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Occupying the Pedestal: Gender Issues in Ellen Gilchrist

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Occupying the Pedestal: Gender Issues in Ellen Gilchrist

Occupying the Pedestal: Gender Issues in Ellen Gilchrist

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Abstract

Ellen Gilchrist's work shows the struggles of women living in a postmodern South. This dissertation explores Gilchrist's representations of southern women as they transition from the old South to modernity. Gilchrist's work depicts women who attempt to break off the pedestal of white Southern womanhood, but never quite do, often simultaneously disrupting and confirming traditional notions of a "good Southern lady." Gilchrist shows how women occupy the pedestal as a form of refuge and also as a form of protest. These are women who, as they navigate the transition to a new South, are reluctant to surrender the privileges of their class and race – privileges that provide them with material well-being and relative leisure. They are conflicted women who feel unsatisfied and finally strike out in ways that bring them hope. Although Gilchrist claims that she is not a feminist, she writes strong women characters who strive for independence from the men around them.

Gilchrist's women are a privileged group, and yet their privilege does not help them attain independence; in fact, their money binds them more tightly to a patriarchal system from which they try to escape. I look at the women who attempt to break with the traditional roles held by their mothers—at the ways in which they succeed and the ways in which do not. I look at how Gilchrist's women align themselves with the dominant culture to get what they want.

In this work I also argue that Gilchrist uses sexuality as a function of the grotesque—to shine a light in the margins and disrupt our ideas of southern female sexuality. I also look at gender performance in Gilchrist's work. Gilchrist's women are expected to perform their gender from very early ages and in ways specific to their region. The black mammy figure in Gilchrist's work tells us much about how the South still struggles with issues of race. Finally, I look at the way in which Gilchrist writes against a patriarchal form. What Gilchrist does not manage to do with words, she accomplishes in form.

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Table of Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION-----	1
II.	CHAPTER ONE---OCCUPYING THE PEDESTAL: THE AMBIVALENCE IN ELLEN GILCHRIST'S WOMEN-----	9
III.	CHAPTER TWO—THE FUNCTION OF SEXUALITY AS THE GROTESQUE IN GILCHRIST'S WORK-----	43
IV.	CHAPTER THREE--GENDER PERFORMANCE IN GILCHRIST-----	73
V.	CHAPTER FOUR—BUT, OUR MAMMIES ARE FAMILY!-----	109
VI.	CHAPTER FIVE—WRITING AGAINST A PATRIARCHAL FORM-----	142
VII.	WORKS CITED-----	169

Book Title Abbreviations

The Ellen Gilchrist titles used in this work are abbreviated as follows:

<i>A Dangerous Age</i>	-----DA
<i>Collected Stories</i>	-----CS
<i>Drunk with Love</i>	-----DL
<i>Falling Through Space</i>	-----FS
<i>Flights of Angels</i>	-----FA
<i>I Cannot Get You Close Enough</i>	-----ICG
<i>I, Rhoda Manning, Go Hunting with My Daddy</i>	-----IRM
<i>In the Land of Dreamy Dreams</i>	-----LDD
<i>Light Can be Both Wave and Particle</i>	-----LWP
<i>Net of Jewels</i>	-----NJ
<i>Nora Jane: A Life in Stories</i>	-----NJS
<i>Rhoda: A Life in Stories</i>	-----RH
<i>Sarah Conley</i>	-----SC
<i>Starcarbon</i>	-----ST
<i>The Age of Miracles</i>	-----AM
<i>The Anna Papers</i>	-----AP
<i>The Annunciation</i>	-----AN
<i>The Cabal and Other Stories</i>	-----CB
<i>The Courts of Love</i>	-----CL
<i>The Writing Life</i>	-----WL
<i>Victory Over Japan</i>	-----VJ

Introduction

This dissertation explores Ellen Gilchrist's depictions of women in the South as they transition from the old South to modernity. Gilchrist's work depicts women who attempt to break off the pedestal of white Southern womanhood, but never quite do, often simultaneously disrupting and confirming traditional notions of a "good Southern lady." These are women who, as they navigate the transition to a new South, are reluctant to surrender the privileges of their class and race – privileges that provide them with material well-being and relative leisure. Yet, they want to be sexually free, independent from male control, and capable of moving freely across space. Gilchrist's work is at its best when she explores tensions found in the lives of women who are relatively privileged, yet nonetheless frustrated by the oppression of their gender.

Gilchrist is an important southern woman writer. She won a National Book award for her collection of short stories entitled *Victory over Japan* in 1984. Gilchrist has written seven novels, thirteen collections of short stories, and two works of non-fiction. In addition, she has written two volumes of poetry. This will be the first dissertation to analyze all of her work (with the exception of *Anabasis* and her poetry).

Given the quality and quantity of her work, there is relatively little scholarship on Gilchrist. Margaret Bauer is the reigning Gilchrist scholar, and her book *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist* is primarily an inter-textual look at Gilchrist alongside the works of Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Ann Porter, William Faulkner, and Kate Chopin. This book was published in 1999, so it excludes Gilchrist's later works. Brad Hooper has published *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist: an Appreciation* which would not be categorized as a scholarly work so much

as an overview of Gilchrist's works. Mary A. McKay's book entitled *Ellen Gilchrist* is a brief look at the life and work of the author. In addition to these three books, there are a few articles written in the past thirty years and four dissertations.

The first dissertation, written by Courtney Celeste Adkins (University of Louisiana at Lafayette—2000) looks at the intersecting landscapes of the female body and the South, especially as it concerns women locating themselves in the South's changing landscape. The second dissertation, written by Gwynne Roper Bennett (Middle Tennessee State University—2001) discusses racial prejudice, religion, and parenting in Gilchrist's work. The third dissertation by Adrian Jeanette Lowery (University of Southern California—2001) looks at the constructs of identity of various Post World War II writers, including Gilchrist, whose protagonists move from roles as traditional females to artists. Another dissertation by Lydia Whitt Rice (University of Georgia—2006) covers Ellen Gilchrist's work as a response to Anne Sexton.

My analysis looks more comprehensively at the way gender works in Gilchrist's work. Although the above scholars have written about Gilchrist and her female protagonists from angles that have naturally covered some gender issues, my dissertation looks at the issues Gilchrist's women face living in the changing South and how, specifically, her women negotiate the changes taking place. I look at how her works are feminist, how they are not, and how her southern women attempt to redefine their roles.

More than this, this work contributes to an emerging scholarship on gender and Southern literature. Patricia Yaeger's work on women and gender in the South examines the astonishing and grotesque in women's literature. Her work examines the female southern writers who write against the tradition of the miniaturized prototypical southern female, replacing them with a

parade of giant women (Yaeger xi). Ann Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson explore sexuality and gender constructions in their work (*Haunted*, 16-17). Carol Manning's edited book entitled *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature* explores the exclusion and undervaluation of Southern women writers in the Southern literary canon(2). My work contributes to the scholarship on the South and gender by examining the complex issues for women in a changing South and how the transition relates to broader society.

Chapter One--Occupying the Pedestal: The Ambivalence in Ellen Gilchrist's Women

The women in Gilchrist's work occupy the pedestal in two ways: they occupy it as a form of protest, rebelling at the notion of becoming a traditional Southern lady, and they occupy it as a form of refuge from a patriarchal society that does not allow them a place with a voice or power. Gilchrist's women are a privileged group, and yet their privilege does not help them attain independence; in fact, their money binds them more tightly to a patriarchal system from which they try to escape. In this chapter I look at the women who attempt to break with the traditional roles held by their mothers—at the ways in which they succeed and the ways in which they either do not make a break with traditional roles or go back to them. I look at how Gilchrist's women align themselves with the dominant culture to get what they want. I also look at one way in which Gilchrist's women do attain some semblance of power--through their beauty. I also explore how class plays a role in the choices these upper-middle class women make, both in ways it limits them and expands their opportunities.

Chapter Two--The Function of Sexuality as the Grotesque in Gilchrist' Work

In Chapter Two, I look at sexuality in Gilchrist's work. I argue that Gilchrist uses sex as a function of the grotesque—to shine a light on the margins and give her readers a good look at

what has not been traditionally discussed about sex in the South. Using sexuality as the grotesque also functions to deconstruct the traditional idea of Southern womanhood.

Gilchrist creates some lusty women characters. I explore in this chapter the bluntness with which they approach sex. Are Gilchrist's women really that sexual? Is their intense and direct approach to sex a sort of performance—a new and improved version of the southern female? While the South might be a sexy place, the traditional southern lady aspired to at least demonstrate a certain level of purity. Is this where Gilchrist succeeds in writing a new Southern woman? Or, is she simply, attempting to present a seemingly progressive feminist stance by writing sex scenes and confronting sexuality directly? Rosalind Coward argues that while “preoccupation with the confession of sexual experience” is a feature of contemporary feminist writings, writing about sex does not make a text feminist or, necessarily progressive (201).

I look at interracial sex in Gilchrist's work and how it also turns on its head the southern, white preoccupation with black men as rapists of white women. I examine the various ways in which sexuality functions in Gilchrist's work. I argue that sexuality not only is a function of the grotesque in Gilchrist's work, but her depictions show women who enjoy sex for the sake of having sex and are not bound by traditional images of women as chaste and pure.

Chapter Three--Gender Performance in Gilchrist

Gilchrist's women are taught to perform gender very specifically, and this shows up throughout her work. When ten year-old Rhoda discards her bridesmaid's dress to enter the boy's realm to soar into the moonlit sky at her grandparent's plantation, she rejects the traditional female role she has been forced to perform. In many other instances in her childhood, Rhoda is left on the margins as her brother and his friends take center stage. Rhoda rebels against the

wishes of her parents to be the “sweet sister” by being anything but sweet. However, Gilchrist’s women know when performing their gender gets them what they want, and they often do so.

I explore the performance of Nora Jane, who robs a bar in the Irish Channel (in New Orleans) as a microcosm of the whole idea of gender and performativity. When Nora Jane dons her costumes and performs, society behaves in ways that reflect assumptions about gender and race. I look at how women use performance as currency to get something they want, whether it is sex or protection from men.

When Amanda leaves New Orleans to enter the Creative Writing program at the University of Arkansas to write poetry, she encounters resistance to her work from a male colleague, with whom she sleeps. Ironically, even after leaving a wealthy Uptown New Orleans husband for a life as an artist, Amanda is still expected to perform her gender, which calls for being less than her male colleague.

Judith Butler asserts that gender is not inherent, but learned through acts, or performance: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender* 34). Gilchrist’s women are often frustrated that society expects them to perform their gender in very specific (and Southern) ways. Sometimes they reject the culture’s expectation that they perform as wives and mothers, and when they do, there are consequences. They also, however, sometimes use performance to outwit the men around them.

Chapter 4--But, our Mammies are Our Family!

The first Christmas party I attended in Coliseum Square Park in the Lower Garden District in New Orleans took place at the home of the one of the families who, as they often put it when referring to themselves, “helped bring the neighborhood back” in the 1970s. On the

massive wall, in their formal dining room, hangs a commissioned portrait of the family. The dark-haired woman in the portrait is seated in a dining room chair, dressed formally and wearing a strand of pearls. Her children are positioned around her, while her husband, in a blue coat with brass buttons, stands stiffly behind her. Off to the side of the portrait, positioned in front of the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room stand three African American servants. As I surveyed the painting (with a stiff gin and tonic prepared by a black man tending bar who looked like an older version of one of the men in the portrait), a long-time neighbor came up, and observed the painting with me. “Isn’t it just amazing?” she gushed. “See, how they had their black servants painted with them? Why, they’re just like family!”

The idea of black servants as family is one that we find throughout Gilchrist’s work. Gilchrist’s treatment of race, particularly as concerns the African American maids who attend to wealthy white families, is problematic. Kimberly Wallace-Sander’s *Mammy: a Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory* explores the idea of mammies as symbols of racial harmony. Wallace-Sanders points out the complex relationships of the mammies to their white employers. The children of the white employer believe they are the most important people in the mammies’ worlds, discounting the fact that these African American women usually have their own families to love and tend. The notion that the Mammy is family is one that is problematic, because they have historically been slaves or are servants, and certainly do not enjoy the privileges of being a family member of their white employers.

Again, Gilchrist’s approach to the issue of race is slippery. She does give a voice to Traceleen, Crystal Manning’s African American maid, and that voice is often wise and wonderful, much as Dilsey’s, in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, is the voice of reason in the family. However, giving Traceleen a voice is not enough to give Gilchrist a free pass on the

issue of race. Traceleen is not a family member, and Gilchrist writes the character without any consideration of the difficulties inherent in servitude. The character of Traceleen is an example of a woman living in the margins. This chapter examines the ways in which the mammy character of Traceleen is both a refreshing departure from the South's attitude toward their mummies, and a confirmation of the racism and indignities that have historically accompanied the position.

Chapter Five--Writing Against a Patriarchal Form

My final chapter looks at the way Gilchrist uses experimental forms to write against traditional patriarchal forms. Gilchrist's work starts, as Cixous writes, "on all sides at once," without clear beginnings or endings. The aesthetics of Gilchrist's work show a resistance to conventional forms of writing. The structure of her work does not follow any pattern, instead deconstructing the idea of time, consistency, and beginnings or endings.

I look at Gilchrist's creation of a composite personality, her story cycle, and her conflation of characters. I discuss how Gilchrist's works are metafictional, examining the inconsistencies in her work and, also, how characters and narrators refer to Gilchrist's previous and upcoming works. I look at the way her style of writing about the same characters in different books, in different years, from varying points of view, and, sometimes providing conflicting accounts conveys meaning and what I believe those meanings to be. The organization of Gilchrist's work is particularly interesting in that it is not linear—her story cycle begins and stops in ways that make it circular. I argue that Gilchrist writes against a patriarchal or masculine form, to create the feminine in the structure of her work.

Gilchrist's form draws attention to what we do not know and how our stories are ongoing. Through her texts, Gilchrist shows an ambivalent relationship with the South,

questioning its traditions, while often reaffirming them. In the structure of her work, however, we find a more direct challenge to tradition, convention, and patriarchy. It is her form that we find the feminine, and it is in her form that we perhaps find Gilchrist's most lasting contribution to Southern literature.

Chapter 1

Occupying the Pedestal: The Ambivalence in Ellen Gilchrist's Women

The women in Ellen Gilchrist's work are not particularly progressive. You won't find a staunch feminist in the group, and you will search long and hard before finding a female character with a modicum of politics. Yet, Gilchrist's women navigate through a Post-World War II South trying to find a way of life very unlike that of their mothers. These are women whose lives and experiences are fully presented and who don't necessarily embrace the patriarchal society in which they live. When they do embrace it, a struggle between the women who try to play expected roles and larger society usually ensues. Her protagonists often deal with the dominant culture in subversive ways, while calling into question ideas about the roles for women in society. Yet, such subversion has its limits, often revealing the extent to which the South has had trouble parting with some of its most entrenched ideas and practices—specifically that men are entitled to hold political and economic power and that women, to some extent, still occupy that age-old and problematic pedestal, rendering them constrained and defined by their relationships to men.

Gilchrist's girls and women show a propensity for rebellion against the idea of the Southern lady. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw discusses the "myth of the Southern white lady" and how the Southern Belle was born in the imaginations of white slaveholding men (73). She quotes Anne Goodwyn Jones who says, "More than just a fragile flower...the image of the southern lady represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial and social perfection" (qtd. in Prenshaw 74). In the old nineteenth-century plantation novels, by writers such as Thomas Nelson Page, the idealized image of the ladies who graced the Old South were "selfish coquettes," around whom all social life revolved, and were universally considered the

center of all things (Prenshaw 74). According to writers such as Page, Southern ladies were courtly, had perfect manners, “clean, pure, sweet country homes” and were “self-possessed” coquettes (Prenshaw 75). Gilchrist writes against the definition of Southern women-on-pedestals, who were silent, polite, and seen, but not heard. Gilchrist’s women are outspoken and bypass flirting, demanding sex with men. They are rarely polite or well-mannered. However, her women do not completely deviate from the old image of the Southern lady. While they are not pure and mannerly, Gilchrist’s women still occupy the pedestal. They run households, but the work is completed by servants. They rarely interact with their children, who are usually attended to by mammies. Their husbands own the world outside their stately homes, and their maids own the world inside their homes, leaving them nowhere to go, really, except back to the pedestal. Gilchrist’s women are feisty, but they have no real power until they leave their husbands, children and homes. Most often they are simply bored alcoholics. Gilchrist’s rendering of women clearly shows that occupying the pedestal extracts too high a price, and to leave the pedestal means to walk out the front door to begin a new life.

This idea of the price of white female dependence is one that Lillian Smith describes in *Killers of the Dream*, the autobiographical account of her life and of her experiences as a woman in the South during the early twentieth century. She says,

The majority of southern women convinced themselves that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure, and meekly stuffed their hollowness with piety, trying to believe the tightness they felt was hunger satisfied. Culturally stunted by a region that still pays nice rewards to simple-mindedness in females, they had no defense against blandishment. They listened to the round words of men’s tribute to Sacred Womanhood and believed, thinking no doubt that if they were sacred, then what under God’s heaven was the matter with them! Once hoisted up by the old colonel’s oratory, they stayed on lonely pedestals and rigidly played statue while their men went about more important affairs elsewhere. (141)

Gilchrist's women never pretend to be pious, nor do they deny themselves pleasure. Gilchrist writes against this notion of the Southern Lady described by Smith, by showing the boredom and loneliness that accompanies pedestal-occupying in the characters of Rhoda and Crystal, for example, among other protagonists. However, these women leave their pedestal reluctantly, and they often manage to get back on them after leaving. Gilchrist wants it both ways—for women to be independent (at least as she envisions independence), and for women to be, as Page perceives, “selfish coquettes” for whom all social life revolves (Prenshaw 75). Gilchrist's protagonists “occupy” the pedestal in the sense that they want social change, while simultaneously occupying it as a place of refuge.

The refuge offered by the pedestal, or traditional Southern Lady prototype, is one in which by adhering to the ideals of the Southern Lady, a woman's physical, financial and, to some extent, social needs are met. The effort to maintain the image of a “lady” required the silent support of a paternal household, and was the currency exchanged for being cared for and having one's home maintained by others. This is, of course, for only the privileged classes of white southern society. The price seems high, and yet this is frequently the example of mothers in literature of the South. Caroline Compson, of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, is an example of a Southern Lady—a woman on a pedestal, but she is ineffective, sickly, removed from the day-to-day affairs of the household and from anything that could give her a sense of self-worth. Rhoda's mother, Ariane, is depicted in similar terms. The absence of anything in these women's lives that would give them a sense of self-worth is what makes them sickly and weak, and yet they are convinced that their role consists of upholding the image of southern lady. The risks are great for these women, as their economic status depends so much upon the men in their lives. Prenshaw says,

In the 1840s and 1850s, when the South came to defend its way of life with its peculiar institution of slavery, or even later, after the worst of the Reconstruction years, when Southern writers like Page looked backward to glorify antebellum days, it is not surprising to find the patriarchal system, which was argued to be in the best interests of the slaves, logically extended and justified as the necessary protection of helpless women and children. (77)

Prenshaw discusses George Fitzhugh's 1854 *Sociology of the South* in which he "describes the Southern woman precisely in terms of her dependency":

So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, men will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness... Woman, like children, had but one right and that is the right to protection. A husband, a lord and master, whom she should love, honor and obey, nature designed for every woman... If she be obedient she stands little danger of maltreatment. (qtd. in Prenshaw 77)

Gilchrist makes it clear that women like Ariane hold no real power, and this is a problem she attempts to solve with Rhoda and the other characters.

The problem, however, is one Gilchrist admits to not being able to solve, at least through the Rhoda character, who happens to be her most popular and most written character. In the short story "Revenge" a young Rhoda defies the society around her, a society that will not allow her to go near the broad jump pit that her brothers and male cousins built. Ten year-old Rhoda's desire to pole vault with the boys in the broad jump pit is thwarted by not only her brother Dudley, but by her grandmother who takes her shopping for a dress to wear as a bridesmaid at a wedding, a reminder to Rhoda that her life will take place in another sphere from the boys in her life. Rhoda's life will be about marriage and domesticity, not playing the boys' games. Rhoda's father, serving in World War II, confirms through his letters the ideas that the boys should be practicing for the Olympics and taking care of Rhoda, as she was "[her] father's own dear sweet girl" (LDD 112). Rhoda is expected to perform her gender at age ten and for a few days is distracted by the excitement of getting to be an attendant in her cousin's wedding. However, by

the time the reception rolls around and Rhoda finds disillusionment in the wedding, much as she finds disillusionment later in her marriage, she takes to the pasture to pole vault in the moonlight. When the wedding guests realize Rhoda is missing, they begin searching for her and find her in the broad-jump pit. Rhoda has discarded the bridesmaid dress, a dress that symbolizes how she is expected to act as a little lady, and is jumping in her underpants. Ten year-old Rhoda describes the scene as follows:

I hoisted the pole up to my shoulders and began to run down the path, running into the light from the moon. I picked up speed, thrust the pole in the cup, and threw myself into the sky, into the still Delta night. I sailed up and was clear and over the barrier.

I let go of the pole and began my fall, which seemed to last a long, long time. It was like falling through clear water. I dropped into the sawdust and lay very still, waiting for them to reach me.

Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me. (LDD 124)

Rhoda has succeeded in entering the boys' world with her jump, but although she has broken through a barrier, she finds that it is the first of many barriers for her in this world. Gilchrist seems to say that the best that could happen for females during this era took place during childhood. Bauer believes that this work's last sentence shows the "limitations upon girls and women who grew up during and following World War II and the consequences, particularly to strong girls and women, of those limitations" (*Fiction 2*).

The Hero's Journey: Breaking with Tradition

Most of Gilchrist's protagonists are willing to leave behind their precious South or to learn to live in it in different ways, leaving behind mothers and grandmothers who are glued to place and tradition. Gilchrist's protagonists are a conflicted lot, striking out in hero fashion to

move beyond the lives of their quiet, ineffective mothers, all the while clutching their pearls, their grandmothers' silver, and fistfuls of their daddies' money. They are women who are caught in transition—who desire, most of all, a life beyond the pedestal. Although they leave the bridge tables and teas of their mothers, Gilchrist's women often do not achieve real power and independence. They seem to have one foot in modernity and one in the past. Gilchrist's women do not achieve power because they do not achieve economic independence. Economic independence does not come as a result of leaving husbands or daddies, because they are still dependent upon family money in order to live.

Although Gilchrist's women want to break out of a Southern culture that binds, they do not completely succeed. They still give too much power over their lives to their “daddies,” and they coddle their sons to grow up to be the daddy prototype—polo-clad Southern white males who might be dumb and lazy but are, nevertheless, handed the reins to society. Gilchrist misses an opportunity with her characters to break the cycle, but perhaps her rendering the sons of mothers this way is meant as a commentary on a culture that keeps churning out men such as these.

And, although they assert themselves and often seem to take charge of their lives, Gilchrist's women cannot completely let go of the dominant culture's expectations of southern women. That southern woman must be charming, gracious, skinny, traditionally dressed, feminine, and sexually available. They are feisty women, but this feistiness is all a part of that Southern female package, and—in Scarlett O'Hara fashion—part of what makes them attractive to men. Always, always there are men, and while storming out of the door of the marital homes to start new lives might be seen as admirable, these women continuously crane their necks to find the next man. Life doesn't seem to be settled for them without one. Gilchrist often makes this

the case in her work when it doesn't seem to fit otherwise. Women whose stories seem to be headed in particularly independent directions often, gratuitously it seems, inject a male (always male) lover in their lives.

Ellen's women often resemble each other. Margaret Bauer says that in Gilchrist's early work she develops a "composite female personality, which she will continue to draw on in creating other female protagonists for her later stories" (*Fiction* 24). Most fall into the Rhoda Manning prototype—adventurous women who identify with their daddies, are mostly contemptuous toward their mothers, and who strike out to lead lives that are not extensions of their past lives. The Rhoda prototype is feisty, rebellious, sexually active, spoiled, and not especially tied to motherhood and domestic life. Anna Hand, another recurring character, resembles Rhoda but is more independent and controlling than Rhoda. Anna manages to break free from her family to carve out a life as a writer, but returns to them in the end. Amanda McCamey, the protagonist in *The Annunciation*, is similar, leaving a posh New Orleans lifestyle to head to the hills of Arkansas to become a writer. Nora Jane is another woman who starts out as a courageous woman who robs a New Orleans bar in order to make an escape to California to be with her boyfriend, only to settle into life with an older, wealthy man who takes care of her, but with whom she is not in love.

Brad Hooper points out that the more Gilchrist writes the character Rhoda the closer Rhoda resembles the characters Anna Hand and Amanda McCamey. He says, "They are basically cut from the same cloth; always in need of a man to ensure complete stabilization in life. Intelligent, articulate, a writer or involved in academia in some fashion...Confident and self-centered" (78). This conflation of characters is confusing in works in which the characters disappear and reappear at different times in their lives, different works, and told from different

points-of-view. But this conflation serves to reinforce Gilchrist's notion of the ideal woman—that confident, self-centered, intelligent and articulate writer—which subtly pushes for a role model that is not the traditional Southern woman, at least as depicted in earlier literature.

These problematic women matter, because they tell us much about the ambivalence not only of the women on these journeys away from the past, but of the ambivalence of larger society toward its women.

Ellen Gilchrist's Women: But, are they feminists?

Gilchrist claims she is not a feminist. In *Falling Through Space* she writes, "For a long time I have wanted to set something straight in the world. There are many people who read my books and decide that I am a feminist. I believe they base this assumption on the stories that deal with an intense sibling rivalry between a little redheaded girl named Rhoda and her brother Dudley, poorly disguised version of my brother Dooley and myself" (152). She goes on to say, "I like men because they protect me. All my life they have protected me and I believe they will go on doing it as long as I love them in return" (FS 152). Mary McCay makes the point that in Gilchrist's works "men do not always protect women but often exploit and damage them" (1). In a later paragraph Gilchrist writes,

But I am an old-fashioned woman. I don't want to be a man. I don't want to have broad shoulders or big arms or be the one to go out and fight the big cats or the invading Huns or whatever threatens us next. I want to go on living side by side with men and running my hands up and down the muscles of their arms and worrying about them and talking about them behind their backs to other women. (FS 155)

Here, Gilchrist attempts to use humor to gloss things over. Her comments about feminism are significant in that they show her propensity to not offend but maintain strong ties with the dominant culture. Again, Gilchrist does not confront issues concerning women directly; instead,

she insists that by conceding power to men and finding ways around it, we can go on “living side by side with men.” She goes on to say, “I can say all that and still know that women are actually wiser than men because we are more intuitive and, of course, much as I hate to bring this up, we do bring them into the world” (FS 155). Again, it is evident in her works that although she writes fiercely independent women, she also “flirts” with her male readers, letting them off the hook by saying, in effect, “Men will be men. We just need to let them flex their muscles and assure them we think they’re wonderful.” This is the attitude that prevails throughout her writing, and it is one reason that describing Gilchrist’s works as feminist is problematic.

Mary McCay thinks that Gilchrist’s claims about feminism are not reflected in her fiction. McCay describes Gilchrist’s disavowal of being a feminist as stating her position “in a most unliberated way” (1). However, McCay goes on to say that Gilchrist’s works “give primacy to women’s experience and promote contemporary ways of looking at that experience. The contrast between Gilchrist’s stated politics and the freer territory of her imagination produces a freshness of vision that enriches and deepens her fiction” (1). McCay discusses the “powerful women who make their own choices about life and love” in Gilchrist’s works (1).

Cheri Register says that a “literary work should provide *role-models*, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are ‘self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men’” (212). Gilchrist’s work does provide female role-models who are self-actualizing, although they are not completely satisfying ones as they are often women who never fully give up their dependence, especially economic dependence, on men. Characters such as Rhoda, Amanda, and Helen (Anna Hand’s sister) leave comfortable programmed lives as mothers and wives to find new lives, but these are women who must, again, find men in order to have fulfillment.

Register also says that “literature should provide realistic insights into female personality development, self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and other ‘private’ or ‘internal’ consequences of sexism” (214). Gilchrist, for the most part, succeeds in providing realistic insights into women, and she does a good job of showing the consequences of sexism in her unhappy characters such as Rhoda, Crystal and Amanda. However, Gilchrist has a difficult time confronting sexism directly; she tends to have her female protagonists make friends with or excuse it, instead. And, what is problematic about this is that Gilchrist’s characters find it easier to become complicit with the dominant culture rather than to confront it.

Rhoda is a perfect example of a character who excuses the bad behavior of the men around her to get what she wants. In the many and varied depictions of her, Rhoda always understands with whom the power lies. She pragmatically befriends and uses that power to get what she wants. In “1957, a Romance” Rhoda has sex with her gynecologist in order to get the name of a doctor who performs abortions. “She had fucked her fat, balding gynecologist all Wednesday afternoon to get the name. She had fucked him on the daybed in his office and on the examining table and on the rug in the waiting room” (LDD 81). Rhoda then solicits her father’s financial help in obtaining an abortion by saying that her husband got her pregnant because she was planning to leave him (LDD 81). She succeeds in turning her father against her husband, easily playing on her father’s sympathies, pitting one against the other. She insists that he keep the information about her abortion from her mother. While Dudley Manning considers how to solve the problem he prays, “You know I’d like to kill that little son of a bitch with my bare hands but I’ll keep myself from doing it” (LDD 82). Rhoda manages her world by ricocheting wildly from man to man.

This work appears in Gilchrist's first short story collection, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, published in 1981, twenty-four years after this story takes place and eight years after *Roe v. Wade* was decided. Although the work does point out the dangers of abortions not being readily available to women, the only person to whom Rhoda turns is her father. Brad Hooper sums up Rhoda's father's character. "The power her father exerts over Rhoda is regressive: he is the traditional macho male in the South in the 1950s, who continues to want the women in his life to be demure and conservative, to remain unexposed to liberating attitudes about women's rights, and even racial ones" (85). Much later, at her father's deathbed, Rhoda realizes she is afraid to go into the room. "Not afraid of the horror of watching our father doped up on morphine by the hospice bullshitters or of him dying, but for fear he would say one last true thing to us about how we had wasted our lives and what we could do to change if we tried and kept on trying" (IRM 114).

A good example of the father prototype who maintains control over his daughter is the one Rhoda Manning describes in the preface to *Net of Jewels*:

I was cathected by a narcissist. That's how shrinks put it and it means, my daddy is a vain and beautiful man who thinks of his children as extensions of his personality. Our entire lives were supposed to be lights to shine upon his stage. We were supposed to make him look good... You have to know that to understand this story, which is about my setting forth to break the bonds he tied me with. It took a very long time and almost destroyed a lot of innocent people along the way. In the end I got free, so it sort of has a happy ending. That's what this country is about, isn't it? Getting free. Freeing people from their pasts. Creating our own crazy dazzling lives. (3-4)

It seems that while Rhoda recognizes that her relationship with her father is the root of her problems, it is her mother whom she treats with great disdain. Rhoda picks up on her culture's attitude toward women—that they are not as valuable to society as men. Rhoda knows that she can manipulate her father in ways her mother cannot be manipulated, but she also

understands that the buck stops with him. Rhoda considers his career as a professional baseball player and the scrapbooks full of his accomplishments. She considers him now:

He had made money. He had made two million dollars by getting up at four o'clock every morning and working his ass off every single day for years. And he had loved it, loved getting up before the sun rose, loved eating his quiet lonely breakfasts, loved learning to control his temper, loved being smarter and better and luckier than everyone else. (RH 188)

In Rhoda's mind her father's authority is unquestionable because he has made two million dollars, and this gives him the right to treat her family members in manipulative and demeaning ways. Rhoda's views about men are rooted in a patriarchal society in which the men deserve power because they make the money. Later, when Rhoda's father is older and she struggles with raising three teenage boys, Rhoda says, "I was from a rich and powerful family and we could solve our problems. If our children went crazy we just took them somewhere and got them well. My father had been a famous baseball player. He could do anything..." (IRM 28). Rhoda will thrash against a society in which the roles for women do not change much over the years. She will never, however, realize the economic independence enjoyed by her father, but will continue to depend on money made by men: her father's money, her husband's money, and inheritance money from her grandfather.

Rhoda longs for change, but not change that she is willing to bring about on her own. Rhoda is not willing to sacrifice the comfort of the wealth to which she is accustomed to become independent. While her road away from her husband Malcolm does not necessarily lead to independence, Rhoda still disrupts the societal norms of the South—those of staying with a husband no matter what, allowing the husband's decisions to dominate her world, and those of finding happiness solely in domestic life and raising children.

