has noted, Tula Springs itself "becomes an important character" in the novels (471). For this reason, I feel that it is necessary to begin any extended discussion of Wilcox with a brief description of the town's status as a Southern space. I would think that any reader who has grown up in the contemporary rural South would, like me, find herself chuckling in affirmation upon reading Wilcox's first illustrations of his imaginary (though very much based on fact) setting, with its tiny assortment of local businesses scattered amongst abandoned buildings. Tula Springs's wasteland qualities contribute to Wilcox's portrayal of Southern identity as one that is lacking in culture, limited to a narrow and naïve conception of life—presumably a result of a restricted Christian (or at least "Christ-haunted") outlook. Even so, I hope to demonstrate it is precisely this assumption that Wilcox ends up dismantling in his tiny fictional town.

As one reads each new installment of the Tula Springs saga, one finds that the town is in a perpetual state of transition, amalgamating (or at least attempting to combine) the historical with the modern, the backward with the sophisticated. Scott Romine views Tula Springs as a town that

can...*only* be toured—that is to say, its heterogeneous spaces are attached to each other only as they are subjectively ‘practiced’ (in Certeau’s sense) by characters moving between and among them. The corollary of this is that Tula Springs uncannily reiterates the old maxim that in folk tales there is no such thing as just a path. (180, emphasis original)

Similarly, Hugh Ruppersburg explains that Tula Springs is a place that “has lost the sense of community that once might have given its citizens a feeling of place and identity. The characters of...Wilcox’s...novels have no central point to turn to. This is his major theme: the search of the citizens of Tula Springs for purpose and meaning in a world where neither exists” (35-6). Both Romine and Ruppersburg extract a very postmodern view of Wilcox’s imaginary town, and we will see why this is a valid reading as we further explore the city of Tula Springs and these scholars’ interpretations of it. But, even more important for the discussion at hand, the postmodern features of Tula Springs are also inextricably tied to Wilcox’s engagement with religious themes because of the fact that the same postmodernity is reflected in the arbitrary religiosity displayed in many of his major characters as they participate in an ongoing struggle between their proclaimed Christian status and the contradictory secular practicalities of their lives.

Tula Springs is, in many ways, the quintessential small, Southern town of the late twentieth-century. Our initial introduction to Wilcox’s fictional world at the beginning of *Modern Baptists* depicts a town that has few amenities to offer aside from the Sonny Boy Bargain Store, which appears to be one of the only establishments with lights on after dark—“to discourage burglars” (8). Wilcox’s subsequent description of the setting further demonstrates Tula Springs’s bareness and illustrates a picture of what one might expect to find in such a place:

Next to Sonny Boy was a tin-roofed Laundromat, then three empty buildings, one of which—the old wooden hotel built by the lumber company—had a sign

promising that it would soon be the home of JoJo's Health Food Emporium (the sign had been promising that for the past two years). Ajax Feed and Seed, across the alley from the hotel, had all sorts of signs painted right on the cinder blocks in letters that dripped...and if you looked hard, you could see underneath a coat of whitewash, Suck Eggs. After Ajax was a Western Auto and a shoe store that never had the size you wanted. Then came Iota's Poboys, a shack no bigger than a tollbooth on the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. Finally there was City Hall, the nicest building in Tula Springs. (8-9)

This passage, aside from simply listing the few resources that Tula Springs has to offer, invites its reader to imagine him or herself as a resident of the town by incorporating the conversational "you" and explaining the unique details of otherwise ordinary establishments. And the fact that one promise of added sophistication in the form of a health food store has not been met (and, we can be sure, will not be) implies that Tula Springs itself remains static, unlikely to ever offer a great deal more than a locally owned bargain store and a condemned City Hall. But while the initial picture of Tula Springs suggests its typical Southernness, it lacks the past-burdened conflicts that one might expect to find in a decidedly Southern text. Rather, the history of Tula Springs is somewhat precarious, even inconsequential. We learn that the original settlers of Tula Springs included many "Tories from Virginia and the Carolinas," and in 1810, "[f]or a short while...this strip of land...pledged allegiance to no one, not to the U.S. or Spain or even England" (a fact that "Mr. Pickens was not very proud of" because "it smacked of Communism") "Then," we're told, "as if Tories and traitors weren't bad enough, around the turn of the century the Illinois Central Railroad began colonizing these parishes with northerners, the shiftless kind that didn't have sense enough to stay where they belonged" (9). If this brief explanation of the town's origins is not substantial proof of the absence of historical intrigue, the fact that in *Hunk City*, an organization is willing to pay millions to obtain a building that will ultimately serve as a museum replicating the "first prison

ever built in the Florida Parishes” (6) that housed those who refused to “fight the Spanish” (102) should be enough evidence to verify that Tula Springs’s past is rather bland. Even so, the city seeks to attract outsiders through emphasizing its status as a Southern space. But as Romine points out in his exploration of Wilcox’s Southern terrain, Tula Springs is often nothing more than a pastiche of stereotypically Southern qualities.

Romine begins explaining his assertion by observing some of the eating establishments in Tula Springs and neighboring areas. He first mentions the Red Top Café, which offers its customers a taste of “not only the South (pickled pig’s feet), but Manhattan (the drink, not the clam chowder), New England (the clam chowder, and Germany (Wiener schnitzel) as well (Romine 179; *North Gladiola* 40).” He goes on to describe the Swamp Possum Resort, a Tula Springs landmark that Wilcox introduces in *Sort of Rich*. A humorous attempt at a tourist attraction, the resort is “located within the city limits on a parcel of land that contain[s] neither swamp nor opossums,” complete with a “zoo,” which “consist[s] of three languishing alligators, one spider monkey, five squirrels, two raccoons, and a nutria” (229). Of course, Wilcox tells us that, in spite of there being “nothing to do” at this spot (aside from visiting the zoo), “the advertising was so energetic...that word of mouth was effectively neutralized” and that Swamp Possum was able to attract “a steady stream of dazed-looking families who wandered fitfully in and out of the gift shop, the zoo” (229). The introduction of such a tourist site is especially appropriate in this particular novel because it is the first one with a central character who is not originally from Tula Springs. In fact, Gretchen Dambar is from New York and moves to Tula Springs in her forties when she marries one of the small town’s most successful investors, Frank Dambar. Over the course of the novel, Gretchen feels



like an outsider but is determined to make her new home in Tula Springs through her relationship with her husband. As the book opens, in fact, we find that Gretchen's comfort in her new surroundings depends solely on her connection with Frank: "Gretchen found that whenever she had doubts about the step she had taken, her faith was restored by mere physical contact. Then, the sense that she was nowhere that mattered, cut off from everything that was important, would dissolve—and even the Louisiana winter would seem less strange" (6). But as the story progresses, Gretchen finds that even this connection is not enough to dispel her feelings of estrangement—a realization that Wilcox represents through Gretchen's inability to navigate the spaces of Tula Springs. After mistakenly going in the wrong direction while driving to Frank's office, Gretchen is surprised at her inability to find her way: "Back in Tula Springs she nosed around, certain she could find her way without having to ask for help. After all, the place was so small, the population no larger than some apartment complexes in New York. Yet she soon found herself on streets she had never seen before" (104). Aside from proving that Gretchen has not, as she believes, become acclimated to her new "home" (and perhaps never will), this short passage also serves as a reminder that, regardless of its small size, Tula Springs can be just as perplexing to a seasoned big city dweller as New York itself.

Romine would suggest that this enigmatic quality is a result of Wilcox's "ironic mappings," which consist of "stylistic dissonance and spatial disorientation." He also argues that Wilcox "dwells in pastiche in order to restore parody, an effort that acquires a spatial analogue in the recurring desire of his characters to return home" (176). As support for this claim, Romine cites many Tula Springs residents' simultaneous attempts at cultural broadness and Southern charm. He claims that Wilcox's characters appear to

be constantly engaged in an effort to understand their relationship to their current abode in Tula Springs, whether they are lifetime citizens like Lou Jones (*Heavenly Days*), northern aliens like Gretchen Dambar (*Sort of Rich*), or resentful expatriates like Donna Lee Keely (*Modern Baptists*). But because “Tula Springs and the surrounding terrain are pock-marked with themed spaces and sites of commodified culture, some more compelling than others” (Romine 179), the task of defining one’s place in such a town becomes complicated. But before we can fully explore this tension, we must first examine some of the “themed spaces and sites of commodified culture” that appear in Wilcox’s Tula Springs novels.

Romine observes a number of examples in his essay, two of which are the restaurant and resort mentioned above. On the one hand, the Red Top Café, in addition to its Southern fare, attempts to pull in cuisine from other areas, thus bringing diversity to an otherwise sheltered community. Meanwhile, the Swamp Possum Resort markets itself as an authentic Southern experience, wielding its country charm to lure in unsuspecting tourists. In addition to these illustrations, Wilcox employs countless others, including a Starbucks inside the local Piggly Wiggly (*Hunk City* 6); an opera held in the St. Jude State College’s museum, which doubles as the venue for “livestock exhibitions, rodeos, and graduation exercises for local high schools” (*Modern Baptists* 44); and the town’s “local white elephant, a warehouse-like building that had once been a five-and-dime, then a John Deere showroom, a discount cafeteria for the aged, a pistol range, and a shoe city...[that] was now slated to be reincarnated as a Wild West mall that was supposed to revitalize the downtown area, luring shoppers away from the mall in Mississippi” (*North Gladiola* 181). Each of these peculiar “themed spaces” strives either to bring culture and

sophistication to the long-time residents of Tula Springs or attract outsiders to the area using a guise of authentic Southern appeal. However, they all come up short as “sites of commodified culture” because of a self-conscious attempt to transform Tula Springs into a genuinely Southern vacation spot and a place that appears the same as the rest of the non-Southern world. And the result of these efforts is, according to Romine, a “homeless world” (187), a place that “can *only* be toured” (180). Consequentially, Tula Springs, as a nowhere/everywhere space, deeply affects Wilcox’s characters who, trying to find, as Ruppensburg suggests, “purpose and meaning in a world where neither exists,” end up searching for that purpose in somewhat obvious spheres—namely, the religious and spiritual. And Wilcox shows us that the fruits of this pursuit are bound to and defined by the homeless state of Tula Springs and are often manifested in the form of more “themed spaces” throughout this small, Southern town. In other words, the postmodernity displayed in the spaces of Tula Springs is also reflected in its residents’ conceptions of religion (especially Christianity), which eventually take very tangible forms by the later novels in the series.

