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CAROLINE GORDON'S CHRISTIAN VISION:
A CONSERVATIVE EMPOWERMENT

A Thesis

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The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Alexandra Michos

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues against recent Caroline Gordon critics who have interpreted her conversion to Catholicism in 1947 as a final submission to the male-dominated standards of her culture. Recent critics have argued that her conversion signals an increasing conservatism in her personal life as well as the complete silencing of her female characters in her post-conversion novels.

Gordon's personal correspondence with Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy provides evidence to the contrary. Her confident tone in these letters makes apparent the sense of empowerment and authority she gained from her faith. Her Christian vision endows her with greater confidence as a literary critic and teacher. Her conversion also enables her to envision her independence from her failing marriage with Allen Tate, a man who influenced her personal life and her artistic career for over thirty years.

This paper examines Gordon's pre-conversion novel, The Women on the Porch, and argues that Gordon begins to define herself in opposition to Agrarianism, a prominent theme in many of her early writings. In her post-conversion novel, The Malefactors, Gordon breaks away from Agrarianism, signaling her dissatisfaction with Agrarianism and her search for another philosophical foundation for her writing. This interpretation goes against the critical grain, arguing that Gordon's Catholicism provides her with a new philosophical grounding for her work, one that enables her to envision more prominent roles for her female characters. Yet while Gordon portrays empowerment within patriarchy, she remains unable to challenge the authority of the Catholic Church or the male world of letters directly. Following in the tradition of many Southern women writers, Gordon couches the incendiary elements of her post-conversion text in conservative language.

**CAROLINE GORDON'S CHRISTIAN VISION:
A CONSERVATIVE EMPOWERMENT**

Recent critics have interpreted Caroline Gordon's conversion to Catholicism in 1947 at the age of fifty-two as a final submission to the male-dominated standards of her culture. I will show how her conversion freed her to a significant degree from patriarchal standards both in her personal life and in her fiction.¹ Gordon's correspondence with Walker Percy reveals that Catholicism provided a firm philosophical foundation for her. In her letters to Percy, she explains her Christian vision and her belief in a connection between art and religious sacrifice. Her Christian vision also endowed her with the critical authority to become an arbiter of artistic standards.

While Gordon's correspondence with Walker Percy and Ward Dorrence shows how Catholicism provided her with a new philosophical grounding for her work, her pre-conversion novel, The Women on the Porch (1944), and her post-conversion novel, The Malefactors (1956), illustrate ways in which Gordon's Catholicism enabled her to envision more prominent roles for her female characters.² These two novels are also significant in the context of her marriage to Allen Tate and her close affiliations with the Southern Agrarians. In her novel The Women on the Porch, Gordon begins to define herself in opposition to Agrarianism. In The Malefactors, she makes a further progression away from Agrarianism, replacing the disappeared hierarchy of the old South with a Christian vision that establishes a new sense

of order and the possibility for spiritual renewal and redemption.³ Her conversion would take Gordon a step further and facilitate the emergence of her own voice. At the same time, her Christian vision develops in tandem with the break-up of her marriage to Tate, enabling her to envision her existence apart from a man who had profoundly influenced her life and work for over thirty years.⁴

Her break with Agrarianism, I will argue, liberates Gordon to write The Malefactors, a novel in which she explores how women could gain independence and authority within the framework of the traditionally conservative Catholic Church. The female characters in The Malefactors finally "separate themselves from men's controlling definitions" and "begin to become creators," and they achieve independent identities that are not merely reflections of male authority figures.⁵ Although Gordon portrays empowerment for women within patriarchy, she remains unable to challenge male authority directly. My discussion of The Malefactors, then, will explore the paradox of Gordon's conservatism. In challenging patriarchy in this novel, she couches the incendiary elements of the text in conservative language.

While I argue that Gordon personally, as well as through her post-conversion characters, achieves a more

commanding voice following her conversion, critic Anne Boyle has traced a gradual silencing of female voices. In pre-conversion novels like Green Centuries and The Women on the Porch, for example, Boyle sees a

polyphony of voices, some stuttering, some assured, some developing, that provides a sense of the promise and the chaos inherent in a world of diverse experiences; in each fragmented voice we hear beauty and ugliness, the potential for liberation and imprisonment, creativity and destruction. With the resolution of The Strange Children and The Malefactors, however, the array of possible orderings of reality has been radically diminished as a single male voice emerges to dominate the landscape.⁶

Boyle's interpretation of Gordon's post-conversion novels hinges on the argument that her conversion signaled a retreat. Instead of viewing the writer's Catholicism as a vehicle through which she could envision more productive and expansive roles for women, Boyle argues that Gordon increasingly "celebrates the voiceless and receptive female, which may have evolved from her growing feelings of alienation and otherness, her religious commitment and/or her desire to establish order in her chaotic life."⁷

Gordon's religion clearly provided her with stability and an unchanging ordering of reality. Explanations of her post-conversion mentality that paint her outlook as completely male-dominated, however, ignore the strong, contrary, and subversive implications of the marginal yet forceful women in her novel The Malefactors. The authoritative male clergy of Gordon's Catholic Church are

absent from the text. Consequently, female characters who occupy positions of importance within Gordon's fictional Catholic Church appropriate responsibilities traditionally held by the male clergy.