In her portrayal of women who break away from tradition, Gilchrist is not easy on the mothers of her women characters. Rhoda and Dudley agree not to tell her mother Ariane about the abortion, instead concocting a lie about visiting Dudley's mines, implying that she is too weak to handle the truth. Ariane is described as a "gentle, religious woman who had lived her life in service to her family and friends" (RH 188). Later in life, after Dudley and Ariane move to Wyoming, Ariane resents the move wishing she were back in the South. Dudley thinks that he should have expected this from "a woman who had her hair done every Friday and wore heels to garden in. A woman who grew hybrid roses and played bridge at the country club and had been a Chi Omega at Ole Miss" (IRM 87). When Dudley mentions that he is buying a ranch in Wyoming, Ariane is surprised. "What ranch?" Ariane asked. "You didn't tell me you were buying a ranch" (IRM 66).

In a society in which men have little respect for the women they marry, young girls become confused. In the short story "Music," published in 1983 in *Victory over Japan*, Rhoda's father Dudley does take her to the coal mines. Dudley uses the trip as an excuse to meet up with his mistress for a few days, leaving Rhoda with a mining family. In an exchange where her father comes to retrieve her, Rhoda tells Dudley that she's tired of being locked up in a trailer with "poor white trash" and religious magazines (VJ 38). Her father tells Rhoda that Maud is "salt of the earth" (VJ 38). Rhoda replies that her "Momma" would have a fit if she knew that Rhoda had stayed with a "white trash country woman" (VJ 39) Dudley replies, "Your momma is a very stupid person...And I'm sorry I ever let her raise you" (VJ 39). Again, this reinforcement of the idea that her mother is stupid and not fit to raise Rhoda by her father is one that encourages Rhoda to demonstrate perpetual disdain for her mother.

Ariane is able to handle Rhoda's independent streak while Rhoda is a child, but later, when Rhoda starts behaving in ways that don't fit in with her mother's idea of how women should behave, Ariane is not happy. This confirms the last line in the work "Revenge," in which the narrator (Rhoda) claims that what has happened to her since her successful pole vault has been "of no real interest" to her (RH 19). It is only in childhood that Rhoda's strength and fiery spirit are tolerated, at least to an extent.

For Ariane, Rhoda must turn off those traits in order to conform to southern womanhood. And part of that is to be as weak and complicit as Ariane is. Since Ariane puts up with Dudley's affair and his disregard for her in other ways, she does not understand why Rhoda would leave Malcolm. Ariane asks Rhoda what she is to tell Malcolm when he calls while "buttering toast with a shaking hand" (RH 189), demonstrating that Ariane is afraid of her daughter's independence. Ariane is too weak to handle the truth and cannot envision her daughter leading a life any different from the one she has led.

Ariane does not approve of Rhoda's leaving Malcolm, not because Malcolm is an ideal husband to Rhoda, but because Ariane is afraid of what this will mean for her. She suspects that Rhoda really wants someone to take care of her children, since Rhoda has left her husband three times in two years (RH 189). Also, Rhoda declares throughout her teenage and college years that she does not want to run a home or have a baby. In fact, the first thing she tells Malcolm, the man she will later marry, is that a baby screamed during the entire plane ride to meet him. She claims, "I wouldn't have a baby for all the tea in China. If I had a baby, I'd give it away" (NJ 132).

Rhoda's ambivalence about marriage is constant. She believes one minute that she must be married, but the next knows she cannot. When Rhoda has a date in college and makes out

with Hap, she regrets it the next day and thinks about the time she had been engaged for three weeks.

From the moment I took the ring until I gave it back I had been in a state of perpetual trauma. I had no dream of marriage. I had no desire to run a house or be a wife or live forever with a man...I belonged somewhere else...I belonged somewhere in laboratories of men and women looking through microscopes...I belonged somewhere where people talked of poetry and didn't have things they read explained to them. I was going to be an old maid. (NJ 95)

However, Rhoda marries Malcolm in college at age nineteen because she wants to have sex and because she begins to romanticize marriage. Even though Rhoda thinks she will be very different from her mother, Rhoda falls into the trap of early marriage.

Rhoda's disdain for her mother is apparent in her exchanges with women who are not from the South and with her father. When Rhoda meets Mrs. Morgan, a woman from Massachusetts who moved to Dunleith, Alabama, during the summer after her first year at the University of Alabama, Rhoda wants this intelligent woman's approval. When Mrs. Morgan tells Rhoda that she has met her mother, Rhoda replies with, "Oh, God, she's so boring. I hope you don't think I'm anything like her" (NJ 57).

When Rhoda elopes with Malcolm her mother becomes hysterical (NJ 191). Dudley tries to calm Ariane by telling her that Rhoda has married someone from "good people" (NJ 191). He tells her to stop her "goddamn crying" and tells "Sister" (Rhoda) to come with him. "He winked at me. Winked and smiled the old smile that meant, Don't pay any attention to her. She's too weak and silly to be involved in the real work of the world, making money, being headstrong and passionate, winning, running away to marry whomever you damn well please" (NJ 192). Rhoda is in an impossible place. She has been told all of her life that she does not

belong with her dad and brothers, but her father's disdain for her mother prevents her from identifying with her mother.

Gilchrist's women have lives that look different from the lives of their mothers because they ultimately make a break with their traditional marriages and embark on new paths, something their mothers do not manage. Celeste Adkins discusses Rhoda's resentment of her mother's subservience to her husband as the cause of Rhoda's break from her mother and reliance on her father. She says that Rhoda does not experience the same break with her father because "she is never able to completely step out of the warmth and protections that comes from him" (43). Rhoda understands that her father's world is the world of power. Adkins says of Rhoda, "Even as a young child she is smart enough to envy the men around her their simplicity, their physical strength, their swagger, rapaciousness and forward motion, enough to try and emulate it. However, Rhoda, unlike them, is constantly thwarted, rejected, and patronized when she goes after what she wants because in her father's and brother's eyes, she is above all else, a girl, their 'Sweet Sister'" (43).

Rhoda learns at an early age that boys are given privileges she cannot enjoy. When her father writes to the family while fighting in World War II, his focus is on what the boys are doing and how they will fit into a post-World War II world. He never considers how that world will change for Rhoda, admonishing the boys to take care of their sister while giving them very specific instructions on how to train for the Olympics. A young Rhoda narrates the following about her father's letter,

The United States would need athletes now, not soldiers. They were to train for broad jumping and pole-vaulting and discus throwing, for fifty-, one-hundred, and four-hundred-yard dashes, for high and low hurdles. The letter included instructions for building the pit, for making pole-vaulting poles out of cane, and for converting ordinary sawhorses into hurdles. It ended with a page of tips for

proper eating and admonished Dudley to take good care of me as I was my father's own dear little girl. (RH 4)

The letter is devoted to what her brothers and male cousins are to do, and Rhoda is mentioned as an afterthought, not part of the real future of the United States. This reinforces what Rhoda fights continuously against as a child—that girls are not as important as boys, and that ultimately women do not really contribute significantly to society. This ideology is reinforced for Rhoda as an adult. Although she is strong and longs for independence, the only time she really matters, in her early adulthood, is when she matters to a man who can take care of her.

When Rhoda is manipulated by her father into attending the University of Alabama, even though she has experienced great success as a writer at Vanderbilt, her first date is with a law student that her Chi Omega “big sister” arranged for her. As Donie describes Stanley to Rhoda, she realizes that her date will be with a man like her father.

Some old law student in a dark suit was coming to take me out to dinner. He was dark and tall and cold. He never smiled. He wanted me to act like a lady. He wanted me to be beautiful and thin. Sophisticated and aloof, quiet and soft and perfect. He was my father. He had come to get my mother. Together they walked down the path from the Chi Omega house to the car. They were going out to dinner. They were irritated and very sad. (NJ 101)

In this passage it is clear that while much is expected of the woman, nothing is expected of the man. He comes to retrieve his “object” who must be many things—beautiful, thin, sophisticated, aloof, quiet, soft, and perfect. These rigid requirements of women are ones which Gilchrist weaves throughout her works. The shift of verb tenses is interesting in this paragraph; Rhoda begins by stating that an old law student “was coming” to take her to dinner and “was” dark, tall, and cold. The descriptions then become ones of her parents. “He was my father. He had come to get my mother...They were irritated and very sad” (NJ 101). In this shift within the same paragraph, Gilchrist emphasizes how difficult it is to escape from the past. During this date with

the law student she becomes the past. Again, this ties back to the comment she makes in telling the “Revenge” story, in that nothing that has happened to her since has ever been as important as that day.

Gilchrist’s women learn to align themselves with the dominant culture in order to find real power in society. By identifying with the real sources of power in the South, most of Gilchrist’s women find their way. It works for gender as well as race. W. J. Cash in “Mind of the South” discusses a southern culture that manipulates the marginalized by finding common traits. The poor, white rural man is made to believe that he identifies, and therefore achieves a level of power, with the rich plantation owner through his whiteness. Cash writes of the poor white southern male in 1941,

Robbing him and degrading him in so many ways, it yet, by singular irony, had simultaneously elevated this common white to a position comparable to that of, say, the Doric knight of ancient Sparta. Not only was he not exploited directly, he was himself made by extension a member of the dominant class—was lodged solidly on a tremendous superiority, which, however much the blacks in the “big house” might sneer at him, and however much their masters might privately agree with them, he could never publicly lose. Come what might, he would always be a white man. And before that vast and capacious distinction, all others were foreshadowed, dwarfed, and all but obliterated. (39)

The same argument could be made for privileged white women. The power of white males was so absolute that the quickest route to their own perceived independence (from parents and poverty) was dependence on a man. Often Gilchrist’s women go from Daddy’s money to Husband’s money, but by staying within the social class to which they were born, they eventually end up with enough money that they can achieve freedom from both. Rhoda, and many of Gilchrist’s women, do not think anything about leaving the men who provide for them and with whom they have children, in part because the men they marry never end up being as important, at least in their minds, as their fathers. Gilchrist’s women, and Rhoda in particular,

believe in a shortcut to power--that the way to have power is to align oneself with it. Rhoda is disappointed in marriage over and over because the men she marries are never as powerful as she perceives her father to be. Rhoda looks back on her life with her father, later, while visiting his grave. She thinks that it is a gift to have the kind of father who would kill or die for you, but it is also a curse (IRM 18). She says, "It's a gift because you have a safe and fortunate childhood and can grow up strong and unafraid. It's a curse because you cannot reproduce it in the adult world. No man can be that wonderful ever again..." (IRM 18).

Instead of working toward authority over their own lives by attaining economic independence through education and work, Gilchrist's protagonists repeat their mothers' patterns of marrying well. The break with their mothers comes after marriage when the protagonist is then not satisfied with domestic life. This is part of what makes Gilchrist's women interesting—their struggle to break up with the old south and its expectations and traditions, and the difficulties these transitions bring.

Power: Women's Beauty and Men's Money

The power that is available to Gilchrist's women usually lies in their beauty. Rhoda claims, "If I am beautiful, the thing I want will show up" (AM 217). Nora Jane is a perfect example of a southern woman who parlays her beauty into power—not only in marrying a San Francisco heir to the Sears fortune, but in maintaining the upper hand in the relationship. We are introduced to Nora Jane in Gilchrist's first book of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, written in 1981 and set in 1978. Nora Jane robs a bar in New Orleans in order to join her cheating boyfriend in San Francisco. While looking for her boyfriend Sandy in San Francisco, Nora Jane meets Freddy Harwood, who will do anything for Nora Jane because he falls for her

beauty the minute he sees her. Freddy has just been voted one of the Bay Area's most eligible bachelors, but quickly becomes obsessed with having Nora Jane even after she attempts to rob him. Nora Jane tells him she is not in love with him, but he is obsessed with her. "Her black curls were violet in the sun. Her shoulders were bare beneath the straps of her sundress. If he could not have her there was no reason for anything. If he could not have her there was no reason in the world, all was madness and random evil and stupid jokes being played by the galaxy and all its real and imagined gods" (NJ 92). When she seduces him, Freddy thinks that he had "worshiped every inch of Nora Jane since the night he met her. He loved her beauty, had been raised to know and worship beauty, believed beauty was truth, balance, order. He worshiped Nora Jane and he loved her" (CL 5). As he touches her "small round hip" he trembles and thinks, "I cultivate this...some men gamble" (CL 5).

Eventually, Freddy realizes it is money that Nora Jane needs, so he systematically tries to woo her with his. He buys her a baby blue convertible the day that Sandy reappears in her life. When Nora Jane gets pregnant and returns to Freddy he immediately asks her what he can buy her (NJ 115). Nora Jane quickly goes from being a quirky, independent anarchist to a tediously devoted mother and housewife. Earlier, Gilchrist introduces Nora Jane as follows:

Nora Jane was nineteen years old, a self-taught anarchist and a quick-change artist. She owned six Dynel wigs in different hair colors, a makeup kit she stole from Le Petit Theatre due Vieux Carre while working as a volunteer stagehand, and a small but versatile wardrobe. She could turn her graceful body into any character she saw in a movie or on TV. Her specialties were boyish young lesbians, boyish young nuns, and a variety of lady tourists. (NJ 25)

Gilchrist creates an exciting Nora Jane character, but it is disturbing to see Nora Jane go from an edgy anarchist to a boring housewife. Nora Jane is at her best as a spunky, rebellious, and unconventional woman—a woman who is not afraid to rob Jody's Bar alone. When Nora Jane robs Jody's Bar in the Irish Channel in New Orleans she uses a stage pistol to hold up the bar she

had been casing for weeks. She is methodical and takes care of details and pulls off this robbery in a bar full of men in broad daylight. Nora Jane had attended Catholic schools, so “she crossed herself and prayed for divine intervention. After all, she told herself, robbing an old guy who sold whiskey and laid bets on athletic events was part of an anarchist’s work. Nora Jane didn’t like old guys much anyway. They were all wrinkled where the muscles ought to be and they were so sad” (NJ, 29). It is ironic that Nora Jane ends up with an older man in San Francisco just a few months later.

The Nora Jane who robbed Jody’s bar is a very different woman than the Nora Jane living in San Francisco five years later. She succeeds in making it to San Francisco only to find that her boyfriend is in another relationship. Nora Jane is, however, so in love with Sandy that she reunites with him whenever he gets the notion. When she becomes pregnant with twins, she is unsure of the paternity. Nora Jane finds some power in becoming pregnant while the paternity of her twins is in question. Both men claim to be father of the twins. Again, this traditional way of holding power—through carrying men’s babies and being stunningly beautiful—seems to be the only power available to Nora Jane.

Nora Jane marries Freddy only because she is pregnant and Sandy keeps leaving her, but she settles into married life with Freddy, whom she tells repeatedly that she does not love, without a hitch. She runs several households, including an oceanfront mansion, gives birth to the twins, enjoys dinners at Chez Panisse, and drives luxury automobiles. There are weddings and children’s activities, swimming pools, and parties. Gilchrist never reconciles the jump from Nora Jane’s love and passion for Sandy and friendship with Freddy to Nora Jane’s loving, lasting marriage to Freddy. Even though Freddy has money and prestige in his community, Nora Jane has power in the marriage. Gilchrist seems to say it is possible to assume power if you’re

beautiful and young enough. Freddy has the business, the fortune, the friends, the homes, the cars, but Nora Jane has the upper hand through the very last chapter. Freddy always feels lucky to be married to such a beautiful woman, and so she has the final say about everything. Nora Jane's beauty is her currency. Although some critics see Nora Jane as Gilchrist's younger generation protagonist (Bauer, *Fiction* 14), and seem to think that involves a departure from her "usual southern belles" (Larue 70), Nora Jane is actually confined to the traditional depiction of women in patriarchal literature. Nora Jane allows Freddy to marry her because she is pregnant and because he is wealthy. He does treat her well, and Nora Jane does go back to school, (although over his objections) but it is the net of his money that allows her to live a life very different from that of the anarchist she once claimed to be. The quirky, fierce woman who stole props from a French Quarter theatre in order to carry out her well-planned robberies morphs into a docile, loving housewife without a hitch. Either Gilchrist does not successfully flesh out the changes taking place in her character, or else she is saying that money is that transformative. Gilchrist does not seem to be able to imagine a life without money; it seems to be her answer, in part, to the inequities that her women experience.

Nora Jane attains a measure of power in society through her husband's money. By evaluating where power lies and co-opting it, the women in Gilchrist's works achieve some control. Nora Jane has no career or influence in the community except through Freddy. Before Freddy and Nora Jane marry, he arranges a job for her in his cousin's gallery. Again, Gilchrist's women have what they have because they align themselves with the dominant culture. Despite Nora Jane's feisty independence and counter-culture lifestyle, she quickly tosses the costumes and pistols in order to settle into marriage with a wealthy man and have babies. For Gilchrist, the

options for women are so restricted that the ways of becoming successful are limited to inheritances or marriage, not unlike their mothers before them.

Gilchrist's women care about money, and they take for granted that it will always be there. Implicit in her work is that money is necessary for happiness. Gilchrist's women have options because they are from wealthy families and marry wealthy men, setting them up to have opportunities, at least those afforded by money, for life. The importance of money for the women in her work is understated, yet taken for granted.

Even though money is taken for granted by her characters, Gilchrist demonstrates how, in spite of money, oppression leads to dysfunction. It is because her women were systematically excluded by institutions made up of powerful men that they are forced into economically dependent relationships. The women in Gilchrist's work do not work, in part because of their husbands' capacity for earning. This is a system that works well for the husbands, but ultimately does not for their wives.

Gilchrist does not, however, let the disparity in work go without comment. In *The Annunciation* Amanda McCamey and her husband argue about attending a party in which Coretta Scott King will accept \$200,000 from Amanda's husband's boss for a scholarship in Martin Luther King's name. Malcolm is a labor attorney who works to keep unions out of his boss's restaurant and Amanda confronts her husband's hypocrisy, telling him, "I wouldn't let you go with me if you wanted to. I wouldn't want Mrs. King to know I was with someone who does what you do for a living" (AN 84). Malcolm replies, "As opposed to what you do for a living?" (AN 84).

In "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," Lelia, a blonde housewife with a good figure and bad temper, does not want her husband to know that she does nothing all day

except play tennis (LDD 30). In an exchange where her husband asks if she has called the coach of their pot-smoking son to see if his practice had been cancelled she tells him she doesn't have to hear this while cooking dinner. "If you keep this up I'll leave and you can cook your own dinner.' She was furiously buttering French bread to go with the fried chicken the cook had left warming in the oven" (LDD 30). This exchange demonstrates that there is an expectation on the part of both the uptown husband and Lelia that she will accomplish something for the household that day. She tries to "get dinner on the table so Will wouldn't know she hadn't done anything all day but play tennis" (LDD 30). However, they have a cook. The underlying tension in this work exposes the impossible place for Gilchrist's women—women who have cooks but must pretend to cook dinner.

Gilchrist demonstrates, through her work, the bizarre positions of the Uptown New Orleans' women with their mansions and servants. Even though some of her women leave these environments, they still have enough money that they do not have to work for a living. Crystal Manning and Amanda McCamey are both wealthy, uptown women in New Orleans who do outrageous things in order to fight against an oppression inherent in their relationships to their husbands and to larger society.

The women who find it difficult to move away from the comfort of mansions and servants are stuck in cycles of alcohol abuse and extramarital affairs. Amanda is a character who spends her days on a Henredon sofa watching soap operas while nursing hangovers. She has a series of alcohol-related accidents and decides to stop drinking after she has a drunken confrontation with Coretta Scott King. She makes such a scene that she decides to throw away the bottle and eventually moves to Fayetteville, Arkansas to become a writer. Crystal is another drunk character, and although she, too, has an independent spirit, she never leaves her New

Orleans husband, continuing a life of drunken escapades and affairs. Gilchrist shows through the character of Crystal that there is a certain amount of inertia on the pedestal.

In spite of the appearance of having everything, Gilchrist's women are typically unhappy. These women are set up for lives of boredom, which lead to alcoholism, affairs and dysfunctional families. Since the men in Gilchrist's work earn so much, there is no reason for women to go to work. Their privileged class does not allow an outlet for the women's energy. Their children are cared for, their meals are cooked, and their homes are cleaned by domestic workers. In the opening line of "There's a Garden of Eden" the idea of beauty leading to boredom is apparent: "Scores of men, including an ex-governor and the owner of a football team, consider Alisha Terrebone to be the most beautiful woman in the state of Louisiana. If she is unhappy what hope is there for ordinary mortals? Yet here is Alisha, cold and bored and lonely, smoking in bed" (LDD 38). Beauty, wealth, social standing, children, and marriage simply do not add up to fulfillment for Gilchrist's women. When Arthur of "Madison at 69th, a Fable" claims that his mother has always been free because she was a "rich man's daughter and a rich man's wife," Sara replies, "That's not freedom. That's chattel slavery" (AM 30). Gilchrist's wealthy women find that money gives them many things, but it does not give them freedom.

Although opportunities were opening for women during the 1970's to enter the workforce and become economically independent, the privileged classes of the South expected their women to be at home at night to comfort and satisfy the desires of their working husbands. This system was set up to perpetuate the age-old Southern lady myth—that of the woman who was too precious to work, too precious to think, too precious to have opinions or politics. Of course, this is an insidious way in which the dominant culture keeps women oppressed—allowing them a place with privilege but no real power, and convincing them they are fortunate to occupy the

pedestal. Gilchrist's work shows that the vestiges of the Old South that society tries to hold onto are the ones that lead to dysfunction. These women whose energy had no real productive outlet, except to support everyone around them, are examples of what happens when the dominant culture in the South cannot and will not change. Ruin and chaos ensues.

Money Talks: How Class Binds Gilchrist's Women

In true good-Southern-girl fashion, Gilchrist rarely mentions money in her works. Historically, it has been impolite for women in the South to discuss money, because women must not concern themselves with money, leaving those matters to men. (Ariane was not to concern herself over her husband's decision to buy a ranch in Wyoming). However, money is a contributing factor to the issues her women face. Gilchrist's protagonists are bound by money in ways that those from less privileged places are not. The working-class women in Bobbie Ann Mason's works, for example, have more freedom to leave. Mason's women are not leaving much and are not afraid of slipping to the bottom of the socio-economic arena—they are already there. However, in Gilchrist's works there is not only a fear of losing material goods; the bigger fear her women have is that they will lose their status socially.

Gilchrist claims to have changed her mind about the importance of money in her journals

Falling Through Space:

Several times in my life I have been rich in money, had at my disposal more money than I could think of ways to spend, and each time I went out and deliberately got rid of the money. I got rid of the money because it is a bore and a terrible responsibility. A roof over my head, honest work to do, friends, books to read, a small income so I can work in peace. These are things that money can properly buy. Large sums of money that allow you at a distance to rule and order the lives of other people and demand their time and labor bring their own bad karma with them. And something worse. They bring fear.

A rich man is always afraid he will lose his money. At any moment the treasure he so desired may be stolen or taken from him and then where will he be? (157)

While Gilchrist's words do show a sensitivity and concern about having too much money, it is clear that if she is deliberately getting rid of money, that she (and by extension most of her protagonists) do not have to *worry* about money. It is one thing to get rid of money when you have more at your disposal than you have ways to spend it; it is quite another to go work as a cashier at Wal-Mart because you must feed and clothe your children. In another section of the same work Gilchrist writes, "I am spending the winter thinking about money. About money as a concept, an act of faith, a means of conveyance. Also, I am thinking about plain old money, the kind we are greedy for and think will solve our problems. Maybe it will solve our problems. It gives us the illusion of security. Money in the bank, a nest egg, something to fall back on. Yes, I am going to ask money to forgive me for all the nasty things I've said about it" (FS 128). She writes this as she decides to buy stocks for the first time and decides it is "good clean fun" (FS 129). She says, "Each age has its rewards. Once I had love and romance. Now I have the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the 'Wall Street Week in Review'" (FS 129). Gilchrist struggles with money the way her protagonists struggle with men—she must have; she must rid herself of it/them, she must have again.

The ways in which Gilchrist's protagonists' money binds them is clear from her first writings. It is taken for granted that money will simply be there. Gilchrist's women do not agonize over money, but it quietly controls their lives. But more than money is the fear for Gilchrist's women that they will lose their places in the social hierarchy of the south. This fear of slipping downward is something that also binds them to their fathers and husbands in ways that prevent them from exerting more control over their lives.

Gilchrist's women have an underlying anxiety about moving downward to a lower class position, whether the move be from upper class to middle class or middle class to working class. Steph Lawler, in her article "Getting Out and Getting Away," discusses a study she completed in Great Britain in which women narrate class mobility, specifically that of moving from a working class position to a middle class position. These women moved into the middle class, either through education or marriage, and all of them had anxieties associated with the possibility of moving back to the working class.

Lawler's findings demonstrate the cultural and symbolic configurations of class, which she argues become incorporated into the ideas of self. She says, "One way in which class inequality works is through making working-class subjectivities pathological, so that class relations are not just economic relations but also relations of superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, judgement/shame" (5). Lawler points out that the "working-class and middle-class cultural competencies and knowledges are not socially constituted as 'equal but different': rather, they are arranged hierarchically, with working-class people's difference from middle-class people being *made into* inequality (emphasis hers). Lawler quotes Lisa Blackman who says, "Working class difference signifies pathology—it is 'other' to the middle-class orientation" (11). Lawler notes that "sociological accounts of working-class life have historically positioned working-class people as untrustworthy, disgusting, apolitical (or right wing) and chaotic. They do not *know* the right things, they do not *value* the right things, they do not *want* the right things" (11). Maintaining their class position is important for Gilchrist's women, and her work is sprinkled with the signifiers that suggest her women know, value and want the right things—from center-hall uptown mansions to designer shoes to expensive German cars.

Lawler says, “The kinds of ‘distinction’ made by these women—the ascribing to the self of cultural artefacts such as knowledge, intelligence and taste—may seem shocking to some readers, but it seems to me that they are born out of two (related) sets of anxieties: first, the anxieties which arise out of being associated with working-class existence, and out of a dread of returning to it, and second, the anxieties which arise out of a sense of being ‘imposters’ in a bourgeois world” (11). Part of the reason Gilchrist’s protagonists align themselves with family and subjugate their desires is that they not only want the comfort of the material things that their class offers, but they want the comfort of being firmly in the class into which they were born. This fear of downward mobility is, in part, what keeps Gilchrist’s women stuck for so long. Crystal never leaves Manny because his money is too convenient, and her brother Phelan has spent her family’s money during her mother’s later years (FA 99). When Crystal visits her ninety year-old mother she complains to Traceleen that Phelan has spent all of her family’s money on gambling and women after her mother put him in charge of her affairs (FA 99). And, Amanda is able to strike out on her own only after receiving her family inheritance.

Lawler discusses the shame associated with the judgments that come with not having a history of being middle class. She argues that the women in her study have a “precarious” hold on the middle-class and that they are afraid of “failing” at being middle class (13). She says, “This ‘failure’ is manifest in the women’s expressions of ‘lack,’ of moments when they were shamed by the (real or imagined) judgments of others—judgments which hinged on the women’s own lack of the ‘right’ judgment, the ‘right’ knowledge, the ‘right’ taste” (13).

In Lawler’s study the women had anxieties about passing as middle class or that someone might see through them (17). She says, “All of these women might be able to ‘pass’ as middle class, but there remains within the self a continual reminder that the habitus claimed is not one

which can be fully inhabited; that the dispositions implied (by the habitus) are not fully possessed” (17). This is too much to give up, for Gilchrist’s women. If one may move from a working-class to middle-class position, and the anxieties produced by that move are significant, the fear of moving to working-class from middle or upper-class is significant enough for Gilchrist’s women to hold on tightly to what they have.

Privilege comes at a price. It is difficult for Crystal to leave a life where money is not an object, a life where Crystal is entrenched in a New Orleans uptown social system that does not have to see poverty, need, disease, and crime. Her class protects her from the unsightly places to which she could be sent by leaving her husband. It protects her from manual labor and keeps her surrounded by the signifiers, such as silver, pearls, antiques, and china that confirm her superior class position.

For Gilchrist’s women, moving up in social class is an easy move. Nora Jane embraces her new life with Freddy without a backward glance to the woman who once stole from the wealthy as a political statement. Even though moving up has its anxieties, moving back produces more. All of the women in Lawler’s study were fearful of going back to working-class positions. When any of them had to give up what, for them, signified having made it to middle class, it made them uneasy. For one woman in Lawler’s study “the loss of perhaps the most public and visible marker of her class habitus—her large Victorian home—induces shame” (16). (Giving up the plantation home in the south is a signifier associated with a downward class move. Rhoda’s husband Malcolm has a lot of shame with losing his family plantation home, which drives him to study and work hard to pull himself back into the class to which he feels he belongs, part of which contributes to the demise of his marriage to Rhoda). While Nora Jane is an example of someone who does not seem to experience anxiety and shame associated with her

move up the social class ladder, she completely casts off her former independent identity in order to embrace her wealthy lifestyle. It is implicit that she must pretend to always be from this class and that she deserves to be in it.

The move downward in social class is not an easy one. When Rhoda moves to Arkansas, leaving behind an uptown mansion on Webster Street in New Orleans, she takes with her the signifiers which will comfortably place her in the middle class. When she decides one apartment in Fayetteville is simply too rough she rents a better one “in a better neighborhood” (RH 268). Rhoda has a Mercedes and “the shameful burden of her husband’s money” (RH 277). Since the move is temporary at first, Rhoda is able to maintain the mansion, her art, silver, designer clothes, monogrammed trays. Without giving up anything, she is able to go back to school to become a writer while holding onto the vestiges of her former life. When she does move permanently to Fayetteville, she still brings the items that will confirm that she is clearly upper middle-class. Although Rhoda experiences a downward move after her divorce from Eric, she still holds on to the items that remind her of where she has been.

Crystal Manning, however, takes no chances. She does not leave her upper middle class life in uptown New Orleans. She has married Manny for his money, and she stays married to Manny for his money (IGC 237). The signifiers for her are the antique monogrammed silver, the linens, and the antique furniture (IGC 242). When her maid Traceleen comes to help her clean out her home, after Crystal’s children have left, there are photographs of sailing trips, jewelry, clothing that has never been worn, ski sweaters, and boxes of slides from her travels around the world (CB 248-49). Traceleen describes the cleaning out as memories of “all the parties and fried chicken and houseplants and gifts of jewelry, all the writers from Nebraska who used to come and stay, all the old friends of Mr. Manny’s from Yale, all the fun and life the house had

sheltered, was there in the drawers of the presses and chifforobes and wardrobes and secretaries” (ICG 247). These cultural artifacts are part of what keeps Crystal glued to her uptown home.

Even when Crystal dreams it is about material things in her house. “In each room were chests of drawers and each drawer was full of treasures, diamonds and rubies and pearls, rare books and old letters full of untold secrets and forgotten wisdom. Her psychiatrist told her it was about all the unfulfilled pages of her life, all the possibilities we pass by, the talents we never use, the doors we never open” (ICG 249). Crystal’s talents remain untapped partly because of the trap of her uptown mansion home. Since she cannot be truly independent, Crystal becomes frustrated and rather than become productive, leads a destructive lifestyle. Also, Crystal does not have much of her own money (ICG 239), which keeps her trapped.

In one of the most telling passages of Gilchrist’s work is Crystal’s friend Lydia’s description of Crystal. “I had a vision of Crystal as the prototype of all the southern women I had ever known, worn out from dreaming of perfect worlds, perfect lives, perfect lovers, husbands, children, friends. While the life of the world went on she stopped a moment to look down and gather strength before she went back to motion and dreaming” (ICG 250). Crystal’s world must take place in the realm of dream, as she has no way to realize the dreams she has for herself in a life in which she is married to Manny.

Fear of losing one’s place in the upper social strata motivates some of Gilchrist’s women to accept a lifetime of pedestal-occupying. For women whose lives depend economically on the men in their lives, there are few choices. Gilchrist’s women are afraid of downward mobility. The idea that what signifies that they are from middle or upper-middle classes will disappear if they completely leave their families or buck the system too hard is one with which they struggle. This is one of the reasons they are pedestal-bound—they are afraid of the shame that will

accompany losing their mansions and maids. It is too great of a risk to no longer be perceived as middle or upper-middle class.

Conclusion

While Gilchrist's women are not political, her work shows societies that are riddled with racism, sexism, and classism. The undertones of Gilchrist's prolific collection of novels, novellas and short stories manage to question the mores of the dominant culture. One of the interesting aspects of Gilchrist's work is that she holds a mirror up to a culture whose values she questions while, often, also affirming them. It's almost as if she doesn't want to appear too unkind. She rarely thrashes her characters in Flannery O'Connor-fashion. Her characters are not forced to confront evil and grace as directly as O'Connor's characters must; in fact, Gilchrist's approach is more polite, more Southern, more gracious. But she does not back away from topics such as abortion, sexuality, and the imbedded privileges afforded the men in southern society.