The idea of geography being inherently linked to spiritual questions is especially pertinent throughout Wilcox’s second novel, *North Gladiola*. We meet the main character, Mrs. Ethyl Mae Coco, at a point in her life when she has been married to her husband for over thirty years and is beginning to ponder the decisions that have brought her from her hometown of Manon, Mississippi to Tula Springs, Louisiana. From the book’s opening (told from a third person perspective limited to Ehtyl Mae), as “Mrs. Coco” ponders her premature decision to marry her husband, she reflects on “what it would have been like if that foolish seventeen-year-old hadn’t fallen in love with The

Italian, if she had stayed where she was loved and understood, among her own people, good Baptists who would have killed for her. Would life seem such a burden in Mississippi?" (4). This question pervades much of Mrs. Coco's story because, although she has been living in Tula Springs for many years, she does not consider herself to be at home there. And the fact that she clearly sees place and religion as interdependent components of self is not only evident in the question itself, but also in the fact that she converted to Catholicism when she married her Catholic husband and moved to Louisiana. Because of this perceived link between religion and home, Mrs. Coco's identity struggle (the focus of this book) is composed primarily of conflicts over faith and region. Throughout the novel, she simultaneously questions her faith and her situation in Louisiana because both represent parts of her former self that she has sacrificed as a result of her relocation. Of course there are Baptists in Tula Springs, but they are obviously not the same as the "good Baptists" who reside in Mississippi, where life might not "seem such a burden." It seems, then, that a new home requires a fairly drastic conversion because, to Mrs. Coco, place and faith go hand in hand. Of course, this notion reveals that Mrs. Coco's religious leanings have little to do with her actual beliefs and everything to do with her environment. For this reason, her "home" in Manon, Mississippi, while it seems to hold the lost part of herself with a genuine Baptist faith, actually reflects nothing more than a Baptist upbringing that is easily exchanged for Catholicism. In other words, while Mrs. Coco appears at first to be a true Mississippi Baptist parading as a Louisiana Catholic, she ends up finding that she doesn't actually "believe in anything" (59). Romine suggests that "Manon...brings order to an untidy terrain by locating home elsewhere, thus accounting for the condition of exile in the

present environment” (185). Mrs. Coco’s lack of a real home is especially apparent when, after an altercation with her husband, she declares that she is “going *home*...to Mississippi” where she will spend the “rest of [her] natural-born days among people who love [her] for what [she is]” (67, my emphasis). The implication here is that she is a non-Louisianan, non-Catholic, Mississippi Baptist. However, after spending a few days with her sister, Quailie, “the good Baptist” who “wouldn’t allow [alcohol] in her house” (71), Mrs. Coco “pack[s] up her Dart and head[s] *home*” to Tula Springs (74, my emphasis). Clearly, Mrs. Coco’s idea of home is ambiguous because, as Romine points out, by figuring herself as a representation of Manon, “Mrs. Coco is able to tell her life as a sense-making story starring herself as the tragic victim of dislocation, beset on all sides by ungrateful children, a husband with a slanderous disregard for Mississippi, and a poignant lack of good Baptists who would have killed for her” (185). That is to say, Mrs. Coco, in order to resolve her identity crisis, must locate home wherever she is not because there is no place that she can truly call “home.” Mrs. Coco must learn what another character in *North Gladiola* discovers in his musings about tourism (the topic of his dissertation): “[I]f everywhere was dependent for its identity, its sign, on somewhere it was not, then one ended up with no actual ‘here’ at all, only a perilous semantic obfuscation of ‘there’” (98). At the same time, she also realizes that, just as she lacks a physical place to call “home,” her assumed genuine faith is also absent—a mirage formed by her mistaken ideas of belief and place.

While *North Gladiola* provides us with an example of how the ambivalent spaces of Tula Springs affect religion and spirituality on the individual level, Wilcox’s later novels indicate that the misconceptions about identity, faith, and place have, as I mention

earlier, taken on a more material form, creating more “themed spaces.” This becomes most apparent in *Heavenly Days*, which follows the life of Lou Jones, an upper-class, middle-aged woman with a Ph.D. in music. Lou’s marriage is unconventional, as she and her husband live in separate houses but insist that their marriage is completely healthy. But perhaps the most unusual thing about Lou Jones is her place of employment; Lou is the receptionist at WaistWatch, a Christian “makeover franchise” housed in the “defunct railroad station that’s been tastefully renovated into Tula Springs’ prime office space” (9-10). With a motto that proclaims, “*Every day at WaistWatch is Christmas,*” (10) the fitness center educates its members in “shedding pounds for Jesus” and “letting Jesus throw out your old wardrobe” (12). The director of WaistWatch, Brother Moodie, “brings a blush to Lou’s cheeks” because of his “old-fashioned, Victorian” good looks. “Something about him amuses her, makes her feel vaguely tickled, glad that this throwback to a robust, unapologetic manhood is here on this planet, in this town, this railroad station” (52). And while Brother Moodie spends his time “disciplining” his aerobics classes (10) and “rapping for Jesus” (47), he appears to invite the advances of Lou and her friend, Grady. At one point, Lou recalls a scene during a particularly tumultuous time in her marriage when she had “broken down in Brother Moodie’s office”: “[s]he had asked Brother Moodie to help her, to take her in his arms, just to hold her. He had come out from behind his desk and pulled her close in a tender embrace. But when she began to press her lips against the mauve [workout suit], he took a step away. Gently, graciously, without actually saying it, he refused” (54). And when Lou ponders this moment of near-infidelity, she is unsure “whether she was rejected for morality’s sake, out of respect for the Ten Commandments emblazoned on the restroom door—or

whether she imply isn't attractive enough to be unfaithful" (55). This statement insinuates that Brother Moodie's resistance, even if it was "for morality's sake," would only have been maintained in order to appease a written notice and not a burdened conscience. But Brother Moodie's questionable spiritual sincerity appears to be analogous to the role of WaistWatch in Wilcox's analysis of Southern Christianity. In fact, Brother Moodie's perpetual mauve ensemble echoes the décor of WaistWatch itself; with its "mauve light over the door....[it] takes a while to adjust to the dim flesh tones that bathe the interior in a Lamaze-like womb" (24). This description suggests that WaistWatch is, in reality, as bland as its colorless interior and that, while it claims to motivate its members with the promises of Christ, the franchise is, in reality, a gimmick. In its attempt to merge the spiritual with the superficial, WaistWatch provides its clients with a convenient way to satisfy their vanity in the name of Jesus. Of course, as with Brother Moodie, there is little spiritual substance behind the appearance of genuine religious enthusiasm. When WaistWatch makes its return in Wilcox's last novel, *Hunk City*, it does so with a "huge plasticine cross, twenty feet high,...with WaistWatch emblazoned in neon across the top" (169). This flamboyant addition only reiterates the franchise's attempt to brand itself as a dual organization specializing in the sacred and the cosmetic. And I would argue that WaistWatch is a physical representation of the town's spiritual state, which is similarly contradictory. This is, perhaps, most apparent in the denominational conflicts that arise within Tula Springs and among its inhabitants.

Wilcox's Tula Springs novels all involve denominational issues that indicate of the state of Christianity in the contemporary American South. His first novel follows the quandaries of Carl Robert Pickens, a Southern Baptist whom, as he explains, "God's

weighed down with a heavy burden of morality, a real penetrating sense of right and wrong” (*MB* 136). The second documents the spiritual journey of Ethel Mae Coco, a Catholic convert (formerly Southern Baptist), while later novels display major characters with less conservative convictions, though Christian nonetheless. But regardless of the particular denomination being showcased in each of these books, Wilcox makes one facet of Southern religion abundantly clear: to be Christian is essential to social acceptance, but each person must also choose where his or her denominational allegiances lie. Of course, denominational differences are not unique to the South, but, in Tula Springs, the deciding factors that lead some to become Baptists and others to become Catholics are rarely doctrinal in nature. Rather, this decision is often made naively, based upon inherited generalizations, as in Burma Van Buren’s experience: “‘Mama and Daddy brought me up real strict. We had to believe the pope was the whore of Babylon. Only now, the older I get, the more sorry I feel for whores’” (*Hunk City* 165). In other cases, as is true of Mrs. Coco, one can simply marry into a church, even if it means making the leap from evangelical Protestantism to Catholicism. But Wilcox never gives readers a sense that his characters entertain deep doctrinal convictions. On the contrary, religious affiliation in Tula Springs is much akin to competition amongst various teams—all appear to be participating in the same sport, but are by no means equal in their strategies.

For many, especially those who do occupy strong doctrinal positions, this assessment of the divisions within Southern Christianity is troubling and even tragic. And while Wilcox may not be delighted over the fact of the petty rivalries among churches in the South, he makes use of it as one of the key elements of humor in his novels. One of the best examples of this comedic theme can be found in the musings of Mrs. Coco, the



protagonist of *North Gladiola*. Within the novel's first several pages, we find Mrs. Coco pondering her identification as Catholic and her decision to boycott her son's second wedding: "Mrs. Coco felt she had to put her foot down somewhere; either she was a Catholic or she wasn't. If she wasn't, why, then there was no reason for her sister, Quailie, to be furious at her for *quitting* the Baptists" (NG 7, my emphasis). While this bit of information comes from a supposedly omniscient third-person narrator, it is clear that these are the thoughts of Mrs. Coco herself. The humor here is in the fact that she views herself as having "quit...the Baptists," as one would quit a band or football team. And the fact that Mrs. Coco "felt she had to put her foot down somewhere" and choose to be Catholic or Baptist suggests that such a decision merely requires a strong will and not necessarily any moral or philosophical persuasion. In fact, later in the book, she blames her husband for the fact that she is a "bundle of nerves" because he "insist[s] on trampling upon all her *hard-earned* beliefs" (23, my emphasis). Again, we see that Mrs. Coco's Catholic convictions have been achieved through a determined effort to make herself a Catholic like her husband and not as a result of any qualms with Baptist doctrine. But she insists upon living up to her notion of a devout Catholic, even after she admits to herself and to the local priest, Father Fua, that she has some serious doubts:

I realized, Father, I'm not sure if I believe in anything. I mean, everything I thought I believed in, Jesus and Mary and heaven, love, all those things, I suddenly realized they were just words, they didn't mean a thing. Father, something is wrong with me. I just don't care anymore, I don't care about anybody or anything. I pretend to, I pretend to all the time, but deep down, I know I don't. I might as well be dead. (59)

This statement comes rather early in the novel, yet throughout the story, we still see a Mrs. Coco who strives to present herself as a woman of great faith, even when she appears to despise Christian teachings. But because she prides herself in being "the most

devoutly married Catholic in Tula Springs” (133), she must uphold her appearance as such. After all, she has forsaken her former Baptist identity and taken on that of a Catholic wife—a tolerable shift because at least she is not, like Duk-Soo (a fellow member of her string quartet, the Pro Arts), an existentialist (109).