Both Boyle and Gordon's biographer, Veronica Makowsky, argue that women are reduced to the role of "interpreters" or "vehicles for divine revelation" in Gordon's post-conversion novels. This explanation ignores Gordon's respect for the female intellect.⁸ Boyle uses the epitaph for The Malefactors, which states, "It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears" to advance her argument.⁹ Gordon's use of a quotation from Jacques Maritain's "The Frontiers of Poetry," according to Boyle, signals the beginning of her unsympathetic representation of female characters. Because Boyle asserts that "the moral vision upon which the novel is resolved will be proclaimed by the male," she implies that men become the only characters capable of combining religious faith with a commanding intellect.¹⁰ She writes:

Although the translation the male offers is supposedly less corrupt than the knowledge that fills the female, his ability to organize a vision and articulate ideas make him the dominant character, the artist, while the female becomes his domesticated sibyl rather than a threatening presence. To attain a state of greatest access to the divine, the female is purified, that is, she surrenders will and voice, emptying the self so as to ready her body for revelation.¹¹

My reading of the progression from Gordon's pre-conversion novel, The Women on the Porch, to her post-

conversion novel, The Malefactors, goes against the critical grain as articulated by Boyle. To set my argument about The Women on the Porch into context, I will examine the significance of her relationship within her literary circle: specifically her marriage to Allen Tate and her relationship to the Southern Agrarians.

The philosophy of the Southern Agrarians can be summed up by the introduction to I'll Take My Stand. The articles in the manifesto "tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, "Agrarian versus Industrial."¹² In 1935, Donald Davidson gave his critical assessment of the movement:

I am sure that at first we did not do much thinking in strictly economic terms. Uppermost in our minds was our feeling of intense disgust with the spiritual disorder of modern life--its destruction of human integrity and its lack of purpose; and, with this, we had a decided sense of impending fatality. We wanted a life which through its own conditions and purposefulness would engender naturally (rather than by artificial stimulation), order, leisure, character, stability, and that would also, in the larger sense, be aesthetically enjoyable.¹³

As Davidson suggests, the contributors to I'll Take My Stand believed that an agrarian South was necessary to preserve the integrity of a southern way of life.

While the contributors to I'll Take My Stand offered a variety of manifestations in their individual essays, John Crowe Ransom articulates the heart of the Agrarian

philosophy in his poem "Antique Harvesters." In "Antique Harvesters," Louis Rubin points out that the South is seen in terms of the land. "The tilling of the land," according to Rubin, "is made into the garnering of treasure of our Lady-- -in other words, into a religious act.

Identification with the South therefore constitutes identification with a religious attitude; the harvesting becomes a way of serving both the South and the Lord."¹⁴ In "Antique Harvesters," Ransom created a scenario in which

a group of men of letters announced that the South, which had gone whoring after the strange gods of industrialism and modernism, must return to its old community heritage, forsake the modern, urban doctrine of progress, and loyally defend a traditional agricultural, rural way of life, in order to make possible the harmonious, mannered society in which the fine arts and the arts of living alike flourish.¹⁵

In his essay in I'll Take My Stand, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," Ransom contrasts his feelings of nostalgia for a stable, rooted, agrarian tradition with southerners who support a "gospel of Progress."¹⁶ He describes nostalgia as "a kind of growing pain ... the instinctive objection to being transplanted, that chiefly prevents the deracination of human communities...."¹⁷ Ransom valorizes the old South when southerners cultivated the arts of "dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, politics, oratory, the pulpit." He explains that "these were the arts of living and not arts of escape; they were also community arts, in which every class of society could

participate after its kind." ¹⁸

Gordon was ambivalent about the Agrarian philosophy, in part because she was excluded from the movement. During the months she and Tate lived in New York City before their marriage in 1924, Gordon was excluded from the intellectual companionship Tate enjoyed. While Tate met with a group of intellectuals at Squarcialupi's in the Village, where he discussed writing with other men from various parts of the country, Malcolm Cowley comments that Gordon did not participate. "She 'wasn't one of us'," remarked Cowley. "'We' were mostly poets and intellectuals and men."¹⁹

While Gordon entertained the Agrarians socially and was respected as an author in her own right, she was not invited to contribute to the Agrarian manifesto. Nevertheless, we can view Gordon's stories, "Mr. Powers" and "The Ice House" as her own "fictive counterparts" to I'll Take My Stand. ²⁰ Yet while the tenor of Gordon's work qualified her to participate in the Agrarian mission, she was aware that she could never qualify as one of the "brethren." Another Gordon biographer, Ann Waldron, points out the irony that none of the Agrarians, except Andrew Lytle, knew anything about farming. She explains that "Caroline, who had lived on a farm and knew all about farming never attended any of the meetings. Allen talked Agrarian, but Caroline was Agrarian."²¹