Oppression of women is a common theme in Southern literature, but women who succeed in "rocking the pedestal" are also evident. Independence from men is a constant theme in Ellen Gilchrist's work, while the women's underlying need for men resurfaces time after time. In "Ellen Gilchrist's Women Who Would be Queens (and Those Who Would Dethrone Them)" Margaret Bauer states that Gilchrist's later works decline in quality because she plays "fairly godmother to her characters, protecting them from any harm" and that her later works are also where "women have the freedom and social approval to be and do anything they want" (130). Bauer goes on to say that while women had more rights and privileges and less social censure in the 1980's and 1990's, "not much has changed with the dominating Southern family" (130). Bauer says, "But as long as Southern families continue to prize compliant daughters willing to

compromise their own ambitions for duty to their families, then the conflict continues unresolved”(130). There are larger social problems than those experienced by the privileged white women in Gilchrist’s work. However, this type of oppression, masquerading as a “honoring women,” is one that needs to be exposed, so that Southern women can move from the pedestal to owning their legitimate powers.

Chapter 2

The Function of Sexuality as the Grotesque in Gilchrist's Work

The pinnacle year of poets in New Orleans. The year the ladies loved the poets.

The year the poets got all the pussy and the preachers got none.

Those were the days, the people from the Raintree would say later.

Those were the years. (Gilchrist, AM 93)

The grotesque in Southern literature functions as a way to both disrupt the everyday and bring attention to the margins. It is used to draw our attention to those cultural aspects of the South that have traditionally been unspeakable or unexamined, to those events that make southerners uncomfortable. Sexuality has been traditionally shoved to the margins in Southern culture, and Gilchrist's open treatment of sex is one way to confront the uneasiness and challenge the silences around female sexuality.

It is not simply that Gilchrist has a unique way of writing about female sexuality that makes her work interesting. She uses sexuality as a way to disrupt notions about the "pure southern lady on the pedestal." Gilchrist's southern ladies do not shrink from the ill-mannered. In fact, they go out of their way, when it comes to sexuality, to be vulgar. It is by taking control of their sexuality that Gilchrist's women find a way to show some semblance of independence. In this sense, Gilchrist uses sexuality as a function of the grotesque in that it deconstructs the traditional image of the Southern woman.

The grotesque has traditionally been a way for writers to deconstruct the South's unexamined truths, including those concerning women. Bodies in southern women's fiction, as Patricia Yaeger notes, can be "intensely political":

When the grotesque body marches onto the page, the ideology that controls southern bodies becomes hypervisible in the most unexpected ways. Southern women's writing is filled with bizarre somatic images that seem unnecessarily cruel or out of control, and yet this cruelty has a function: it tears at the social fabric and tries to leave it in shreds. (121)

Gilchrist's depictions of sex and female sexuality serve the same function; they tear at the ideas and assumptions about sex that have been in place in the South for years. Just as the large and loud women in Flannery O'Connor's and Eudora Welty's work function to dispel the prototype of the traditional diminutive Southern belle, Gilchrist's writing of sexuality is a form of the grotesque.

Gilchrist was no stranger to the grotesque. She studied under Eudora Welty at Millsaps College and wrote her own share of the southern grotesque. In the 1981 publication of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, for example, she adopts the southern grotesque in using mangled bodies to disrupt the "natural" way in which race and class structure southern society. In "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society" Lelia is a "liberal" woman who "never called black people niggers or Negroes even when she was mad at them" (LDD 27). When she finds her son Robert with Gus, an African American boy who sold pot under a Live Oak tree in Audubon Park, she asks him, however, what he is "doing with that black boy" (LDD 27). When Lelia makes plans with her husband to go away for the weekend, Robert asks Gus to come stay with him in the Chandlers' beautiful uptown mansion. Lelia finds out that Robert must have something planned when, while getting her hair styled, a beauty shop patron, whose son is a friend of Robert's, thanks Lelia for inviting the patron's son to spend the night. Lelia rushes home to find Gus walking down the hall "wrapped in a plush baby-blue monogrammed towel from the Lylian Shop" (LDD 35). Gus is described as "black as a walnut tree in winter, draped as a tiny emperor, carrying his empty champagne glass in one hand and using the other for an

imperial robe clasp” (LDD 35). Lelia screams. She screams “six months of unscreamed screaming. She screamed an ancestral, a territorial scream. She screamed her head off” (LDD 35). Gus runs through the master bedroom in all its finery and jumps from a double French window, into a crepe myrtle forty feet from the ground:

Gus jumped into the heart of the crepe myrtle tree. He dove into the tree and swayed in its branches like a cat. He steadied, grabbed again, and began to fall through the upthrust branches like a bird shot in flight. As Robert watched Gus came to rest upon the ground, his wet black hair festooned with the soft pink blossoms of the crepe myrtle. Then, as Robert watched, Gus pushed off from the earth. He began to ascend back up through the broken branches like a movie played in reverse, like a wild kite rising to meet the sun, and Robert was amazed and enchanted by the beauty of this feat and jumped from the window high into the air to join Gus on his journey. And far away in the loud hall Lelia beat on the door and beat on the door and beat on the door. (LDD 37)

As Yaeger points out, “[When] Robert follows his friend out the window, the story ends with two grotesque, mangled bodies—their lost potential mingling with the scents of the crepe myrtle tree. Here the open bodies of two children make the unremarkable properties of ‘neutral’ white space both outrageous and visible” (226). The children are defined in opposition to each other and Gus’s fate for crossing the boundary into the white space results in his death (Yaeger 226). Yaeger goes on to say, “The boys’ fractured bodies suggest the contradictions inherent in and hidden by elite southern space. Robert’s parents live in a house built from and dependent on the capital and hallucinogens wrestled from the ghetto, and yet they define themselves as utterly self-reliant. The fates of their children suggest a spatial symbiosis made visible by the grotesque” (226). Robert’s parents have benefitted from a South that has been built by black labor, and while Lelia claims to be progressive in her attitudes about race, she is obviously uncomfortable with her son’s black friend. Lelia is blind to the ways in which African

Americans have built the South she so enjoys. Other than the black servants employed by Lelia, black people are not welcome in her uptown mansion.

For Yaeger, "...the southern grotesque has been used, over the space of half a century, to mobilize spatial unrest, challenging the homogeneity and regulative ideals of 'ordinary' space. At its best the grotesque troubles these ideals by breaking up the surface of a world that had formerly seemed—at least to its white inhabitants—static, continuous, unified, proper" (227).

The grotesque in the form of mangled bodies is a theme that runs through much of Gilchrist's work. Gilchrist often takes a beautiful Uptown New Orleans home, full of thick towels from the Lylian Shop on Magazine Street, silk drapes in rooms with sixteen-foot ceilings, and expensive artwork and throws a battered body into that carefully honed beauty. In the short story "Rich," another from her 1981 collection entitled *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, a New Orleans uptown couple who have wealth, social standing, friends, and a strong New Orleans connection to tradition find themselves childless. They adopt Helen, who turns out to be so mischievous that her father begins to hate her. When she accidentally kills their newborn baby, Tom takes Helen on a trip to his hunting camp on Bayou Lafouche where he shoots and kills his daughter before turning the gun on himself. The scene is described as follows:

The bullet entered her head from the back. Her thick body rolled across the hardwood floor and lodged against a hat rack from Jody Mellon's old office in the Hibernia Bank Building. One of her arms landed on a pile of old Penthouse magazines and her disordered brain flung its roses north and east and south and west and rejoined the order from which it casually arose. (LDD 23)

Tom proceeds to shoot his well-bred Labrador retriever and then himself. "He stuck the .38 Smith and Wesson revolver against his palate and splattered his own head all over the new pier and the canvas covering of the Boston Whaler" (LDD 23). The town believes a horrible accident has occurred. Gilchrist finishes the story with the following lines:

No one believed that much bad luck could happen to a nice lady like Letty Dufrechou Wilson, who never hurt a flea or gave anyone a minute's trouble in her life.

No one believed that much bad luck could get together between the fifteenth week after Pentecost and the third week in Advent.

No one believed a man would kill his own little illegitimate dyslexic daughter just because she was crazy.

And no one, not even the district attorney in New Orleans, wanted to believe a man would shoot a \$3,000 Labrador retriever sired by Super Chief out of Prestidigitation. (LDD 23)

The grotesque, in this work, functions as a way to remind us that chaos, dysfunction, and even murder lie underneath the gilded surfaces of the gorgeous lives of the wealthy and entitled families, who seem to have everything.

Gilchrist writes about a family here, something that might be seen by male scholars such as Luis Rubin, as the minutiae (Yaeger 116). However, in her renderings of everyday life, Gilchrist shows the deep underlying political and social currents of life in the South. Tom and Letty's wealth could not save them from the demons of a privileged life that was viewed by everyone as perfect. The Chandlers' money could not keep their teenage son away from drugs, just as a perfect towel from the posh Lylian Shop on Magazine Street in New Orleans could not wipe away the mess of the chaos within the Chandler's home. Gilchrist makes it clear that a high social standing in a city like New Orleans and plenty of family money do not erase the everyday problems that come with being a family. Yaeger points out that "everything—especially the ambitious sweep of politics and history (in the South) has already invaded the trivial world and helped to shape it" (154). This "trivial world" is a source of social change and "a thousand daily resistances" (Yaeger 154). In this work Gilchrist manages to bring the "rich" worlds of the Wilsons and Chandlers, with all of their trivial details, crashing down.

Dead bodies are also found in more humble homes in Gilchrist's work as part of the grotesque. In "The Blue House," published in the 1995 collection *The Age of Miracles*, Gilchrist shines a glaring light on the effects of alcoholism on a young girl. Nora Jane is around nine years old and upon returning from selling mirlitons (a Caribbean fruit that is popular in New Orleans) she finds her grandmother dead on the floor. Nora Jane's mother is an alcoholic and single mother who cannot take care of her daughter, and Nora Jane depends upon her grandmother's care. When she finds her grandmother "crumpled" on the rug beside the bed, she throws herself on top of the dead body (AM 137). After the funeral Nora Jane's mother agrees to stop drinking so that her daughter may live with her full time. However, she substitutes prescription pills for alcohol and stays in her bedroom "like a zombie against her pillows with the radio on low, playing jazz" (AM 138).

Rhoda's youngest son Teddy also confronts the grotesque when his alcoholic mother spends a night out on the town. When his stepfather Eric takes Teddy with him to find Rhoda at ten o'clock one morning after she has spent a night hanging out with the poets, they find her on some steps leading to an apartment on Chestnut Street in uptown New Orleans. "Halfway up the stairs Teddy's mother was lying on a landing. She had on a pair of pantyhose and that was all. Over her naked body someone had thrown a seersucker jacket" (AM 113). Later, Teddy sits with his mother as she sleeps off her hangover in her bedroom. "Teddy leaned back against the edge of the waterbed. His mother had not moved. Her legs were lying side by side. Her mouth was open. Her breasts fell away to either side of her chest. Her pearl necklace was falling on one breast. Teddy got up and looked down at her. She isn't dead, he decided" (AM 114). Teddy thinks that she should not have been outside at night without her clothes on. "She'd kill me if I did that" (AM 114). Teddy understands that something is dreadfully wrong here, and the

images of his drunk mother underscore a less dramatic but more pervasive form of the grotesque in Gilchrist's works.

While Gilchrist's writing of the grotesque fits into the category of traditional southern grotesque, she does not stop there. Gilchrist takes the grotesque one step further with her writings about sex and sexuality. Sex for women in the South traditionally meant within the confines of marriage and with one man. The idea that women were meant to be pure is something that was needed to guarantee paternity of children, and there was little intolerance for the impure woman. Anne Goodwyn Jones says, "[T]he southern lady is at the core of a region's self-definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady" (*Tomorrow* 4). Goodwyn Jones also says that the ideal southern lady "acts as a moral exemplar" (*Tomorrow* 9). She continues, "She is chaste because she has never been tempted; in some renditions she lacks sexual interest altogether" (*Tomorrow* 9). Gilchrist's protagonists deconstruct this image of the pure woman, as they fiercely and unabashedly use sex for their own needs. Sex in Gilchrist's world serves to demonstrate that women are on equal footing with men, at least in this regard. They deserve sex as much as men, when they want it and with whomever. Their casual attitudes about sex seem to send the message, "We can do what you can do, maybe better." While there are many inequalities for women, in Gilchrist's world, sex is usually not one of them.

Gilchrist's depictions of sex are, for the most part, passionless. Although her protagonists seem to be obsessed with sex, Gilchrist's writing represents none of the energy, passion, and lust that usually accompany the act of sex. In fact, underlying her female protagonists' blatant demands for sex, is a certain apathy, making the women appear at once lusty, yet not. Consider Sara Conley as she considers leaving her lover in New York. "This is

over, she decided, as she was falling asleep. It's over. I knew it months ago. Goddammit, I hate to break up with him in the winter. I'll have to give him money for an apartment. There won't be anyone to light the fires. No one to buy groceries. No one to make me come" (SC 83). Her apathetic attitude about sex is clear in this passage, because she equates sex with household duties. Sara is a woman who holds the power in her relationship with Robert, yet she plans to break things off because she has reconnected with an old lover at his wife's (and her best friend's) funeral.

Gilchrist's women are no strangers to the extramarital affair. Her characters demand them, pursue them, and feel no guilt about having them. Perhaps characters, such as Rhoda, identify with fathers who have had mistresses. When a married Rhoda goes to join the poets in Fayetteville, she does not think twice about hopping in bed with a married fellow MFA student. Meanwhile, Rhoda's third husband stays in New Orleans to watch Rhoda's child from a previous marriage. Although the affair begins with Ketch watching Rhoda's dress slide up her silk stockings as they sit through a class on James Joyce at the University of Arkansas, it quickly becomes a meaningless fucking match. "She was a poet. He was a fiction writer. On this basis they fucked each other" (AM 165). They begin by going to Rhoda's apartment and opening wine, lighting candles and making love with the windows open. However, "[t]hey made love out of curiosity and greed, without passion or tenderness or joy. They made love to prove they were mean enough to do it. When it was over he got up and put on his clothes and went home to his wife" (AM 164).

However, apathy is not the only way in which sex gets turned upside down by Gilchrist. She also demonstrates sexuality as the grotesque in her renderings of such events as having sex during a menstrual period or as a woman ages. Gilchrist does so to expose the humanity of

women who were encouraged to act like lifeless statues. Gilchrist writes real women who have menstrual blood and dry vaginas, drawing attention to the physicality of women while disrupting images of chaste and sexless women.

Rhoda's bloody sex with Ketch is a way that she plays tough. She is not the fragile flower described by Goodwyn-Jones. She demonstrates that she does not let something like a menstrual period, (or a marriage, for that matter), serve as a limiting factor in her sex life. As Ketch becomes jealous of Rhoda's work she becomes "bored with fucking Ketch on Wednesday nights. It was so cold, so pointless, so rude. The week before she had been menstruating, bleeding like a stuck pig from her Lippes Loop. They had gotten drunk and made love anyway. In the morning there was blood everywhere, on the carpet, on the sofa, on the lining of her blue silk kimono" (AM 166). There is no passion between Ketch and Rhoda, and there seems to be no real reason for the affair beyond a mild physical attraction. Sex between them seems to be a way to express an extreme dislike for each other.

Gilchrist shows sex as a selfish act, one that is about taking rather than giving. When Rhoda reconnects with an old, married lover in "Love of my Life," she describes her sexual encounter with Raine as follows: "Later, back in our room, we fucked each other without mercy. We beat upon each other's body, taking all the pleasure that we could, giving nothing away, taking, taking, taking" (AM 232). Here sex is an outlet for anger and frustration. Rhoda feels robbed because Raine, the love of her life, will not leave his wife.

Gilchrist also demonstrates that sex is not a direct route to marriage for her protagonists. In *A Dangerous Age*, written in 2008, Winifred tells a soldier whose face was blown apart in Afghanistan that she won't marry him. "'But when you get out of here I might fuck you' Winifred continued. 'Just to be mean and just because I haven't been laid in four years. This

wedding made me horny. Making myself come is okay and I'm good at it because I went to a girls' boarding school. I'm an expert; I can get it done in two minutes and get back to work. It's not that. I want to cuddle up to you. That is, if you have a face when this is over and don't look too bad'" (DA 33). The language used by some of the protagonists about sex is as jarring and disruptive as some of the gargantuan bodies written by Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor or a Bible salesman taking off with a girl's wooden leg. Again, Gilchrist's use of the grotesque in her work tears the wrapping from the neatly packaged ways the South has traditionally looked at sex.

Sex can be completely meaningless in Gilchrist's work. Lydia, who is Crystal's best friend, joins Crystal and her family for a vacation in "A Summer in Maine." Crystal invites her lover Alan to join them, much to her children's chagrin. Lydia has sex with Alan, but attempts to talk her way back into Crystal's life. "...You're mad at me for fucking Alan. It didn't mean a thing, did it, Alan? It was less important than a fly, the death of a fly'" (ICG 252). Gilchrist tries to disrupt the notions that sex must have meaning. Sometimes, it means absolutely nothing. This idea contrasts with a younger Rhoda's belief that she must marry a boy if she makes out with him. Gilchrist shows here that ideas about sex are generational, that they change with time.

And, when Sara Conley makes love to her younger lover it doesn't "work very well" (SC 99). Sara tells Robert, "The aging body is a biochemical system and some of my supplies are drying up. My pussy's drying up, to tell the truth. I'd think it was funny if it didn't hurt" (SC 100). Here, Gilchrist drags post-menopausal sexuality to the front of the room, disrupting the notion of the very private, pure Southern woman of the past. With Gilchrist's matter-of-fact and casual treatment of sexuality, she draws attention to the margins, where the South has placed the idea of women and sex in the past. In these margins reside the fears of the culture, and women's

sexuality in the Bible belt of the South is something that has been feared and pushed to the background. Yaeger says, “When new ideas are born, when new practices and ideologies make their way into public discourse against resistance, what emerges is the figuration of monstrosity “(5). The discussion of a “drying pussy” has not been common in public southern discourse. In bringing discussions about issues such as postmenopausal vaginas to the forefront, Gilchrist’s women claim the power that these hidden and private matters have had over women. According to Yaeger,

The anthropologist Mary Douglas explains that many cultures respond to anomaly by reordering unexpected events, reducing ambiguity to a new set of rules. The southern stories we’ve begun to analyze suggest an equally heightened response to dissonance. Instead of reducing disorder to rule, dissonance gets magnified or multiplied; anomaly gets figured as monstrosity, and monstrosity itself becomes a way of casting out or expelling the new. This suggests a poverty within southern culture’s political idiom—an idiom that is not enriched by change but made hysterical... When crisis erupts, when change grapples toward history, it is configured via appalling body images as something excessive, as monstrosity. (7)

Gilchrist is not afraid to splash some menstrual blood on a sex scene to show a South that is changing in regards to its attitudes about sexuality. Gilchrist marches the grotesque to the center in order to challenge attitudes about women’s bodies and sexuality. Her depictions of female sexuality suggest that her protagonists experience sexual freedom and brazenly satisfy their sexual desires. And, in these depictions we see a quiet smashing of the conventional southern lady on a pedestal, pure and asexual.

The Paradox of Rhoda’s First Sexual Experiences

The grotesque functions to bring our awareness to what is hidden and kept secret, and sexual assault and rape often fall into that category. Rhoda’s first sexual experience, depending upon which account you read, is monstrous. In *The Net of Jewels* Rhoda is sexually assaulted

while attending the University of Alabama, and the scene is tragic in many ways. Her date, Stanley Mabry, represents an establishment that gets by with rape. Stanley is a law student, his father is lieutenant governor of Alabama, and he is “dark and tall and cold” (NJ 101). His voice is “laconic...dark and full of sarcasm” (NJ 102). When he calls Rhoda he demands that she be waiting for him by the door, which is ironic since he is fifty minutes late and drunk on their first and only date.

In spite of the fact that Stanley is a disrespectful drunk, he is considered a catch. Rhoda’s sorority big sister sets up the date, and it is almost as though Rhoda is caught in a system from which she cannot escape. Donie serves a pimp of sorts, arranging the date and receiving gifts from Stanley in return. She also has arranged with Stanley to allow Rhoda in after curfew, without telling Rhoda. While Rhoda tries to make conversation, Stanley does not engage; in fact he speaks only to ask Rhoda if she wants another drink.

When Stanley attempts to rape her, Rhoda bites him, opens the door to the car and runs across a cow pasture to get back to the restaurant where they had dined. She describes the scene, “I was fighting him. Fighting him the way I fought my brother Dudley. Deadly, ferocious, biting his hand, clawing his face, kicking, cursing. I was a deadly fighter, a consciousness biter from way back. I bit his knuckle down to the bone and he screamed and let go of me and I opened the car door and kicked off my shoes and pulled up my skirt and began to run” (NJ 119). Rhoda gets a ride with friends from the restaurant, and tells them what has happened. When Stanley comes to find her she tells him that she will have her brother kill him and that he will pay for her torn seventy-nine dollar suit. Stanley begs her not to tell, and she covers for him. “In the end I didn’t tell on him. It wasn’t done to tell on people in 1955. That is to say I didn’t tell on him to the grown people. I didn’t tell on him in the emergency ward of the Tuscaloosa General

Hospital and I didn't tell our housemother when May Garth and Sheffield finally got me back there" (NJ 121).

It is significant that Rhoda fights back and threatens Stanley. But, in the end he suffers no consequences for his actions. Gilchrist has shown, again, the theme that runs through her work. Women struggle in spirit against the men in their lives, and on the surface they seem to act strong and fight for change. However, in the end they do not do enough. They seem to be afraid of dismantling the power structure. They won't really stand up to the men in their lives, and in the character of Rhoda we are reminded again and again of the power her father has over her life. Before Stanley assaults her, Rhoda tells him that he reminds her of her father.

For Gilchrist, the discrepancies about Rhoda's first consensual sexual experience are irrelevant. She acknowledges the fact that she has written two first-time consensual sexual experiences for Rhoda, but makes no apologies for it (Bauer, *Fiction* 11). The first account appears in "Music", part of the 1983 *Victory over Japan*. Rhoda is fourteen years old and has sex with sixteen year-old Johnny Hazard, an employee of her father's coal mine in Kentucky who wants to "fuck the boss's daughter" (VJ 47). Rhoda accompanies her father to check out the mines and drives into town, buys a sexy red dress, and seduces Johnny while her father leaves her to go spend time with his mistress. When Rhoda returns from the blue pond where she has had sex with Johnny (who has stolen fifty dollars from her purse), Dudley is waiting on her. "Dudley smelled it on her before he even touched her. Smelled it all over her and began to shake her, screaming at her to tell him who it had been" (VJ 48). Again, the double standard is at work here. Dudley has left young Rhoda's mother and taken his daughter along as an excuse to meet his mistress. He is enraged that Rhoda has had a sexual experience, while he has spent three days having an affair and leaving Rhoda with a mine worker and his wife. Gilchrist challenges

Dudley's belief that women must be chaste and pure and points to the hypocrisy of using a fourteen year-old girl as an excuse to meet his mistress.

In another account of Rhoda's first consensual sexual experience in *Net of Jewels*, Rhoda has sex with Malcolm Martin her second year in college, so she would be about nineteen. This work was written nine years after *Victory over Japan*. Rhoda relates her first sexual encounter with Malcolm: "Later, much later, we locked ourselves into the bedroom of Putty LaValle's apartment and I took off the dress and we did it. Whatever I had thought doing it would be, this was more terrible and exciting and interesting and endless than anything I could have imagined and even if I was doing it wrong I wanted to go on doing it" (VJ 137).

These two different accounts of Rhoda's first consensual sexual experience might suggest that it is not such a significant experience, or that the trauma that accompanied being found out by her father causes Rhoda to forget her experience at age fourteen. These two accounts emphasize, also, what Gilchrist perceives as the South's preoccupation with a girl's first sexual experience. Also, this is fiction, even though Gilchrist claims that she has based Rhoda's character on her own life. And Gilchrist might be toying with her reader, as Rhoda's creator, pointing out that the role of the author of fiction gives her freedom to tell the story any way she chooses. Bauer discusses the two "first" sexual experiences of Rhoda. She says, "Similarly, explaining Rhoda's reinstated virginity, Gilchrist herself has said, 'The more I've written about Rhoda, the more I know about her'... a statement that prepares for my perception of an evolving prototype at the center of the larger story cycle made up of Gilchrist's whole body of fiction" (*Fiction*, 11). Rhoda is Gilchrist's most written about character, and some of the stories are contradictory, which will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

Gilchrist's rendering of Rhoda's initial sexual encounters with Malcolm in *Net of Jewels* are the only ones in which sexuality is treated with a degree of tenderness. The passion of the two young lovers is rampant and leads to their hasty marriage. Rhoda says,

I had hardly been in Atlanta a week when I started wanting to get married. It was too hard to do it if we weren't married. It was impossible to do it in the car. It just wasn't big enough. And it was hard to do it in Malcolm's room in the KA house because people kept slamming in and out the front door and scaring me to death and because half the time we had to sneak out the kitchen door when we got through. Don't get me wrong. Doing it was worth it. Doing it was divine. The more we did it, the more I wanted to do it and the more he wanted to do it. All we wanted to do was do it. It was what we had in common and it was plenty. (NJ 184)

In Gilchrist's other works about sex she consistently disrupts and jars with her protagonists' language and high libidos, reminding us that the version of the "pure Southern woman" is one that is long gone.

Interracial Sex

Michael Kreyling discusses the idea of a fate worse than death for African American men who "eyeball white southern women: "The woman on the pedestal, usually the object of veneration and worship, is the fuse for fear and panic" (80). Gilchrist's casual treatment of interracial sex disrupts this notion, especially since her white female protagonists initiate sex. Goodwyn-Jones writes about the traditional Southern lady, "Because it is unthinkable for her to desire sex, much less sex with a black man, and because the white man protects her from the black man's presumable uncontrollable sexual desire, her genes are pure white" (*Tomorrow* 9). Gilchrist's white protagonists boldly and brazenly take African American lovers and without apologies.

Rhoda has no reservations about having sex with an African American man, especially if it helps her advance her agenda. When she hawks her wedding ring in “The Lower Garden District Free Gravity Mule Blight or Rhoda, a Fable” Rhoda calls in a claim to her insurance company. Rhoda decides she is attracted to the African American insurance adjustor, who has a “soft, black voice” (VJ 54) and, later, at dinner tells him a story about taking off her underpants as a child, which made the black people in her community laugh. When he asks if she wants to make him laugh, she tells him to hurry and up and finish eating. “When I think of something I like to go right on and do it. In case they blow the world up while I’m waiting,” she tells him (VJ 69). She then tells him, “I don’t know what I’m going to do next. But right now I’m going to go home and fuck you. I’m tired of waiting to do it. I’ve been waiting all day” (VJ 72). Rhoda’s direct and brazen demands are a manifestation of her confidence about her sexuality, as well as her assumption that African American men continually desire white women.

This work also shows that Earl, the insurance adjustor, and Rhoda use and manipulate each other. Rhoda claims that the wedding ring she pawned has actually been stolen by a workman, as she is desperate for money in order to obtain a divorce. Earl knows that Rhoda is lying, but brings by a check anyway. Before he arrives, Rhoda gets dressed in a tennis skirt and red sweater, telling herself, “They love red...They love bright colors. Besides, what had she read about red? Wear red, red keeps you safe” (VJ 55) Here she implies that there is an essentialism in African Americans regarding the color red and that Earl is somehow dangerous, in spite of the fact that they have spent hours on the phone talking to each other. Rhoda also tells Earl that she has talked to a priest about getting his son in an exclusive summer arts program, manipulating Earl in order to get her \$5,000 check. Earl tells Rhoda he is divorced, and as they get close to her house she suddenly confesses to him that she stole the money from

him—that she had actually pawned the ring to a “fat piggy little Jewish boy on Melpomene” (VJ 72). Earl tells her that he just saw a flying mule go by. Rhoda repeats that she stole the money, removing his hand “from around her waist and put[ting] it between her legs” (VJ 72). Earl then repeats to Rhoda that he saw a flying mule go by and then adds that he is actually married (VJ 72). Although they finally confess the truth to each other, the flying mule signifies that the stories they have told each other all along are about as reliable as one of a flying mule.

The shop at which Rhoda pawns her ring is on the corner of St. Charles and Melpomene, in the Lower Garden District. Melpomene turns into Martin Luther King Boulevard on the lake side of St. Charles. Gilchrist omits this fact, and yet those familiar with New Orleans would understand that the jewelry store is on a significant corner in a story about interracial sex. This corner is where Central City meets the Garden District, or a historically black neighborhood intersects with a historically white one. Rhoda also reveals her racism when speaking about the Jewish man in the jewelry store who takes advantage of her by buying her \$5,000 ring for \$750.00. He also suggests that Rhoda make an insurance claim since the shop does not keep records. Rhoda thinks as she leaves, “I’ll get that little fat Jewish bastard. My God, it must be terrible to be a nice Jew and have to be responsible for people like that. That’s the strangest thing, how they all get lumped together in our minds, a saint like Doctor Bernstein and a little bastard like that. No wonder they all want to move to Israel” (VJ 60). Rhoda’s blatant racism with regards to her Jewish jeweler is juxtaposed against her more subtle racism about Earl. Even though Rhoda assumes Earl likes the color red and might be dangerous, her racism takes a back seat because she wants to have sex with Earl. She suggests they get together that night right after taking a look at his black skin. “Her eyes dug into his skin, thick black skin. Real black skin. Something she had never had before” (VJ 66).

It is, perhaps, one of Gilchrist's boldest moves coming from a history that held so much panic about black men having sex with white women. Of course, Gilchrist is not the first southern author to write about interracial sex. However, most contemporary writing about interracial sex is in the context of relationships. Gilchrist's women get their sex and move on. Suzanne Jones discusses "tabooed romance" in her 2004 work entitled *Race Mixing*. Jones points out that not until 1998 and 2000 were anti-miscegenation laws removed in South Carolina and Alabama. She says, "The Old South's taboo against love between blacks and white has cast a long shadow. No other cross-racial relationship has been so pathologized by American society. Even in 1967, when the Supreme Court finally declared antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, sixteen states still prohibited interracial marriage, down from forty states at one time" (148). Even though writers such as Reynolds Price, Alice Walker, Ernest Gaines, and Sherley Anne Williams had written about interracial relationships, Gilchrist's writing about race mixing is limited to their having sex without relationships. However, Gilchrist writes non-interracial sex in the same way. Gilchrist demonstrates that women enjoy sex for physical pleasure, not just as an avenue to a relationship. With these renderings, Gilchrist also promotes the idea that race should not be a factor when considering having sex.

The South has a long history of white men raping black women. During slavery, African American women were used as breeding machines to grow the slavery population. Minrose Gwin says that "sexual domination of female slaves was an avenue to power for the white male" (67). Gwin writes about "the beleaguered slave woman" who was considered "lustful and willing" (49). Gilchrist does not back away from showing her readers that the history of white male with black female can go both ways. She demonstrates that desire is a two-way street, and that white women are lustful and willing with black men. Annalisa sleeps with her chauffeur

Kenny in “First Manhattans,” propositioning him with, “I do not take the pill but I am equipped with a diaphragm that has not failed me yet and if you would like to sleep with me I will go and put it on” (DL 135). When Kenny tells her he is “game” she tells him to take her to her bedroom. “Have your way with me” (DL 135).

One of the fears perpetuated by the dominant culture in the South is that of the black man who is obsessed with raping white women. Although this is a complicated subject that deserves a broader discussion, this fear has been a significant one in the history of the South. In bell hook’s *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* she says, “Images of black men as rapists, as dangerous menaces to society, have been sensational cultural currency for some time. The obsessive media focus on these representations is political. The role it plays in the maintenance of racist domination is to convince the public that black men are a dangerous threat who must be controlled by any means necessary, including annihilation” (61).

Yaeger discusses how “intensely political” the bodies of southern women’s fiction are:

The racially pure and diminutive female body in need of protection becomes the motive force, the purported source for the taboo against race-mixing. As southern myth, this fragile white body helps motivate (1) southern modes of population control, reproducing black and white populations as separate, (2) the regulated segregation of these racial bodies in space, and (3) the need for deeply interiorized categories of racism that will do the work of segregation. In other words, the small compass of the ideal white woman’s body is oddly at war with its epic stature in minds of white men. (120)

Gilchrist takes control of the white woman’s body, deconstructing the entrenched beliefs that women’s bodies need protection from black men. By showing white woman’s desire for black men Gilchrist takes another swipe at the white southern lady on the pedestal.

Yaeger also discusses the fear instilled in their daughters by white fathers of the South. She writes of Minnie Bruce Pratt and her recounting being a white female during the 1960s. “At

the height of the civil rights movement Pratt's father terrorized his children by lodging his own race-terrors—his flimsy belief in white supremacy—in his daughter's wayward, uncertain flesh”

(119). She quotes Pratt:

The entombment of the lady was my “protection”: the physical, spiritual, sexual containment which men of my culture have used to keep “their women” pure...