The sentiment that any Christianity is better than none at all is present in each installment of Wilcox’s continuing Tula Springs story, but it is difficult to determine whether this exists solely for the purpose of adding humor or if there is a more serious element of social commentary. Wilcox is clearly a master of comedy, but as someone who was brought up in such a religiously tumultuous context, we can assume that the humor in these instances is not simply meant to give readers a good laugh; in fact, these situations are funny precisely because they represent (sometimes through exaggeration) a truth about Christianity in the South—that it is often nothing more than a chimera. For Mrs. Undine, attending a Christian church appears to be a matter of convenience: “Mrs. Undine held vague, Unitarian-like beliefs about a Life Force and worshiped, undisturbed, at an Episcopal church that she could get to without having to make any left turns. She worried a lot about cutting across traffic” (*MULR* 98). Mrs. Undine, who clearly does not believe in the traditional Trinitarian God of Christianity, must find the most viable alternative option, which will allow her to worship her “Life Force...undisturbed” because the Episcopalian church is at least a Christian one. Thus, Mrs. Undine maintains her appearance as a socially acceptable elderly woman although she does not necessarily accept Christian beliefs. The implication is that in the town of Tula Springs, those who perform Christianity through some form of corporate worship are normative, regardless of how far their own views deviate from the beliefs of their chosen denomination.

Perhaps because of this ideologically imposed obligation to be Christian, we find in Wilcox's novels characters who, as previously mentioned, profess their faith of choice without an admirable reason for doing so. Again, *Mrs. Undine's Living Room* presents us with a prime example of blind denominational competition, as we see the results of two minor characters' argument over their church's decisions in musical instruments: "[T]heir quarrel was over the new organ at the Baptist church. Vondra was trying to cut corners with an \$85,000 organ from a second-rate manufacturer, while Mr. Dambar was insisting on the best, a \$110,000 organ from Germany. Two people had already resigned from the congregation over this issue and become Methodists" (219). Here, Wilcox makes comedic use of the petty disputes that result in the disbanding of many Southern congregations, but he also reminds us of denominationalism's somewhat arbitrary nature by conjuring the ridiculous image of a few angry Baptists marching straight over to the Methodist church because of a musical budget concern. We can assume that the extreme points of departure between Baptist and Methodist beliefs and practices do not deter these Christians from switching sides because they hadn't put a great deal of consideration into the side they chose in the first place.

Speaking of her experience as a Unitarian Universalist living in the South, religious scholar Brenda Stewart notes the "alienation" that comes upon those who are not "conservative and/or fundamentalist Christians, political conservatives, and anti-intellectuals" (79). She goes on to observe, "Those who experience this alienation because they reject religion achieve at least superficial commonality with their Christian neighbors by affiliation with a religious institution—they too have a place to go on Sunday morning" (80). And I am suggesting that it is this same "superficial

commonality” that motivates many of Wilcox’s primary characters to attend their respective churches, regardless of personal beliefs. In this setting, professed Christianity, regardless of its integrity or flippancy, becomes a status symbol—a subject position that one must necessarily claim if he or she is to be culturally intelligible and accepted. And while many of Wilcox’s figures do appear to aspire to a more “true” Christian belief, the terms of their faith most often seem to be driven by a desire for social approval as opposed to a supernatural change of heart and hope for a new life in Heaven.

In this way, church involvement becomes a sort of social capital—even a commodity. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their discussion of religion in a consumer-driven society, explain, “One of the effects of embracing consumerism in the Christian tradition has been that it has become easier to view attendance at church as a lifestyle commodity rather than as an ethical response” (126). This idea of church participation as a “lifestyle commodity” certainly holds true for Wilcox’s characters, as I have shown in the previous examples. But this display of commodified religion in the town of Tula Springs, while it does satirize the state of Southern congregations, also celebrates a form of spirituality that goes beyond any denomination and grounds itself in a communal blessing outside of the church’s four walls and above the towering steeple. Wilcox’s most prominent characters may be dysfunctional in many ways, but they are all brought to the realization that they need other members in their community in order to survive in their sometimes mundane, sometimes chaotic town.

## CHAPTER II

### IMITATIONS OF FAITH

Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson explain their notion of “popular religion” as “the religion that surrounds us in our everyday lives; it is the ways that ordinary people use religion to make sense and give meaning to their lives, a religion more about bumper stickers than about philosophy and theology and less about the Bible than about religious tracts” (18). It is precisely this type of religion, I would argue, that we see in Wilcox’s work. But often in Wilcox’s novels, this display of popular religion manifests itself first in very material ways, only reaching a spiritual level when we closely examine the connections between Wilcox’s characters’ sense of authenticity in the physical realm and its translation to religious matters. Through understanding these links, we see Wilcox demonstrating a view of Southern identity that questions its supposedly inherent ties to Christianity.

The people of Tula Springs seem to have a preoccupation with the dichotomy between the real and the fake. Throughout Wilcox’s novels, an emphasis is placed upon what is genuine and what is merely an imitation. The opening paragraph of *Modern Baptists* tells us that Mr. Pickens will be serving his brother “mock turtle soup (canned—but Mr. Pickens didn’t tell his half brother it was canned, or mock)” (3). Even the clarification that F.X. is merely Mr. Pickens’ *half* brother reiterates a lack of authenticity that comes up time and again within the text of *Modern Baptists*. The next few scenes of

the book show Mr. Pickens's "imitation fur hood" (6) and Toinette's (Mr. Pickens's teenaged love interest) "failed frizzy redhead version of the elaborate Farrah Fawcett hairdo" (15), which both draw attention to the keen awareness of what is legitimate and what is just a synthetic attempt at the original. The significance of these allusions to a real/fake dichotomy might not be immediately apparent; however, one must first examine what exactly is real as opposed to what is fake and the connotations that each carries with it.

These dichotomies of real/fake, original/replication, and any other binarisms that surface in the simple details that these passages address are directly related to another dichotomy, which is that of sophistication versus simplicity or backwardness. Many characters in the novel seem to have a fear of being seen as deficient in sophistication or, as Mr. Pickens describes it, "class," which is "what he found lacking" in Burma, his co-worker (6). Perhaps one might say that it is Pickens who seems the most obsessive over keeping up appearances, as when the narrator relates the amusing instance in which Mr. Pickens' aversion to being seen as simple is revealed: "When the door chimes rang, he turned the channel to local news before seeing who it was" (38). Changing the channel from *The Three Stooges* to the news demonstrates, rather comically, a desire to be seen as cultured or well-informed. Donna Lee's "martini in a jelly class" (141) also seems to merge the two ends of the sophistication spectrum, conveying a sense that something—in this case, the martini—is out of place. This concept, too, is repeated constantly, in the run-down Hollywood Apartments, frozen veal patties (24), the plot for Toinette's make-believe rape of F.X. (94), and Christmas carols sung by Disney characters (226)—everything is strangely removed from its original context and contorted into something

altogether different. One thing to note is that there is always a “failed version” of the original. Hollywood is in California, not Louisiana; veal is served in expensive restaurants, not from a lonely man’s freezer; men rape women, not the opposite; Christmas carols are sung by choirs, not Disney’s mice. These, at least, are the presumptions that one would likely make from all of the seemingly misplaced items, through which the text is leading to what amounts to a cultural distinction that produces the absurdity behind a woman drinking a typically urban beverage from a typically rural beverage container. What is crucial to observe is that in most of these examples, the thing that is being imitated is typically seen as part of a refined urban taste or culture (with the exception of the Christmas carols, which attempt to create a religious experience), while what is being concealed is anything that connotes what is usually perceived as backwards and, more specifically, Southern. Anything that is not Southern is therefore privileged as superior to those items or qualities that are. What is Southern then becomes the Other in this system of binaries, both to itself and to the rest of the nation.

Perhaps this otherness is most readily accessible in the apparent isolation of the small Louisiana town. One scene that appears at first to be a humorous anecdote may prove to carry more weight than one might initially notice. Mrs. Wedge, the perfect picture of a stereotypical Southern elderly neighbor, interrupts Mr. Pickens’s interlude as a shoe salesman by asking him to burn a caterpillar tent out of her pecan tree. Because of the fact that this picture appears to be primarily a sketch of Southern humor, the description of the caterpillar tree seems out of place, in all of its darkness: “Cradled in a sticky, gauzelike pouch, hundreds of pale caterpillars writhed in a hellish tangle. They blackened and curled as he held the mop directly beneath them, until finally the tent

broke loose and drifted down” (76). One could account for the sinister language present within this depiction by noticing the similar situations of the caterpillar tent and Tula Springs itself. Both are, to many outsiders, seen as unwanted blemishes, in which the members are all trapped “in a hellish tangle.” Still, the caterpillar tent is in an anxious period of change, just as one finds Mr. Pickens to be, and just as Tula Springs itself is because of its unusual positioning within the Bible Belt. This progression from a minute caterpillar tent to the individual and finally to the culture is precisely the formula used to approach the issue of Southern identity in *Modern Baptists*.

Each of the characters of Tula Springs seems to represent some facet of Southern culture, whether it is blind adherence to Southern tradition, vehement rejection of what is perceived as customarily Southern, or somewhere in between the two. Donna Lee, for example, might be a portrayal of the latter of the two extremes, while her mother, Mrs. Keely, abides by what is perceived as a Southern way of life, which is by definition close-minded and naïve. She relays to Donna Lee what she has learned in her abnormal psychology class, which is “that everyone normal [is] really abnormal underneath it all,” and insists that she has “never had an abnormal thought in [her] life” (125). This statement, of course, comes from the same woman who claims that if she were on welfare, she “wouldn’t dream of anything but that unlabeled kind” of food (113), which is yet another example of the recurrent fixation on what is real and what is artificial. Mrs. Keely’s views represent both a conservative and presumably Baptist position, especially taken in light of Mr. Keely’s involvement in the men’s Bible study and Donna Lee’s disdain for her father’s group of Baptists. She observes, “The ones who are the worst racists are always quoting the Bible” (113). One must recognize that, in the context of the



novel, Donna Lee's contempt appears to be well-founded when one considers the people that are mentioned as part of the Bible study—the greedy Mr. Randy, along with Dr. Binwanger, who seems to be more concerned about how to skin a catfish than the teachings of the Old Testament. The picture that the Keely family and the Bible study provides is once again an example of a failed imitation of the genuine, thereby making the very idea of being a Baptist another Southern commodity. In the same way that Donna Lee needs to drink a martini in order to feel disassociated from her rural Southern roots, so do the inhabitants of Tula Springs need to claim the accepted denomination of the region in order to gain social approval. But the truth remains that Donna Lee is still drinking her martinis from a jelly glass, just as the town members are still only claiming to be Baptists, when the only thing that would define them as such is their clinging to rigid moral codes. Mr. Pickens, however, has a solution to this dilemma—the *modern* Baptist.