In her private correspondence with her close friend

and confident, Sally Wood, Gordon reveals at once both her intimacy with and her exclusion from the Agrarian circle. Her personal friendships with the Agrarians accounts for her insight that they were unequipped to put their philosophy into practice. She writes about a man, whom she does not identify, described as "positively rabid on the subject that the Agrarians must develop a field technique eventually which is certainly true. But adopting the present radical technique which is really what he demands of us won't get us anywhere and besides I have tried in vain to make him see Allen and John Ransom and Don Davidson would make damn poor field workers."²² Gordon respected the intellectual project of the Agrarians while entertaining no delusions of the impracticality of their ideas.

In a letter to the editor of the magazine The Hound and the Horn, Gordon remarks that "The focus of my feelings, of course, is regret for the lost cause. It would have been better, I think, if our grandfathers had been carried off the field dead. The South as it exists today has little of the Old South in it--we have sold out certainly."²³ Gordon's background and rural sensibility caused her to be sympathetic to the Agrarian cause. She may have regretted the consequences of losing the Civil War. Yet, she was nonetheless skeptical of the idea that an intellectual group of men, who were essentially fighting an ideological battle, would succeed in altering history.²⁴

By the 1940's Agrarians such as Tate and Ransom began to reevaluate their Agrarianism, considering their motives in light of their critical distance from the project. In 1945, Ransom declared in the Kenyon Review that Agrarianism had deteriorated into an act of nostalgia.²⁵ A few years later, Tate took Ransom's evaluation of the movement a step further. Explaining Ransom's comments to Davidson, he writes that Ransom

alluded to our old views of the late twenties, when we were rebelling against modernism, and pointed out that we never got much further than Nostalgia because no historic faith came into consideration. I think there's a great deal in that. We were trying to find a religion in the secular, historical experience as such, particularly in the Old South. I would now go further than John to say we were idolaters. But it is better to be an idolater than to worship nothing, and as far as our old religion went I still believe in it.²⁶

As Lewis Simpson points out, Tate admits that Agrarianism involved a kind of "idolatry" of the South, and a confusion of "profane and sacred" history.²⁷ Tate would make these comments in the context of his having recently embraced Catholicism in 1951. In 1952, Tate told the editors of Shenandoah magazine that "human life presupposes ... a prior order, the order of unified Christendom."²⁸ The South had perpetuated many of the virtues of such an order, according to Tate, but to revive it now "would be a kind of idolatry."²⁹

In her novel The Women on the Porch, Gordon takes her husband's logic a step further and launches a forceful critique of the Agrarian philosophy. She begins, in effect, to define herself in opposition to the Agrarian circle. The female characters in The Women on the Porch, for example, are the hostages of a post-Agrarian setting. They cannot create a role for themselves on a stage where male authority is absent and the traditional agrarian society has vanished. Rather, Catherine Chapman, Gordon's female protagonist, has relatives who are stranded in an "agrarian" setting that, when reconstructed by her rich relatives, only becomes a parody of itself. In this way, Gordon's novel itself may be read as a parody of Agrarianism and the "idolatrous" nature of that philosophy. Her depiction of an unreconstructable post-Agrarian setting, moreover, similarly shows as misguided the Agrarians who romanticized the past. The victims of this idealized Agrarian society in The Women on the Porch are the female characters who lack the vision or imagination to free themselves from their stagnant lives. Rooted in the past, the same past the Agrarians idealized, Catherine, Willy, and Daphne cannot envision or realize independent identities or tell their own stories.

In The Women on the Porch, the character of Catherine Chapman flees to her ancestral home in Tennessee, Swan Quarter, which turns out to be no more of a regenerative environment than her home in New York City. Instead of

providing a healing atmosphere where Catherine might recover from the blow of her husband's infidelity, Swan Quarter suggests an "inferno."³⁰ The struggling farm in Tennessee, moreover, illustrates the impossibility of resurrecting a way of life that has steadily declined since the Civil War. At Swan Quarter, Catherine confronts an empty shell of the agrarian society she remembers from her childhood. She enters a world of women--without men--that promises a sterile, barren, and non-regenerative alternative to the life she has led with her husband in New York City. After realizing that escaping into her past is an impossibility, Catherine decides to return to her husband.