It was this protection that I felt one evening during the height of the civil rights demonstrations in Alabama, as the walls that had contained so many were cracking, when my father called me to his chair in the living room. He showed me a newspaper clipping...about Martin Luther King, Jr., and told me that the article was about how King had sexually abused, used, young Black teen-aged girls. I believe he asked me what I thought of this; I can only guess that he wanted me to feel that my danger, my physical, sexual danger, would be the result of the release of others from containment. I felt frightened and profoundly endangered, by King, by my father: I could not answer him. (Yaeger 119)

Gilchrist's white, privileged women choose to seduce black men, which turns this notion, at least to some extent, on its head. By choosing to tell these stories Gilchrist encourages a re-thinking of the South's historic preoccupation with preserving the “honor” of its white women. And while these sexual encounters preclude any sort of real relationship between the white women and their black lovers, it is significant that Gilchrist chooses to focus on casual sexual encounters between black men and white women that do not look very different from those of white men and white women.

Sex and the City, or the Ozarks

Ellen Gilchrist's work, although not brimming with explicit details of the protagonists' sexual experiences, does demonstrate insatiable sexual appetites on the part of her female protagonists and a preoccupation with sex. Gilchrist's women do not shock with kinky experiences, but they do seem to think that going to bed with everyone around them is perfectly

fine. Gilchrist makes no judgments about casual sex through her characters, who seem to think that no one of the opposite sex is off-limits. In her depictions of sexuality, Gilchrist tosses aside conventional stereotypes about women, saying women are sexual beings not bound by traditional or rigid categories for women. In this way, her work shows a progressive and feminist attitude about sexuality.

Rosalind Coward discusses the preoccupation with sexuality saying that “novels by feminists also present the experience of sexuality as the significant experience of the novel. Whereas in romantic fiction (and indeed quite often in ‘the classics’) it was the events leading to marriage or events disrupting love, which occupied the position of significant events, increasingly sexual experience is becoming sufficient” (201). Coward also argues that a preoccupation with sexuality is not “in and of itself progressive” (201).

While at a first glance it might seem that Gilchrist’s protagonists are simply preoccupied with sex, Gilchrist goes beyond that in her depictions. Gilchrist began writing in the 1980s and has continued writing for thirty years. Her protagonists’ obsessions with sex can be seen as an extension of ideas within the feminist movement and the ensuing sexual revolution. Her protagonists want to be as sexually liberated as their male counterparts, and Gilchrist works to disrupt notions of women as chaste, pure, and asexual.

In bell hooks’ work, *Communion*, she discusses the role of the women’s movement in regards to sexuality:

Indeed, the intersection of women’s liberation and sexual liberation actually made feminism more appealing to men. The invention and mass production of the birth control pill may have freed women’s sexual bodies, but it was feminism that freed our minds. Feminist demand for sexual agency made us feel that we were engaged in revolutionary struggle when we boldly satisfied our sexual lust. We had been given permission to give blow jobs if we wanted to, but only if we wanted to. We had been given the freedom to be sexually loose without fear of losing respect. And lots of straight men were more than enthralled with a

movement that freed all women from the prison of sexual fear and/or frigidity.
(67)

Gilchrist's women love their sexual freedom. They are not restrained by religion, politics, family, or guilt when it comes to having sex. If anything, sex seems to be one of the outlets available to women whose lives do not seem to hold a lot of meaning. Sex seems to be an activity like tennis or bridge, something to enjoy and to occupy time. It certainly takes place more outside of marriage than it seems to within marriage for Gilchrist's older protagonists.

Meaningless affairs abound in Gilchrist's work, and she demonstrates that women like to have sex for the sake of having sex as well as an antidote for boredom. In "There's a Garden of Eden," published in 1981 in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, a married Alisha Terrebonne has a carpenter come to work on her kitchen cabinets. When the maid announces his arrival to Alisha, who is in bed, Alisha wants to know which carpenter. The maid tells Alisha that it's the new one, the young one. The maid then looks down at her shoes and says to herself, "Blue collar workers...Now it's going to be blue collar workers" (LDD 39). It is clear that Alisha has had a lot of meaningless affairs.

Alisha sends the maid home and goes to bed with Michael. When the streets begin to flood, and Alisha and Michael leave to go check on her mother, Alisha asks if she will get to make love to him again (LDD 46). This straightforwardness seems to have little to do with passion. It is almost as if Alisha has sex with her carpenter because she is bored. They fantasize about other people as they make love. Alisha pretends to be an "Indian princess lying in a tent deep in a forest, dressed in a long white deerskin robe, waiting for Jeff Chandler to come and claim her for his bride" (LDD 44). Michael pretends that he is a millionaire having sex with "a beautiful, sad old actress" (LDD 44).

Alisha accepts being objectified without being offended, even inviting objectification. When Alisha asks Michael if he likes her body he replies that he does. “I’ve been wanting to touch your tits ever since the first moment I saw you. The whole time we were walking around your house I was wanting to touch your tits” (LDD 44). Alisha exclaims that she had always thought men liked her for her mind, only to find out that they were more interested in her tits (LDD 44).

One message that can be taken away from Gilchrist’s work is that when women are not included in the activities of the dominant culture, they turn to passionless affairs and alcohol. Alisha is described in the opening paragraph as “cold and bored and lonely, smoking in bed” (LDD 38). She stays in bed most days, “reading and drinking coffee, listening to music, cutting pictures out of old magazines, dreaming, arguing with herself” (LDD 38).

Gilchrist writes against a traditional southern womanhood that John C. Ruoff claims represents the South (Goodwyn-Jones, *Haunted* 8). Ruoff argues that “a violation of Southern Womanhood was also, *ipso facto*, a violation of the South. Conversely, an attack upon southern civilization and culture was an attack upon Southern Womanhood” (qtd. in Goodwyn-Jones, *Haunted* 8). In “In the Land of Dreamy Dreams” LaGrande McGruder loses a tennis match to a new Jewish club member, who LaGrande is certain should not have been admitted to the exclusive Uptown New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club Ladies. LaGrande loses the game even though she has managed to cheat quite flagrantly. LaGrande dumps her tennis racket into the Mississippi River upon losing and goes shopping, buying Christian Dior and Calvin Klein. “When she had bought one each of every single thing she could possibly imagine needing she felt better and went on out to the Country Club to see if anyone she liked to fuck was hanging around the pool” (LDD 71). It is apparent that LaGrande thinks that by consuming expensive

designer clothes she can overcome her anger about losing the tennis match to a Jewish woman. However, it is not enough for her, so LaGrande must then think about having sex with someone. In this case she limits her choice to fellow club members, unlike Alisha who chooses a carpenter.

Gilchrist also depicts lusty women who do not have sex simply to pass the time. When Crystal takes her family to Maine for the summer, without her husband, she hopes that her lover Alan will come. “Maybe he’ll give me a piece of ass for a change if he comes up there” (ICG 205). Crystal’s is no longer attracted to her second husband Manny, but she is afraid to leave him because of money. She says about Manny, “Poor Manny. If he could fuck me it might be all right. He just isn’t any good. He isn’t bad. He isn’t impotent. He just isn’t any good. Maybe it was the boys’ school. Maybe they masturbated all the time. I don’t know. Maybe when he fucks me he has to confront something that scares him to death. I have never been able to understand it and I’ve given up. I’m sorry. I’m a beautiful woman and I want a lover. I don’t care how much trouble they are. I can’t sleep with sexually immature men” (ICG 231). Good sex is important to some of Gilchrist’s women, and in Crystal’s case she is simply not settling for less.

Alan does visit Crystal in Maine, and when he does, he has sex with her best friend Lydia, who subsequently feels regret for having slept with Crystal’s lover. Lydia thinks, “Men are amazing, aren’t they? Why do I always want to fuck them?” (ICG 239). When Crystal finds out she insists that Lydia leave to go back to California. The emotional chaos surrounding the sexual trysts of Gilchrist’s protagonists, however, does not stop them from continuing to pursue sex with anyone and everyone.

Gilchrist’s older women are just as interested in sex as her young protagonists. In “Mexico” a fifty-three year-old Rhoda is bored and “has run out of men” (LWP 133). The work

begins with Rhoda in her home “on a mountain overlooking a sleepy little university town. There was a drought and a heat wave and everyone she knew had gone somewhere else for the summer. There was nothing to do and no one to go riding around with or fuck or even talk to on the phone” (LWP 133). The story takes place in 1988, and Rhoda makes the trip to Mexico with her brother Dudley and her cousin Saint John.

Gilchrist’s protagonists use sex as a substitute for the real things in life they have missed out on, such as leading productive lives as adults. Rhoda becomes obsessed with sleeping with a bullfighter while she watches him from the sidelines of a bullfighting ring. “This is so sexy, so seductive, she was thinking, the hips on that man, the softness of his face of the skin beneath his white shirt. How many years has he worked to learn this strange art or skill? To allow that bull to move its horns so close to his hips, to his dick, then to turn his back and walk away” (LWP 171). Rhoda thinks it is mean to torture the bull but rationalizes that it does not matter because it is how things have always been, as she watches the bullfight (LWP 171). She thinks that men “have learned these skills to protect themselves from animals, to protect their children and their women. And it’s so sexy, so fucking wonderful and sexy. I would fuck that bullfighter in a second, AIDS scare or not” (LWP 171).

When Dudley and Saint John try to convince Rhoda that she should not go meet the married bullfighter in his downtown hotel room she argues with them. “I want to go fuck this guy. I’m fifty-three years old. It’s none of anybody’s business. I don’t mess around with your sex lives” (LWP 179). Dudley and Saint John end up acting as Rhoda’s protectors, from a random sexual tryst, by getting her drunk. She does not make it to the downtown hotel before the bullfighter leaves, but feels she is missing out. She says to Saint John, “Here’s to the girls growing old...Who think they didn’t get laid enough. Lost their youth and their puberty and

their childbearing years being good for Daddy and big brother and fucking Jesus” (LWP 178-79). Saint John reminds Rhoda that she has had all kinds of boyfriends and husbands and asks Rhoda what she has missed out on (LWP 179). Rhoda replies, “Normal relationships. Having one husband and loving him forever. Getting laid on a regular basis...I never got laid during the great primitive fertile years, thanks to no birth control and our Victorian upbringing” (LWP 179). Saint John then asks Rhoda, “So you want to go fuck some Mexican bullfighter in a cheap hotel to make up for not having a normal life?” (LWP 179).

Even when Gilchrist’s women move on to become productive writers, they often remain focused on sex rather than work. When Rhoda moves to Fayetteville to join the poets at the University of Arkansas, she decides at a dinner given by the director of the creative writing program that she was going to have sex with a “gorgeous preppie from New England” (AM 245). “He’s the one I’ll fuck,” she thinks, upon meeting him (AM 245). Gilchrist’s women are not afraid to make quick decisions about sex and act on them right away. Although Rhoda has been given the chance to go back to school to write poetry while her husband takes care of her son from a previous marriage in New Orleans, Rhoda begins her classes by trying to decide whom she will fuck. Gilchrist emphasizes the importance of sex for women in works such as this and seems to say that sex is so important that it will always come before family, friends, and work.

Gilchrist often gives us protagonists who just cannot control themselves sexually. The physicality of some men is simply irresistible, according to Gilchrist. By rendering men whose bodies are incredible, she draws attention to the fact that women lust after men, just as men lust after women. Olivia Hand, in the 2008 *A Dangerous Age*, tells an old, married lover that she is fucking a newspaperman from Fayetteville just to spite the old lover (DA 57). When Kane drops

by her Tulsa newspaper office Olivia immediately falls for him again, in spite of the fact that he has treated her very badly in the past. She narrates in first person, "...I get a whiff of the pheromones and I might as well go on and take off my clothes, since he can do this to me on the telephone, let alone when he's standing in my office in his perfectly tailored gray slacks and his soft Italian long-sleeved polo shirt—as if clothes could cover that incredible body, as if anything could hide that power and those reflexes and the sheer unbelievable intelligence of his physical being..." (DA 56). She thinks, "I might as well go on and fuck him—carpe diem and all that. Life is short and we're all doomed one way or the other" (DA 57). Gilchrist's protagonists, no matter how successful and intelligent, and no matter how self-sufficient they are, seem to crumble in the face of a little male sex appeal. When Olivia gets up to have sex with Kane he puts his body around her and holds her "as though [she] were a bird in a golden retriever's mouth" (DA 57). In this line it is apparent that Olivia feels that she is victimized by Kane's sexuality.

Again, Olivia is the successful, focused, and accomplished editor of a Tulsa newspaper who has been abandoned repeatedly by Kane, but she cannot stay away from him when he resurfaces. When Bobby Tree, Olivia's ex-husband reappears a few days after her tryst with Kane, Olivia suggests that they go to bed to see if he can still make her come (DA 65). When they drive out to see her grandparents, she wishes he had his old pickup so she "could cuddle up beside him and feel him driving and see his dick getting hard and his breathing slow when he started wanting [her]" (DA 72).

The list goes on and on. This direct way of approaching sex is something that is recurrent in Gilchrist's work. In stating what they want sexually, Gilchrist's women assert some semblance of power over the men in their lives. They are not passive receivers, but actively

pursuing sex. Coward claims that writing about female sexuality does not make a work progressive, and this is certainly the case in Gilchrist's work. However, for the era in which her texts are written, it does open up new ways of thinking about female sexuality in the South.

Gilchrist's Seduction of the Reader

Along with her depictions of female sexual freedom as a way to break down conventional ways of thinking of women's sexuality, there seems to be something else at work. Again, Gilchrist gives patriarchy what it wants: women with high libidos. In the same way that Gilchrist befriends the dominant culture and affirms it, as discussed in Chapter One, similar tendencies show up in her depictions of sexuality. Her forward, aggressive women do not emasculate their men, but seduce them with a "no strings attached" attitude.

Again, bell hooks sums up what has taken place during the women's movement:

Straight men were thrilled to encounter sexually liberated feminist females who also paid their share of the date. Conflicts and problems began when the wanton feminist cared to exercise complete control over her body and say no when she wanted to. Feminists' refusal to make satisfying male desire the primary goal of female sexual liberation disturbed men. (*Communion* 68)

Gilchrist's women want to satisfy their own sexual desires. Yet, Gilchrist's women keep giving men what they want. Gilchrist's women do not seem to set boundaries or to have real control over their bodies. Her feminist protagonists fit into a sort of male fantasy—access to sex at all times, because men are so powerful and so sexy that women just cannot resist.

Gilchrist does not directly challenge the dominant culture in her works. She gives dominant culture what it wants while trying, at the same time, to empower her women. I would argue that another layer of Gilchrist's depictions of female sexuality is one in which she tries to seduce her reader, specifically her male reader. Margaret Bauer claims that Gilchrist tries to

please her critics; that, in fact, she writes to the critics' reproaches in her later works (*Fiction 10*).

She writes:

If one recalls how, early in her career, Gilchrist responded to negative reviews of her novel with a short story that simultaneously parodied the novel and mocked the reviewers, it is troubling to realize that she seems, in most recent years, to be allowing her readers to dictate the tone of her writing... In an essay for *Southern Magazine*, Gilchrist refers to having "confuse[d] and sadden[ed her] readers" when she killed off a main character in *The Annunciation*... This reference to her readers' disappointment with the novel's original ending supports the view that she wrote the "new ending" to please them. (*Fiction 10*)

In the same way that she tries to please her readers by rewriting endings, Gilchrist tries to please her male readers (many of her reviewers were male) by seducing them through her portrayals of sexuality that mirrors those of the dominant culture. Specifically, she writes women who want sex for the sake of sex and nothing more. With her depictions of women who want sex without commitment, without relationship, without attachment, Gilchrist is not only providing ways of seeing sex for women in a different light, but is affirming it for both sexes. What greater seduction is there, than that of supporting the type of sex that the Raines and Kanes and Dudleys and St. Johns of the world have to her male audience?

Conclusion

There is a lot taking place in Gilchrist's work regarding sex and sexuality. Again, Gilchrist operates on several levels, wanting to have it both ways. Gilchrist disrupts the traditional notions of sexuality with her use of sex and sexuality as the grotesque in her work, and also gives us the lusty women who confirm to the dominant culture that its version of sex and sexuality is perfect. Again, Gilchrist's ambivalence shows up in her work about sex. She does not take a firm stand on sexuality as the grotesque, nor does she completely confirm the dominant culture's version. She shows through her portrayal of sexuality that while she can add

a “drying pussy” to a sex scene, she can also have women talking dirty and enjoy being objectified with the best of them.

Chapter 3

Gender Performance in Gilchrist

Judith Butler contends that gender has a “constructed and performative dimension,” one that involves politics and power (*Gender* xxiii). Although Butler’s work focuses on how gender is expected, by the dominant culture, to follow strict masculine and feminine categories and how those categories are to produce corresponding sexualities, her work points to a broader use of gender and performativity. The performative aspect of gender is one that goes far beyond sexuality; women are to perform in expected and socially constructed ways, ways that reinforce the existing power structures. If the men in Gilchrist’s works can keep their women focused on tennis and tea, power stays in the hands of men. When women, even as young girls, do not perform their gender, there are consequences. Gilchrist’s protagonists struggle as young girls to enjoy the same freedoms and roles experienced by the boys, and they struggle in adulthood to find a place beyond the expected roles of mother and wife that their genders are to perform.

Butler asks, “Does being female constitute a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance, or is ‘naturalness’ constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” (*Gender* xxxi). “Gender” is not a noun, “but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, *Gender* 34). What does it mean to perform “woman”? Gilchrist’s protagonists perform what their cultures expect, but they are often forced or bullied into that gender performance.

Gilchrist’s southern women perform gender in a particularly southern way, one that involves maintaining strong ties with what the South sees as physically, and emotionally feminine. From needing men in order to feel safe and have protection, to donning the very floral

Laura Ashley dresses, to dieting themselves to skin and bones, these women have a rather particular way to look and act out their gender.

Butler's position is that gender identity is not a stable locus from which acts follow, but is, instead, a tenuous position from which repetitive acts follow that fit into socially constructed ideas of feminine and masculine (*Gender* 191). "Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" (Butler, *Gender* 186). Butler contends that these acts and gestures produce gender, and it is interesting to note the ways gender is performed in Gilchrist's work. When Gilchrist's protagonists challenge this "obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" they are reprimanded and reminded by their social circles to behave like women.

From the pole vault pit of Rhoda's youth to the wedding altar as a young adult and the ensuing struggles with motherhood, Gilchrist establishes that women are expected to act like women in a South that spans the thirty years she writes fiction. Although the culture of the South changes within those thirty years, it is significant that throughout those years of writing the roles of Gilchrist's women have not changed much. Margaret Bauer notes that this is a realization and disappointment that Gilchrist comes to in her writing—that her women will always be struggling under "the perpetual influence of patriarchy" (*Fiction* 33). Bauer says that one of the disappointing findings about the character Rhoda in Gilchrist's work is that "in spite of her vivacity and strong will, Rhoda has not overcome the limitations to women's opportunities in the patriarchal South" (*Fiction* 2).

Gilchrist's young girls struggle with the expectation that they are to act like girls and not boys. This expectation is one about which Rhoda, in particular, has repeated skirmishes with her

brother Dudley and with her parents. However, it is Gilchrist's adult women who are caught in an unusual quandary. While Gilchrist points out, in part, society's expectations that women maintain their places on the pedestal, she also shows that it is very restrictive to perform gender on a pedestal. Protagonists such as Crystal Manning Weiss and Rhoda Manning are expected to be "southern ladies," but those very restricted and uninteresting roles do not involve a lot of work and lead to boredom, dysfunction, and alcohol abuse.

For southern women, performing gender has been very specific, historically, but the performance is one of little action. The act of performing gender is restricted and manipulated by the very idea that women are to project an image of staid purity and support for the men who are running their South. Anne Goodwyn Jones points out, "More than just a fragile flower, the image of the southern lady represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial and social perfection" (*Tomorrow* 9). Performing an image is a difficult proposition, and Gilchrist manages to show that for her protagonists, perpetuating this image of the southern lady simply cannot be sustained.

The southern lady, according to Goodwyn-Jones, is expected to serve God, her husband, her family, and her community and by being submissive she shows the ultimate sacrifice (*Tomorrow* 9). "Historians agree that the function of southern womanhood has been to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race" (*Tomorrow* 10). Ironically, although Gilchrist's women upset the idea of southern womanhood, they do not fundamentally challenge the system that maintains their own privilege. This is the ambivalence that is present throughout Gilchrist's work—that of deconstructing the old order, but at the same time not wanting to confront it directly.

Rhoda's Childhood and the Push for Performance

Butler says that gender performance is repeated. "This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (*Gender* 191). Gilchrist's protagonists are saddled with very specific pressures about how to perform gender, and her writings show that they reflect the expectations of a South that has not moved forward, but is stuck in the past. Her characters are constantly struggling with, and poking at, a patriarchy whose broad contours remain remarkably stable over time.

Some of Gilchrist's best writing is from the perspective of young children, particularly Rhoda, who experiences many admonitions from her family that she act like a "girl." When Dudley builds a tree fort with his friends and Rhoda begs to be a part of it he tells her, "I doubt it, Shorty. You're a girl. Girls aren't supposed to be in everything" (RH 32). The only role Dudley can find for Rhoda when she presses to play with them is that she can serve them water, confirming the southern tradition of women serving men. When Rhoda, coming home from a ballet lesson, finds Dudley and his friends building the tree fort she asks what they are doing. Dudley tells her that they're building a fort and to go in the house and get them some water (RH 29). "'Get your own hell damn water'" Rhoda tells him (RH 29). Dudley repeats his request to Rhoda, "'Get us some water, Shorty, if you want to help'" (RH 29). Rhoda does not obey his request, but handles the rejection by, instead, watching the action from the porch step, drinking chocolate milk from a baby bottle. Rhoda is around nine years old at the time she narrates the following:

By noon they had a circle of trees piled four trees high and held together with clothesline and two-by-fours. Inside the circle was an enclosed space about as large as a bedroom. They filled that with old sleeping bags and a camouflage tarpaulin. I sat on the back steps and watched the activity. I was eating a

sandwich and sucking a baby bottle filled with chocolate milk. My mother had a new baby and I could borrow his baby bottles anytime I wanted to and use them to suck chocolate milk. The milk picked up a wonderful flavor as it passed through the rubber nipple. I bit off a small piece so the milk would flow more easily. I knew they could see me drinking out of the bottle but I didn't care. It never occurred to me to stop doing something just because someone was looking at me. (RH 29-30)

Rhoda finds that her gender separates her from her brothers in such a dramatic way that it is synonymous with being a baby. She watched the boys divide into teams. "I sucked my bottle. The January sun beat down on Seymour, Indiana. Inside my little plaid skirt and sweater my hot sweaty little body sucked down the rubber-flavored chocolate milk and watched the battle of the fort proceed" (RH 30). She cannot have what they have; she cannot do what they do, so Rhoda believes that she might as well just sit and suck from a baby bottle in front of them, because, as a girl, she has as much usefulness to the world around her as an infant. In this case, Rhoda refuses to be relegated to serving her brother and his friends; she rejects performing her gender as expected. However, she does not take up the task of doing something equally fulfilling.

Also, Rhoda finds her brother and his friends doing something that she deems brilliant—making a tree fort out of old Christmas trees--as she returns from a ballet lesson. She does not seem that interested in ballet, but it is something her parents expect her to do to perpetuate her femininity. Rhoda narrates it as follows, "I was coming home from my ballet lesson, walking up the alley from Sycamore Street, dragging my ballet shoes behind me by the laces, on the lookout for anything valuable anyone might have thrown away. I had found a hand-painted card shuffler in that alley once. It could happen again at any time" (RH 28). It is significant that Rhoda drags her ballet shoes behind her, demonstrating that she does not value ballet at this time in her life; she would rather build tree forts with the boys. Also, what is important about the ballet lesson is the walk home through the alley, where she searches for treasure, not the lessons themselves.

What Rhoda seems to find interesting is hunting for trash in the alley, rather than becoming the dancer her parents want her to become. In contrast, her brother and his friends drag trees, something that seems far more significant to her (RH 29). Rhoda also thought Dudley's idea about the tree fort, made from Christmas trees on Epiphany, was a brilliant idea that ruined her life (RH 29). "What was Dudley up to and how had he once again hit upon an idea so wonderful, so startling in its power and simplicity, that it was certain to ruin my life for weeks?" (RH 29). Simply by being a girl Rhoda's life is devastated, because she must observe what the boys get to do without joining them. Rhoda repeats the phrase as she narrates the story. "It was eleven-thirty on a Saturday morning, right in the middle of a world war, and once again Dudley had found a way to ruin my life" (RH 29).

Rhoda admires Dudley, again attributing to the males of society all the qualities she would like to have but finds lacking. She says about Dudley, "He was brave, braver than I was in every way, and I loved him, with his thin face and his long thin arms and high intelligence quotient and his ability to stand up to and get along with our father...He took punishment like a man. He worked like a man. He was a man. I was safe in his room" (RH 31). Again, the idea of finding safety with the males in her life starts at an early age. This brings to mind Gilchrist's comment in her journals about needing men to protect her. She says, "I like men because they protect me. All my life they have protected me and I believe they will go on doing it as long as I love them in return" (FS 152).

Dudley performs his gender by building weapons and acting tough. He risks getting beaten with a belt by his father by staying up past bedtime to make rubber guns for the boys to use in the fort (RH 31). "The manufacture of rubber guns proceeded apace. The strips of rubber were of varying sizes, as Dudley experimented with different types of inner tubes. He would sit

for hours in the evenings, sanding and polishing the stocks and handles, cutting old inner tubes into strips, sewing holsters from scraps of unbleached domestic and suiting samples” (RH 33). However, his acting like a man, imitating the war that was playing out across the Atlantic Ocean, brings him to the point where he loses an eye. Ironically, Dudley loses his eye to a backfiring rubber gun—one he made during those late night hours when he should have been in bed. Rhoda narrates that Dudley’s good eye was all they talked about after that and that Dudley “had a strange relationship with the fort” after he returned from the hospital in Memphis. “I remember him standing there with his big black patch on his eye, wearing his brown and white tweed knickers, his hands on his hips, looking at the fort, not defeated or scared or really puzzled even. Just standing there looking it over” (RH 35). While Dudley’s accident confirms to Rhoda that the fort was not something she wanted to be a part of, she still struggles with feeling as though she does not get to be a part of what is important in life. The boys are always on the important track, living the real life, while she is relegated with her ballet shoes and baby bottle to the sidelines.

This is evident in the short story “Revenge,” about a ten year-old Rhoda who stays with her grandmother and five male cousins on a farm in the Delta during World War II. When Rhoda attempts to help the boys build the Broad Jump Pit, her brother Dudley tells her to get away, because it is only for boys (RH 4). When Rhoda throws a temper tantrum and the boys drag her back to the house, her grandmother and Calvin the cook try to comfort her with pound cake and letting her help churn butter in the kitchen (RH 5). Rhoda’s grandmother also tells her that she will take her to a neighboring plantation to play with Ann Wentzel. Everyone expects ten year-old Rhoda to act like a girl: to help in the kitchen, play with other girls, and to leave the boys alone. Instead of allowing Rhoda to expend her energy in play with the boys, it is corralled

and managed, leading to tantrums and fits. Rhoda's grandmother tells her that she cannot believe she cares about "what's going on in that pasture" because, "[e]ven if they let you play with them all it would do is make you a lot of ugly muscles" (RH 13). Rhoda is reminded that she must look feminine so that she, like her cousin Lauralee, will one day get married. When Rhoda tells her grandmother and aunt that she does not plan to get married, but plans to be a New York lawyer one day, they argue with her, suggesting that she must watch too much television to get those kinds of ideas in her head (RH 13).

Rhoda takes up dancing with the housekeeper to try to keep her mind off of the Broad Jump Pit, but "it shimmered in the sunlight, constantly guarded by one of the Olympians" (RH 9). Rhoda is also given the chance to be a maid of honor in her cousin Lauralee's wedding. Although she attempts to make the boys jealous about the wedding, underneath it all Rhoda still feels as though she is missing out. She tries to perform her gender by dancing, playing with girls, planning the wedding with Lauralee, shopping for a bridesmaid dress, and helping in the kitchen. But, Rhoda feels that this acting like a lady is inferior to training for the Olympics, that what she is doing is a waste of time compared to what her brother and cousins are doing.

Young Rhoda feels the differences in the way she is treated in many ways. When her father wants her to entertain the banker's daughter by riding horses with her, Rhoda is assigned an old mare named Dixie. "She is the worst horse we have, Rhoda thought. I bet he's going to make me ride her" (RH24). When Rhoda's father tells her to get on Dixie, he tells her that she can hardly ride, so it makes no difference that she is assigned a horse that has no gait and has a hard time moving (RH 24). When Rhoda pushes Dixie to keep up with Dudley and the banker's daughter, Dixie takes off, throwing Rhoda who ends up in the emergency room. Again, Rhoda is

expected to plod along on an old mare, since she is a girl, instead of trotting or galloping with her brother.

Another way in which a fourteen year-old Rhoda tries to perform her gender is in trying to please Bob Rosen, a college student. Rhoda thinks that she will “memorize the books and records he told her to buy. She would wear the clothes he told her to wear and write for *The Purple Clarion* and be a cheerleader and march with the band and do everything he directed her to do. *So he would love her*. Love me, love me, love me, she chanted to the dark bushes, along in the yard at night, sending him messages through the stars” (RH 94). Rhoda, as independent and high-spirited as she is, learns that to fit into her community she must do what the men in the community expect her to do. This involves cheerleading and wearing specific clothes that Bob Rosen mandates through written letters. Bob knows that Rhoda wants to have sex with him, and since he is eighteen that he would be in trouble if they did. Still, he teases her. In one of Bob’s letters to fourteen year-old Rhoda he writes,

I am going to be home this coming weekend. November 1, 2, and 3. If you will be waiting for me wearing a black sweater and skirt and brown shoes and get that hair cut into a pageboy I’ll be over about 6:30 to take you to the ball game in Benton. If you have to wear your cheerleading things (Is there a freshman-sophomore game that night?) you can bring the black skirt and sweater and change at my cousin Shelton’s house. If you show up in that pink dress looking like Shirley Temple you will have to find someone else to violate the Mann Act with. I have been thinking about you more than seems intelligent. (RH 101)

Rhoda performs exactly as he instructs, and although they do not have sex he kisses her, tells her he is in love with her, and gives her his fraternity pin.

Not only is Rhoda encouraged to perform her gender, but to perform her particular region’s gender. When she wins a high school swim meet or awards for the newspaper column she writes for the daily paper, her family ignores it, pushing instead for the time when she will do

what she is meant to do as a southern woman—get married and have children (NJ 12). “‘She’ll be all right,’ Daddy decreed. ‘She’ll marry a nice boy someday and have some babies. She’s still wet behind the ears’” (NJ 13). Rhoda’s family resolutely ignores her achievements. When Rhoda’s mother points out that Rhoda “won some race” and that “people talk all the time about the columns she used to write,” her father Dudley tells her mother not to encourage such behavior (NJ 13). Dudley discourages the idea of Rhoda having a career, because he associates it with what people from the north do. He says, “Well, don’t encourage that. Look what happened to Sissy Arnold. They let her work for that Hodding Carter down in Greenville and now she’s in New York married to that drunken man who wrote all that bad stuff about Clarksville and all that nasty stuff about Aunt France’s house...He and Sissy were down there last summer handing out birth control things to the Negroes” (NJ 13).

As she grows older, Rhoda’s family expects her to continue the gender performance by achieving their idea of beauty, namely through dieting and remaining thin. After moving to Dunleith, Alabama, Rhoda writes, “Anything I wanted I could have. All I had to do was stay on my diet and be ‘nice to people’ and get acquainted with north Alabama” (NJ 30). Ariane is concerned with her daughter Rhoda’s weight because she wants to make certain that Rhoda is able to catch a man so that she will have the means to live. This thinking is so much a part of Rhoda’s life that it does not even seem strange to her that her mother and father are constantly pushing her to diet and lose weight. Rhoda’s parents’ happiness is dependent upon the clothing size she is wearing.

When Rhoda returns from college a little heavier than usual, her mother takes her to the doctor and asks him to put Rhoda on a diet, including using diet pills. Although Rhoda has won a freshman writing contest at Vanderbilt, her family ignores that, instead focusing on her weight

(NJ 46). Rhoda understands how important it is for her to conform to the notions of heterosexual beauty, and this has much to do with being skinny. This notion leads to perpetual and bizarre dieting. Not only does Rhoda take diet pills and continually starve herself; she and May Garth take arsenic to curb their appetites. May Garth tells Rhoda that arsenic makes bones thinner and skin paler (NJ 97). They literally poison themselves to become thinner, whiter females.

Patricia Yaeger discusses the miniaturization of white female bodies, saying that the “petite white female body” serves to mask any sense of power (126). Yaeger says that “white women have been compelled to inhabit pleasant, undifferentiated, fragile bodies in search of protection” (126). The image of the diminutive white female body is a powerful one, because the South’s identity relies in part “upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady” (Yaeger 120). This image of being small and vulnerable is important to Rhoda’s parents who represent the larger south, because it perpetuates the idea about the southern lady as the core of the region’s self-definition (Yaeger 120). It is also important to Rhoda’s parents that she remain small so that she can marry soon and perform “woman” the way she should. Rhoda’s parents care about Rhoda becoming a southern lady so that she will marry a man from her social class and fit into the world of the South.