Although Mr. Pickens describes his prospective church as “modern,” his meditation on what the church would actually be yields a slightly different idea:

*His* Baptist church would be guided by reason and logic. Everyone could drink in moderation. Everyone could dance and pet as long as they were fifteen—well, maybe sixteen or seventeen. At thirty, if you still weren't married, you could sleep with someone, and it wouldn't be a sin—that is, as long as you loved that person. If you hit forty and were still single, you'd be eligible for adultery not being a sin, as long as no children's feelings got hurt and it was kept very discreet. (145)

It seems that Mr. Pickens' church would not be so much of a modern establishment as it would be a *postmodern* one, in the simple fact that his guidelines are arbitrarily assigned on an individual basis, calling for more of a relativistic view of issues such as premarital sex. Of course, to further analyze Mr. Pickens' qualms with the Baptist church as it is, one must first see the significance of his character progression. Mr. Pickens is, as Burma

describes him, “a man of high morals” (99), which she derives from the simple fact that Pickens is incapable of telling anything but the truth. For this reason, he decides that his calling must be to become a preacher; he explains to Burma, “There’s some people like me who God’s weighed down with a heavy burden of morality, a real penetrating sense of right and wrong. We just can’t escape it no matter how hard we try” (136). Mr. Pickens’ sense of entrapment by his supposed morality, however, is soon eliminated after a bizarre praying episode with Emmet. The relationship between Mr. Pickens and Emmet Orney (Burma’s fiancé) is an intriguing one, to say the least, because their interaction harbors a great deal of tension, almost seeming to form a sort of fusion between strict “Baptist” morals (such as Mr. Pickens’ obsession with telling the truth) and an implied homosexual connection. The scene of their fight has some strange allusions, recalling that as they “rolled over and over, struggling silently, fiercely, like Jacob and the man, the clouds so high above them melted, and the stars shone forth in hundred-carat glory” (224). The reference to Jacob’s wrestling with God (Genesis 32.24-29) suggests that Mr. Pickens is experiencing the same sort of new identification or rebirth, as the night sky seems to bless him in his struggle with Emmet. Perhaps the incident is not meant to imply any sort of homoerotic battle, but when one considers its pairing with the later scene of passion between F.X. and Donna Lee outside of the Christmas party, there seems to be further evidence to support the idea of a homosexual bond between Emmet and Pickens. The differentiating factor of the two instances is that Donna Lee and F.X. are consumed in “merciful darkness” (235), while Pickens and Emmet grapple beneath a sky of “hundred-carat glory.” The language not only suggests that Pickens receives a similar blessing to that of Jacob when he became Israel; rather, the episode could be hearkening

back to the metaphorical caterpillar's tent, which is an emblem of transformation, and even in the description of the "melted" clouds above, Pickens' "blessing" is linked to the fate of the cocoon. And, like Pickens himself, the town of Tula Springs cannot fully cling to its own understood identity, even holding fast to a tradition so seemingly stable as Baptist.

Interestingly, the name of the novel itself seems to make an attempt at replacing the original notion of the *Southern* Baptist with the idea of *modern* Baptist, but one can only find that neither modifier can adequately resolve the issue at hand—the attempt to incorporate such a denomination, a *faith* into a culture that has no place for such things. It is clear that Mrs. Keely's version of Baptist, which would be the Southern type, is not driven by a real faith, but by a legalistic tradition. In the same way, Mr. Pickens' adaptation of Baptist, the (post)modern Baptist, would have to be paired with a certain relativism that, by its definition, contradicts what was originally a faith which sought to be biblically defined. This is to say that the Baptist position and the postmodern condition cannot logically coexist within the same individual because they, by definition, contradict one another. As this inherent conflict becomes more apparent, Mr. Pickens loses "all faith in being modern, much less Baptist. The only parts of the Gospel that he believed in now were the bad parts. . . . The rest was nothing but a story" (207). Mr. Pickens' struggle of faith seems to go beyond the level of the individual and penetrate Southern culture itself. After all, if Baptist is merely a social commodity that Southerners like the ones who live in Tula Springs feel the need to possess, it is no wonder that the Bible Belt South would be in a state of identity crisis similar to that of Mr. Pickens—even to that of the caterpillar in its tent, awaiting its emergence as a new creature. If the perception of Baptist has

become to Southerners nothing more than a set of guidelines for social correctness and an ugly mark of extreme conservatism to any non-Southerners (or expatriates like Donna Lee), then the identity crisis no longer involves a faction of Christianity and whether or not to classify it as modern. Rather, the situation calls for a new identity altogether; just as Mr. Pickens is “sick to death of Bobby” (208) by the end of the novel and wishes simply to be addressed by his first name—Carl—the Bible Belt South must be renamed and no longer distinguished by a denomination to which it no longer conforms.

Wilcox’s most recent novel, *Hunk City*, brings many of these themes full circle through the self discovery of another primary character who comes to realize that her lifelong faith in Christ has only been a means of adapting to her social surroundings. The book reintroduces into its leading role one of the side characters from *Modern Baptists*—Burma Van Buren (formerly LaSteele). Burma is in her early sixties and fairly recently widowed as *Hunk City* begins. And although she is still employed at the same bargain store (now as assistant manager), the years have brought about some major changes. What was once Sonny Boy is now Redds Dollar Store, and Burma, a woman who had once been employed there out of necessity, is now worth around 3.6 million dollars. The change in Burma’s financial situation has come as a result of her deceased husband’s stroke of good luck, as we learn that he “had been a catfish farmer who won the Pick Twelve lottery” (4). But while Wilcox’s most recent portrayal of Tula Springs and its inhabitants looks quite different from earlier depictions, *Hunk City* also merges some major themes that run throughout previous novels. Burma Van Buren, as an unlikely millionaire widow who despises materialistic branding while also obsessing over her own idea of sophistication and Christianity, embodies some of Wilcox’s recurring concerns

about the authenticity of Southern culture as it is often perceived in relation to the rest of the country.

This question of authenticity presents itself within the first few pages of the novel and, in fact, pervades Burma's entire life. We learn early on that Burma lives at "Graceland II," which is "a replica of Elvis's house, only much bigger" (5). (The late Mr. Van Buren had apparently been an Elvis fan, which motivated him to spend a portion of his winnings on building a copy of the King's abode on his catfish farm.) But one of the major dilemmas that Burma must face during the course of this narrative is whether or not to sell her already copied dwelling to "AmStar Historic Trust," an organization who, Burma learns from her young accountant, hopes to transform Graceland II into a museum because of its location at a "historical site....the first prison ever built in the Florida Parishes" (6). Mr. Harper (Burma's accountant) relays the company's plans to "convert Graceland II into a museum and IMAX," to which Burma insists that she will not have her home made into a "fake prison" (7). And although Burma is literally surrounded by attempted imitations at apparently desirable originals, she cannot bring herself to enjoy such pleasures of wealth, even those authentic items—Tiffany lamps, Michael Kors "crocodile platform sandals," and Vera Wang plates; she is simply "tired of all the fancy names that [have] padded her life like two hundred pounds of unliposuctioned fat" (26). To Burma, both the replicas and originals that millions of dollars can buy are apparently nothing but frivolities that need to be disposed of. For this reason, she is content with vinyl tablecloths and plastic plates and would "give it [her money] all away to the poor," thus doing "what Jesus says" (123). But what she doesn't realize—something that Wilcox alerts his readers to time and again—is that her home is not the only counterfeit attempt

at an original referent; her ideas of Christian morality and generosity are also simulations created from her rejection of the Christianity which her parents taught her—another moral code that is only very loosely based on scripture and ultimately serves to aid politically conservative ideals. As in his other novels (especially *Modern Baptists*), Wilcox floods *Hunk City* with questions of authenticity, both on the physical and spiritual levels, thereby removing misplaced labels and creating a more honest (though, at times, exaggerated) portrayal of Southern identity.

Throughout *Hunk City*, Burma struggles to live according to her ideas of Christian morality, but is constantly hindered by herself and other characters, all with very different notions of the Christian life. Mr. Pickens, the man with whom Burma has been in love for years, is also a proclaiming Christian who has forgone his true Democratic leanings in order to win his current position as the Tula Springs “superintendent of Streets, Parks, and Sewers” (9). His faith, however, is not always firm because he, like Burma, is fed up with the hypocrisy of Tula Springs’s leading officials. Burma’s closest friend, Donna Lee Keely, on the other hand, is the town’s most successful divorce attorney and perhaps its loudest spokesperson against Christianity, holding weekly “Bible studies” in order to dismantle its teachings. Mrs. LaSteele, Burma’s mother, is a loyal First Baptist who finds Burma’s singleness to be an affront to her parenting: “The thought of having a daughter reach sixty and still not manage to reel in a husband was too much for Mrs. LaSteele. It reflected so badly on Burma’s upbringing” (9-10). These characters exhibit a desire to maintain certain appearances—to replicate their own ideals for themselves. As I have already mentioned, Mr. Pickens decides to run in his election as a Republican, even though he actually thinks of himself as a Democrat. In other words, he’s willing to

replicate those traits that are desirable to citizens of Tula Springs, even if it means switching political parties and attending prayer breakfasts at IHOP. Donna Lee appears at first to be the opposite of Bobby Pickens, but we soon learn that they share a desire for social acceptance; as Donna Lee contemplates her affair with a client's husband, she realizes that "her concern wasn't about professional impropriety itself. Rather, about the *appearance* of impropriety" (78, emphasis original). Finally, Mrs. LaSteele, like the others, insists upon being perceived as a "normal" Southern Baptist. In fact, we even learn that she "always kept the curtains open day and night so that the neighbors could see that nothing untoward was going on in *her* house. No, Mrs. LaSteele had nothing to hide, not a thing" (35, emphasis original). Through these characters, Wilcox demonstrates the power of cultural acceptability in a small Southern town. Regardless of their spiritual beliefs, they all live by a code of propriety that ultimately has nothing to do with obeying or rebelling against any Biblical authority. And while Wilcox may appear, at first, to position Burma as the one genuine believer amongst a crowd of humorous hypocrites, she too is finally exposed as another failed replica of sincere belief.