Catherine's reacquaintance with her aunt, cousin, and grandmother helps her recognize that her ancestral home would not provide a refuge from urban values that have contaminated her relationship with her husband. Neither can Catherine sustain herself on the bitter recollections of her husband's infidelity.³¹ As a way of warding off the implications of her separation from Jim Chapman, she attempts to begin a new life with her cousin, Tom Manigault, whose financial resources and farm promise an escape from her marriage. She will discover, however, that her affair with Tom, whom she plans to marry, will offer no better alternative to her marriage to Jim Chapman (220-221). Catherine's marriage to Chapman, she admits, had been a long, exhausting effort to please him, but she comes to

realize that Tom Manigault's dissatisfaction with his proto-agrarian life might result in his demanding the same pampering treatment. Her unconscious recognition that Tom Manigault is incapable of offering an alternative to Chapman alerts her to the impossibility of functioning in an agrarian setting where male authority--as I will show--is impotent.

The absence of male authority at Swan Quarter is a burden that each of the women of the household must bear. While the women live an isolated existence largely independent from the outside world, their lives are dominated by a host of dead males that haunt them from a distant past. Catherine's senile grandmother, for instance, remains preoccupied with reveries about the Civil War and the tensions surrounding the confusion in her love life brought about by the war. Although the men are not present to interfere with the lives of these women, they persist in influencing the women's behavior. Rather than adjusting to their female-dominated existence, the women remain preoccupied with the unrealistic task of maintaining the farm as it traditionally functioned. The women at Swan Quarter, in other words, remain trapped by the remnants of a hierarchal society that exists only in their imaginations. The absence of men, moreover, creates an atmosphere where women view their dependence upon one another with frustration and resentment. The dearth of males creates a

tension that divides the women against each other.

Although we learn during the narrative that the deceased men of Swan Quarter were incompetent, the women's lives are nevertheless driven by their memories of these men. In the case of Willy, Catherine's aunt, we learn of her preoccupation with her dead brother, Jack, who was thrown from a horse and broke his neck (18). Before Willy begins her day's work on the farm, she remembers that her financial problems are due to Jack's imprudent decision to mortgage part of the farm. Her mother's reaction to Jack's careless behavior, however, illuminates how the women left to run the farm forgive him for his shortcomings, especially after his death. Willy resents her mother's preferential treatment of Jack since she bears the burden of coping with Jack's mismanagement of the farm while caring for their aging mother. Willy ponders the unfairness of her plight:

It was strange, though. Mama had been almost wild when she discovered that there was a mortgage on the place but she had never really been mad at Jack, not half as mad as she had been with her, Willy, when she sold the dogwood trees for shuttles. And yet they could never have got through the last two years without that money (16).

While Willy recognizes the injustice of her mother's reaction, she harbors conflicting emotions about Jack's death. Willy feels more energetic now that Jack is gone because she now has responsibilities, whereas before "there wasn't anything to do but dry up" (18). Then, after pausing for a moment, she reflects, "I wasn't ever really glad,

Jack. I'd give it all up to have you back..." (18).

Even though her supervision of the farm might be more effective than that of her brother, the memory of the last man to run the farm looms above the daily routine of the women who, in a world without men, exist in a power vacuum. That the women have never accepted Willy's traditionally male managerial role illuminates the ways they still cling to the values of a vanished society where males occupied the dominant role. In this way, Jack's death represents for "the women on the porch" the extinction of the already feeble vestiges of an agrarian way of life founded on male authority. While the men are all dead or living in urban areas, women still hang on to a farm that bears little resemblance to a functioning agrarian farm. A philosophy based on the preservation or romanticization of an agrarian ideal is shattered in The Women on the Porch. Implicit in her depiction of the women at Swan Quarter, as I will illustrate in more detail, is an attack upon the idealized notion that an agrarian way of life can be revived in the South.

The afflictions Catherine's cousin Daphne endures enhance the drama created when women, entrapped in a post-agrarian world, manipulate each other as a way of coping with their abandonment and isolation. Daphne's life had never been the same since a woman named Charlotte Mayhew had convinced an ill-intentioned suitor that Daphne was worth

marrying only for her money. Daphne's husband abandoned her on her wedding night after discovering that she had no fortune. Daphne, still preoccupied with Charlotte's motivations years later, bitterly recalls: "Charlotte Mayhew was irresponsible, wicked. She played me, as she would have finessed a queen at cards, married me for a joke, to a man who wanted only the money he thought I had" (179). Daphne tries to understand why Charlotte had treated her with such callousness:

People who had known Charlotte all her life said that when she was a young girl she had not had that streak of malice in her nature. It is no joke [for Charlotte] to be left a widow, penniless, and with three children. She had no education, no particular talent. There was nothing for her to do but open a boarding house. But she had never made any secret of her hatred of it. (173)

In The Women on the Porch, the women express their bitterness toward one another as a means of coping with their own feelings of powerlessness.