Rhoda’s parents care about Rhoda’s weight because they fear that if she is fat she will miss the opportunity to get married, thus never leaving home. Dudley and Ariane do not want the continued responsibility of taking care of Rhoda, and they never entertain the idea that Rhoda might be successful on her own. They assume she will always need someone to take care of her, because that is the tradition from which they come. Rhoda tells her new friend Patricia that it embarrasses her parents that she is fat (NJ 46). The idea that Rhoda is given no freedom to move beyond and look different from the southern women around her plays out in the pathologies that

develop later in her life. It certainly affects the decisions she makes and sets her on a course to disaster.

Gilchrist believes gender plays out differently in the north and the south. When Rhoda meets Patricia Morgan she thinks that it must have been very difficult for Patricia to move to Dunleith, Alabama. She says,

I think now what it must have been like for her to come to Dunleith from Massachusetts. To be dumped down into a sleepy little Alabama town with instructions to be careful of what she said. A town where the ladies spent the mornings getting dressed and the afternoons playing bridge. Whose intellectual food was the *Dunleith Daily* and the *Birmingham News* and the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Who thought New York City was where you went to spend the day at Elizabeth Arden and the evenings seeing Broadway musicals or carefully selected plays without any dirty language. Where everyone went to church and sent money to Africa to save the heathen but took it for granted that the black people in Dunleith couldn't read. (NJ 48)

Here it is apparent that Rhoda has a life before her of performing the role of the southern lady. She envies Patricia her difference, her sensibilities, and her detachment from Dunleith. Rhoda knows that her lot in life is to follow her mother—to get married young, have children, and let her husband take care of her. Only, with Rhoda this path leads to disaster, unlike her mother who complacently accepts her role.

Rhoda's father Dudley makes it clear what he thinks Rhoda should do as a woman. When Rhoda reads a book by Ernest Hemingway on a car ride with Dudley to see his mines in Kentucky she tells him that Hemingway dedicated his book to his wife, who is "terrible looking. She doesn't wear any makeup and she's got this terrible wrinkled skin from being out in the sun all the time...I don't know what he sees in her" (RH 191). Rhoda has been conditioned to believe that being physically attractive is the basis for love. Dudley replies, "Maybe she knows how to keep her mouth shut...Maybe she knows how to stay home and be a good wife" (RH

191). Again, Dudley is pushing his agenda for women, not only for his wife, but for his daughter. By turning Rhoda's question into an edict about how women should act, Dudley manipulates the situation to his advantage. He makes it clear that the expectation is that Rhoda is to perform her role as a woman who stays home, is quiet, and a "good wife." The fact that Rhoda is focused on Mrs. Hemingway's physical beauty is also telling. Because Rhoda is raised in a culture that values women who dress nicely, wear makeup, and stay out of the sun, she cannot understand how Ernest Hemingway can dedicate his book to his "terrible looking" wife.

Performance and Identity Formation

Children in Gilchrist's works are forced to perform their gender, but clear identities are not initially formed. As children continue to perform their gender into adulthood, identities are produced. In the quest to produce a common identity, it is important to question "the political construction and regulation of identity itself" (Butler, *Gender* xxxii). As discussed earlier in this work, Ellen Gilchrist disavows feminism and would say that women do not need to challenge the power structure as much as befriend it. Although Gilchrist challenges traditional views of southern womanhood, she still writes women whose identities are formed and regulated by the dominant culture.

Performance creates identity, and the identity of the Gilchrist southern woman is one that involves marriage and motherhood. However, those aspects of identity are problematic for Gilchrist's women. They believe that marriage and motherhood are their primary purpose, yet they hate it. They find motherhood suffocating, as in the example of Rhoda, who as a young mother moves to Alexandria, Louisiana because of Malcolm's job. Rhoda's first order of business is finding someone to take care of the children. The housekeeper she hires comes to the

house at breakfast and stays until dinner to take the “boring work” off her hands (RH 277).

Rhoda says, “[My new life] would do as soon as I found someone to take care of the babies. It wasn’t that I didn’t like them or resented them coming unbidden into the world. I just didn’t like to take care of them. It bored me to take care of small children because it’s a boring job. Nature never intended a young woman to be alone in a house with small children” (RH 277). Rhoda does not find fulfillment in motherhood, yet she continues to have babies because she is playing a role to which she has been assigned by society.

Gilchrist’s women eventually find that the identities their mothers had as wives and mothers are not enough for them. When Rhoda gets married and starts having children she believes her identity as wife and mother might be satisfying. In spite of years of protesting marriage and motherhood, Rhoda gets married in college because she wants to have sex. She narrates, “I had hardly been in Atlanta a week when I started wanting to get married. It was too hard to do it if we weren’t married” (NJ 184). However, after getting pregnant for a third time and concocting the story that her husband impregnated her on purpose because he knew she planned to leave him, she flies with her father to Houston to get an abortion. Before she goes in for the procedure they spend a night in a fancy new Hilton hotel. Dudley gives his daughter a one hundred dollar bill and tells Rhoda to go buy a swimsuit in the shop downstairs so that she can go swimming in the Olympic pool. Here, suddenly, Rhoda’s identity has nothing to do with being a wife and mother.

Rhoda tried on five or six swimming suits and finally settled on a black one-piece maillot cut low in the back. She admired herself in the mirror. Two weeks of being too worried to eat had melted the baby fat from her hips and stomach, and she was pleased with the way her body looked.

While she admired herself in the mirror the saleslady handed her a beach robe. It was a black and white geometric print that came down to the floor.

“This is the latest thing in the Caribbean,” the saleslady said. “It’s the only one I have left. I sold one last week to a lady from New York.”

“It’s darling,” Rhoda said, wrapping it around her, imagining what Ernest Hemingway would think if he could see her in this...

Rhoda added a pair of white canvas wedgies to her new outfit, collected the clothes she had been wearing in a shopping bag, paid for her purchases, and went out to sit by the pool.

The swimming team had arrived and was doing warm-up laps. A waiter came, and she ordered a Coke and sipped it while she watched the beautiful young bodies of the athletes. There was a blond boy whose shoulders reminded her of her husband’s and she grew interested in him, wondering if he was a famous Olympic swimmer. He looked like he would be a lot of fun, not in a bad mood all the time like Malcolm. She kept looking at him until she caught his eye and he smiled at her. When he dove back into the pool she reached under the table and took off her wedding ring and slipped it into her pocketbook. (RH 194-95)

Here it is clear that she transitions quickly from the unhappy wife and mother in distress who needs her father to help her get an abortion to a woman who feels sexual and wants to attract the attention of the men on the swim team. Her identity is tied in part to the expensive clothes her father can afford to buy for her. It is also tied to the idea of having her body back after her abortion. Rhoda has been so conditioned to be thin that she is obsessed with aborting her baby in order to get her body back. She believes that her power is connected to her body being beautiful and thin. For Rhoda, performing her gender is to be sexually attractive to men.

Rhoda has been programmed to perform beautiful for so long that she struggles with the changes that motherhood bring to her body. She wants her abortion, in part, because she wants to reclaim her thin body. After Rhoda’s abortion, she and Dudley attend a family reunion back in Tennessee. Her mother arrives with a maid and her babies. She washes her legs, rubs lotion on them and puts on her new black swimsuit that “fit better than ever” (RH 202). “‘I’m beautiful,’ she thought, running her hands over her body. ‘I’m skinny and I’m beautiful and no

one is ever going to cut me open. I'm skinny and I'm beautiful and no one can make me do anything.' She began to laugh. She raised her hand to her lips and great peals of clear abandoned laughter poured about between her fingers, filling the tiny room, laughing back at the wild excited face in the bright mirror" (RH 202). It is at this point that Rhoda considers that she will make a break from her conventional life. Her face is wild and excited because she realizes that there can be life beyond being a wife and mother. Ironically, she is excited about being skinny which makes her a desirable and objectified woman. This is what Rhoda knows she must be—skinny, beautiful, and sexually attractive to men, as she recovers from an abortion, plans to divorce Malcolm, and get physically ready for the next man who comes along. But, she also realizes at this point that "no one can make [her] do anything" (RH 202). This realization is what empowers her to move away from married life. Although Rhoda quickly moves to the next man, she eventually finds her way to independence through her writing. Eventually, letting go of the identity of wife and mother and moving away from homes that keep Gilchrist's women tied to identities that include Uptown wives helps them create new identities, ones with which they can finally live.

Beauty is a central component in identity creation in Gilchrist's work. Young girls are trained to perform "beauty," and by the time they are in junior high and high school are well on their way to creating identities that are first and foremost beautiful. Gilchrist demonstrates this in the character of Lele who is plump and does not make junior high cheerleader. In the work "Traveler" Lele is able to reinvent herself by taking a trip to the Delta from Indiana. However, the ways in which Lele tries to construct a new identity conform to the dominant culture's ideal. Lele feels the pressure of performing her gender in very specific ways. She needs to be skinnier, to be a cheerleader, to be well-dressed, and to know how to play a good bridge game.

Lele begins to perform gender in a different way in the South in order to construct an identity that will work better for her. Lele is “just a little on the plump side” and cannot wait to leave Franklin, Indiana where the junior high school has “made the mistake of failing to elect [her] cheerleader” (LDD 138). Lele goes to spend the summer with her cousin Baby Gwen Barksdale who is “queen of the Delta subdeb dances” and who is dressed in a “navy blue dotted Swiss sun dress and high-heeled shoes” and whose “slip was showing, a thin line of ecru lace. Her dark pink lipstick exactly matched her fingernail polish, and she smelled divinely of Aprodisia perfume” (LDD 139). Baby Gwen represents what Lele is not as a fourteen year-old. By performing an identity that convinces Baby Gwen that Lele is someone to be respected, she begins to actually inhabit this identity. Lele tells Baby Gwen that she was elected cheerleader and that nearly the whole football team came to the train station to see her off (LDD 139). Lele begins to care very much that in this new environment she could develop a reputation as a “wild child” (LDD 144). Lele is compared to Zelda Fitzgerald by a visitor and thinks it is a wonderful comparison (LDD 144). Lele says about herself, “I was beginning to believe my own publicity, that I was someone very special, that there might be some special destiny in store for me” (LDD 146).

Interestingly, Lele finds that in the South she can live her fantasy life, in spite of the fact that she is plump and unpopular in Indiana. Lele and Baby Gwen schedule their summer days to lie in the sun for an hour each day, play bridge in the afternoons, and have boy visitors each evening. Gender performance for Lele and Baby Gwen involved a certain amount of idleness, which was easy because Sirena, the African American housekeeper, takes care of all of the work for them. Sirena even bathes Baby Gwen, who is in junior high and over five feet tall. Lele and

Baby Gwen have nothing more to do than to try to develop identities that will help them navigate through their worlds as they enter adulthood.

Butler says, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender* 34). Lele finds that her identity is fluid and can be recreated by assuming the aspects of femininity that she desires. By performing as a southern woman she becomes a southern woman.

Struggling with Gender Performance

Gilchrist’s protagonists perform gender for varying reasons. They perform out of habit, in part, because it is what is going on around them. They perform to get something they want, and they perform for protection. They perform because they are oppressed, and they perform because they are vain. Sometimes they perform their gender in order to keep the dominant culture thinking it has control as they outsmart it. Butler says,

The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. (*Gender* 199)

The multiple roles for Gilchrist’s women lead them to discover that they cannot be all the configurations of gender that a patriarchal society expects them to be. Gilchrist’s women show that it is difficult to be a mother and a heterosexually desirable object. It is difficult to perform all the permutations of gender at once—to make a mark in the world while giving birth and looking sexy. So Gilchrist’s women make choices, and they are often unpopular ones.

Rhoda’s struggles with marriage and motherhood are probably the most dramatic examples of gender performance in Gilchrist’s works. Rhoda claims as a child and teenager that

she will never get married and that she will live in New York and have a career (LDD 119-20). However, she moves right into marriage with the first man with whom she wants to have sex. This quick move from never wanting to have children or be married to finding herself pregnant with her third child says a lot about the Bible belt in the South. Women were expected to save themselves for one man and marry that man. Early marriage was encouraged and premarital sex discouraged in the South. So, in spite of Rhoda's writing skills and goals in life, her options as a Southern woman seem limited to marriage and motherhood to her. She is expected to perform gender in very specific ways. This brings about boredom, bitterness, alcoholism, and finally a break with performing as a wife and mother.

Rhoda believes her identity must be that of a wife and mother. Although Rhoda claims to want a life as a scientist, poet or New York attorney, she does not live in a society that makes those options obviously available to her. Motherhood is the role that has been expected from her since she was a young girl, especially by her parents, but also by larger society. Butler argues that "gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term *strategy* better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (*Gender* 190). Rhoda understands that economic survival, at least as she knows it and has been modeled for her, depends upon her gender performance.

Rhoda jumps into marriage with Malcolm, in part, because she knows she must get married in order to ensure her survival. When Rhoda talks him into marrying her just one week after she moves to Atlanta for summer school, Malcolm expresses that he is not ready. Rhoda persuades him after accusing him of not loving her, and they decide to elope. Still, the wedding

ceremony is the sort of performance Rhoda knows must be part of her life, and she prepares diligently for the elopement. She narrates,

Four days later, on Thursday morning, I cut all my classes and drove down to Rich's department store and went shopping. I bought a white pique dress with pearl buttons down the front and a white satin slip and a long white negligee and a gown. I bought some white satin slippers with fuzzy white balls on the toes. I bought a book on how to have sexual intercourse. (NJ 185)

It is significant that Rhoda begins the discussion about her wedding preparations with the phrase "I cut all my classes." By cutting classes, Rhoda is cutting off the avenues that will lead to her independence. Rhoda trades her masculine schooling for feminine clothing, conforming once again to patriarchal ideas about performing her southern femininity. When they arrive in Walhalla, South Carolina on June 25, 1956, the scene is described as follows:

A boy and girl walking into a gray stone building to get married. It is very early in the morning. He is wearing a pair of chinos. She is wearing a long white dress with tiny pearl buttons down the front. They are holding hands. Her hand is beautiful and plump and the color of apricots. His hand is large and bony and covered with fine brown hair. They look like brother and sister. Neither of them has slept in days. (NJ 187)

Butler says that a bride "functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence" (*Gender* 52). Rhoda is functioning as a relational term among men because she goes from being her daddy's own "sweet sister," to Malcom's wife. Her role in performing her gender as a subservient daddy's girl transitions to a subservient wife, for a while at least. The white dress and white negligee signify purity, a patriarchal expectation of southern women. The book on how to have sexual intercourse is ironic, because Rhoda and Malcolm have been very sexually active. The book, however,

signifies not only Rhoda's willingness to give her body to Malcolm, but it serves to reinforce, at least in Rhoda's mind, the idea of her own purity.

When Rhoda marries Malcolm, she soon understands that the role she is to perform has nothing really in it for her. Malcolm is still a full time college student. She drops out of college to work in a dress shop downtown to provide support for their family unit and gives up her dream of being a writer. Malcolm expects Rhoda to work full time, have dinner ready for him every night, and to keep the house clean. Rhoda thinks as she buys groceries, "It's terrible. All he does is fuss at me. I can't stand it here. I've been working all day and now I have to cook dinner for him and he still won't love me. He won't even get ice cream for me. He's the most selfish person I ever met in my life. He never thinks about me. All he thinks about is himself. He thinks I'm his slave" (NJ 204). Rhoda discovers she must abandon all hopes for an identity outside of wife (and later mother) when she marries Malcolm, and she is conditioned by her society to do so. Whereas she once reflected her father's ideas of being female, she must now reflect her husband's.

However, Rhoda is so conditioned to believe that her identity does not exist outside performing a role expected by patriarchy, that she moves on to find another man after she leaves Malcolm. She believes her problem with Malcolm is Malcolm, not realizing that her problems have to do with living in a patriarchal society that insists that women perform roles that serve its needs. When Rhoda has been separated from Malcolm for one week she begins to look for the next man. And the gender performance in "Love of my Life" is at full throttle. Rhoda knows she must perform to catch the next man. It does not seem to occur to her that marriage was not great for her and that she might consider what she wants to do with her life besides get married again. For Rhoda, it is her only real option. In this work Rhoda meets her brother's friend Raine

whom she falls for immediately. Rhoda describes herself in the beginning of the work as watching her children play on the Slip-and-Slide as she makes biscuits and new potatoes—food she will not be able to eat because she considers food the enemy (RH 203). She takes Dexedrine and diuretics to stay slim. She describes herself as follows:

I have strong bones and red hair and straight legs. I am very, very tan. I am wearing sandals, a pair of blue cotton shorts, a tight blue-and-white-striped blouse...I never eat. Food is the enemy of what I want. I don't know what I want but I know how to get it. If I am beautiful, the thing I want will show up. I've been waiting since I was fourteen years old for the thing I want. Once I thought it was the father of my children. Once I thought it was a federal judge my father's age. I never thought it was the children. They are the price I have to pay for looking for it. I don't have to pay anymore. I had a tubal ligation. I don't have to worry about getting pregnant anymore but still I worry. (RH 203)

Rhoda goes on to say that she meets her “one true love” on this day, one week after leaving her husband. Again, it is her physical appearance on which she remains focused:

I am very very thin. My half-wet shirt sticks to my ribs and breasts; beneath my shorts my tanned legs are straight and shapely. I am so young. I am twenty-six years old. My hair is cut in a chin-length bob with a part on the side. I wear a barrette in my hair. If I am wearing blue, the barrette is blue. On this day, the day I met my one true love, the Indian man, the man who was my equal, who was good enough for me, on this day I think the barrette was blue. It must have been because my shorts were blue. (RH 205)

Rhoda believes her survival depends upon making herself beautiful enough. The minutiae on which she focuses, the blue barrette, is significant because it shows the obsession with each detail in creating the beautiful. Rhoda is focused on her tan, her body, her clothing, and even her barrette, because she believes that if she dresses perfectly and her body is thin and tanned then she will finally get the man who is right for her. This emphasis on the material details and on being thin enough keeps her from focusing on what she might do independently with her life. However, her conditioning from her parents and larger society keep her narrowly fixated on the next man to catch. Rhoda understands that she cannot risk attempting to live an independent life,

because the “punitive consequences,” as pointed out by Butler, will be too great. Although she might be talented enough to make a living at writing, she will never have the support of her family or larger society in striking out alone, as a single woman. It is only by being beautiful enough to catch the next man that Rhoda believes she will survive outside of her parents’ household.

Rhoda has very specific ideas of achieving beauty. While getting ready to go out with Raine, Rhoda puts on “Jungle Gardenia” perfume, makeup, and styles her hair. Rhoda’s notions of being beautiful include being very thin, tanned and dressed very specifically. She realizes that in order to achieve beauty that she must perform specific actions. Expensive clothing is important to Rhoda, so beauty is also commodified. When she looks at herself in a mirror, she reflects,

I was beautiful. More beautiful than I had ever been in my life. They had tried to kill me with the babies. They had tried to ruin and kill me and make me ugly but it had not worked. I had outwitted them. I was separated now and I was going out to the Jackson Country Club and find out what I wanted. I didn’t know what I wanted but I believed it existed. It existed and when I saw it I would know it.
(RH 208)

Rhoda believes that she has almost been ruined by having babies. She understands that her parents, Malcolm, and larger society have pressured her to have babies, and she believes this has taken away from her beauty. She realizes with panic that she may not have many options left if she does not act in certain ways to bring about her idea of “beautiful.” Rhoda finds being beautiful and sexually available a much easier role to perform than that of mother. She believes that society has tried to trap her into motherhood to ruin whatever chances she might have outside of that first marriage. Rhoda clearly cannot see past the next round of performing as a woman. As she concentrates on her dress, makeup, hair, and body to catch another man, she is

angry at the role she feels she has been forced to play as a mother. For Rhoda, motherhood is all about performing her gender as society dictates.

Rhoda discovers that finding the next man is an endless cycle in which she must perform in order to have a man. With Raine, she performs sexually and convinces herself that it is enough to take him away from his wife, but their affair is full of chaos and strife. Although Rhoda claims Raine is “good enough for her” and is her equal, he is really unattainable. Raine treats Rhoda badly at times and will not leave his wife for her. He takes her to Chicago right before Christmas to attend a banquet at which he will be honored. However, he leaves her in the hotel room and attends the banquet alone, presumably so he can keep the affair a secret. Again, Rhoda believes that by paying attention to her clothing and how she looks she can cause Raine to leave his wife for her. She packs a “beautiful black pantsuit with lapels of black satin and the little white satin blouse” for their trip (RH 218). Raine does not come back to the hotel room to take her to the banquet after she has carefully dressed for the banquet. Rhoda says, “At ten-thirty he returned to the room and let me yell at him. I screamed at him. I beat upon him and tore him with my fingernails. He begged me not to hate him. He said he loved me until death. He said he brought me here because he loved me. I cried myself to sleep on gin” (RH 220).

Gilchrist’s women often find an outlet in their frustration, in being expected to perform their roles as women, in temper tantrums. Because they are frustrated and do not have outlets for their intelligence and creative energy, they resort to acting like children to try to bring about change. Crystal Manning throws a television from a third story window because she is distressed about the Vietnam War (DL 210). Rhoda pushes her mother down in the yard when her father will not allow her to leave with her friend Charles Williams (NJ 341). LaGrande McGruder throws her tennis racquet into the Mississippi River from the Huey P. Long Bridge after she

cheats and still loses a match to a crippled new Jewish member, whom she does not believe belongs at her exclusive country club. LaGrande wants the country club to exclude anyone who is not like her, because she wants to feel special and privileged. The tantrums these women throw are destructive and manipulative, but they are the result of living lives of oppression. Gilchrist's women find that performing their gender as women in the South gives them no real independence or freedom. They are tied indefinitely to roles that keep them serving the people around them.

Costuming and Creating Personas: a Microcosm for Performing Gender

Sometimes Gilchrist's women use gender performance to outwit the men in their lives. One of the most interesting examples of performance is one by Nora Jane who decides to rob a bar. The work, entitled "The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar," is the first about Nora Jane in the 1981 *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. Nora Jane relies on performing gender to rob a bar so that she can get together enough money to travel to San Francisco to meet her boyfriend. In this work, she dresses as a nun in order to leave a bar unnoticed after holding it up with a stage pistol she stole from a French Quarter theater dressing room. According to the narrator, "Her specialties were boyish young lesbians, boyish young nuns, and a variety of lady tourists" (LDD 49). When Nora Jane dons a costume, she has the freedom to perform gender in various ways, in ways that are not particularly feminine. By performing as a lesbian or as a nun, Nora Jane positions herself to reject traditional roles for women, discarding marriage and compulsory heterosexuality.

This same imagination that Nora Jane uses to create other personas with costumes is one that allows her to believe she is doing good work while robbing people. Nora Jane becomes a thief, although she prefers to call herself an "anarchist," by robbing stores with her boyfriend

Sandy. Nora Jane finds that “[s]tealing small things from elegant uptown gift shops was as easy as walking down a tree-lined street” (LDD 51). By calling herself an anarchist, Nora Jane justifies her own behavior. Although Nora Jane uses the money she steals for personal things, she imagines that she is doing good things for the world by taking from the rich owners of uptown shops.

Through the character of Nora Jane, Gilchrist shows how convincing carefully constructed performance is when it plays into the community’s assumptions about gender and race. In this work, Nora Jane’s performance of gender intersects with the community’s assumptions about the expected performances by black males. Because the community is so certain that a black male will rob Jody’s Bar, Nora Jane can use those expectations to her advantage as a white female. Nora Jane cases Jody’s Bar several times in different disguises before the day of the robbery, so that she can evaluate the space, the regular customers, and the proximity of the cash register to the door. She dons a nun’s habit and collects money from the bar patrons for a charity.

Because she understands the clientele of Jody’s Bar in the Irish Channel, Nora Jane knows that they will be so focused on believing the bar will be robbed by a black man, that they will be caught off guard when a woman holds up the bar. Jody, whose favorite subject is local crime, tells some of his regular customers, including a judge, “The first nigger that comes in here attempting a robbery is going to be in the wrong place” (LDD 53). Judge Crozier, a regular, tells Jody that he does not know how he will act during a robbery until it happens, as sometimes there are innocent people in the bar “like that sweet little girl who came in last Saturday collecting for the Crippled Children’s Hospital” (LDD 53). That girl is, of course, Nora Jane in disguise who was in the process of preparing for her big robbery.

In her perceived role as an anarchist, Nora Jane sees a male establishment as a perfect target. Because Jody's Bar is also an establishment for men, Nora Jane sees this as a double challenge. As a woman, she will hold up a haven where men may go to get away from women, and she will rob money from an establishment she perceives has plenty. The women's bathroom has boards over the broken window, a window that had been used for boys on the sidewalk to spy on the few women who come into Jody's. The window is broken for a long time, because women are not valued in Jody's Bar. And, "no woman, no matter what her tale of woe, had ever managed to get [Jody] to call a man to the phone" (LDD 54). He would simply tell the women that he had not seen their men. "If a woman wanted a man at Jody's she had to come look for him in person" (LDD 54).

Jody's Bar is brimming with chauvinism and condescension toward women. On the day of the robbery, Prescott Hamilton is holding a poll to see whether he should marry his girlfriend Emily Ann. Since they had been "getting along fine for years without getting married," Prescott decides to solicit the answer of whether or not he should marry from the patrons at Jody's Bar. A mason jar in front of the bar is being staffed by a fourteen year-old who asks all the male patrons to vote yes or no. He tells them,

Take all the time you need to make up your mind. Think about your mother and father. Think about what it's like to have a woman tell you when to come home every night and when to get up in the morning and when to take a bath and when to talk and when to shut up. Think about what it's like to give your money to a woman from now until the day you die. Then just write down your honest feelings about whether a perfectly happy man ought to go out and get himself married. (LDD 54)

The boy's language about marriage expresses the bar patrons' views about performing gender in marriage. The husband is the one in a marriage who loses freedom, performing the role of a whipped man. The boy's views that wives control their homes is one that would have come from

the men hanging out at Jody's Bar, who complain about their wives. The outcome of the poll depends upon one man's vote—if one man votes for marriage, Prescott will marry Emily Ann. Again, this environment of chauvinism is one that Nora Jane decides to challenge.

Because Nora Jane understands that she can play into men's assumptions about street women, she chooses the attire of a street woman for her performance during the robbery. Before leaving to hold up the bar, Nora Jane prepares carefully, packing a brown leather bag with her bus ticket to San Francisco, the stage pistols, and a costume change—a stolen brown nun's habit and Red Cross shoes. She puts on a reddish-blond wig “with cascades of silky Dynel falling around her shoulders, fake eyelashes and plenty of bright makeup” (LDD 57). She has also rolled a change of clothing and sandals into a bundle and hidden it in an oak tree in Audubon Park, where her boyfriend Sandy had buried their money for her trip to meet him in San Francisco.

Nora Jane uses gender performance to outwit the men in Jody's Bar. By playing the part of “street woman” well, she confirms their expectations, giving her power. Nora Jane holds up the bar with the stage pistol, moving the men into the women's patched-up restroom. This is a move to humiliate them further, maybe as a reminder that they have humiliated the female patrons of the bar by not taking care of the broken window properly. Not only are they being held up by a woman dressed as a hooker, but they are crammed into the women's restroom, which Nora Jane locks. Nora Jane tells the men, ““Please be very quiet so I won't get worried and need to shoot through the door...Be awfully quiet. I am an alcoholic and I need some of this whiskey. I need some whiskey in the worst way”” (LDD 59). In playing on the expectations the men would have of a brightly attired street woman, Nora Jane's ruse of needing whiskey in order

to rob the cash register is another way in which she performs in order to confirm dominant culture thinking.

In wielding control over the men she has relegated to the women's bathroom, Nora Jane becomes empowered to do more. She robs the cash register, taking the cash without counting it, and then decides to throw in all the IOUs (LDD 59). Nora Jane's removal of the IOUs, even though they will not benefit her in any way, is a way of giving a little break to the working class, who are positioned powerless, as Nora Jane is. The people who have had to charge their drinks are probably mostly the down-trodden. This is most likely the highlight of her anarchist activity.

In her final move, Nora Jane performs a bit of masculinity. She takes off the wig, eyelashes, and removes her makeup with a bar rag. She then dons the nun's habit and Red Cross shoes before leaving the bar. She places the wig into a bag to discard in a dumpster, and as she leaves she marks a ballot, folding it neatly and dropping it into the Mason jar (LDD 59). By casting a vote in a poll in which only men are included, Nora Jane mocks their games and their world. Nora Jane's ability to outsmart a very chauvinist bar in the Irish Channel is probably more exciting to her than now having the money in hand to travel to San Francisco.

This performance is one in which Nora Jane demonstrates that by donning different attire, she can transform herself into any of the personas she creates, and it is one that gives her power. Her costumes allow her to become everything from a hooker to a nun, and she would have enjoyed a tradition of costuming living in New Orleans, where costumes play a major role in many festivals, and even in everyday life. Her choices to play roles as dramatic as hooker and nun show not only the scope of her ability to perform, but two extreme stereotypes of femininity. Nora Jane's ability to transform herself into these female personas and expect society to react to her in very programmed ways speaks to the larger issue of her performing gender as a female.

The expectations are for her to do so, and she is rewarded with predictable responses whether she is performing in order to hold up Jody's bar or performing as a wife to Freddy, later in San Francisco. Costumes and dress are a major component of performance for Gilchrist's protagonists.

Performance as Currency—for Sex, Protection, and the Names of Abortion Doctors

Gilchrist's women often understand that they must perform their gender in exchange for something. They use performance as a sort of currency to extract something from the dominant culture, and the examples of what Gilchrist's women want vary widely. Sometimes they want sex, other times protection, or once in a while, an abortion.

An aging Rhoda wants to have sex with a physician she has met at a reading. When she decides to join the recently widowed doctor, for his daughter's wedding, she chooses sophisticated attire for the event. Rhoda chooses a "white silk shantung suit," new shoes, and tiny pearl earrings, and plans to wear her hair pulled back into a dancer's bun (AM 11). When the doctor tells Rhoda that he wants her to wear a dress she tells him that she likes sophisticated suits, such as Donna Karan pantsuits (AM 12). The doctor insists on sending her a Laura Ashley dress to wear, a very floral, cotton, old-fashioned and southern-belle type of dress. Rhoda understands that the doctor is trying to control something only she should decide, but she wants to have sex with him so badly that she agrees to wear the dress.

However, at the last minute Rhoda decides to take back control of her dress. She wears the original silk suit, and ends up leaving the wedding, aborting the weekend they had planned together. When Rhoda argues with the doctor about what she should wear, she is astonished that he wants her to wear "tacky little-girl clothes" (AM 12). The Laura Ashley dress would have

confirmed what the southern doctor likes for women to be—fragile, little girls without taste or opinions ensconced in puffs of floral cotton—a version of the earlier discussed southern lady on the pedestal. Many of Gilchrist’s protagonists fret over their dress, as they understand that dress represents significant aspects of southern culture.

Rhoda later realizes that she was almost willing to perform the childish role, his former wife played, in order to have sex. She narrates it as follows:

Wouldn’t you think I would have heard that gong? Wouldn’t you think that someone with my intelligence and intuition would have stopped to think? Don’t you think I knew he was talking about his dead wife? A size six or eight from smoking who let him go down to Laura Ashley and buy her flowered dresses with full skirts and probably even sheets and pillowcases and dust ruffles to go on the antique beds and said, ‘Oh, Daddy, what can I do to thank you for all this flowered cotton?’ (AM 12)

Performing gender through dress is important to Gilchrist’s protagonists. Clothing defines them, and they are no longer comfortable with the good old days of male-dictated southern dress.

Clothing is an important component to performing gender for Gilchrist’s women, and their ideas about identity are often wrapped up in clothing. While in college, Rhoda feels remorse after she makes out with Hap Dumas, but thinking about what she will wear to a luncheon helps. She says, “I had let Hap Dumas put his hand inside my bra. I had let him lay his hand upon my stomach. I was as good as married. It scared me to death to think such things” (NJ 95). She begins to feel better when she thinks about the red cashmere sweater set she had just charged to her father and her tweed wraparound skirt and pearls (NJ 96). Clothing represents a way to change personas, in this case from the shame of making out with someone to whom Rhoda was not attracted, to the wholesomeness she associates with her sorority. The cashmere sweater set she will wear to her sorority dinner functions as a reset button, restoring her to respectability.

Gender performance also ensures a measure of protection for Gilchrist's women. In one of the few works in which Gilchrist's protagonist is not a wealthy woman, "The Bear," Minette lives in the country on several acres with her husband. She works as a cashier at Wal-Mart; he works in a chicken processing plant. Minette is frightened when her toddler DuVal encounters a black bear in the back yard. She has rejected her husband's sexual advances all evening, but after the bear is captured, Minette is happy to have her husband's protection. She cuddles down into her husband's arms and pretends to be "helpless and dumb" (CS 503).