When we first meet Burma, she is a self-proclaimed Democrat and opposer of violence who practices her own unique brand of Christianity, rejecting her mother's twisted Baptist teachings. And while she tries to give her money to the poor and to anti-violence organizations, her friends are constantly trying to sway her to give to what they believe are worthy causes, whether it be Dr. Schine's "Center for the Elimination of Growth Hormone Research (CEGAR)" (16) or Donna Lee's campaign to have Mr. Pickens impeached from his position as the Tula Springs "superintendent of Streets, Parks, and Sewers" (9). Early on, we learn that Burma's idea of sincere Christianity

involves giving an African American customer five hundred dollars in change for a \$0.98 purchase (12-15) and practically begging a burglar to take all of her most expensive kitchen items (25-28). But even her charitable endeavors cannot mask the fact that Burma's faith is also a self-imposed burden, especially when it involves her sexual life. As she muses about her physical attraction towards the handsome Dr. Schine (her landscaper) and considers her guilt over the "bunny love" that she and her late husband had enjoyed so often, Burma feels regret for her religion: "Oh, if only she weren't a Christian, then she wouldn't have to worry so much about whether this bunning was the same as going all the way" (19). Here, Burma reveals her dismay at the disconnect between her real desires and simultaneous obligation to abide by (or at least attempt to obey) Biblical regulations. Of course, the fact that her thoughts include "if only she weren't a Christian" indicates that her faith is more of a culturally inflicted duty than a supernatural calling.

This truth about Burma becomes clearer near the end of *Hunk City*, when Wilcox introduces what appears to be a tangible symbol for Burma's faith in the form of a twelve-foot plastic cross. After Mr. Pickens has been impeached and divorced, he moves into Graceland II with Burma. When he is home alone one day, he sees a mysterious man (who turns out to be Edsell, Mr. Pickens's former assistant and town teeth flosser) planting the cross on Burma's property. Fearing that "it must be the Klan," Mr. Pickens covers the doorknob to the mansion with Godzilla Glue, hurries inside and locks the door behind him (138-9). As a result of this incident, Edsell ends up suing Burma because of the fact that when he tried to wash his hands in her catfish pond, he fell in and ingested some kind of amoeba that apparently "set up shop in his intestines and won't leave for



nothing because of the raw sewage in the pond” (142). Thinking that her client couldn’t possibly have requested that Edsell plant this cross on her property, Donna Lee plans to countersue for defacement of property. But when she learns that Burma has actually purchased the cross and asked Edsell to install it, Donna Lee questions Burma’s sanity. Burma replies, ““What’s wrong with that? In case you forgot, I *am* a Christian”” and goes on to explain, “ ‘It’s just plastic,...from WalMark. Real lightweight, hollow, and easy to assemble. If Bobby had any sense, he could’ve seen it’d never burn”” (143, emphasis original). Burma’s description of the cross seems at first to be fairly insignificant. But the presence of such a powerful symbol of the Christian faith in “lightweight” and “hollow” form has deeper implications for the state of Burma’s own spirituality.

Like the cheap plastic cross, her faith has also been “lightweight, hollow, and easy to assemble”—something that would, in fact, “never burn,” in a supernatural sense, because it is only an imitation of the real thing. Furthermore, the hollow cross serves as a demonstration of the ways in which Christianity is used in promoting any number of unrelated causes, and we can see this usage in how a number of characters view the cross. For Burma, it “meant that Graceland was a Death-Free Zone” (151). Apparently believing that Christianity and extreme right-wing politics must go hand in hand, Mr. Harper expresses his astonishment at Burma’s decorative decisions to Donna Lee: “[S]he [Burma] doesn’t believe in capital punishment. What the hell is she doing putting up a cross?” (149). Another character (Iman, a fiercely devout Catholic who becomes Donna Lee’s assistant) purports that the cross “was planted there to remind every citizen of Tula Springs that any form of birth control was condemned by God” (151). Clearly, this economical emblem of Christ’s sacrifice yields countless interpretations for the

residents of Tula Springs, and none of them appears to be even remotely related to the Biblical meaning of the Cross. Wilcox insinuates that the cross as an icon for citizens of this small Southern town has become nothing more than an empty lawn fixture that can represent whatever its beholder sees fit and has lost its connection to Christ, his life, and his teachings. But Wilcox does not necessarily appear to mourn this fact in his work. Rather, he brings his characters to the realization that their struggle to obey culturally imposed regulations (both in religion and propriety) have actually blinded them to the blessings that already fill their lives. Just as, at the end of *Modern Baptists*, Mr. Pickens finds his own mercy in the unlikely character of his brother F.X., Burma finds freedom from a heavy load of morality in a similarly unexpected source. As she walks the grounds of her estate, Burma examines the large white cross and has what can only be described as an epiphany:

From a rise bordering the largest catfish pond, she paused to survey the plastic cross Edsell had assembled. For some reason it was like seeing it for the first time. Already set, the sun yet managed to reflect some rays on a fleeting wisp of cirrus high above. In contrast to this tender glory the hollow plastic below seemed tacky as sin. (174)

As she continues on her walk, she notices an unfamiliar structure in the distance. She wonders at first if it is “a steeple there on the horizon” (174). She quickly discovers, however, that the supposed steeple is not a steeple at all, but a pagoda. The lines that close this particular section are especially intriguing:

The beams curved artlessly, without a hint of the maker. Richly textured, the cedar didn't seem treated at all. Yet it was smooth, dark as a blood stain. And as fragrant as if the wood had been freshly wounded.

A sweet anguish opened her arms. As she collapsed her great bulk of calories into its planks—forgetting all, every injustice, every desire, every last yam she should have eaten instead—the temple embraced her. (175).

We later discover that the pagoda is actually a gazebo—a “shrine” that Burma’s mother had built for herself, complete with an “altar” containing a picture of Mrs. LaSteele, with a “stick of incense, wafting up its reverence” beneath” (181). But Burma’s initial encounter with the gazebo indicates that in this simple structure, she is able to find rest from all of her exhausting attempts at living up to her own supposedly Christian standards and be “embraced” by the “temple.” Even the comparison of the cedar to a “blood stain” and a wound implies that it is in this metaphorical haven and not in the cross (the symbol that is typically associated with blood and sacrifice) that she is finally able to find peace with herself. While the “hollow plastic” of the cross which is supposed to represent Burma’s relentless loyalty to Christ appears to her “tacky as sin,” the gazebo is the place where she is finally able to lay down her burdens. The moment when Burma decides to let go of the plastic cross, the symbol of her allegiance to Christian doctrine, appears to be the moment when she finally receives her long-awaited freedom from a lifetime of professing a faith by which she cannot (or will not) fully abide. Like Mr. Pickens, Burma represents the confused state of religion and identity in the contemporary South.

CHAPTER III  
WILCOX'S "CHRIST-HAUNTED" FICTION

Visitors to my home town in Prattville, Alabama who are unaccustomed to Southern religiosity would probably be baffled by any number of religious displays within the city. One such spectacle, most often referred to as the "Cross Garden," is not even a mile from my parents' home on the same county road and has enjoyed a great deal of attention from out-of-town photographers. This landmark occupies two yards on either side of the street and is filled with wooden crosses and other structures proclaiming messages such as, "You Will DIE," "HELL IS HOT HOT HOT," and "JESUS SAVES." The man who began this massive collection on his property in 1976 (William Carlton Rice) passed away in 2004, but his garden remains intact, along with the rumors that surrounded this real-life Boo Radley figure. Even now, it's not uncommon to see a car pulled to the side of the road in front of the Rice property, its owner peering through the lens of a professional camera.

Prattville's other claim to fame can be seen as drivers leave the city heading north on I-65. A large and demanding billboard stands just a few miles past the last exit and has been there for the past fifteen years. Although the sign has undergone several cosmetic changes since the year that it was erected, its content remains the same. A stark white background underlies a red silhouette of a man with horns and a tail. He holds what appears to be a large scythe. Taken apart from the entire billboard, one might mistake this

figure for a lighthearted rendering of God's eternal enemy. But the sign's message quickly dispels any notion of humor; it reads, "GO TO CHURCH," in bold, black letters and warns beneath in red, "Or the **Devil** Will Get You!"

I mention these features from my own background because they share a common evangelical tactic that resonates in much of Wilcox's fiction—an appeal to fear. Both are meant to persuade viewers to repent and adhere to certain Christian standards by warning them of the punishment that awaits them if they reject such messages. Rice's cross garden is filled with reminders that Hell is, indeed "HOT HOT HOT," along with representations of the actions that will get one there. And the interstate warning sign is reminiscent of the Santa Claus legend that parents wield against naughty children around Christmas time, cautioning them to be "good" because Santa knows when you're "naughty or nice" and gives only lumps of coal to the former. While we rarely see such persuasive attempts in Wilcox's novels, we can certainly be aware of their presence because of the subtle implications of individual turmoil about death and the afterlife. Of course, these feelings are not unique to Southerners like those living in Tula Springs, but they certainly bring with them a great deal of cultural baggage that is not likely to appear on such a large scale elsewhere in the country. Such anxieties are further fueled for the native of Tula Springs (and, perhaps, the Southerner) by his "Christ-haunted" home. The fear that the Devil or something worse will, indeed, "get you" if you do not "go to church" is always lurking in the background, even if not spelled out on a billboard.

In Wilcox's work, this theme first manifests itself in the form of a general preoccupation with death, related through a number of primary characters. In the opening pages of *Modern Baptists*, we meet Mr. Pickens, who is plagued by what he believes to

be a “malignant” spot on his back that “looked like New Jersey” (23). However, he learns early in the novel that there has been a mistake at the doctor’s office and that his spot is actually benign—news to which he apparently has little response: “Here he was, knowing that he wasn’t going to die after all, and he felt pretty much the same” (23). But later, he worries that he may be in physical danger, thinking to himself, “How ironic would it be if he were really dying of cancer? He brooded a moment: Was he really sure it was his mind that felt bad and not his body? Or could his body have made his brain seem more depressed than it actually was? He sighed and felt more muddled than ever” (85). As Mr. Pickens mulls over the prospect of an untimely death, he does not appear to be disturbed or frightened—only “muddled” and even apathetic.