The frequent manifestations of bitterness among women, Gordon implies, is caused by the deterioration of southern customs and values. Daphne's husband exploits the demise of social rituals, for instance, by devising a plot to plunder her promised fortune. In keeping with his false motives, he refuses to consummate the marriage after realizing that Charlotte duped him. Her husband's behavior, significantly, illuminates the double standard inherent in what remains of southern social rituals. His example shows how the

deterioration of these rituals place women in vulnerable positions, where they face limited options. Having no spiritual vision or education to carry her through her crisis, and powerless to exert her bitterness toward another man, Charlotte Mayhew turns her bitterness against another vulnerable and innocent female. She contrives a scheme that will prevent Daphne from enjoying the traditional role of wife and mother that she herself had been deprived of by her husband's death.

As a way of coping with personal tragedies such as Daphne's, the women at Swan Quarter retreat into a anti-social and barren existence. They sequester themselves from the community and have no opportunities to participate in a larger society. Their seemingly self-imposed isolation originates from the complete lack of hope that permeates every domain of their lives. Daphne, for example, channels all her creative and scientific energies into mushroom picking. Her hobby fills her days, relieving her from direct confrontation of her emotional lack.

Daphne's only emotional sustenance, moreover, dates back to her childhood when she remembers experiencing love and friendship for the first and last time. As she walks through the forest looking for mushrooms, her mind drifts back to her childhood games with Agnes, Catherine's deceased mother. Daphne recalls a day of "toiling" when the girls had worked all day in the forest constructing an imaginary

house.

They had made their "people" out of that. Small, shining pebbles for eyes, moss garments, cheeks colored red with pokeberry juice. If you sprinkled the figures lightly with water the clay women - they had not bothered to make any men - would not crumble but stayed intact for days.
(167)

In this passage, the girls imagine a world where male authority cannot interfere with their playing or dominate the landscape. Perhaps instinctively, the girls understood that men would eventually have the power to change the course of their lives. Their willingness to exclude men from their games illustrates the girls' desire to prolong the intimacy between themselves. They intuitively resist the moment when the realities of a male-dominated society will have the power to alter their lives.

What distinguishes Daphne and Agnes as children from the adult women in the novel is their ability to imagine their way out of men's "controlling definitions." The adult women at Swan Quarter have lost the capacity to imagine. The consequence of having lost that ability, and having allowed themselves to remain oppressed by the barren landscape and their persistent memories, amounts to a loss of self and the inability to envision their own individuality. Without the capacity to imagine, the women cannot create themselves anew. Looking backward as a way of retrieving a sense of identity and purpose, Gordon implies, may result in entrapment by the past rather than liberation

through the past. Implicit in Gordon's novel, then, appears to be a scathing commentary upon Agrarianism, a philosophy that revolves around an "idolatry" of the past, as Tate admitted in his letter to Davidson. The Women on the Porch is a novel that plays out the potentially destructive nature, for women in particular, of such a philosophy.

For Daphne, the summers spent playing imaginary games with Agnes constitute the most fulfilled moments of her life. Her happiness is violated the day Agnes's suitor arrives at Swan Quarter. As cousin Kit came up behind Agnes to give her a push on the swing, Daphne instinctively knows that "Agnes was gone from her, into another world," a world that would exclude Daphne. Significantly, Daphne considers Agnes, not her husband, as the lost love in her life.

Daphne remembers:

Afterwards she had had moments of rebellion, moments, even of hope. She had thought that Agnes would get tired of having a beaux and come back to her. There had been nights when she lay awake, praying that she would. But deep inside she had known that Agnes was gone, never to return. They said childhood griefs were soon cured. She could not ever remember having experienced a greater sense of desolation. And why not, she asked herself, bringing her arm up savagely to brush a cobweb from her face. Why not? It was the last time in my life that I was ever happy. (170)

Daphne's days of happiness have ended in part because, just as she has lost the capacity to imagine, she has likewise shut out emotions of "rebellion" or "hope." She seems, rather, to indulge in the maintenance of a fiction of the past, a past that has betrayed her, ensuring that she will

never be forced to come to terms with it.

Her pathetic claim that her childhood friendship with Agnes was the last time she was ever happy signifies the unnatural degree to which the women at Swan Quarter remain plagued by the past. Gordon's depiction of a vanished agrarian world clearly offers no place for women without independent resources. Daphne's impotence, moreover, magnifies her wounds because she has no outlet for her bitterness. Consequently, she copes with her recollections by channeling her energies into mushroom collecting. She shields herself from genuine contact with people by corresponding by mail with other mycologists. Her way of communicating with the outside world, therefore, thwarts the chances that she will ever be forced to alter her self-image as a neglected and betrayed individual.