Rhoda also looks to her father and to her brother Dudley for protection. When Rhoda, Dudley and her cousin Saint John travel to Mexico together for adventure, Rhoda thinks, as she falls asleep, that she is happy they are sleeping next door to her for protection (RH 328). This is ironic considering Rhoda has had to fight off Dudley's sexual advances during childhood. Rhoda is fifty-three years old, and Dudley and Saint John protect her by getting her drunk so that she will not go meet up with the bullfighter for a rendezvous. Gilchrist's women pretend to enjoy protection from the very brothers and fathers who often present a source of danger for them.

Sometimes performance involves a dichotomy of enactments. When Rhoda arrives home after having sex with her gynecologist in order to get the name of an abortion doctor in Houston, Malcolm is angry because he thinks she has been drinking again. Rhoda tells Malcolm that she had an appointment with her doctor to discuss using Antabuse for her alcoholism and narrates the following,

I swept by him into the house and went into the bathroom and pulled off all my clothes and grabbed a washcloth and washed off my body and stuck a tube of spermicide up my vagina and then put on some cutoffs and a loose shirt. I swept back into the kitchen and started setting the table and heating vegetables and getting out bread...I could do it all and do it all at once. I could cook and set the table and take care of babies and get an abortion. I was Aphrodite and Athena and Diana. I was unstoppable and amazing and divine and I sure as hell wasn't

going to have any more babies no matter who they belonged to or what I had to do. (NJ 318)

The activity involved in performing as a woman in this section ranges from performing as a prostitute—to have sex with her gynecologist in exchange for the abortion doctor’s number--to that of the multi-tasking involved in taking care of babies while getting dinner on the table. It also involves both embracing motherhood by “taking care” of her babies, while rejecting motherhood by getting an abortion. Rhoda’s references to Aphrodite, Athena and Diana show that she sees herself as performing her femininity as a goddess of love, a goddess of childbirth, and a goddess of wisdom. Even though Rhoda sees herself as a lover who has no problem giving birth multiple times, she is wise enough to know when to stop.

Gender Performance and the Gay Man

There are only two short stories that feature gay characters in Gilchrist’s work. “The Dog who Delivered Papers to the Stars” is a work in which a man dying of AIDS rescues an injured dog. “Phyladda, or The Mind/Body Problem” features Jodie Wainright who “heals” patients by helping them understand the emotional issues that underlie their physical symptoms. The one gay man in all of Gilchrist’s novels appears in *The Net of Jewels*, published in 1992. Rhoda’s friend, Charles Williams, is the Mannings’ neighbor when they move to Dunleith, Alabama. Charles becomes Rhoda’s most stable and closest friend throughout her life. Charles has a girlfriend Iris whom he later marries, but he also has a male lover named Davie. When Charles introduces Rhoda to his boyfriend, she is confused and tries to make sense of this in a southern world that is unaccepting of gay people in the 1950s. Despite her struggles with Charles’ relationships, she accepts and loves him unconditionally.

Charles is a perfect example of a person who must perform his gender to survive in his society. He must act like a man, so he marries Iris. Butler says,

The disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the productive domain. The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. (*Gender* 815)

Charles finds a way to conform outwardly to society's expectations that he act like a man within a very regulated heterosexual world, while privately maintaining a relationship with his male lover. Gilchrist writes this character without making judgments about his marriage to Iris or his maintaining a lover. Charles and Iris build a stable and lovely home together and by all accounts seem to be very happy together. Gilchrist is able to show that within the context of the homophobic South in which Charles and Iris live, Charles is able to carve out a life that holds meaning and beauty. Although it seems problematic to Rhoda that Charles is not honest with Iris, ironically, their marriage lasts longer than any of Rhoda's marriages and has none of the chaos of Rhoda's marriages.

Rhoda protects Charles because she, as a woman, identifies with his marginalization as a gay man. Rhoda has a confrontation with her father about going out with Charles, when her parents think she should be home watching her children. She acquiesces, something that Charles brings up to Rhoda while he is dying. He tells her that he cannot believe she gave in to her father's demands after she pushed her mother down. He remembers, "'When I drove up you were tearing around in some tacky little aqua dress with your boobs hanging out and your daddy was right behind you. Then he was yelling at me to leave and Ariane was on the ground by the oak tree. I'd never seen white people act like that. It was better than a play'" (NJ 357). Rhoda

tells Charles that she only gave in to her father because she was afraid that he would say something mean about Charles being gay (NJ 358). Charles then replies, ““Oh, Dee, upper-class southern men didn’t mind gays back then. We weren’t a threat to them. Didn’t you know that? You were trying to protect me?”” (NJ 358).

Although Gilchrist’s rendering of Charles is one that, perhaps, too simplistically solves the problem of a gay man living in a homophobic South, Charles is one of Gilchrist’s more likeable characters. His character does point out how rigidly the South looks at gender, and how Charles must fit into the notion of binary sexuality in order to survive culturally. Butler writes that “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*Gender* 190). Although Charles succeeds in outwardly appearing heterosexual, Rhoda “fails to do [her] gender right” by not conforming to the idea of being maternal and a submissive wife. Ironically, the gay man in Gilchrist’s work survives his South through his early and middle-age years better than Rhoda does. However, Charles does die of heart failure at age fifty-five, and there is a hint that his drinking contributed to his early death (NJ 358). Rhoda does end up experiencing success in her writing later in life, but she continues to struggle with expectations that she perform her gender.

Gender performance in Gilchrist’s work is significant because it points to the rigid ways in which the South expected gender to operate. Southern femininity and masculinity are constructs, and they form a central part of Southern identity. Although Gilchrist’s women succumb to the pressures that they perform as southern women, they attempt to make a break with convention and strike out on their own. However, they are not able to make a break with performing Southern femininity. Gilchrist’s women struggle from an early age with expectations that they perform their gender. This becomes more complicated for them as they become women, because the female protagonists in Gilchrist are women who must reign in their energy

and independent natures and conform in order to survive. While Gilchrist's women demonstrate that performance can reward them with cultural approval, they find they suffer as individuals for that approval. Although some of Gilchrist's women find a path to independence and productivity, they continue to perform along the way.

Chapter Four

But, Our Mammies are Family!

*“It would be easier, where property is well secured,
to live without money than without the poor;
for who would do the work?”*

Bernard de Mandeville (qtd. in Palmer, 8)

Although race is consistently present in Gilchrist’s work, it tends to play out within fairly narrow boundaries. White protagonists are richly explored, multi-dimensional, and exceedingly complex. They are fully human. Black characters, on the other hand, are often one-dimensional, almost never exist outside of their relationships with whites, and more often than not are defined almost exclusively as employees. Their humanity is rarely noticed, and never exists outside of white society. The black character that is perhaps most frequently written by Gilchrist is the “mammy” figure, the subject of this chapter.

Race relations are often understood – by both white and black characters – in ways that smooth over, rather than reveal, the extent to which race structures the profound inequalities that define southern society. Gilchrist’s characters may, at times, point to the evils of extreme instances of racism, but generally in ways that ultimately restore the racial order.

White protagonists, with little irony or self-reflection, consistently echo the tired trope that “their” African American servants are so well cared for by their white employers that they are, in effect, “family.” With remarkable consistency, white protagonists are excused from any collective guilt associated with slavery and the subsequent legacy of race relations. Past and present sins are washed away by the gentle paternalism of a kind employer. Treating servants well, even “like family,” allow whites to ignore – much less analyze or confront -- broader

inequalities. Gilchrist's protagonists never "exploit" their help because everyone agrees – blacks included – that blacks' sole purpose is to serve the physical and emotional needs of whites.

For their part, black protagonists tend to be defined and understood through a relatively limited set of essentialized features while occupying an even narrower range of roles within Gilchrist's southern society. They are generally portrayed in a positive, if slightly paternalistic, light, but nonetheless remain essentialized as inherently wise, responsible, intuitive, or joyful. Complexity and contradiction seem reserved for white protagonists.

Moreover, although Gilchrist's black characters are ideally situated (as servants) to understand and reveal the racial inequalities that define southern society, they rarely, if ever, serve this role in her writing. Instead, they affirm the "natural order", at times pointing to racist acts or exchanges, but always confirming the broader hierarchy defined by white control and black subordination. Blacks remain defined by white society, and seem satisfied in their limited, supportive, and nurturing roles. Margaret Bauer defends Gilchrist's characterizations of African Americans, in response to book critics' assessments of her portrayal of race, as follows:

Any attempt to excuse this weakness in Gilchrist's characterization of the African Americans in her fiction would only sound like those who laud other white southern writers for their efforts to write of the "Black Experience" and to excuse the gaps in their narratives by saying how broad-minded they were "for their time period" (which implies that it is okay to be prejudiced as long as one is not too prejudiced). It would be more honest—and, it seems to me, less condemning of the writer—just to admit that the African-American experience is not a central concern in Gilchrist's fiction. She is more interested in telling the story of the white woman of the upper middle class in the South. African Americans, therefore, as well as white males, are inevitably minor and hence underdeveloped characters. (*Fiction* 92)

While I agree with Bauer that Gilchrist is not overly concerned with the African American experience, it is significant that she gives voice to Traceleen, maid to Crystal Manning Weiss,

one of the central characters in Gilchrist's work. Traceleen narrates many short stories and chapters in various works. Thus, Gilchrist's treatment of race, especially where it concerns women, deserves our attention.

A Quick Look at Gilchrist's Broader Depictions of African Americans

In Gilchrist's first novel, *The Annunciation*, she writes about race in ways that recur throughout her work. Most notably, white people are the focus of African Americans' lives. Their lives revolve completely around white society. At times, they provide the cheerful audience for the lives of white protagonists. On the Esperanza Plantation, "These were the black people, Baby Doll and Nailor and Gert and Overflow and Sarah and June and Sam, who clapped and laughed when Amanda danced or threw fits. All except Kale, who never smiled at anyone, and Ditty, who was a hundred years old and could tell fortunes and make conjures and tell warts to disappear and was as white as Guy's mother" (AN 8). In one instance, an African American servant even helps his white benefactor commit murder. When Amanda's grandfather has a shootout with Mr. DuBose, Man, "the tallest Negro on Esperanza," helps him in the shootout (AN 8). Amanda's grandfather is the only one to stand trial and is acquitted, and "afterwards everyone went back to Esperanza for quail. Man ate his on the front steps with a mason jar full of whiskey for a chaser" (AN 9). Either way, African Americans do not have lives that extend beyond serving – generally with a smile -- the wealthy white people in the big houses.

Indeed, Gilchrist is consistent in her depictions of white people employing black people. To be sure, this hierarchy defines much of southern economy. Yet, not only does this inequality remain largely unexamined and taken for granted, but black characters almost never exist outside

of their role as dutiful employees (often disguised as family). White people are kind to their black employees, and black people are satisfied and overjoyed to be included in the lives of their white employers.

It does not seem at all unusual to Amanda that her mother-in-law tells her that she will “give” Lavertis to Amanda and that if she likes her she can “keep” her (AN 79). It is clear that the idea of African Americans as property seems perfectly normal to Amanda in the late 1960s, when this was to have taken place. In fact, Amanda sees Lavertis as her closest ally and her best friend. “Amanda kept her. Or the other way around. Amanda and Lavertis loved each other from the start. They liked the way each other looked. Lavertis was beautiful. She had lovely erect posture and a wonderful face. Everything she did in the world was done with courtesy and love” (AN 79). Although Lavertis does serve Amanda in the capacity of closest ally and best friend, the friendship is unbalanced. Lavertis calls Amanda “Mrs. Ashe,” and while she consistently makes Amanda the center of her life, the reverse does not happen.

bell hooks finds this image of the self-sacrificing black woman disturbing. “Unfortunately, though positively motivated, black mother worship extols the virtues of self-sacrifice while simultaneously implying that such a gesture is not reflective of choice and will, rather the perfect embodiment of a woman’s ‘natural’ role. The assumption then is that the black woman who works hard to be a responsible caretaker is only doing what she should be doing” (*Yearning* 45).

Gilchrist’s African Americans are also essentialized in various ways. They are frequently portrayed as naturally intuitive, possessing a sixth sense about things. When Amanda and her cousin Guy begin experimenting sexually at a young age, the white people on Esperanza Plantation are oblivious. However, the African American people know that something is

happening. The narrator says, “Amanda and Guy. Amanda and Guy. The only white children for ten miles down either road. The only white children with two pairs of shoes and shampoo. Amanda and Guy and the love that passed between them like a field of light. Everyone on Esperanza watched it but only the black people knew what they were watching. Only the black people knew what it meant” (AN 12). It is not clear whether Gilchrist is writing about intuition or that she believes African Americans would be drawing on experience, implying that they understand incest and pregnant fourteen year-olds. When Amanda falls in love with a younger man later in life, she tells Guy that Will knows how to love and be happy. “Not many people can do that anymore. Not many white people anyway” (AN 294).

On the issue of essentialism, bell hooks says, “The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness” (*Yearning* 28). Gilchrist’s protagonists often demonstrate that they believe there are qualities inherent in African Americans, qualities such as nurturing, tolerance, and longsuffering. When the dominant culture “imposes” these elements of essentialism on the marginalized, they often begin to take them on and act them out. And, in Gilchrist’s depictions of African American domestic workers, she continually confirms these elements of essentialism.

Gilchrist also writes about interracial sexual encounters, as discussed in Chapter Two. The exception to writing African Americans either as domestic workers or sexual partners is “Memphis,” a work found in her collection of short stories entitled *Drunk with Love*, and it is the only work of its type in her oeuvre. Although it can be seen as a work that confirms stereotypes about black men, this work also seems to suggest that larger society is partially responsible for

the pressures black men face that might lead to violence. Specifically, it points to the hypocrisy around race relations in the South.

“Memphis” is about an interracial couple. Frank, an African American male, kills his white wife, Baby Kate, after several episodes of domestic violence. Baby Kate’s father was an integrationist, but when he finds that his daughter is dating an African American he orders her out of his house and asks her how she dare bring that “trash” into his house (DL 93). The narrator of the work, Allie, is Baby Kate’s aunt and allows Baby Kate and Frank to use her home for their sexual meetings. Allie says, “So first they were doing it in my apartment. The musk from those encounters rose up and invaded the walls. Hours after he was gone I could feel his breath on everything” (DL 92). Frank beats Baby Kate to death with a wooden rocking horse that had been Baby Kate’s childhood toy and had been stored at Allie’s home. When Allie goes to the scene of the crime, Baby Kate’s body is lying in the doorway. Baby Kate’s father tells Allie, “She’s dead. A nigger killed her” (DL 99). Allie, feeling partially responsible, screams at the gathered crowd of African Americans, “Go back inside your houses. Stop watching this. How dare you be here. You goddamn stupid worthless pointless television-watching idiots, get back inside, get out of my sight. I cannot bear the sight of you” (DL 101).

Margaret Bauer discusses critics’ discomfort with this work and the idea that a black man committing a violent act against a white woman confirms stereotypes (*Fiction* 92). However, the larger idea in this work is that an interracial couple could not hold up under the pressure of a racist, patriarchal society. Bauer says, “Memphis’ is not...a story confirming taboos against miscegenation. The blame for the black man’s murder of his white wife ultimately falls back upon the white patriarchy...Allie both accepts and rejects responsibility for her niece’s murder and recognizes the suffering of both races due to the past system of slavery and the continuing

oppression that results from it” (*Fiction* 94). And Allie says, toward the end of the work, “Perhaps I will go and visit him in jail...Black people. We brought them here. Someone did. Not me. We are being punished forever, the bringers and the brought. Tautologies, old clichés, pray for us all. Pray for the world” (DL 105).

Gilchrist has moments when she displays a deeper understanding of how the South was built in relation to African Americans. When Rhoda’s grandmother dies and leaves Esperanza to Amanda and Guy, Amanda gives her young lover Will some money. “It isn’t my money, anyway. It came from the Mississippi delta. It came from land that was cleared and worked by black people whose children and grandchildren are dying in the slums of Detroit and Akron. I don’t have any right to it anyway. It’s money someone *gave* me. Now I’m giving part of it to you. Please just take it and don’t think about it anymore” (AN 214).

Amanda also takes Katie, a Fayetteville potter, to the Garden District in New Orleans and tells her that she can get an idea about the beauty of the city from the neighborhood. Amanda says, ““It’s this overpriced bunch of monuments to slavery they’re talking about. They worship these old houses. There’re people down here that spend every cent they’ve got to keep up these old mausoleums. And, of course, there isn’t a single plaque anywhere with the names of the people who actually *built* them”” (AN 106). It is clear that Amanda understands the past and has guilt associated with it. However, while she feels guilt concerning the plantation and slaves her grandparents and great-grandparents owned, she is unable to see her problematic relationship with her maid Lavertis. Amanda, like many of Gilchrist’s characters, seems unable to deepen her understanding of how race structures southern life. As Minrose Gwin says,

In a profound sense the white South has known literal and moral defeat because of its failure to acknowledge the black South. More than anything else, the relationships studied [in my work] reflect that white failure and the volatile, moving powerful responses of the black self to it. These black and white women,

fictional and real, mirror the paradox of the South. Their bonds are often deep and strong. Yet they are those of victim and oppressor, and they are cemented by suffering. (16)

Lavertis: She Makes the Ashe World Go ‘Round

Amanda believes that she respects Lavertis, but she does not seem to be able to see the larger picture—the picture of African Americans who subject themselves to the selfish lives of white employers. For Amanda, kind treatment of her black charges is sufficient to address racial inequality. Amanda does, upon leaving Malcolm, make her first request that he give Lavertis money so that she does not have to work for “some asshole” (AN 125). However, that does not mean that Amanda has not been an “asshole” in her own way to Lavertis.

After Amanda marries Malcolm and moves to New Orleans, Malcolm’s mother sends Lavertis over to help with the unpacking. Lavertis had worked in the sugar mills in south Louisiana, but has moved to New Orleans with a husband who then left her (79). “By the time Amanda knew her, Lavertis was alone with small children to support and could only do work that allowed her to be home early in the afternoon. In New Orleans that meant housework, wearing a white uniform, washing a white lady’s underwear, standing all morning ironing linen sheets and Brooks Brothers shirts and white tablecloths” (AN 79). Amanda tells Lavertis that she had to leave Mississippi because of all of the Ku Klux Klan members. The idea that Amanda sees herself as progressive with regard to race is troubling. After all, she has no problem with the picture of a black woman in a white uniform washing a white woman’s underwear.

Gwin sums it up with, “White women—fictional or actual, writers or subjects—rarely acknowledge...the humanity of their black sisters” (5). Gilchrist attempts to show the cross-racial relationships as good ones by portraying her only female African American characters as loving friends of the wealthy, white women who employ them. However, while the humanity of

white protagonists is all over Gilchrist's pages, the humanity of black servants is rarely a factor or even mentioned. Yes, the black domestic workers in Gilchrist's works do a lot of good things for the people who employ them. But they work for these people. It is unclear outside the realm of employment what humanity exists for the "black sisters." The white uptown women, on the surface, are kind and gracious to their black employees, which seems to be Gilchrist's answer to the long and sordid history of cross-racial female relationships in the South. However, just because a black domestic worker is described as beautiful or is allowed to ride in the front seat of the car or enjoys the built-in fellowship that accompanies domestic work does not mean that their white employers acknowledge the black women's humanity. The world revolves around the wealthy white employers. Their black domestic employees are paid to fuss over them and offer themselves up as emotional crutches to their whiny, drunk, white employers.

When Amanda decides she should stop drinking, Lavertis tells her that she has been "praying and praying" for that. "Every Sunday I go down to the prayer circle and pray you'll stop doing yourself that way" (AN 86). Lavertis then counsels Amanda about how to go about it, telling her that she needs to get a "baby or a job or something" so she does not have as much time on her hands" (AN 86). In fact, Lavertis runs the household so well that "[i]t left Amanda plenty of time to drink" (AN 82). Although Lavertis fulfills the role of friend and confidante for Amanda, much as other domestic workers do in Gilchrist's other works, Gilchrist seems to suggest that these black maids are lucky to get to be that close to their white employers. And even more telling is that Lavertis's prayers are for her wealthy white employer, who has everything, materially. It would seem that her prayers might have been needed for the poor people with whom Lavertis lived in the St. Thomas project, which is described as a frightening place when Amanda later attends Lavertis's wedding.

Amanda depends upon Lavertis for not only running her home but for taking care of her emotionally.

Lavertis took care of her when she had hangovers, pretending they were colds or sinus headaches or flu. She would come into Amanda's bedroom bringing glasses of chocolate milk or iced tea, and sit on the bed listening to Amanda's morning-after remorse. By noon they would be together in the library watching *As the World Turns*. Lavertis would be ironing, Amanda lying on the couch beginning to feel better, comforted by the sound of the steam rising from Lavertis's tireless iron. (AN 82)

It is clear that nothing seems amiss to Amanda in a world where Lavertis irons tirelessly while nursing her employer back from a hangover, or if anything is amiss it is Amanda's drinking and not the disparity between their worlds.

When Amanda decides to translate poetry at Tulane University, Lavertis adapts. "She brought endless cups of coffee into the room on trays as she had seen secretaries do on television. She answered the door and the phone and told everyone Mrs. Ashe was working and couldn't be disturbed. She noticed if Amanda's spirits got low" (AN 92) Lavertis also tells Amanda when a translator is coming to town while getting out the vacuum (AN 93). The responsibility Lavertis shoulders for running the Ashe household while pulling Amanda along emotionally is another stereotypical depiction of African Americans who are willing to do anything for their white employers. From Amanda's point of view, their lives are conflated. Lavertis's life merges with Amanda's. Amanda's desires are Lavertis's desires. Amanda's work is Lavertis's work. Amanda's needs are Lavertis's prayers.

Later, after Amanda moves to Fayetteville, Arkansas, Lavertis writes her faithfully, to tell Amanda that she is still praying for her at Wednesday night prayer meetings. In fact, Lavertis writes to Amanda, still addressing her as "Mrs. Ashe" (AN 253). Lavertis writes that she knows Amanda is busy with her work, but she would really like for her to write her and tell her what is

going on (AN 253). She says, “Seems like every day I turn around and start to tell you something and you aren’t there” (AN 253). It is significant that someone Lavertis misses and wants to hear from this much is still not available to Lavertis on a first-name basis, and the letter writing seems to go one way. Despite the distance and change in association, it continues to be a one-sided relationship with Lavertis doing most of the giving.

The actual labor performed for their white employers is cheap labor that does not have systems in place to protect the domestic workers. In fact, the idea that the domestic workers, or mammies, experience a certain amount of economic freedom and protection because of their white employers is the story the South tells itself. It is the same mindset that has kept women “protected” and “economically sound” by keeping them on that much-discussed pedestal. It is this mindset that has been touted as being particularly “Southern” or “Old South” or part of the culture that outsiders cannot understand, and it is this mindset that helps keep the South culturally “stuck.” The South has been afraid to let go of the idea that the dominant culture “protects” and “keeps” its women and its African Americans, despite a history that shows gross abuses to both.

Traceleen, White Woman’s Best Friend

In *Black and White Women of the South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature*.

Gwin discusses the disparity in the roles of black and white women in the South’s history:

It is not the smallest irony of slavery that the nineteenth-century southern mythos demanded moral superiority from white women and sexual availability from black, and yet simultaneously expected mistress and slave women to live and work in intimate physical proximity. As obverse images in the popular mind, the chaste belle and the lustful female slaved evolved into rigid stereotypes emerging out of the institution of slavery and its chivalric codes of conduct. As actual individuals of flesh and blood, black and white women often shared kitchen, boudoir, and Big House. Plantation mistress or slave, southern womanhood

served the patriarchal master. Although many male slaveholders eschewed philanderings in the quarters for reasons of morality, religion, or husbandly devotion, perceptive historians of the southern experience have observed volatile psychological and sociological connections between the white man's sexual exploitation of the slave woman and the evolution of the lady's pedestal. (46)

Gwin goes on to discuss slave narratives in which black women were raped and white women experienced sexual jealousy that was turned into "perverse cruelty" (50). In spite of this, Gwin points to literature that treats the attachments developed "in response to male-initiated crisis" (23). White and black women gained strength from their relationships and were often able to overcome problems together (Gwin 23). Gwin says, "They nurse each other, mother each other, and initiate each other into the mysteries of death. Their bond is their common womanhood. Their sphere is the family. Their enemy is anything that seeks to degrade or destroy either" (23). According to Gwin, white women often joined forces with black women to oppose their husbands, often ineffectively, when slave families were split up and members sold (25).

Gwin also points out that white women often embraced "the materialistic dehumanization of slavery" and that those women often "deny their own maternal impulses as well as those of their slaves" demanding "maternal nurture for themselves from those same women" (36). This need for maternal nurturing is evident in Gilchrist's protagonists Amanda and Crystal. Both women expect their black maids to drop everything and take care of them. In Gilchrist's depictions of the protagonists' mothers it is clear that these women lack strong mother figures in their lives and rely on the age-old African American mammy to care for them. The maids that these white women later employ must fulfill some of the roles the earlier mammies were expected to fulfill. Crystal needs a mammy figure for her children, but she also needs one for herself. She relies on Traceleen, her African American maid, to be the mother figure in her life. Gwin says, "Just as black women were forced to be strong, white southern women often were

compelled to appear weak...[T]he patriarchy of the Old South seems to have firmly assisted its ladies up onto the pedestal, that emblem of chastity and powerlessness..." (4).

Gilchrist gives Traceleen a voice, a wise and wonderful one. However, the relationship is much like the one that Amanda and Lavertis experience. It is one-sided; the black servant's world revolves around her rich white woman. Traceleen first appears in Gilchrist's work *Victory over Japan* in a short story entitled "Miss Crystal's Maid Name Traceleen, She's Talking, She's Telling Everything She Knows." It is significant that the character Crystal is introduced to us by her African American maid. Traceleen is a humorous narrator, and she has a practical, sensible approach to life, much as Dilsey does in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Both women serve as the stable, guiding forces for very chaotic and dysfunctional southern families.

Although Traceleen is given a voice, she still serves in part as a stock figure, or as Margaret Bauer says, "a stock figure straight out of ante- and postbellum plantation fiction—the happy darky whose prejudices are comparable to those of the white people he serves" (*Fiction* 91). Traceleen has no children of her own, but she has one niece. Her life is wrapped up in Crystal's life, and she loves Crystal's and Manny's daughter Crystal Anne as her own child. She is the most stable adult figure in Crystal Anne's life, much as Dilsey was to the Compson children.

The idea that Traceleen's life revolves around her white employers' lives is one that Kimberly Wallace-Sanders discusses in her work *Mammy: a Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. Traceleen is, essentially, a modern day mammy, and Wallace-Sander's work points out the problems inherent with the South's beloved mammy figure. Wallace-Sanders uses the figure of Aunt Jemima as an example. "Aunt Jemima was created as a trademark that tapped into the national longing for an established and mythological Old South. This romanticized

mythology of the plantation as a utopia was transferred into the commercial and marketing arena as an effort to reunite the country after the Civil War” (4). This image is one to which the South still clings, as a way of connecting black and white. Wallace-Sanders continues, “An African American *pretending* to be a slave, was pivotal to the trademark’s commercial achievement in 1893. Its success revolved around the fantasy of returning a black woman to a sanitized version of slavery. The Aunt Jemima character involved a regression of race relations, and her character helped usher in a prominent resurgence of the ‘happy slave’ mythology of the antebellum South” (61). The mammy figure was first depicted as a slave and later as a freed woman, but always with a “noticeable attachment to white children” (Wallace-Sanders 6). Wallace-Sanders says, “Her unprecedented devotion to her white family reflects her racial inferiority” (6). Although Gilchrist attempts to sugarcoat her “mammy” figures, she manages to draw upon stereotypes in her depictions of African American domestic workers.

Traceleen, in true mammy-fashion, picks up the pieces in the Weiss’s broken household. In the first work in which Traceleen is introduced, she tells of an incident of domestic violence. Crystal flirts with her brother-in-law’s friend Owen at a wedding in Memphis, and Manny pushes his wife down the stairs. Traceleen narrates, “What they want to call the accident. I was along to nurse the baby, Crystal Anne, age three. I was right there for everything that happened. So don’t tell me she fell down the stairs. Crystal hasn’t ever fall down in her life, drunk or sober, or have the smallest kind of accident” (VJ 207). Traceleen is the voice of truth in the Weiss household; she calls it as she it, and does not try to cover things up to make them seem nice or normal.

The idea of covering up the truth, or forming an alternate story that is more acceptable socially, has been common practice for the South, historically. In the same way that Crystal

“fell” down the stairs, rather than being pushed by her jealous husband, the South’s stories about their happy African American slaves or servants serve to cover up the truth about race relations. Traceleen describes Manny as he watches his wife Crystal flirt with Owen at the Memphis wedding, “I kept seeing Mr. Manny standing against the wall with a drink in his hand. Not letting anything show. None of the Weisses let anything show. They like to act like nothing’s going on. They been that way forever. My auntee worked for the old folks. She says they were the same way then” (VJ 211).

Crystal tells Traceleen, upon hiring her, that she will only be hired if she agrees to let Crystal pay for her to go back to school, because Crystal does not “believe in people being maids” (VJ 216). However, Traceleen continues to work for Crystal throughout the many works about the Weiss family, and there is only one mention of school, in a much later work. Traceleen says that she tried school part time, but gave it up after nine months (CB 250). It is easy to see why it would be difficult to attend school with all of Traceleen’s responsibilities to the Weiss family. Even though Crystal pays lip service to a more progressive way to think about getting domestic workers out of the line of domestic work, she is still too selfish to give up Traceleen as a maid. She becomes too dependent upon her and selfishly lets her continue to serve her. Her philosophy about not believing in people being maids is tossed aside so that her lifestyle can continue uninterrupted. Although Crystal is not a feminist, this work takes place in 1976 when the struggle for women’s rights was in full swing. She might want Traceleen to go to school because of the feminist rhetoric around her, but feminism takes a back seat to Crystal’s need to be cared for by a rich man and a black woman. When Crystal’s cousin Dede asks Crystal, earlier, why she is marrying Manny, Crystal replies ““He’s rich...He’s rich, rich, rich, rich, rich, rich”” (VJ 245).

The idea that African American and white women experience feminism differently is an issue that bell hooks takes on. She says, “In the nineties, collusion with the existing social structure was the price of so-called liberation. At the end of the day, most privileged class white women and their upwardly mobile peers of other races wanted class privilege and social equality with men of their class more than freedom for themselves and their exploited and oppressed sisters” (*Class* 106). Clearly, Crystal might buy into the ideas of liberation for both black and white women, but she is more concerned, in practical terms, of not losing her place of privilege.

The Telling is in the Details

Even though Crystal believes she has a progressive attitude toward her African American maid, Traceleen must wear a uniform to the wedding in Memphis. Although Traceleen states that she would have gone to the wedding for free, she is made to wear clothing signifying that she really does not belong. She cares for three year-old Crystal Anne during the wedding and reception and rescues Crystal when Manning pushes her down the staircase (VJ 209-10).

Traceleen is only allowed to be a part of the Memphis wedding because she is there in a capacity to help white people. She must wear clothing that dramatically signifies her status as maid, in this case a “black gabardine uniform with a white lace apron” (VJ 212). Because she tends to Crystal Anne, her presence is accepted at the lavish wedding of Crystal’s brother-in-law Jody. Wallace-Sanders points out that a white child was often the ticket for African American women in a racist South. She says that “the presence of a white child makes African American women more tolerable and acceptable to whites who would find her offensive by herself” (55). Traceleen describes the scene as follows, “The young people took over one hospitality room and the old people took up the other. Me and Crystal Anne sort of moving from one to the other,

picking up compliments on her hair, getting Cokes, watching TV. I was getting sixty dollars a day for being there. I would have done it free” (VJ 209). It is problematic that Traceleen plays the part of the “Happy Darky” so well that she claims she would do the work for free, because as the beginning of her second sentence points out, she does not really fit in. She does not fit in with the young people where Crystal Anne belongs or with the older people where Traceleen belongs. Traceleen is so accustomed to this sort of living on the margins that she does not even recognize it.