However, we see a different response to death earlier in the novel, as he relates his conviction views about the concept of an afterlife to his brother, F.X.:

Then I think, okay, so maybe when you’re dead, you’re dead, and there’s no more you. I try that one out, and Lord, F.X., that one scares me just as much. I mean, what if it’s true what some people say, that there’s not going to be any Last Judgment? Doesn’t that seem just about as awful as if there *was* going to be one? Think of people like Hitler and Nero and Castro, all of them getting off scott-free. (22)

However, Mr. Pickens’s zeal for justice is short-lived as he reflects on his own recent missteps, particularly stealing an eighteen-year-old co-worker’s (Toinette) watch as a conversation starter and never mentioning his innocent joke after the plan backfires. As he finishes this speech to F.X., he realizes that he is not as innocent before God as he would have liked to believe: “Mr. Pickens paused. The Last Judgment: he would have to get that watch back before he died” (22). Present within this statement is the idea that in order to ensure one’s standing with God, he must somehow right his wrongdoings—a belief that is at least partially common in many Christian traditions. However, Mr.

Pickens's fear of "The Last Judgment" is vague and uncertain. He begins by stating his doubt that there is such a thing, yet the possibility of being judged and punished is enough to motivate him to return Toinette's watch to her. In his essay, "Hypocrisy, Religious and Secular, in *Modern Baptists*," William Dowie interprets Mr. Pickens's "relationship with God" as "strictly a *quid pro quo* arrangement," because he hopes that God will reward his devotion by causing Toinette to fall in love with him. Dowie explains that Mr. Pickens's "theological foundation is built on a bed of straw, the same straw of self interest that has ruled all his other relationships" (38). This description of Mr. Pickens's spirituality is especially helpful because Dowie emphasizes the lack of genuine faith that Wilcox is portraying in this character.

Similarly, Frank Dambar, the fifty-four-year-old leading man in *Sort of Rich*, decides to make his amends to God before having a "small benign growth in the bladder" (121) removed by a local doctor whom he sees as "the type who might sew up a sponge inside you" (123). Unsettled by the thought that he may have cancer, Frank spends a great deal of his time ruminating on the possibility of his death. After being overcome in a moment of lust for his wife, he contemplates how to spiritually prepare himself for his upcoming surgery: "What with the operation coming up, he should have his mind on Jesus, he knew, asking for forgiveness for any sins he may have committed" (124). Like Mr. Pickens, Frank does not appear to be deeply affected by the Bible's teachings until he faces the risk of entering into an afterlife. For even as Frank comes to the conclusion that he must "have his mind on Jesus," he comes to a different realization about himself: "...his body seemed more alive than ever, joyful in a way that it never had been with Jane or Mrs. Anderson [his former wife and mistress]. The resurrection of the body, he

thought. The words had never meant anything to him, an *empty formula*, until now” (124, my emphasis). These statements are indicative of Mr. Dambar’s indifference to a Christian hope in Heaven and eternal life; it has been to him nothing more than an “empty formula.” But his current wife, Gretchen, is enough to make him feel that his body has already been resurrected. So all that remains of his already unsure faith is the dim fear that he may die and be held accountable for his actions; and the acts of assuring himself that this will not happen are merely tedious and obligatory, hardly the results of a sincere belief in Christ.

Wilcox’s use of characters who do not display a genuine faith in Christian teachings but who boldly proclaim their Christianity points to a reality that Flannery O’Connor recognized more than thirty years before Wilcox’s first novel was published. In her essay, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” O’Connor famously writes, “I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn’t convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God” (*MM* 44-5). This is to say that, although the Southerner’s “general conception of man is still, in the main, theological,” it is sometimes only so to the extent that the Christian tradition of his homeland has informed his view of the world. And O’Connor recognizes that even those who openly deny Christ are haunted by the possibility that his teachings are, in fact, true. To entertain this possibility is, as O’Connor suggests, to admit that one could be created “in the image and likeness of God”; coming to terms with this also means, for the individual steeped in Christian tradition, realizing the fact that he is a fallen image of the God who created him and, therefore, in need of redemption to resolve his enmity with his creator. Hence, the



“ghost” of Christ, even if not practically realized in the life of the self-proclaimed believer or unbeliever, is nevertheless “very fierce and instructive” (45). In his reading of O’Connor’s most famous story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Ralph C. Wood refers to the Grandmother as a “good Christian atheist in the sense memorably specified by John Wesley, who said that we are practical atheists whenever we live as if God does not matter.” (38-9). Here, Wood shows us the connection between O’Connor’s theoretical conception of a “Christ-haunted” South and its literary manifestation in characters such as this. The Grandmother, as Wood goes on to demonstrate more fully, is not Christ-centered, but Christ-haunted:

[T]he Grandmother has no deeply ingrained moral and religious character; she is a practical atheist. When faced with the threat of death, therefore, she is willing to deny her faith in an attempt to save her life. The Grandmother is a woman who lives by her own lights, though they provide little illumination of her sinful condition. She is Flannery O’Connor’s portrait...of the average Christian soul living amidst the compromises and deceits of ordinary life. (40)

This description of one of O’Connor’s most memorable literary creations is especially pertinent to the correlation that I am attempting to make between thematic and comedic elements within the works of both O’Connor and Wilcox. Both writers depict “the average Christian soul living amidst the compromises and deceits of ordinary life,” and both demonstrate the discrepancies between the Southerner’s practical life and the faith that she proclaims. Both, too, appear to grasp the power of human finiteness in their characters’ spiritual revelations when they are forced to face their own mortality. However, these authors do not necessarily come to the same conclusions about these tensions. But in order to see at which points these two writers differ, we must first examine more closely those at which they converge.

According to John Allison, James Wilcox “identifies [Flannery] O’Connor’s short stories as an influence on his writing, noting that they gave him the courage to write novels” (469). And Wilcox’s writing, while it is certainly not the dark humor of O’Connor, echoes many of her most central concerns, all of which Wood has expounded upon in his insightful book and which O’Connor made abundantly clear in her own prose. One puzzling aspect of O’Connor’s writing is her insistence upon creating, most of the time, Southern fundamentalist characters to relay her message, as opposed to ones who share her own faith. But Wood postulates that O’Connor “saw that Southern fundamentalists held fast to twin realities often abandoned by Christians and secularists alike: an unembarrassed supernaturalism on the one hand, and a deep veneration of Holy Scripture on the other” (34). As Wood points out, O’Connor recognized that she was living in a time when a generic, unifying civil religion was replacing doctrinal authenticity. O’Connor, he says, “saw that, once the American virtues of self-reliance and hard-work and self-discipline are abstracted from their particular historical communities, their particular narrative traditions, their particular religious practices...they succeed as the false god of civil religion, the deity to which the churches must bow down in obeisance” (22). In other words, O’Connor, devoted Catholic that she was, did not appreciate causes that paraded about in the guise of Christianity when, in reality, they had no real connection to Christ or to the Bible. However, Wood also observes O’Connor’s appreciation for the extreme Christian fundamentalists of her day because she saw within them something genuine. Unlike their more proper “Christian” neighbors who fretted over manners, they allowed themselves to be led by the mystery of their sincere faith.

This dichotomy certainly plays itself out in many, if not most, of O'Connor's short stories. "Greenleaf," for instance, presents us with two women on opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Mrs. May is "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she [does] not, of course, believe any of it [is] true," (*Collected Works* 506). Mrs. Greenleaf, on the other hand, makes a habit of performing "prayer healing," her practice of flinging herself in the dirt to groan and wail over the "morbid stories out of the newspaper" (505). Mrs. May is appalled by such behavior upon witnessing Mrs. Greenleaf's cries to Jesus for the first time because she "thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom" (506). For Mrs. May, propriety and manners far outweigh the mystery in praying aloud to Jesus, as though he actually hears. She is far more comfortable with simply being labeled a Christian, although she does not actually believe its teachings, and she eventually suffers the fate that she has always feared; she is gored by the detestable bull, who seems to represent all of her misgivings about what she perceives to be the Greenleafs' impropriety, Mrs. Greenleaf's prayer healings being the greatest offense because she dares to practice the faith that Mrs. May only proclaims.

Commenting on the brutality that so often and unexpectedly occurs in her own work, O'Connor explains,

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. The idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (*MM* 112)

When we apply this philosophy to a story like "Greenleaf," we can immediately recognize the character who has been returned to reality "at considerable cost"; Mrs. May

loses her life, but we are left to believe that in the instant after her heart is pierced by the horns of the bull and she has “the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable,” she is also jolted into her reality. Of course, Mrs. May’s reality, far from being a source of comfort, is quite grim. She realizes that her attempts to keep the illegitimate bull from her unadulterated cows (which represents her fear of the Greenleafs’ advancement in society, especially because of Mrs. Greenleaf’s unabashed faith in Christ) have been futile. For as she sees Mr. Greenleaf running toward her in the distance, she finally understands her human connection with the man who, until this point, she has so despised. Perhaps this is why our final image of Mrs. May is one in which she appears to be “bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (524). Like many of O’Connor’s stories, this one ends in a seeming tragedy, but is also a “moment of grace.”

While I do not wish to wander too far from this project’s primary focus—James Wilcox—it does seem appropriate at this point to unpack the phrase “moment of grace,” as it is such a significant concept to O’Connor’s (and, I will argue, Wilcox’s) aesthetic. In the above excerpt from *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor clearly states that in her stories, this moment happens in conjunction with her characters’ return to what she refers to as “reality.” Of course, in this instance, *reality* is a loaded word, especially because she specifically connects this idea with a “Christian view of the world.” Before this point in O’Connor’s discussion of her work, she has been describing her notion of “what makes a story work.” She explains that “it is...some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies.” She goes on to say that this gesture must be “totally right and totally unexpected,” and

that it “would have to be on the analogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it” (*MM* 111). And this gesture is also connected to the “moment of grace,” at which point the character is mercifully brought back to reality. What is significant to note here is that O’Connor again links this gesture to the spiritual, the “Divine life and our participation in it,” which is to say that each of these components is always centered around her characters’ standing before God. And the realization that each of them must come to upon receiving their moment of grace is that they are not, in reality, what they have believed themselves to be. Wood, in his penetrating reading of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” discusses the instant that O’Connor cites as the Grandmother’s moment of grace (when she calls the Misfit one of her own children) and what that grace and simultaneous return to reality looks like for this character: “In this single saving gesture that costs her her life, the Grandmother at last drops all of her fearful self-justifications, all of her vain attempts to stay alive at whatever price. Finally she tells the truth: she is not a good woman; he is not a good man; they both are in terrible trouble, and they both need radical help” (39). It would appear then, that the gracious dose of reality that the Grandmother receives at this point in the story is the recognition that she, like the Misfit, is utterly fallen. And this realization of her own depravity is precisely the grace that O’Connor bestows upon the Grandmother; this character must be fully humbled before she can realize her need for and take hold of a savior. O’Connor even seems to insert her own commentary in some of the Misfit’s final words: “She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (153); that is to say, she would have been “good” had she been humbled sooner and on a continual basis. This story, indeed, is in large part

about the very idea of “good” people. And in the end, O’Connor’s Christian conception of humanity declares itself vehemently, reiterating the apostle Paul’s assessment of all people: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3.11-12). The grace that is granted to O’Connor’s characters is in realizing that, regardless of their stature and propriety, they are not “good,” in and of themselves, but are in need of a higher power to redeem them. In a way then, O’Connor’s most famous story reveals its message within its title, which would perhaps more appropriately read, “A Good Man is *Impossible* to Find.” And the shocking reality of which her characters must eventually be made aware is their utter depravity apart from Christ.