A woman related to Catherine and her relatives by marriage, Elsie Manigault, provides a provocative comparison with Daphne. Elsie's sophistication and fading glamour make her an anomaly at her farm located a few miles from Swan Quarter. She retires from Long Island to her husband's ancestral home because, despite her financial resources, she has no direction or purpose. Like Tom Claiborne's wife Vera in The Malefactors, Elsie submerges herself in the affairs of running a farm as a way of coping with the sterility of her emotional life and her lack of an artistic or spiritual vision. An episode that illuminates her stagnation is her

recollection of a discussion with Roy, the homosexual architect who rebuilt her husband's old mansion. She reflects that

Roy is always talking about how superior the artist is to the common man, how everybody else is born for the whip. I wish I had been born like that. I wish I cared about some one thing more than anything else. But I have not ever really cared about any of the things I have done....
(235)

Although Elsie longs to direct her energies in a productive way, she lives trapped by her decadent lifestyle and her lack of imagination. While The Malefactors offers Tom Claiborne's wealthy wife Vera an opportunity for spiritual direction through her religious faith, Elsie can find no productive outlet for her frustrations. In consequence, Elsie manipulates others by using her fading beauty and wealth as both a protective barrier and a weapon.

Elsie betrays her son, for example, through the decision to tear down her husband's ancestral home. In its place, she constructs an elaborate house modeled after Mount Vernon (53). Her son, Tom Manigault, resents his mother's decision to rebuild the home because he rightly interprets her efforts to physically transform the farm landscape as a direct attack upon the agrarian values and traditions once governing the routine of the farm. In his eyes she wants to obliterate the past, to assert her own dominion over the land. Elsie's behavior shows the futility of attempting to resurrect artificially an agrarian life-style. Once the

organic fabric of a society has been ruptured, Gordon implies, attempts to invoke Agrarian ideals only parody the original values. Elsie, for instance, pretends to keep up what she describes to Catherine as "the customs of the country," but falls short in her assumed role as mistress of the farm (60). Her use of Northern capital to reconstruct her husband's farm assumes an arrogance, moreover, that represents a perversion of the values promoted by Tate and the "brethren."

In the same way that Vera raises bulls in The Malefactors, symbolizing her husband's psychological abandonment and her barrenness, so Elsie breeds horses in an effort to exercise control over at least one domain of her life. She also seeks worldly recognition through breeding and showing horses. Unlike Vera, however--who relinquishes her aimless lifestyle in return for a religious life wherein she achieves a sense of purpose and self-worth--Elsie, like Charlotte Mayhew, channels her bitterness into an attack against another vulnerable woman.

Elsie's regret that she carelessly let a prize stallion slip into her cousin Willy's hands plants the seed for a conflict that results in two women fighting over a symbol of male authority and virility. For Willy, the recognition that she will have the opportunity to show her stallion represents the first chance for happiness that she can remember since her childhood:

It was a long time since she, a girl of fifteen, used to go with her brother to horse shows around the country. It was always hot and dusty. You would wish you had not come and then a horse would walk into the ring and as his trainer turned him slowly around, the light would strike on him and you would get that feeling of sudden, almost uncontrollable excitement that you never got at any other time, that she had never got since - and then over only a few horses. It would be like that if she showed Red. (35)

Willy's opportunity to leave the farm after many years for the sake of showing a horse enhances the poignancy of her childhood memory. Red gives her an excuse abandon her domestic responsibilities, if only for a few days, and participate in an activity beyond the humdrum routine at Swan Quarter.

Willy's prospects for a rejuvenating break from the farm vanish, however, when Willy confronts Elsie, who wishes to buy back Red at any price. In an effort to understand why Elsie has unexpectedly shown up at her hotel room, Willy considers her motivation:

Elsie Manigault's face looked drawn. Her vivacity masked a nervous intentness. She is talking as if we were friends, Willy thought, as if she came often to Swan Quarter. But we have never been friends. Why has she come here now? And then she reminded herself that Mrs. Manigault was always polite, even gracious to everybody. But it was the abstracted, impersonal graciousness of careful breeding. Her graciousness tonight was a little exaggerated. She has only come because she wants something, Willy thought. She wants Red! He is all I have and she knows it and wants to take him away from me. But she cannot have him. If I can't have anything else I'll have him. I won't sell him. No matter what they offer. I won't sell him. (268)

Elsie's plot to take from Willy her most important

possession attests to how women manifest their feelings of bitterness against one another.

The dispute between Elsie and Willy raises normal attachments to horses to an unnatural status. The sport of horse showing becomes more than recreation and social ritual. A traditional sport, rather, becomes a matter of individual identity for these women. Horse shows lose their traditional meaning once they are used by women, like Elsie, as a way of showcasing wealth rather than as a natural manifestation of a way of life. Both women insist upon the privilege of associating themselves with the success of Red, showing the unnatural degree to which their well-being depends on their identification with a stallion. With no balance of power between men and women, Red is their only access to power. They fight over a horse that symbolizes the absence of male authority in their lives.

Elsie's reaction to Willy's firm refusal to sell the horse reveals a sadness harboring more emotion than simply disappointment over losing the horse itself. Willy speculates that Elsie lost all hope at that moment of refusal, suffering a deeper "never-to-be-explained loss, something she had always wanted and never got and now feared that she never would get" (270). As the above passage reveals, Elsie reaches an impasse in her efforts to achieve a sense of purpose or individual autonomy. Elsie's inability to "care about one thing more than anything else"

manifests itself in a repudiation of those less powerful women around her who, ironically, face a similar problem of creating a meaningful sense of purpose in their lives.