In bell hooks’ work *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* she discusses the idea of marginality:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. (149)

Traceleen accepts a little glibly her place in the Weiss’s world. In her voice, created by a white writer, we are shown a passive woman who believes that although she is wiser in many ways than her white employers, she considers herself fortunate to have access to their wealthy world. bell hooks goes on to say,

There were laws to ensure our return. Not to return was to risk being punished. Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. (*Yearning* 149)

Traceleen understands that she is a necessary and vital part of the Weiss's life, but she considers herself more of a friend to Crystal than an employee. In hooks' next paragraph she states,

This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world-view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and solidarity. (149)

Traceleen does not find the “radical possibility” and “space of resistance,” that hooks locates, in the margins in which she lives. The fact that neither Traceleen nor Lavertis ever raises her voice in opposition to the oppression in their lives makes Gilchrist's depictions problematic. Whatever they do, they do for the benefit of the family for which they work. In this way, Gilchrist continues the South's story of the happy slave. Wallace-Sanders says,

'Mammy' is part of the lexicon of antebellum mythology that continues to have a provocative and tenacious hold on the American psyche. Her large dark body and her round smiling face tower over our imaginations, causing more accurate representations of African American women to wither in her shadow. The mammy's stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites—all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia. (2)

The relationship between Crystal and Traceleen is one that mirrors those between the white mistress of the old plantation and the black slave. The idea that Traceleen's life exists in relationship to Crystal's life is one that carries on in Gilchrist's later literature. Traceleen is the modern-day mammy figure—a black woman who is lucky to work for a rich white woman. She is a woman who manages to hold everything together without her own personal life infringing upon her work for the rich white family. And, even though Crystal seems to treat Traceleen with kindness, it is still an unbalanced relationship—a material arrangement based on the trade of Traceleen's labor for Crystal's money.

Another example of the way in which Gilchrist's protagonists exploit their black maids shows up in the work "Traceleen's Diary," a short story narrated by Traceleen. In this work Crystal shows complete disregard for Traceleen's time off from work. It is inconceivable to Crystal that she cannot just pluck Traceleen from her leisure time to come serve the Weiss family in any capacity.

In the details of Traceleen's story, it becomes evident that in the process of Crystal's attempt to rescue abused children, she exploits Traceleen. Crystal and her friends Mr. Deveraux and Lydia decide to take on the task of finding out whether some of the bars in the French Quarter are selling young boys to homosexual men from out of town (VJ 238). Crystal begins to think of her son King. "What if it was King," she says. "If King was poor and black they'd have him for sure, beautiful as he is" (VJ 239). Crystal pretends to be an old hooker and becomes friends with the owner of a French Quarter bordello. Mr. Deveraux is writing a piece of investigative journalism on the issue. Traceleen points out that Miss Lydia cannot play the role of hooker in their endeavor. "Miss Lydia is not going to be any use to them because she is too large-boned to ever have been in that kind of business and wears short hair. Nobody would believe she is anything but a schoolteacher which is what she is. She just went along for the ride" (VJ 238).

When the three make a plan to go back down to the bordello in the French Quarter to see if they can catch the owners selling young boys in action, Crystal tells Traceleen to call her husband and tell him she must spend the night. Crystal's access to Traceleen's life after work is extremely invasive. She assumes Traceleen is completely available to her at all times, even at night. This type of presumption does not seem at all unusual to Gilchrist's protagonists. Crystal

has complete control of Traceleen's life, and this total access to her life speaks volumes about Traceleen's lack of freedom and the fact that she is treated with disrespect.

It is often the case that Traceleen is trying to comfort a young Crystal Anne, who feels abandoned by her mother—a mother who is often carrying on an affair right under everyone's noses. When Crystal decides to take on the cause of the boys being sold in the French Quarter, it is clear that she wants meaning in her life. Since there was never any discovery of any activity, it is most likely a rumor, but one that Crystal chases to bring substance to her life.

It is the meaninglessness of Crystal's life that causes the chaos and dysfunction. Crystal looks for fulfillment in extramarital sex, in trying to find a cause to get behind, in latching onto people she finds important (Francis Alter, the poet), in dieting, yoga, alcohol, and food. It is because her life holds no real meaning for her that she suffers through a whirlwind of chaos. Ironically, because Traceleen shoulders the burden of motherhood and domestic labor for Crystal, she is left with more time to be dysfunctional.

The problems are ones that bell hooks discusses, saying "I had grown to black womanhood hearing about black women who nurtured and cared for white families when they longed to have time and energy to give their own" (*Yearning* 43). hooks' mother experienced this conflict as a maid to a white family. She explains,

In our family, I remember the immense anxiety we felt as children when mama would leave our house, our segregated community, to work as a maid in the homes of white folks. I believe that she sensed our fear, our concern that she might not return to us safe, that we could not find her... When she returned home after working long hours, she did not complain. She made an effort to rejoice with us that her work was done, that she was home, making it seem as though there was nothing about the experience of working as a maid in a white household, in that space of Otherness, which stripped her of dignity and personal power.

Looking back as an adult woman, I think of the effort it must have taken for her to transcend her own tiredness (and who knows what assaults or wounds to her spirit had to be put aside) so that she could give something to her own. (*Yearning* 46)

In Gilchrist's work, this side of the story is never considered. Her black women's lives, beyond serving their wealthy, white employers, are never explored. They function only in relation to the white protagonists.

Gwin says, "From both white and black female perspectives emerge moments of real closeness in the face of common suffering. But for the most part racism blinded white women to the reality of that suffering in their black sisters and built in Afro-American women impenetrable layers of hatred and resentment toward the fair ladies who refused to see them or the immensity of their pain" (12). However, in works in which a white writer takes on the voice of a black maid, something gets lost. We see none of the "layers of hatred and resentment," but around the edges and in the details we find examples of complete disregard for the black maids who serve their wealthy white employers. The egos of Crystal and Amanda are so large that they are blinded to their own entrenched racism.

It is not unusual for the white women in Gilchrist's work to believe that they are far from being racists. Amanda's friend Katie claims to be a civil rights activist when she attends Lavertis's wedding with Amanda. Amanda takes Katie, a hippy potter from Fayetteville, to the wedding in New Orleans, which takes place in the St Thomas Project (108). The neighborhood is described as a barren floodplain:

They were near the river now. Everything was the color of the river. The streets were covered with dried mud, the courtyards so bare she could not tell the difference between the concrete and the earth. Even the shrubs were covered with dust. In three blocks they had come from the lush tropical beauty of the Garden District to a floodplain. No one could live here, Katie thought. No one could live in such a place. (AN 108)

Amanda tells Katie not to be afraid, that no one will hurt her because they are “under Lavertis’s protection” (AN 108). The implication is that they could expect to come into harm’s way by entering an African American neighborhood. In a courtyard a group of black men are drinking beer around a Martin Luther King statue (AN 108). “A child walked by carrying an empty bottle. He ran his hand across the hood, then stopped and stared into the car. The men by the statue turned and looked their way” (AN 108). Again, in this scene Gilchrist deploys stereotypes about African American neighborhoods and the fear felt by white people who enter them.

Lavertis has been watching for them, so she sends her brother out to escort Amanda and Katie (supposedly through the black people in the street) inside the building. Again, this scene depicts the imbalance of the relationship. Lavertis is so thrilled that her former white employer is attending her wedding that she stands at the window watching for her arrival so that she can send her brother to escort the women safely into the building. This is a stretch for any bride busy with a wedding, but it seems to say that it means *that* much to Lavertis that a privileged white person attends her wedding—that is the highlight for her.

Again, even though Amanda attends the wedding, the focus is on Amanda, not Lavertis the black bride. At the end of the wedding scene we are left with this description: “Then the bride, who was cutting her wedding cake, put down the knife, came across the room and held out her hands. Amanda rolled her skirt up around her waist, took off her shoes, and the two women began to dance. They danced and danced, holding each other’s arms, laughing up into each other’s eyes, while everyone clapped and cheered them on” (AN 109). This is the image of black and white unity according to Gilchrist.

The Making of the Mammy Image

Mammy was an important figure in the system of slavery. Wallace-Sanders says of the mammy images, that “proslavery authors use these images of slave women with a white child as a symbol of racial harmony within the slave system” (13). She goes on to say, “By layering racial inferiority on top of class inferiority, adding the possibility that she is both wet-nursing and subsequently raising a child that may actually own her and her family, the mammy moves into another sphere of time-honored loyalty altogether” (16). Wallace-Sanders asks, “What better way to defend the slaveocracy than by using the power of maternal representation?” (19).

One of the most complex issues for the mammy of the Old South was her responsibility for both raising and nurturing her white charges along with her own children. In proslavery literature the mammy’s preference for her white children is emphasized. Isabel Drysdale wrote about an Aunt Chloe in 1827 in a book entitled *Scenes in Georgia*. Drysdale writes, “Those who have never witnessed it can scarcely conceive of the affecting tenderness displayed by the Negro nurse to her little charges. It seems even to exceed the force of natural affection for her own offspring, combining strong maternal love with the enthusiastic devotedness of loyalty” (qtd. in Wallace-Sanders 18).

The idea that Mammy loves the white children entrusted to her more than her own is one that emphasizes that Mammy believes in her own inferiority (Wallace-Sanders 19). Wallace-Sanders says, “Her ‘natural’ maternity is constructed as primitive, instinctual, base. Simultaneously, her maternal devotion to white is constructed as sublime, extraordinary, superhuman. Her behavior and maternal status are inextricably linked when her biological (black) children function only to reaffirm her attachment to her surrogate (white) children” (19). Wallace-Sanders points out the insults at work in these portrayals as the idea that African

American mothers exhaust their store of maternal devotion and have nothing left for their own children and the idea that black children are different from white children—that they have fewer needs (26). Wallace-Sanders discusses the “mammy dilemma” as: “how can one mother take care of another woman’s children and still be a good mother to her own?” (54) Lavertis’s children are never once mentioned in the entire novel, and Traceleen conveniently has no children of her own.

The discussion of the mammy figure is important because it establishes the attitudes pervasive in southern literature (and the South) about black domestic workers, and Gilchrist confirms these age-old stereotypes of the mammy in her works. Traceleen takes care of Crystal Anne because she is paid to do so. Crystal depends upon Traceleen to be Crystal Anne’s nurturer, to protect her, and to mother her. Crystal is not simply selfish; she has been raised in a culture that believes African American women are better at mothering. Wallace-Sanders says that “because of widespread theories of nineteenth-century racial essentialism, African American women were thought to be innately superior in their abilities as caretakers of white children...As a result, the mammy emerges as a mother who frequently displaces white mothers and has ambiguous relationships with her own children” (8).

Traceleen says about her work, “Miss Crystal is the lady I work for. I nurse her little girl, Crystal Anne, and I run the house. They’re rich people, all the ones I’m talking about. Not that it does them much good that I can see. Miss Crystal’s married to this man she can’t stand. All the money in the world will not make up for that” (VJ 249). Although Traceleen is sensible and sees the problems inherent in having too much wealth, she is subjected to Crystal’s every whim. Not only are Crystal’s expectations of her unreasonable, but Crystal takes advantage of the

imbalance of power in the relationship, assuming that her life is so much better than Traceleen's that Traceleen will always put Crystal first.

When Crystal gets so drunk that she passes out, she leaves Crystal Anne essentially alone, playing by herself in the living room (DL 217). Young Crystal Anne is cold and decides to start a fire, which sets the Weiss uptown mansion on fire. Traceleen leaves the Weiss house after Crystal starts drinking. She says, "I was put out with her that night. She was going to ruin all our good work and there was nothing anyone could do to stop her. The Lord's will be done, I suppose I was saying something like that. That is the will of the Lord. I still think I was right to go on home. Of course, if it had turned out differently I would be feeling like it was my fault" (DL 217). Traceleen has a mammy-type responsibility to Crystal and Crystal Anne. She is in a situation where she has no real control over their lives and yet feels responsible for their safety and even their happiness.

In the work "Traceleen, She's Still Talking," Traceleen narrates in first person an account of taking a big six-hundred series Mercedes to Crystal's brother Phelan in Texas. Phelan will use the car that he ordered directly from Germany and shipped to New Orleans to ferry people to and from an exotic animal hunting ranch he has set up in west Texas. Phelan holds the purse strings to the family money. Since he is a man, he has been given permission to spend his and Crystal's inheritance, which is one reason Crystal feels she must stay in a loveless marriage to Manny. He insists that Crystal drop everything and drive the big, flashy car to his ranch where he will pick up clients that week to hunt Russian boar for \$2,000 per person (VJ 251).

Although Crystal does not want to please Phelan, she feels like an adventure and is attracted to her cousin Harry, who accompanies her on the trip. Crystal tells Harry that she will "take" Traceleen along with Crystal Anne, before she even asks Traceleen if she wants to go

(and before Traceleen gets “permission” from her husband Mark) (VJ 254). Crystal and Harry stock the new car with two hundred dollars- worth of whiskey and start drinking so heavily that they insist that Traceleen start driving at the point they arrive in Lafayette, about two and a half hours from New Orleans (VJ 255). During a pouring rain, Traceleen must care for three year-old Crystal Anne who is riding in the front seat, negotiate the rain, drive a car she has never driven before, and listen to the loud laughter and singing to country music from the back seat. Traceleen wrecks the brand new, expensive and uninsured car, running it into a live oak tree on the bank of the Lacassine River (VJ 256). When they finally arrive at the ranch, after being pulled from the mud by state troopers, Phelan asks why they would let a “nigger maid” drive his car (VJ 261). In spite of his disparaging remark, Traceleen says she feels sorry for Phelan while watching him pull chrome from his new car (VJ 261).

It is clear that Crystal’s selfishness has daily consequences for Traceleen, yet Traceleen continues to feel nothing but loyalty. When they get back into the car after it is towed from the mud, Traceleen notices that Crystal looks bad. Traceleen narrates, “She was starting to look pretty bad, her hair all coming out of her pageboy and her pants covered in mud. I can’t stand to see her like that, hard as I work ironing everything she owns” (VJ 259). The way Crystal looks reflects poorly on Traceleen, even though Traceleen has managed to keep the baby Crystal Anne from touching everything in the dirty office at the dock, has changed a diaper in the car as they get started, has taken over driving the long journey to west Texas in a thunderstorm, and all while trying to keep a crying baby calm. Traceleen never thinks that she might look like a wreck, because her life does not matter. It revolves around Crystal’s.

It is stories such as this one that subtly draw attention to the embedded attitudes toward African American workers in the South. On the surface, this story is one in which the reader is

most likely expected to be amused with Crystal and her feistiness. And the fact that an African American maid tells the story in her language through her own eyes adds to the humor.

However, more importantly, the way Traceleen is taken for granted illustrates the larger story about twentieth-century African American domestic workers. There is a lot of carry-over from the past in expectations, assumptions, and attitudes when black people work for white people in the South.

Gwin discusses the journals of plantation-owning women during the early nineteenth-century. The autobiographical writings from both white and black female perspectives reveal much of the ambivalence of both white and black women. One thing of particular interest to Gwin was the fact that the white females often did not believe that black women had separate lives from their own. The idea that their black slaves have affection for anyone other than the white wealthy family they serve seems implausible (Gwin 107). Gwin writes of Mary Chesnut whose slave Molly was a very nurturing and maternal presence for Chesnut. However, Chesnut was jealous of Molly's time with her own family. Chesnut could not see Molly as a separate person, a person whose world was not completely Chesnut's world (Gwin 109). It is this same presumptuous attitude that can be found in the characters of Gilchrist's white protagonists. Gwin says that "those color lines blinded white women to the humanity of their black sisters and built in black women massive layers of hatred for those fair ladies who would not, or could not, see their suffering" (109). Gwin points out that "this inability or unwillingness of one human soul to recognize humanity in others" is the "flaw of the Old South that led to its destruction" (113).

Gilchrist attempts to show a deep friendship between Crystal and Traceleen, one in which the characters recognize each other's humanity. However, Gilchrist does not succeed in doing so because she cannot get past the entrenched prejudices and ideologies of the Old South. Gilchrist

cannot get past white supremacy, although she attempts to show that Crystal does a lot for Traceleen and that they have a unique relationship.

Traceleen describes her relationship with Crystal when her husband Mark tells her to stop worrying about Crystal (DL 216).

But how was I to stop? If you are with someone you begin to love them, you hear their joys and sorrows, you share your heart. That is what it means to be a human being. There is no escaping this. Ever since the first day I went to work for her I have loved Miss Crystal as if she was my sister or my child. I have spread out my love around her like a net and I catch whatever I have to catch. That is my decision and the job I have picked out for myself and if Wentriss wants to call me a slave that is because she does not know what she is talking about. Miss Crystal always pays me back. She would go to battle for me. We know these things. We are not as dumb as we seem. (DL 216)

Although it is clear that there is affection between Traceleen and Crystal, it is not clear why Traceleen will drop everything to attend to Crystal's needs. Traceleen's friend Wentriss even points out to Traceleen that she is performing the same role as a slave. Traceleen defends her actions because of her love for "Miss Crystal," which confirms her role as a mammy figure.

When Crystal tries to stop drinking, Traceleen gets up at 5:30 in the morning because she worries about Crystal and wonders if she is okay. She spends her weekends encouraging Crystal to stop drinking and trying to divert her attention from the bottle. She bakes cakes, thinks of people to call up, arranging play dates for Crystal Anne, doing anything and everything to keep Crystal away from alcohol.

Traceleen acknowledges that the chaos in the Weiss household contributes to her own health problems. When Manny moves back into the Uptown home on Story Street, Traceleen counts the number of times she has moved around a heavy wardrobe for him. She says, "Every time there is a flare-up in this relationship I end up with my back out from moving furniture" (DL 211). When Manny chases Crystal through the skies in a rented plane, radioing for her to

come back to New Orleans in a thunderstorm with a panicked Traceleen in tow, her husband Mark tells Traceleen not to give him the details, unless she wants someone killed (DL 210).

The Lucky Maid gets to Tag Along

Traceleen narrates that she is fortunate to be included in Crystal's spa outings, shopping excursions, and trips with the family to Maine. This implies that Traceleen's life has no form or meaning beyond the people for whom she works. It also implies that to get to tag along with Crystal is a privilege, because these events are ones to which she would have no access without Crystal. The philosophy that seems to be promoted is that if every wealthy white person just gave special perks to their African American workers, then the lives of black people would be greatly enriched. This, of course, takes away from the collective responsibility for standing behind better labor laws and policies that ultimately help poor African Americans lead lives whose own experiences are ones that are meaningful to them—not lives that are dependent on prescribed handouts from wealthy white people.

When Traceleen accompanies Crystal and her family to Maine for the summer, no mention is ever made of what she is leaving behind. It is as if her husband, her friends, her community and extended family are irrelevant. If she has an opportunity to hang out with the white family, then she will always opt for that. However, before agreeing to go on the trip Traceleen asks Crystal, “What is there to do up there for black people?” (ICG 209).

On this trip Traceleen serves the same role she does in New Orleans—that of peacemaker, housekeeper, confidante, and cook. Chaos ensues during the vacation family because Crystal's lover Alan joins them, and her children are angry about it. Then, Crystal's best friend Lydia sleeps with Alan, which paradoxically, angers Traceleen. Traceleen does not

like Alan, but she also does not want to see Crystal betrayed by her best friend. It is up to Traceleen to negotiate the relationships between all parties, as usual.

There is clearly a dividing line between the black employees in Noel's vacation house in Maine and their white employers. Traceleen serves the family, who dine in the dining room, on fine silver trays (ICG 247). Traceleen takes her meals in the kitchen, even though she is invited to the dining table. Her niece Andria eats in the dining room with the family, however (ICG 247). Crystal's son King and Andria are enamored of each other, and Andria is attending LSU on a scholarship. Andria does not see the racial lines drawn in the same way Traceleen does, which seems to say that things are improving with each generation. Traceleen, who is unhappy at the thought of King and Andria's romance, announces that she would like Andria to meet "some young people of her own race if any are up here" (ICG 222). Crystal then tells her that her niece who is part Cherokee Indian will soon be arriving and, "that ought to be good for Andria" (ICG 222).

One of the reasons Traceleen decides to accompany Crystal to Maine is because she feels sorry for Crystal who has been so wrapped up in King's addiction problems that she has not been able to take trips that had been scheduled. Traceleen says, "It had been a terrible year and Miss Crystal hadn't left home even to go skiing or sail their sailboat in the British Virgin Islands or do a thing but worry, worry, worry" (ICG 209). Again, the privileged world of Crystal is juxtaposed against Traceleen's difficult household work and taking care of the Weiss family. Traceleen seems to feel that this is a huge injustice to Crystal, not thinking about the daily injustices in her own life. It is this selflessness that has been historically ascribed to female African Americans, and this ascription is simply manipulative.

In a passage narrated by Traceleen about Crystal being “blind as a bat” and rarely using her glasses, she states that when Crystal does put them on she sees things she never sees in day-to-day life (ICG 211). “Occasionally, she will look up at me when she is at her desk doing bills or wearing her glasses in the kitchen to see a recipe. Then she will move in real close and really look at me as though she had never seen me before, and begin to comment on the color of my eyes or my earrings, the same ones I have worn every day since my auntee died down in Boutte and willed them to me” (ICG 211). This is significant because Crystal does not really “see” Traceleen. This is one of the most telling passages having to do with race in all of Gilchrist’s work. The fact that Crystal cannot see the woman upon whom she depends and with whom she spends nearly every day speaks volumes. Crystal cannot see Traceleen’s humanity most of the time, not only because Crystal is self-absorbed, but because she is racist.

While it is necessary for Traceleen to see the smallest of details in Crystal’s life and to take care of those details, Crystal does not have to see her black sister’s humanity. Traceleen serves in the background, quietly taking care of everything without really being seen by her employer. It is also significant that Crystal repeatedly notices Traceleen’s earrings; she seems shocked that Traceleen can own amethyst earrings set in eighteen-karat gold (ICG 211). These earrings were given to her aunt “by a Mrs. LaDoux Provostee of Ascension Parish,” implying that her aunt was also a domestic worker (ICG 211).

Much later in life, after her children are grown and she is a grandmother of two, Crystal calls Traceleen to help her with a deep cleaning. They realize, while cleaning and looking at old photos of themselves that they are getting older and that they both look haggard. Traceleen says of Crystal, “She was still wearing the sweater and from the side she looked much older than fifty-three. I couldn’t help thinking maybe the pact she had made with her psychiatrist to never

get a face-lift had not been such a good idea after all. Those thin blond women seem to fade so fast once they start fading” (CB 253). Crystal offers to treat them both to a spa outing with money she received from her mother for Christmas. Although they enjoy the outing together, this episode seems like a stretch. It seems to scream, “See how good I am to my maid?” It is perfunctory, not an organically joyous outing between two friends. And as usual, it is infused with a complete imbalance of power.

Later, Crystal suggests that she and Traceleen put some romance back into their lives by hitting a sale at Victoria’s Secret. She says, “Let’s go. This house is clean enough. Let’s go see what we can find to wake up the men” (CB 271). Traceleen seems to have little choice in the Crystal-sanctioned events offered to her. She must go along and pretend to enjoy and appreciate them or disappoint her employer.

The central problem in Gilchrist’s treatment of race in her works is that racial inequality is often resolved through individual acts of kindness by having wealthy white people give African Americans what they deem important. The notion that whites know what is important for African Americans is not that far removed from the paternalism inherent in the institution of slavery. Treating African American domestic workers with respect goes beyond taking them along on trips, to spas, or on shopping excursions. This sort of treatment breeds a false illusion of equality. More importantly the small acts of kindness by whites not only serve the interests of the white employer, but do not change the lives of the African Americans in a structural sense. They reproduce the racial order.

It may be that Gilchrist simply cannot know the experience of an African American maid. bell hooks discusses Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s work *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Fox-Genovese admits that it is difficult as a white woman

to write about the experiences of black women, but feels that “we all have to be able to study any subject provided we are honest” (qtd. in *Yearning* 55). hooks disagrees, saying, “While valorizing the notion of intellectual freedom, the comment obscures the more crucial issues involved when a member of a privileged group ‘interprets’ the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group” (*Yearning* 55). Gilchrist’s interpretation of African American domestic workers through her art is also problematic. Gilchrist’s work skims the surface, merely providing a privileged perspective, overlooking the very real and difficult problems inherent in domestic work.

It is not clear whether Gilchrist’s depictions of the African American experience are meant to point out the problems in a South where many black people work for white people and racial injustices are still prevalent and often ignored, or whether she believes the version of racial relations she writes is unproblematic. Gilchrist approaches racism much as she approaches sexism—lightly. Gilchrist gives the dominant culture one more pass. In spite of this, it is still possible—through a critical reading—to recognize the problems and frustrations of African American women in Gilchrist’s work.

Chapter Five

Writing Against a Patriarchal Form

*As to all that nonsense Henry and Larry talked about,
the necessity of 'I am God' in order to create
(I suppose they mean 'I am God. I am not woman')...
this 'I am God' which makes creation an act of solitude and pride,
this image of God alone making sky, earth, sea,
it is this image which has confused woman.
Anais Nin (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 82)*

Perhaps the most significant way in which Gilchrist shows a resistance to patriarchy is in her writing form. Within her form, especially looking at her entire oeuvre, Gilchrist departs from writing texts that are linear and have clear endings. Rosemary Jackson states that “questioning linear narrative” and “structural indeterminacy” are important because they challenge traditional writing forms (Eagleton 138). Jackson sees, in certain women writers, fragmentary and circular forms with no strong narrative line which reject “an authoritative and definitive resolution” (Eagleton 138). Writing against a patriarchal, authoritative form is not unique to women; biology does not determine a writer’s form of expression. However, Gilchrist accomplishes with form what she does not manage to do with words. Gilchrist shows, through her writing form, a challenge to patriarchy that is not found as directly in the stories she writes. As discussed in previous chapters, Gilchrist does not take the dominant culture head-on; rather, she tries to befriend it. It is in Gilchrist’s unique approach to form that we find a more subversive challenge to the dominant culture.

Rita Felski claims that aesthetics in literature “can be a space of resistance as well as conformism” (Felski 40). The aesthetics of Gilchrist’s work show a resistance to conventional

forms of Southern writing. She departs from traditional structures in her overall work. The structure of her work does not follow any pattern, instead deconstructing the idea of time, consistency, and beginnings or endings.

Elaine Showalter says the three stages for literary subcultures are imitation, protest, and self-discovery (Showalter 12-13). Showalter describes these stages for women as feminine, feminist, and female, but concedes they are not rigid categories (Showalter 13). The last stage of self-discovery, or the “female,” is the phase from 1920 to the present with a new self-awareness developing around 1960 (Showalter 13). It is the phase beyond 1960 during which Gilchrist writes, and the unique structure of Gilchrist’s work is the way that she allows herself to break with tradition, writing an essentially new form. In Gilchrist’s form, her readers will find conflated characters, a composite personality, a story cycle, and no continuity in time or plot.

That is not to say that Gilchrist has an inherently female sensibility or imagination. I am not advocating biological determinism. However, within the tradition of women’s writing it is clear that Gilchrist does not mimic the structure of previous writers. Gilchrist presents her characters in a unique way, one that is not rigid but elastic. This flexible structure promotes a different relationship between the author and her readers, one that keeps her readers returning for more. Gilchrist’s stories have no tidy endings, and sometimes her readers will find that the endings change when the story is resumed in another work. Gilchrist also returns to some of her characters over again and connects her characters through her work. This flexible structure allows her stories to continue, providing no conclusions.

Although Gilchrist has, in a sense, broken new ground with form, she still deploys some of the literary techniques of her predecessors. As Bauer points out, Gilchrist’s fiction can be read intertextually with Faulkner, Hemingway, Chopin and Porter. In spite of the fact that there

are ways to connect these texts, none of these writers' fiction forms what Bauer calls "an *organic story cycle*, a story cycle that continues to evolve as each new book appears, comparable to the *roman-fleuve*" (*Fiction 3*). In Gilchrist's work, her novels as well as her collections of short stories are connected, and the works are not chronologically ordered, as they would be in most works that would qualify as roman-fleuve. Gilchrist returns to many of her characters and plot lines throughout her work, while other characters and plot lines are dropped (Bauer, *Fiction 4*).

Her stories are never-ending ones. Characters appear again after they die, the same female character has her third child at age nineteen and then in another work at age twenty-six, a mother will have one name in one work, another in a later one, and a woman has sex for the first time multiple times. Just when we think that a character's life is wrapped up in a work, she appears later in a short novel or in a collection of short stories. Many times a character's story is unfinished, leaving readers to wait for the next work. Gilchrist is never through with her characters, suggesting that there is never really an end to our stories, or that there are no tidy endings.

Helene Cixous says, "A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we've learned to read books that basically pose the word 'end'"(316). Gilchrist's work demonstrates this quite well. Bauer says of Gilchrist's work that "there are no definite endings to the individual books" (*Fiction 3*). She goes on to say, "For the most part, there is no order in which Gilchrist's books should be read, a characteristic of her canon that reflects the chaotic contemporary world in which the author sets her fiction" (*Fiction 3*). Gilchrist's fiction functions well as individual works or as episodes within a larger work.

Gilchrist has written over a span of thirty years, and with the exception of *Anabasis*, her fiction deals mostly with the same few characters, who form a composite personality in the course of her work. Bauer claims that “the interrelatedness of the individual works within Gilchrist’s canon makes it particularly interesting, unique, and worthy of critical analysis” (*Fiction 2*). She says that although writers have been writing interrelated stories for many years, Gilchrist’s work is distinctive because, “*all of her work is interrelated to the extent that her whole body of work—that which she has already published and probably that which she will publish—is part of an organic story cycle*” (*Fiction 3*). In this story cycle, works are in random order and often do not pick up where they left off earlier. Cixous says that “a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void” (316). This void presents a place of possibilities for the reader. Cixous also says of beginnings,

The origin is a masculine myth: I always want to know where I come from. The question ‘Where do children come from?’ is basically a masculine, much more than a feminine question. The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn’t haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it’s the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but starting on all sides at once, that makes a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over. (316)

According to Bauer, there are also no clear beginnings to Gilchrist’s cycle of stories (*Fiction 3*). When Gilchrist writes a work, it is almost with the assumption that we already know these characters or have read their previous stories. Reviewer Lynette Felber says of Gilchrist’s work, “Much of its popularity is based upon its creation of an extended relationship between readers and characters; our familiarity with these seemingly real friends compels us to ‘tune in’ week after week or year after year to see what becomes of them” (qtd. in Bauer, *Fiction 4*).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also discuss the idea of beginnings in texts as a particularly male concern. “A man cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason, after all; that his child is *his* is in a sense a tale he tells himself to explain the infant’s existence. Obviously, the anxiety implicit in such storytelling urgently needs not only the reassurances of male superiority that patriarchal misogyny implies, but also such compensatory fictions of the Word as those embodied in the genealogical imagery Said describes” (84). Edward Said emphasizes how the word “author” is embedded in the idea of patriarchal authority (Gilbert and Gubar 83). Gilbert and Gubar say, “In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (83). In Gilchrist’s work there are no real beginnings and, so far, no real endings.

Gilchrist’s first work, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, fits snugly within the tradition of southern literature. In this collection the southern grotesque abounds and as Bauer points out, Gilchrist draws attention to “the southern aristocracy and the caste system still operating in the contemporary South” (*Fiction* 3). Carl Wood calls Gilchrist’s first collection of short stories a fragmentary novel (Bauer, *Fiction* 24). He says that *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* is “a collection of short stories which are unified, not merely by a common theme or subject matter, but also by a discernible plot development dealing with a single character or a single personality type represented in several characters” (qtd. in Bauer, *Fiction* 24). However, while Gilchrist’s first work of fiction might not seem unusual in its form (many southerners had written fragmentary novels—Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* is an obvious example), it was her later work that opens discussion with regards to a unique form. Although certain elements of Gilchrist’s form are common to earlier writers’ work, it is when looking at her canon that some interesting

and unique configurations are clear—in which Gilchrist is creating her own form, or writing against an established patriarchal form. Certainly, character prototypes, story cycles, fragmentary novels, and metafiction exist in previous writers' works. But no other writer arranges her writing in quite the way Gilchrist does.

Order, or Disorder in Gilchrist's Work

Gilchrist's work is full of surprises. It is common, in some of Gilchrist's collections of short stories that seem to focus on a particular character, to find a sudden jump in the last few stories to other characters. Considering her whole collection of work, her texts seem to start, as Cixous suggests, "on all sides at once."

If one were to pick up *The Courts of Love* (1996), for example, one might think the book will be a fragmented novel about Nora Jane, as the first half of the book covers the period of Nora Jane's life when she decides to go back to school. Her twins' father Sandy reappears, and Freddy and Nora Jane move their family when they discover that Sandy's girlfriend's mother is their neighbor. The first section of this work is entitled "Nora Jane and Company" and covers other San Francisco characters' lives, as well. In the second half of the book, entitled simply "Stories," the first work is about Nora Jane skipping school as a young child in New Orleans, while her alcoholic mother sleeps off a drinking binge. The following story is entitled "The Man Who Looked Like Me" and is about a writer whose boyfriend from the past comes to hear her read her work and initiates a memory of their teenage romance. The female narrator is unnamed but sounds a lot like Rhoda and has much in common with her, including being a swimmer and writer who was raised for a few years in Indiana by an overbearing father.