Now that I have presented a reading of O’Connor’s understanding of grace and reality, it seems appropriate to return to Wilcox by reiterating the work of the scholar who first alerted me to some of the significant ties between these two writers’ work. In his essay, “Moments of Grace in James Wilcox’s *Modern Baptists*,” Charles Pastoor brings to light some of the ways in which Wilcox’s work both employs and adapts O’Connor’s notion of grace. Pastoor’s primary concern throughout this article is to show that “the characters in *Modern Baptists* experience such moments [of grace] throughout the course of the novel, and particularly at the end, thus winning costly but meaningful victories” (Pastoor). Although he cites many convincing examples from the text, Pastoor’s reading of Mr. Pickens’s spiritual journey is the most relevant to understanding Wilcox’s contemporary adaptation of O’Connor’s theoretical standpoint. He explains that Mr. Pickens’s attempted suicide is “precisely...[when] he achieves his victory and makes contact, as O’Connor would say, with mystery” (Pastoor). Before Mr. Pickens tries to kill

himself by smashing his car into a telephone pole, his aspirations to lead a “modern Baptist” movement have ended in a total loss of faith: “The only parts of the Gospel that he believed in now were the bad parts, like the time Jesus was hungry and the fig tree, which he cursed, had no fruit. The rest was nothing but a story. After all, if there was a good God, a loving God, would He have treated Mr. Pickens so badly?” (207). Ironically enough, when Mr. Pickens does decide to take his own life, he is foiled by what can only be described as a miracle: “He pressed the accelerator to the floor. But even though he kept his foot down hard, the car gradually slowed until finally, at the punch line sign, where he planned to swing off the road, he was hardly moving at all” (222). This, of course, is the “mystery” that Pastoor recognizes Mr. Pickens to have encountered, although slightly less mysterious upon Mr. Pickens’s realization that he has neglected to fill his car’s gas tank.

Pastoor also notes that Mr. Pickens, like many of O’Connor’s primary characters, is often unable or unwilling to see himself as anything less than perfectly moral. According to Pastoor, Mr. Pickens, “[i]n order to sustain...belief...must deny his own failings, however slight, throughout the story” (Pastoor). And it is only in the novel’s final pages that Mr. Pickens does finally see his own imperfections, driving him to an attempted suicide. But Pastoor locates Mr. Pickens’s true moment of grace in another character—Emmet Orney. For Emmet is the one who helps Mr. Pickens out of his predicament, even after their altercation in front of the town prostitute’s house, just after Mr. Pickens fails to kill himself (which happens to be on Christmas Eve). Up to this point in the book, Mr. Pickens and Emmet have had a peculiar relationship; having met through Emmet’s fiancé and Mr. Pickens’s co-worker, Burma, the two develop a friendship that

has consisted of Mr. Pickens making Emmet his first disciple, forcing his version of morality upon the indifferent Emmet. However, when Mr. Pickens finds himself stranded on the highway with no gas, Emmet is the last person one would expect to give him aid, considering the fact that Burma has called off their engagement because she is in love with Mr. Pickens. But, as Pastoor notes, Emmet's offer to provide fuel for Mr. Pickens's car, even after the two have fought, is a moment of grace. He explains, "Emmet's charitable act is truly strange; it is both 'in and beyond character,' and it makes contact with the mystery represented by the figures [nativity scene] on Miss Mina's lawn, a mystery that proclaims peace on earth to men of good will." (Pastoor). As the novel closes, we see Mr. Pickens and his ex-convict brother, F.X., preparing to attend a Christmas Eve gathering. Still somewhat depressed, Mr. Pickens hesitates as they leave for the party and finds help in another unlikely source—his brother:

As they were walking down the sidewalk that cut the front yard in half Mr. Pickens was suddenly overcome with doubt again. He stopped, gazing up at the stars. It hurt a lot to look at them, those shameless stars, but he couldn't help looking. Then he felt an arm around his shoulder—"Come on, son, they're waiting for us"—and with this yoke, which was easy, he was able to continue on his way. (239)

Here, Mr. Pickens is reluctant to go to the party because of his sense of defeat and because the hosts of the Christmas Eve gathering are some of Tula Springs' most upstanding, Bible-believing citizens—the Keelys. He fears that neither he nor his brother is worthy to be in such company. But Pastoor reads this final scene as another moment of grace:

Mr. Pickens is, in a sense, correct; a full and honest reckoning of who they are and what they have done might very well prevent him and F.X. from joining the party, from entering the feast. But, the conclusion of the novel suggests that, by an act of grace, such a reckoning is not necessary. F.X., himself unworthy, is able to extend the gracious welcome to his brother, and Mr. Pickens, recognizing a fellow



sufferer, is able to accept. The story echoes the Christian understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven: only by recognizing our unworthiness can we enter in. (Pastoor)

Pastoor's interpretation of the novel's closing lines is also well-supported by the fact that F.X.'s gracious gesture to his brother is clearly connected to the merciful disposition of Jesus Christ towards sinners, which Wilcox refers to when he appropriates some of Christ's most famous words to the weary: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matt. 11.28-30, my emphasis). Wilcox's unmistakable Biblical allusion certainly places the end of *Modern Baptists* at the "anagogical level," especially when we consider the fact that F.X. is extending a Christ-like gesture to Mr. Pickens when he invites him to a meal that he is not, in fact, worthy to attend.

Of course, Wilcox is not simply recreating a concept originally established by his predecessor, O'Connor. *Modern Baptists* takes many of its mysterious elements from her short stories, but it does so in a very different way and from what appears to be a very different point of view—one that reflects the results of some changes in the Christianity of the South that O'Connor had only begun to see in her lifetime. Pastoor hints at this distinction when he explains that "the relative obscurity of grace in *Modern Baptists* reflects a more postmodern way of thinking about redemption" (Pastoor). And it is on this point that I hope to show Wilcox's simultaneous adaptation of and departure from O'Connor's literary representations of Southern Christianity. As Pastoor has shown, Wilcox's conceptions of grace and redemption are very similar to those of O'Connor but are, as he suggests, more postmodern. Obviously, this is to be expected, given the fact

that O'Connor was writing during the end of the modernist era, while Wilcox is contemporary. But by noting the points of departure in the religious matters of these two authors, we can gain a better understanding of Wilcox's innovation and his depiction of the more current state of Southern spirituality. For although his characters' epiphanies do meet some criteria of O'Connor's moments of grace, they also deliver a decisively more temporal and relative view of grace than those of O'Connor. By this, I mean that Wilcox's characters receive their blessings from horizontal sources (as in other people), as opposed to one that is vertical (i.e., God). This is apparent at the end of *Modern Baptists* because Mr. Pickens receives his Christ-inspired grace from a fellow sinner so that he can continue, in many regards, living just as he always has. As Dowie notes, "the failure of his faith precipitates the beginning of hope, for only after he abandons his self-righteous pretensions is he able to begin seeing himself" (38). And while O'Connor's characters also obtain their merciful awakenings through other fallen people, she typically leaves readers to believe that figures such as the Grandmother are supernaturally transformed as a result of their connection with another person. These moments, for O'Connor's characters, are also far more drastic because they almost always involve a violent and often fatal act. This is not the case with Wilcox; his characters, far from undergoing any supernatural alteration are, instead, simply given a sense of camaraderie with others who are equally helpless, so that they can have the ability to carry on being exactly who they are. In other words, there is no sense of a reckoning with the fact that they are fallen and their subsequent standing before God (as is the case in O'Connor's work); rather, they come to a point at which they realize their own failings, accept them, and move forward with their lives.

This story plays itself out in Wilcox's second novel, *North Gladiola*, as well.

Over the course of this narrative, we see Ethyl Mae Coco's journey to self-realization and acceptance as she struggles to be a good Catholic wife while also fighting feelings of anger and doubt. In the beginning, we meet a woman who is at odds with her son, George Henry, because she refuses to attend his second wedding due to its illegitimacy in the eyes of the Church. (George Henry's first marriage ended in divorce.) Mrs. Coco cannot condone George Henry's decision to marry again, partially because she has already "compromised herself by attending the wedding, a second marriage, of Larry, her oldest son," and because she "felt she had to put her foot down somewhere; either she was Catholic or she wasn't" (7). Even her string quartet (the Pro Arts), originally composed of herself, George Henry, an elderly town gossip (Myrtice), and a middle-aged Korean doctoral candidate (Duk-Soo), is not exempt from the impact of her determined faith:

As a strict Catholic, Mrs. Coco felt compelled to tithe the Pro Arts's services to nursing homes and hospitals, especially when paying engagements were scarce. It was a good opportunity for them to keep in shape before audience while offering themselves to God. Of course, George Henry and Myrtice claimed they weren't playing for God, they were playing for themselves, but Mrs. Coco, with a Levite's indifference to what the sacrificial oxen might think about the matter, offered them up anyway. (30-1)

Mrs. Coco is, indeed, a staunch Catholic, despite the fact that she was raised in the Baptist tradition, because she married a Catholic man at a young age and saw it as only proper to make herself into the appropriate wife. But as the novel progresses, we begin to see that her devout life is motivated by a sense of duty and not by unwavering belief. Even after finally admitting to herself and her priest that her faith has really been nothing more than an act, that the Gospel teachings she has claimed to believe are really "just

words” that “didn’t mean a thing” (59), she still finds herself “stand[ing] outside Our Lady [her church] all day selling cakes for a God she wasn’t sure she believed in” (83).