Although Willy stands her ground by refusing to capitulate to Elsie's request, she nevertheless identifies with Elsie's plight and accepts Elsie's defeat as the natural conclusion to her efforts to obtain Red:

Nobody gets what they want, Willy thought, and lay watching the events of the day recede, losing little by little their fiery brightness until they seemed like something that had happened a long time ago, to be remembered, but only at intervals and that more and more rarely, until finally the recollection disintegrates, like paper which, when it has lain long enough, turns brittle, so that, finding when we open the casket only the brown, dry fragments, we forget what was written on the fair page and do not visit the room that harbored it anymore. (270)

As that quotation suggests, even away from Swan Quarter Willy builds an impenetrable wall between herself and happiness.

Among the chances for happiness that Willy passes up is her decision to decline her trainer's proposal to marry her on the night following Red's victories and her episode with Elsie. Her rejection of Mr. Shannon stems in part from her inability to envision change. Like Daphne, Willy sees no alternative than set up barriers to protect her emotional vulnerability. Her life has thus far been so circumscribed and empty that she cannot envision her own happiness. Instead, Willy copes with the day's events by blurring the present with memories from the past.

Willy, like the Southern Agrarians, idealizes the past, thus her immediate lumping of the events of the day with occurrences that "had happened a long time ago." It is precisely this absorption in the past that prevents her from coping with the present. Her reveries quell the "fiery brightness" of the day. The hope for her happiness "recedes" as she allows the past to blot out the present. A resurrection of the past, Gordon implies, is futile. The past brings to mind images of "a casket," "dry fragments," and a "room" that we do not visit anymore. Red's death by electrocution at the conclusion of the novel, moreover, seems to be the result of her inability to envision her own happiness. Her morbid preoccupation with her past leads her to identify herself unnaturally with Red. She kills off Red, who represents hope and identity, because she cannot accept change or let go of the past.

In The Women on the Porch, Catherine Chapman is another character who must come to terms with the misguided fantasy that she can rebuild her life in an atmosphere where women like Daphne, Willy, and Elsie cannot overcome their attachment to a masculine past. Catherine's affair with Tom Manigault represents her attempt to begin her life again with a man ten years younger. Tom can offer her a farm, horses, and what she imagines would constitute an agrarian alternative to her life in New York City. She gradually recognizes, however, that Tom's obsession with his mother

dominates him and will prevent him from loving either his work as a farmer or any woman besides his mother. While Catherine initially plans to divorce her husband in Reno, her sentiments change when she realizes that "The land is not enough for him ... or his beast or his friends or the women he will love. There was something went before. And it is no use to tell him that his mother is not one to awaken either love or hate" (220). Catherine concludes:

I have made a mistake, she thought, I have taken the wrong road and it is too late to turn back. Am I lost? She trembled. It seemed to her that she was alone in the woods and the glittering light had a voice, a voice that would have spoken but for the command laid upon it, and then suddenly the stilled woods gave tongue and the air all around was quivering with the wild, high-pitched, despairing cry that brought her to her feet and sent her racing towards the house. (221)

As the passage above reveals, Catherine only begins to understand that her affair with Tom has plunged her into yet another hell. Ann Fraiștat explains that Catherine, "like Dante, has lost her way in a dark wood in her middle years (she is thirty-five, we learn), but unlike the poet, she has not fully realized that she is in an inferno--one of her own making."³²

Like Catherine, Jim Chapman also lives in the "inferno" of New York City where his own misguided actions have resulted in his inability to keep his life in order. As a young, unmarried scholar, Chapman had managed to isolate himself from the community of intellectuals at Columbia. He

recalls his apartment on Eighth Avenue where he completed his first and last book:

There was an iron bed, so frail that it creaked when you turned over, a table and two chairs, one for him to sit on while he wrote and one, as Bob said, "For solitude.... He would forget that when he got to writing, forget even that there was a stove until, after midnight, when the room would grow colder and he would get up, and with his eyes still on the words he had just written, take his overcoat down from its hook and in that brief pause, the only one that he might know before daybreak, become aware of the silence that had settled over the city, a silence that in those small hours used to grow and deepen until, miraculously, it found a voice and spoke to him, his constant, dear cell-mate, the best companion he had ever had. (111)

Significantly, Chapman's days of creativity and accomplishment date from a period before he took a job teaching history at Columbia. His exposure at Columbia to an intellectual atmosphere where "words have grown light and anybody can pick them up" marks the beginning of his dry and unproductive phase (278). Chapman runs into some of his peers in a cafe and finds himself faced with the reality that they have compromised their artistic talents. He reflects, for example, that "Bob [Upchurch] was too good-looking, too smart, knew his way about in the wilds of New York too well..." (126). Chapman reflects upon the commercial turn of Upchurch's career and judges that Upchurch has wasted his talent as a poet. "He has lost his Muse by being silent," Chapman reflects, "Apollo no longer regards him" (128). Chapman's recognition that his friends

have sold out by working for the universities or magazines enhances his awareness of the corrupting urban environment of New York City. As Ann Fraistat explains, "The blasphemous belief in poetry, as well as an egotism that precluded love of others, would place such poets in one of the [Dante's] circles of hell."³³ Chapman's contamination by the misguided values of his intellectual peers, Gordon implies, accounts for his moral and artistic decline.