The book continues by introducing a new character, an anthropology student named Anne, who lives in Indiana and is in her fifties. Her neighbor gets divorced and remarried and the new wife wants to have a three-some with Anne. It is entitled “Paradise.” The next work, entitled “Fort Smith,” is about a couple who have a bear visit their home while their young child plays outside. This is the only work in which Minette and Dell appear. The next two works are about a female protagonist named Aurora who has an English professor for a father and does not make the cheerleading squad so gets involved with a cult. Aurora continues to appear in Gilchrist’s other short story collections. The following work, “The Dog who Delivered Papers to the Stars” is about a woman who leaves a man with their children, so he shoots their very talented dog. The dog, Dan, is rescued by a man dying from AIDS. Gilchrist continues her circular form with a story about Rhoda entitled “An Ancient Rain Forest, or, Anything for Art.” Rhoda is in her sixties in this work, and she attempts to persuade a Mormon woman to leave her faith and become more progressive during a road trip they take with a famous poet. The last work, entitled “Excitement, Part I,” features a female character named Garland who is looking for some extramarital excitement. In this newly named character, Gilchrist writes a Rhoda/Crystal combination, continuing her nonconventional approach to character creation.

In *The Courts of Love* it is not clear which of the characters will emerge as recurring or major characters. It is not clear if readers will ever see Nora Jane and Rhoda after this, although they most likely will. The thematic connections between the short stories are loose, so readers might ponder how the stories in this work are connected. In *The Courts of Love* Nora Jane takes center stage for a while, new characters are introduced, Rhoda appears in a story at the end, and in the last work we find a new character that is a Rhoda and Crystal conflation. *The Courts of Love* was written in 1996, right after *The Age of Miracles*, which was published in 1995 and

includes sixteen short stories that feature Nora Jane, Rhoda, and Crystal. Both of these books' stories are in random order and include works about the characters as older adults, as middle-aged adults, and as children. Both works show the non-linear or circular style in which Gilchrist writes.

It is not clear why Gilchrist has created this seemingly random structure for her work. This unmethodical way of presenting her works does, however, serve Gilchrist well, as it keeps her readers returning to her work. If a reader thinks she will get the next Rhoda installment after "The Statue of Aphrodite," and it is then followed by a work about Crystal, a reader might become interested in Crystal and follow both characters. However, while the characters may be revisited, the stories do not progress with a plot line in any sort of linear fashion. So far there are no endings, allowing Gilchrist to present endless possibilities for her characters, even those who die.

Gilchrist is not above bringing a character back to life, as she does later with Amanda McCamey's much younger boyfriend Will, whom she kills off on a snowy drive home through the Ozark Mountains on Christmas Day. Amanda is giving birth to a son, surrounded by friends and colleagues from the University of Arkansas, as Will's car goes over the side of a mountain. The scene from *The Annunciation* is described as follows:

He was around the curve and the lights of the truck were there as if they had been there forever.

As if the truck and the Ford had been traveling toward each other since the dawn of time. They struck and bounced away. Then his hands were loose on the wheel as the little car spun out into the soft white air. The car filled with light. It was all right. It was all perfectly all right. He even had time to regret the borrowed car. Will had always been very careful about returning things he borrowed. The car lifted off into the still white air, describing a long curve like a stone throw into a lake. Then it began its downward spiral. Then there was nothing at all, 'no possum, no sop, no taters,' no songs to sing, no games to watch, no beer to drink, no women to love, no stories to tell.

The radio had come from Kyoto, Japan. It was made of sterner stuff and went on playing until long after dawn. (AN 352)

It is clear that Will has died in this scene. However, in “Life on Earth,” included in the 1989 collection entitled *Light Can be Both Wave and Particle*, Will wakes up from the car wreck and discovers he suffers only superficial injuries. Bauer writes that Gilchrist was worried that her critics and fans were upset that she killed off Will at the end of *The Annunciation*, so she brought him back to life. She asserts that Gilchrist allows her readers to “dictate the tone of her writing” (*Fiction* 10). She also points out that Gilchrist wrote in an essay for *Southern Magazine* that she had confused and saddened her readers when she killed off Will in *The Annunciation* (*Fiction* 10). She says, “This reference to her readers’ disappointment with the novel’s original ending supports the view that she wrote the ‘new ending’ to please them” (*Fiction* 10). Bauer argues that the original ending is one in which Amanda is able “to regroup her strengths and is preparing to try again to live her own life as she determines it should be lived” (*Fiction* 17). The original ending is one that is a hopeful ending for the work, as Amanda learns to find her way through the world without a man, that she has finally achieved a level of independence.

When Gilchrist brings Will back, the story with Amanda is never resumed. The only other time Will appears after his hospital stay is in “The Abortion”, and in this work Will is a construction worker whose son impregnates his teenage girlfriend. In all of Gilchrist’s works Will Lyons appears only three times. He first appears in 1982 in the novel *The Annunciation*, as Amanda McCamey’s young Fayetteville lover who dies in a car accident while she gives birth to their child. He then comes back as a hospitalized man resurrected in “Life on Earth” published in 1989, and finally as the father of a teenage boy named McCamey Lyons in the 2002 “The Abortion,” found in *I, Rhoda Manning, Go Hunting with My Daddy*. This is an example of

Gilchrist's many productions of non-linear writing or works with non-linear plots. There is no conclusion to the story of Will, and no real beginning, an example of the circular writing of feminine texts to which Cixous refers.

With the exception of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, most of Gilchrist's collections of short stories appear in arrangements similar to *The Courts of Love*. The 1998 publication of *Flights of Angels* is another example of random ordering or circular texts in Gilchrist's work. In the prologue and first work, entitled "A Tree to be Desired," we are introduced to Juliet whose separated parents get back together when she starts dating a black man. Juliet, who seduces an African American hospice aid at her grandfather's death bed, never reappears in Gilchrist's work after this short story. In the second work, "While We Waited for You to Be Born," Sally narrates a work in second person to her daughter about her daughter's birth and about her father, who has disappeared from their lives. Gilchrist continues her unusual form with an appearance by Rhoda in "The Carnival of the Stoned Children." This work is very similar to "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society" published in 1981 in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. A reader might believe she has already read "The Carnival of the Stoned Children" if, earlier, she read "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society."

Further evidence of the random ordering of Gilchrist's work continues in this volume with a story entitled "Mississippi." Larkin is a civil rights worker who murders, a man she had once slept with, after he intentionally runs over Someral, who was demonstrating in a protest. Someral is an African American with whom Larkin had been raised on Esperanza Plantation. Larkin is pardoned, in the end by the governor of Mississippi, but never appears again in Gilchrist's work. Again, this work might send readers back to look at *The Annunciation* to see

where Larkin fits in. The Esperanza Plantation is the one on which Amanda and Guy were raised, and so far, we have only been introduced to Amanda McCamey's family on Esperanza.

In the middle of this volume of work, Gilchrist returns to the Crystal character. Right after "Mississippi," Traceleen narrates "Miss Crystal Confronts the Past" and "A Sordid Tale, or, Traceleen Continues Talking." After two stories narrated by a black domestic worker we are introduced to Jodie Wainright. Jody is a gay actor who works in a diagnostic clinic that deals with hypochondriacs in "Phyladda, or, The Mind/Body Problem" Jodie never appears again. This work is followed by "Battle," a story about Mrs. McPhee, who sends her racist husband to a nursing home, where he dies shortly after entering it. This is the first and only writing about the McPhees, although Mr. McPhee closely resembles Rhoda's father as an old man in the work "On the Wind River in Wyoming" in the 2002 publication of *I, Rhoda Manning Go Hunting with My Daddy*. The order of these works seems random, especially since recurring characters such as Traceleen and Crystal are thrown in the middle of a work with entirely new characters. Also, some of the new characters in *Flights of Angels* resemble ones we have seen in previous works.

Gilchrist continues her non-linear structure in the eight short stories that follow. The character Aurora appears in the next three short stories in *Flights of Angels*. Aurora is introduced in 1996 in *The Courts of Love* and does not appear again in Gilchrist's work after 1998. "Ocean Springs" introduces the one-time appearance of Miss Anastasia Provine, an older woman who is raped in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. The next two works in *Flights of Angels* are Rhoda stories, and the following work, entitled "Down at the Dollhouse" is about Mrs. Woods-Landry who goes to the beauty shop to get her hair done and dies afterwards in the parking lot in her car. The collection rounds out with "The Southwest Experimental Fast Oxide Reactor." A

character named Chandler narrates a story about spending time on the roof of an experimental breeder reactor, built by the government on rural land near West Fork, Arkansas.

The works in *Flights of Angels* demonstrate Gilchrist's indifference to any sort of linear organization of her work. The work does not seem to be connected by theme, characters, or plot. Gilchrist's method of constructing her texts seems to say that she will write and organize her works in her own way, one that does not necessarily follow conventional ways of shaping texts.

Another way to look at the order, or disorder, in Gilchrist's works is to follow a character. Rhoda is all over the place in Gilchrist's fiction. She is Gilchrist's most popular character, appearing throughout Gilchrist's fiction and during the entire period of Gilchrist's writing. When considering the sequence in which Rhoda appears, it is clear that Gilchrist employs a distinctive way of weaving her characters throughout her many works.

Rhoda is introduced in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, written in 1981. The short story in which she first appears is entitled "1957, a Romance," a third person account about Rhoda's abortion, which takes place when Rhoda is nineteen. The next work is entitled "Generous Pieces" and although it is about a girl named Margaret the character is a Rhoda character. In this piece Margaret is a junior high girl who lives in a small town in Indiana (LDD 97). Margaret's father is having an affair with her best friend's mother, and the story is related in first person. The character of Margaret has everything in common with the character Rhoda, as a child. In the next work about Rhoda, "Revenge," Rhoda is ten years old and lives in Indiana but spends the summer on her grandmother's plantation in the Delta, a plantation that sounds much like Esperanza, where Amanda McCamey grew up. Rhoda's grandmother has a housekeeper named Baby Doll, the same name as a housekeeper on the Esperanza plantation on which Amanda was raised.

Gilchrist continues with the Rhoda character in the short story “1944.” An eight year-old Rhoda narrates her infatuation with a war widow who plays martini glasses in the Officer’s Club in Seymour Indiana. In this work Rhoda is smitten by the widow who is probably having an affair with Rhoda’s father Dudley. The next short story, “Perils of the Nile,” is about Rhoda at around age eleven, and the following work, “Traveler” is a story about Lele, but the character is very much Rhoda. Lele is in junior high in Seymour, Indiana but spends a summer at her cousin’s home in the Mississippi Delta, just as Rhoda does. Lele struggles with the same issues with which Rhoda struggles—her weight, not making the cheerleading squad and having an overbearing father.

Gilchrist’s characters are often written so much alike as to be almost indistinguishable. In *The Annunciation*, written in 1982, the character Amanda McCamey is a version of Rhoda. Rhoda and Amanda both leave wealthy husbands in uptown New Orleans to seek writing careers in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Both leave behind young boys from a previous marriage with stepfathers. Both women become successful writers at the University of Arkansas.

The character Rhoda continues to be scattered throughout Gilchrist’s work. In *Victory Over Japan*, written in 1983, the first three short stories are about Rhoda. In the first two Rhoda is a child; the third is about an adult Rhoda. Rhoda is the protagonist in thirty-two works following *Victory Over Japan*, with two of the works, *Net of Jewels* and *Rhoda, a Life in Stories* being devoted solely to Rhoda stories. These works are not written or published chronologically, are written from different viewpoints, and often riddled with obvious inconsistencies. With the exception of *Net of Jewels*, the Rhoda character does not appear in chronological order anywhere. A story about Rhoda at age sixty will often be followed by a story of Rhoda at age eight.

Gilchrist makes an attempt at chronologically ordering the stories of Rhoda, in *Net of Jewels*, written in 1992. In this work Gilchrist adds to the story of Rhoda's life during young adulthood and her first marriage to Malcolm. Most of Rhoda's life during her forties is omitted. Some works in *Net of Jewels* are altered from their original versions in earlier works, such as "1957, a Romance." *Rhoda, a Life in Stories*, written three years later, includes works from previous collections with some additions. The added short stories round out some of the missing pieces from *Net of Jewels*. For example, "Love of my Life" is the story of Rhoda's first romance after her divorce from Malcolm, and "Drunk Every Day" is about Rhoda's life in New Orleans before she moves to Fayetteville. These short stories do not appear in any of Gilchrist's other works.

Gilchrist does not give up on the story of Rhoda. *I, Rhoda Manning go Hunting with my Daddy* was published in 2002, and covers Rhoda's life during her early childhood, her sixties, her late thirties, and then back to her sixties. In this work, as in many, the stories are connected thematically, but no solid plot line emerges. However, in works that seem to be devoted to Rhoda, there will often be a set of stories about another character. For example, in *I, Rhoda Manning go Hunting with my Daddy* only half the short stories are about Rhoda; the last half of the book features other characters and goes back to Nora Jane, with seemingly little connection between the stories or the characters.

The female characters who keep showing up throughout Gilchrist's work are Rhoda, Nora Jane and Crystal. Nora Jane was also introduced in Gilchrist's first work, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, in the short story entitled "The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar." Nora Jane continues to show up as a protagonist in twenty-nine works, and *Nora Jane, a Life in Stories* is a collection published in 2005 of her stories. Gilchrist's recurring character, Crystal, is introduced

by her maid, Traceleen, in *Victory Over Japan* published in 1983. Crystal is the main character in one of the three novellas in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*, published in 1990. It is entitled “A Summer in Maine.” Crystal’s stories number fourteen, including the ones told by Traceleen. Crystal is also a character in the novels *Starcarbon* (1994) and *A Dangerous Age* (2008), although she is not the central character in either.

While many of Gilchrist’s characters are recurring ones, Rhoda, Nora Jane, and Crystal are characters who continue to show up throughout Gilchrist’s entire oeuvre. While the three women share some characteristics, the ways in which they are different might indicate Gilchrist’s ambivalence about the way their lives play out. Perhaps, Gilchrist keeps returning to these three characters because their stories are not completely satisfactory independently. All three women begin lives at various ages in uptown New Orleans. Rhoda moves to New Orleans from Mississippi to marry a wealthy man, has affairs, and ends up moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas to become a writer. Crystal is from New Orleans, marries a wealthy man from New Orleans, and remains in an unhappy marriage using alcohol and extramarital affairs to self-medicate. Nora Jane is from uptown New Orleans but moves to San Francisco, marries a wealthy man, and happily stays married, raising twins and living a big life. Perhaps Gilchrist loves these characters so much she cannot let them go, and perhaps working out different trajectories for wealthy uptown New Orleans women demonstrates the diverse ways in which women, whose lives were at some point very much alike, can choose to live. Interestingly, of the three, only Rhoda has a career; both Crystal and Nora Jane are stay-at-home mothers. And while Gilchrist has other protagonists who are writers, such as Anna Hand and Amanda McCamey, she seems to find few career paths for her independent women.

Gilchrist's work illustrates Cixous's point of no clear endings or beginnings. And, as Cixous says of the feminine text, Gilchrist's work "starts on all sides at once." Gilchrist claims that her "longer work is coming out piecemeal" (Bauer, *Fiction* 58). Gilchrist has written seven novels, thirteen collections of short stories, and two works of non-fiction (as well as two volumes of poetry). In six of her novels and all of her short story collections the same characters appear and reappear. New characters are sometimes introduced and then forgotten. Lele, Anna, Helen, Olivia, Amanda, and Aurora are also characters who are sprinkled throughout Gilchrist's works. Crystal and Rhoda appear as references in the stories about Anna Hand and Olivia Hand, and all of these Gilchrist protagonists intermittently make appearances in later collections of short stories. This fractured way of presenting her characters is one of Gilchrist's devices, and perhaps reflects Gilchrist's view of life in a postmodern world. Gilchrist's texts disrupt what we know about her characters, presenting them in contradictory ways. Her character depictions throughout her work deconstruct notions of stable identities and narratives.

Gilchrist's Conflated Characters and Character Prototype

Two of Gilchrist's most interesting approaches to characters are that she conflates her characters, and she has also created a character prototype. A character named Rhoda in one work might appear with the name Lele or Garland in the next. And, while it may seem presumptuous to assume Lele is Rhoda, the characters are often distractingly similar. In charting her works in relationship to characters it is clear that there is no strict organization or rigid patterns. Gilchrist's tangled way of weaving her characters not only makes her work unique, but reminds her readers that she is the creator and artist.

When Gilchrist conflates a character, she creates a new character that merges two characters that appear elsewhere. One of the best examples of character conflation is in the short story entitled “Excitement, Part I,” in *The Courts of Love* (1996). By this point Gilchrist’s readers are very familiar with the Rhoda and Crystal characters. However, in this work a female character named Garland is introduced. Garland’s friend Abby has a Frenchman visiting that evening, and Garland, who desperately wants to have an affair, insists on meeting him. Garland reminds Abby repeatedly that she would not have the Frenchman to her house had Garland not helped Abby lose weight (CL 280). Garland leaves her husband Tommy and daughter Molly, who is playing basketball, at the Jewish Community Center on St. Charles Avenue and takes a streetcar to the Ponchartrain Hotel to have drinks before planning to meet up at Abby’s home to meet the Frenchman (CL 284). Garland calls her cousin Ingersol before she takes a drink and decides to remain sober, stay with her husband, and go home to her family before she gets into trouble (285). Upon coming home, she finds that Tommy and Molly have thrown a big surprise birthday party for her (CL 286). This confirms to Garland that she should settle down and stay with her family. The Frenchman is there with Abby, but he is described as “a dismal chain-smoking academic searching for a living” (CL 286). Upon further reading we realize that Garland *is* Rhoda, because the story continues with Rhoda narrating. However, it is not definitively Rhoda, as in the next episode she is uncannily close to Crystal in character, as well.

The next installment of Abby running with the narrator of a work in Audubon Park takes place in “Excitement in Audubon Park,” a story in the *Flights of Angels* collection published two years later. This work begins with the line, “After the Frenchman fell through, Abby and I decided to give up on men for a while and concentrate on our bodies” (FA 278). We soon find out that the narrator is Rhoda, not Garland. Upon looking at the details of the characters,

Garland is a mixture, or conflated character of both Rhoda and Crystal. Garland's cousin Ingersol picks her up from the Ponchartrain Hotel and Rhoda has a cousin named Ingersol. Rhoda and Crystal are both obsessed with losing weight, but it is Rhoda who runs in Audubon Park. Crystal has one daughter, and Rhoda has three sons. However, when Garland arrives home her daughter Molly is awaiting her, along with Garland's husband Tommy. Both Rhoda and Crystal have Jewish husbands, and in the "Excitement" story Tommy takes their daughter Molly to a basketball game at the Jewish Community Center on St. Charles Avenue. Both Crystal and Rhoda, like Garland, seek extramarital affairs.

More than conflating her characters, Gilchrist has created a character prototype. Bauer discusses Gilchrist's use of a character prototype, saying that Rhoda Manning serves as the prototype for the composite personality in Gilchrist's work (*Fiction* 10). Bauer claims that Gilchrist's characters evolve rather than simply being manifestations of the Rhoda Manning prototype (*Fiction* 16). She says that the "evolution begins with Amanda McCamey of *The Annunciation*" and that "Amanda McCamey [can] be seen as a transitional figure between Rhoda Manning and Anna Hand" (*Fiction* 16). Bauer goes on to say that Amanda's character has much in common with Rhoda in the beginning of *The Annunciation* but that she finally "focuses her energy upon her power to create art" and begins to live her life as she believes it should be lived (*Fiction* 17). Bauer sees Anna Hand, the fourth of Gilchrist's recurring characters, as the "apex of Gilchrist's development of her prototype" (*Fiction* 14). (The first three recurring characters are Rhoda, Nora Jane, and Crystal). Bauer writes,

With the characterization of Anna in the novel, Gilchrist reveals the full potential of her prototype: she can overcome social obstacles and limitations when she recognizes her strengths and does not focus on her weaknesses, and when she uses those strengths toward the creation of her art...rather than to attract the attention of a man..." (*Fiction* 15)

Anna ends up committing suicide when she finds out that she has terminal cancer, and she does not appear again (so far) in Gilchrist's works. However, much of the Hand family then focuses on Anna's papers and life, which become the basis for two of the novellas in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough* and the novel *Starcarbon*.

It is not as clear to me that Anna Hand is the "apex" of Gilchrist's character prototype, because only in the end did Anna allow her work to be the priority in her life, after many years of wasting her love and life on a married physician in New York. Rather, I would argue that Gilchrist explores with her characters different possibilities. Gilchrist writes what she knows, and the composite personality found in Rhoda, Nora Jane, Amanda, Crystal and Anna, as well as many of her one-time protagonists, is one that she finds compelling. John T. Irwin says, "Sometimes a writer gets an idea for the structure of a character, and one fictional incarnation isn't enough to exhaust the possibilities inherent in it, possibilities for its development that may often be mutually exclusive" (qtd. in Bauer, *Fiction* 15).

Bauer claims "Gilchrist's character prototype is unique, because she does not write her characters in chronological order" (*Fiction* 26). Bauer compares the Rhoda prototype to Hemingway's prototype of Nick Adams. However, she points out that Gilchrist's composite personality is different because Hemingway orders his stories showing his protagonist growing older, while Gilchrist shows her protagonists as adults in the first half of her work, and as children in the second (Bauer, *Fiction* 26). Bauer says, "Gilchrist chooses...to present the shocking adult personalities first and then to illustrate how these women are products of their common upbringing. In this way, Gilchrist emphasizes the sinister role that society, (the same social system that tortures her adult protagonists), plays in the development of her child protagonists" (*Fiction* 26). However, Gilchrist's characters are not simply presented as adults

first and then children. Gilchrist goes back again and again to the adulthoods and childhoods of her characters. Many of Gilchrist's later works, written after Bauer's book was published, do not follow the pattern suggested by Bauer of stories of adult women followed by stories of children.

Gilchrist says that she has created a cast of characters that are "like a Fellini troupe. They are always trying to steal the spotlight away from each other" (FS 126). "It's gotten to the point where it's impossible for me to create new characters because the old ones keep grabbing up all the roles. The minute I think up a new dramatic situation, one of my old characters get up off the page and take the pen out of my and start expanding their roles" (FS 126). It is interesting that Gilchrist sees her characters claiming roles. She admits she would like to create new characters, but the old ones will not let her do so. Again, this points to Gilchrist's unwillingness to let go of the old characters. She shows how there are no real conclusions to our stories by continuing to write Rhoda, Nora Jane, and Crystal.

Gilchrist also believes there is a limit to the number of characters a writer can write or stories a writer can tell (FS 126). She says, "When I've told all my stories and created all my characters I want to get off the stage as quickly as I can and with as much grace as possible" (FS 127). Gilchrist returns again and again to her main characters because, it seems, she has not told all of their stories. She also demonstrates that our stories continue as long as life continues (and sometimes after death).

Bauer makes a case for Gilchrist's character prototype as a way to see what is taking place in the larger South:

The parallels between these prototypes' personalities do not suggest that Gilchrist is not original. The similarities are between character types and themes; the plots are certainly distinctive. What the comparison does reveal is how very little has changed from one generation to another for little girls growing up in the South...In

this development, one can find Gilchrist's belief that strong women are moving toward not only surviving but also thriving in spite of the limitations of southern gender roles and codes of conduct. (*Fiction* 70)

Gilchrist's prototype serves as a way for her to explore possibilities for her characters and to not give up on them when they return to their old habits. The character prototype opens up ways for Gilchrist's characters to explore options and find different ways out of their dilemmas.

Gilchrist's conflation of characters, character prototype, and composite personality do not reflect her limits as an artist. Her ability to write a variety of characters is evident throughout her entire body of work. Gilchrist returns to her favorite characters because she cannot bear to part with them, because their stories, like hers, go on and on. By writing and rewriting these characters, she shows the complexities of life and of being a twentieth-century woman. With her conflations, rewritings, contradictions, and story cycle she says that life is too large and complex for chronological order, consistency, and a simple story or novel.

Point-of-View in Gilchrist

One device with which Gilchrist experiments repeatedly is point-of-view. Gilchrist often employs different points of view within the same story, shifting from first person to third person or even second person to third person. Brad Hooper takes issue with Gilchrist's use of point-of-view in "Perils of the Nile," published in the 1981 *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*:

Generally speaking, short stories have little room to accommodate point-of-view shifts. Successful exceptions to this rule are possible, and Gilchrist herself will, even in later stories in this first collection, proffer workable exceptions; an exception to the rule has to do with the lack of abruptness in the shift from one point of view to another. The *raison d'être* of a short story is its leanness—"meanness," in a way of looking at it—in depicting one aspect of a character or one situation that displays the character in a most telling light. Quick, sudden changes in point of view muddy the effect of what a short story can accomplish; it

breaks, too suddenly, the reader's focus on the character standing in front of them at the moment. (25)

In "Perils of the Nile," Gilchrist shifts from Rhoda's point of view as a first person narrator to her friend Bebber's point of view. Hooper argues that to shift suddenly to another character's perspective causes a distraction akin to "someone talking in your ear" (26). Gilchrist's use of point of view is sometimes jarring and confusing, but, at times, she pulls off the abrupt change successfully.

Gilchrist shifts from first person narration to third person limited often in her work. Hooper claims that she successfully pulls it off in some of her short stories, such as "The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar," also from the *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* collection. In this work, when she changes points of view from third person limited to omniscient, Gilchrist sets off the section with a roman numeral. Gilchrist has found a way to address the problem of point-of-view by simply dividing the sections in her work.

Another example of an interesting shift in point-of-view takes place in "While we Waited for You to be Born," from the 1998 *Flights of Angels* collection. In this work Sally narrates the beginning of the story in second person. She addresses her daughter with "you" throughout the work, but several points of view are introduced in the story, as it shifts back and forth from second person to third person, to first person and to omniscient.

Another work that demonstrates an interesting point of view is "The Dog Who Delivered Papers to the Stars," from the 1996 *The Courts of Love* collection. In this work Gilchrist gives the dog a third person limited narration. After Dan, the dog, is taken out into the woods and shot by his owner, he wakes up. "His neck felt like it was encased in a huge iron collar. It was all he could do to hold his head up long enough to limp over to a tree and lean against it while he licked the blood from his leg and paws. The blood was fresh and gave him new courage and he

began to move in the direction of the road” (CL 251). In Gilchrist’s use of point-of-view she again demonstrates her disregard for convention and plays by her rules. Although Gilchrist does not always pull off these shifts in points of view successfully, (as Hooper has suggested), she continues throughout her work to experiment with point-of-view as a device in which she shows fluctuating and different perspectives.

Metafiction and Inconsistencies

Gilchrist’s work has had elements of metafiction in it since her third work, *Victory Over Japan*, which was published in 1983 (Bauer, *Fiction* 179). Anna Hand is introduced as a writer in one of the short stories entitled “Looking over Jordan.” In this work, Anna is distressed about critics’ negative reviews of her first novel, entitled *The Assumption*, much as Gilchrist was over the negative reviews of her first novel, *The Annunciation*. Bauer points out that “Looking over Jordan” is self-referential and that Gilchrist humorously parodies herself and mocks her reviewers in it (*Fiction* 10).

Gilchrist often refers to her own work in her work. In “A Wedding in Jackson” Rhoda narrates the story and claims, “I started up the curving mountain road leading from Fayetteville to Alma. I once killed a character in a novel on that road. Later, I brought him back to life in a short story” (AM 37). Rhoda is referring to Will, Amanda’s boyfriend in *The Annunciation*. In her references, Gilchrist is not only drawing attention to her power as an author to create, but she creates a bond with her avid readers through referencing what has taken place in earlier works.

Another example of Gilchrist’s referencing her other work is in the short story entitled “Anna, Part I,” in the 1986 publication of *Drunk with Love*. Anna tells her editor that she will write a novel entitled *Light can be Both Wave and Particle*, which is actually Gilchrist’s

collection of short stories published three years later. Anna tells her editor she is writing the book to make her readers think. “If they can’t think they can’t be my readers” (DL 221). Gilchrist writes *The Anna Papers* in 1988 about Anna Hand’s decision to focus her energy on writing instead of men, after having a long affair with a New York pediatrician. In “Anna, Part I,” Anna later decides to write about the married man (DL 223). “I will tell the story of the married man. But how to plot it? How to make it happen? How to make it live? How to move the characters around so they bruise against each other and ring true? How to ring the truth out of the story, absolve the sadness, transmute it, turn it into art” (DL 223). Again, this refers to Gilchrist’s writing process and is a good example of drawing attention to her own work, since she writes the story of Anna and the married doctor in her next work.

Another Gilchrist work that is self-referential shows up in *I, Rhoda Manning Go Hunting with My Daddy*. Rhoda’s father asks her why she would want to write a story about someone robbing a bar (85). He tells her that it could cause a young person to believe it is okay (85). Since one of the stories in Gilchrist’s first work is about Nora Jane robbing Jody’s Bar, this work looks back twenty-one years from 2002 to 1981 when *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* was published. In “1957, a Romance” Rhoda is reading a book by Hemingway on her way to get an abortion. As she reads, she imagines herself in Italy hunting ducks with Hemingway (LDD 86). The narrator says, “(Rhoda was not fooled by personas. In her mind any modern novel was a true story of the writer’s life)” (LDD 86). This draws attention to many of the autobiographical elements in Gilchrist’s work. These are just a few of the many examples where Gilchrist references herself as a writer in her works. Gilchrist’s use of the self-referential adds a layer of interest to the work. The reader is reading fiction, but the fiction draws attention to the author’s process of creation, as well as the author’s other works. In this way the lines between fiction and

nonfiction become blurred. Also, the reader is, in a sense, rewarded for understanding the references to previous works, being made to feel like an “insider” or part of the “Gilchrist Club.”

Inconsistencies abound in Gilchrist’s work. Although her readers might await the next “installment” of a character, the story around that character might have completely changed. When Rhoda has an abortion in “1957, a Romance,” part of the 1981 *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* collection, she has two boys, and she is nineteen years old (LDD 90). When Gilchrist writes about Rhoda’s third pregnancy again in “Adoration,” a part of the 1986 *Drunk with Love*, Rhoda is twenty-six years old when she becomes pregnant with her third child (DL 63). In *Net of Jewels* the story about Rhoda’s abortion is rewritten to include her affair with Robert as being the cause of Rhoda’s pregnancy (NJ 315).

Names can also be confusing in Gilchrist’s work. Rhoda’s mother is named Jeannie in “1957, a Romance,” but in most accounts of Rhoda’s life her mother is named Ariane (LDD 84). May Garth is Rhoda’s best friend in college, but later when Rhoda and Abby run in Audubon Park they get May Garth to join them so a judge will let them run with him. May Garth in “Excitement in Audubon Park” is a beautiful younger dancer, very different from the tall, awkward activist May Garth in *Net of Jewels*. Amanda gives birth to a boy she names Noel in *The Annunciation*, yet Amanda and Will have a teenager named McCamey Lyons in the 2002 short story entitled “The Abortion” (IRM 187). In most of the work about Rhoda her sons are named Malcolm, Jimmy and Teddy, but in “1957, a Romance,” Rhoda has been nursing Bobby (LDD 86). Also Rhoda and Amanda have husbands named Malcolm (the name of one of Gilchrist’s sons), causing more confusion. Crystal’s husband’s name is Manny, which is close to Rhoda’s and Crystal’s surname—Manning.

Bauer argues that the details of Rhoda's life are not always consistent to remind the reader that "individual works are to some extent autonomous" (*Fiction 11*). However, the works are still interrelated, although the inconsistencies "give the reader pause to consider their significance" (*Fiction 11*). Gilchrist claims that the more she writes the character Rhoda, the more she knows about her (Bauer, *Fiction 11*). Bauer claims that this statement "prepares for my perception of an evolving prototype at the center of the larger story cycle made up of Gilchrist's whole body of fiction" (*Fiction 11*).

The reordering of the details and self-referencing in Gilchrist's fiction are forms of metafiction. These devices are intentional. In reordering her details, Gilchrist gives her readers pause, possibly sending them back to earlier works to check facts. By referring to herself and her other works in her own texts, Gilchrist draws attention to herself as author of the texts, blurring the lines between fiction and fact. Metafiction is non-linear, disruptive, and it draws attention to the fact that it is, in fact, fiction, and the author has control over the process and can do as she pleases. In Gilchrist's work the inconsistencies are deliberate and remind the reader that we don't always know what we think we know.

Conclusion

Cixous explains that females often do not write feminine texts, just as males do not always write masculine texts:

When someone says 'I'm not political' we all know what that means! It's just another way of saying: 'My politics are someone else's!' And it's exactly the case with writing! Most women are like this: they do someone else's—man's—writing, and in their innocence sustain and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine. Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be

masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. (315)

Gilchrist's work "starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times over." The story cycle which Bauer discusses is one in which characters appear in different works, at different ages, reappear with a different perspective about the same story; they pop up and down and in and out of Gilchrist's works. Sometimes they are connected, as are the characters in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County—and we read generations of work. Sometimes the stories contradict each other. These non-linear story lines are ones in which Gilchrist is writing a feminine text. There is no origin; there is no end—Gilchrist keeps writing. This "starting on all sides at once," which Cixous discusses, is a quality that can be attributed to Gilchrist. Gilchrist's unique structure helps establish her as one of the innovative twentieth-century writers of the South.

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