But her life becomes more complicated when she meets Ray Jr., a seventeen-year-old schizophrenic who happens to be a patient at the mental hospital where the Pro Arts has one of its charitable engagements. After a doctor at the hospital convinces Duk-Soo to move out of his dorm room at the local college and into a house with Ray Jr., Mrs. Coco finds herself becoming more involved in the boy’s life. Fearful that Duk-Soo might be swaying Ray Jr. towards his own existentialist beliefs, Mrs. Coco feels it her obligation to educate Ray Jr. about the Bible’s teachings. When Mrs. Coco and Ray Jr. sit alone in her living room after Duk-Soo and he have stayed the night at her house (a result of Mrs. Coco’s refusal to allow her guests to drive at night), she tells Ray Jr. about Jesus:

Kings were what they had in the old days, before people knew what was good for them. Today we elect presidents. There’s a president who’s in charge of the whole United States—think how powerful he is. Now try to imagine a president of the whole world—think how much bigger he would be. And now—now you’ve seen all the stars outside—well, Ray Jr., just shut your eyes and think what it would be like to have a president of all those stars, every single star in the sky. That’s what Jesus Christ Our Savior is like. (117)

After this brief lesson, we learn that Mrs. Coco is “determined to make the most of these few moments by planting the seeds of Christianity and democracy in this poor boy’s soul” (117). At this point in the novel, Mrs. Coco’s insistence upon “planting the seeds” of a faith in which she has expressed so much doubt seems strange, but it is also indicative of her unwillingness to accept defeat when it comes to matters of religion and politics, even when her own convictions on the subjects are not as firmly rooted as they would seem. She simply cannot conceive of abandoning a code by which she has been expected to live for the majority of her life. As she preaches to Ray Jr., she even

acknowledges the discrepancy but comes to this conclusion: “[T]he fact that her own religious beliefs were in a state of disarray did not quell her missionary zeal. She still had enough sound morals and ethics left over to last her a lifetime” (118). Of course, this all happens before Wilcox gives Mrs. Coco her moment of grace, in the person of Ray Jr. (and, perhaps, others).

As the elaborate plot of *North Gladiola* begins to unravel, we learn some surprising things about Mrs. Coco’s past. Nearly twenty years prior to the setting of this novel, Mrs. Coco had been horrified to learn that one of her daughters, Helen Ann, was involved in an affair with the mayor of Tula Springs, Binwanger, a man whom she despises because of this. When Mrs. Coco learned that her daughter was with child and decided that the “idea of Helen Ann bearing that man’s child was, of course, unthinkable,” she determined that “she *had* to urge Helen Ann to get that abortion” (228). This plot twist comes quite unexpectedly, especially from the same woman who believes that even condoms are an unacceptable means of contraception for a practicing Catholic couple (180). By the end of the novel, Ray Jr., after being moved around to several different places and not being able to cope in any of them, is confined to the state hospital. When Mrs. Coco visits him, she is not greeted by the same happy and naïve boy she had known, but by a disturbed young man who no longer appears to remember her face and cannot even get out of bed. During this meeting, Mrs. Coco comes to a realization about the beginnings of her relationship with Ray Jr.: “There was something about his eyes, that look he had had when they were playing the Mozart. It had haunted her, reminding her of something beautiful that could have been. Could have, might have—this was the beginning of her despair, her denial” (251). By the end of their

meeting, Mrs. Coco finds herself lying down next to the boy on his rubber sheeted bed.

At this moment, she comes to a new understanding about herself and her supposed charitable intentions toward Ray Jr.:

Ray Jr. did not move, his arms did not even attempt to hug her. But it was enough to have him there beside her, making even the black pumps she had on, her tweed suit, and the purse digging into her hip seem somehow a natural living part of her. This, of course, was the biggest lie of all, she realized, for she was not, as she had thought when she crawled into bed with him, protecting *him* from the rubber sheet. No, it was the other way around. There never was and never would be a Saint Ethyl Mae of Tula Springs. There was simply a woman who was tired of crying 'Unclean' wherever she went, who was hoping finally, after all this time, to be touched. (251-2)

This scene is Ethyl Mae Coco's moment of self-realization and of grace. After years of presenting herself as the upstanding, Christian wife who is proper and morally upright in all situations, she discovers in this moment that her life has been as much of a fabrication as her pumps, her suit, and her skirt—all of which are not, as they seem "a natural living part of her," but "the biggest lie of all." In the next and final chapter, we learn that Ray Jr. is, in fact, the grandson whom she believed to have been aborted so many years before. (Her daughter, unable to go through with the act, had made arrangements for her son as she departed to live in Australia.) But Mrs. Coco understands, even before learning that her connection to Ray Jr. is not merely coincidental, that he embodies all that she has been too afraid to admit about herself—namely, her imperfections. Until the moment when she lies next to Ray Jr. in his hospital bed, Mrs. Coco has imagined that she has harbored only unselfish and charitable intentions towards the boy, when in actuality, her concern for him has been self-serving; he has been her project, her disciple, a means through which she can exorcise her unbelief and sow the seeds which have never grown in her own life. But her moment of grace—the moment when she realizes that there

“never was and never would be a Saint Ethyl Mae of Tula Springs”—comes in the form of a seemingly improper act. And she must compromise her respectability in order to receive it.

Like O’Connor’s characters, Mrs. Coco’s moment of grace involves a humbling experience and a new understanding of self as an imperfect being. Mrs. Turpin of O’Connor’s “Revelation” is, in many ways, similar to Mrs. Coco; she, like Mrs. Coco, fancies herself to be quite the philanthropist, gloating in the fact that she “never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent” and thanking Jesus that “He had made her herself and given her a little of everything” (O’Connor 642). But both women are humbled by their interaction with a young, mentally unstable individual, although Mrs. Coco’s encounter is far less violent than that of Mrs. Turpin. But both women react very differently. O’Connor’s story ends with Mrs. Turpin confronting God for causing her to see herself as a “wart hog from hell” (650) and eventually realizing that Christ’s understanding of greatness is completely reversed from her own (654), and we are given the sense that Mrs. Turpin has reached a turning point and will be a drastically changed woman after her humiliation. Mrs. Coco, on the other hand, ends up with a changed perspective of herself, but instead of a need to change her own life, she simply learns to accept it. In other words, Mrs. Turpin must have a reckoning with God, while Mrs. Coco must confront only herself. And while this is only one example from each author, it does seem to illustrate their very similar literary techniques, while at the same time showing their very different perspectives on humanity. O’Connor creates humbling moments as a means of bringing her characters to a deeper understanding of mystery (i.e., Christ and the Bible), while those moments in Wilcox’s

work bring his characters to a deeper understanding of themselves and others—a mystery, but one that is not necessarily based upon one central Truth, but a more relative conception of spirituality.



## CONCLUSION

Fred Hobson, in his book *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, explains, “[T]he contemporary southern writer, like the contemporary American writer, lives in a postmodern world, a world in which order, structure, and meaning...are constantly called into question” (9). Wilcox’s novels certainly reflect this aspect of the contemporary South, especially in his emphasis upon the relativism that has made its way into Southern religious thought. Whereas in the past, according to Wilson, religion once “provided worldviews for Southerners that nurtured a sense of identity and mission” (238), that firmly established religious heritage has, in more recent times, been greatly affected by an increasingly postmodern perspective of the world that conflicts with the very narrow Christian perspective of the world and humanity. Wilcox’s novels exhibit the contemporary Southerner’s disconnectedness with Christian doctrine and appropriation of the Christian label as a means of cultural acceptance in a society that has always been thought of as inherently Christian. Through his characters and the town of Tula Springs, Wilcox depicts a reality that Santana and Erickson have shown to be a facet of popular religion—namely, that “[t]he Bible exists as an idea—an origin of truth and a promise of an absolute—but not as an *actual* practiced source of creative popular thought. Instead, ideas and beliefs come from alternate texts...which in turn emulate or become the sacred” (20). Likewise, for the people of Tula Springs, the Bible is a conveniently acceptable reference for identity, but it rarely serves to inform the actions or beliefs of

those who proclaim its inerrancy. Of course, while Wilcox's novels indicate the effects of a postmodern culture upon its religions, many questions remain. The most prominent of these would inquire the extent to which the fictional city of Tula Springs is representative of the real-life, small, Southern town. Obviously, no description is capable of capturing a culture or region in its entirety, but readers of Wilcox may still question the validity of Hobson's assertion that Wilcox, "although abundantly talented, sometimes give[s] in to southern stereotypes" (81). And if some would agree with this statement, the results of these stereotypes could easily be seen as intentional exaggerations that serve to entertain and challenge those who see their groundings in reality. Another question that Wilcox's novels may invite has more to do with the opinion of humanity presented in his writing. As I have demonstrated in the prior chapter, Wilcox's characters, instead of undergoing any drastic conversions as a result of their respective epiphanies, simply learn to accept their own realities and embrace themselves with all of their faults. But does such an outcome suggest that people are incapable of change but can, with the help of others, be at peace with themselves as they are or that they are eternally flawed and must simply accept their circumstances until their meaningless lives are over? Although we can guess, based upon Wilcox's personal life and beliefs, which of these is most readily applicable, there is still no way of determining how readers from various backgrounds will receive the internal journeys of Wilcox's characters.

But even while such questions present themselves, the fact remains that James Wilcox is an author who warrants more scholarly exploration. Southern religion, though a significant aspect of Wilcox's novels, is only one of many facets yet to be investigated. Two of his novels are set in New York and would be compelling literary illustrations of

Southern expatriation and the ways that Southern identity translates to an entirely different region in contemporary culture. Another unexplored feature of Wilcox's writing, even though it is a prominent concern in all of his novels, is Southern sexuality, especially Southern masculinity and homophobia. If the Christian faith is no longer a defining feature of the region, troubles over gender and sexuality certainly remain prevalent. Finally, as one might expect, race is still a primary issue in Wilcox's writings and would be an especially interested area of study because, far from the blatant racism that is found in classic Southern texts, Wilcox's characters are hypersensitive to racism. In their outlandish attempts to prove their cultural and ethnic tolerance, they often end up alienating the minorities whom they vehemently claim to accept. Regardless of the chosen focus of study, James Wilcox's work offers abundant possibilities for further analysis. He is, I would argue, making an artistic contribution to contemporary Southern culture that is comparable to Flannery O'Connor's offering to the South of her time. And Wilcox's gift for capturing the "mundane views that [we] never really look at" (122) is one that should not go unnoticed.

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