Jim Chapman, like Catherine, is slow to recognize how his actions have been misguided. An incident in a student hangout near Columbia, however, is one example in a series of events that brings him closer to recognizing his mistakes. Chapman's encounter with a student who needs help interpreting one of Dante's cantos provides a warning that he has lost his way. A Dante scholar, Chapman translates the fifteenth canto wherein lies a message that for Gordon would account for his errant behavior. In the fifteenth canto, Fraistat explains that

Ser Brunetto is committed to this circle of hell for his crimes against Nature, and although Jim cannot literally be accused of sodomy, as Dante uses the term, he is among those writers who prostitute their God-given gifts and idly spend their powers in illicit and debasing pursuits.³⁴

Chapman's decision to travel to Swan Quarter to retrieve Catherine indicates that he, like Catherine, recognizes that continuing the illicit affair he has been conducting would prolong his errant course. At Swan Quarter, however, he encounters resistance on Catherine's

part. After she tells him of her affair with Tom Manigault, Chapman almost strangles Catherine to death. Yet, Catherine forgives Chapman's violent reaction to her confession. She and her husband resolve their differences with alarming ease.

At this juncture, Catherine seems to have lost her will. She puts up no resistance to her husband's declaration that they will leave Swan Quarter together that day. Their abrupt flight illustrates that neither Catherine nor Chapman has come to terms with the reasons for the separation. Chapman seems not to have made the connection between his moral decline and the degree to which his actions have adversely affected his scholarship and his relationship with Catherine; she never confronts the decision to leave her husband abruptly for Swan Quarter. In the last scene of the novel, Chapman makes a gesture that sums up the nature of their reconciliation. "She held her hands before her face. The sound he had heard was the slipper falling from her dangling foot. He stooped and was about to slide it back on her foot, when, still holding it in his hand, he bent lower and set his lips on her bare instep" (316). Falling back into the traditional mode of their marriage, the kiss represents a kind of agreement between the couple: He will promise to worship her in exchange for her willingness to resume her role as the devoted and docile wife. Their reconciliation resembles a

contractual arrangement more than a liberation. The novel, consequently, does not end on a satisfactory note.

Catherine and Chapman recognize only that they are better off as a couple than stranded alone in either an agrarian or a urban setting. At the conclusion of the novel, Catherine and Chapman are suspended between two "infernos," urban and rural.

Catherine's decision to return to her husband marks her own inability to envision a life without dependence upon male authority; her inability to resist Chapman shows that in her days at Swan Quarter she has earned no independence or self-sufficiency. Just as her relatives remain immersed in memories of the past, she too is incapable of fashioning a new life for herself in the present. Her inability to appropriate the kind of patriarchal authority she depends upon, in the person of her husband, renders her incapable of looking beyond him to her own sources of strength.

Catherine simply plunges from Tom Manigault's arms back to her husband's. The act of submitting to her husband represents her complicity in allowing him to organize the new direction their lives will take. Although Catherine rarely raises her voice against her husband throughout the novel, she is utterly silenced by the conclusion.

While my argument that Catherine is silenced by her husband at the conclusion of The Women on the Porch corresponds with Boyle and Makowsky's interpretations of the novel, I disagree with their interpretation that Gordon's conversion signaled her diminished respect for the female voice. Gordon's correspondence with Walker Percy and Ward Dorrence, rather, establishes the degree to which her acceptance of Catholicism created a new philosophical foundation for her writing enabling her to step out of the Agrarian ideology and envision more expansive roles for women. An explanation of the connections Gordon made between the literary artist, Catholicism, and religious sacrifice, moreover, is essential to my argument that in The Malefactors Gordon indirectly challenges the patriarchal foundation of the Catholic Church.

In a letter to Ward Dorrence she compares joining the Church to "suddenly being given the authority to believe all the things you've surmised."³⁵ The sense of "authority" Gordon derived from her conversion enabled her to redefine her own identity as a literary artist.

Gordon describes her conversion in a letter to Ward Dorrence. She writes that she was converted

mostly by reading the Gospels. I was reading the Gospel of St. Mark last summer, out at Robber Rocks, and all of a sudden the words that had been in my memory all my life were saying something I'd never heard before. I think I have been converted partly by my own work, too. I have lived most of my life on the evidence of things not seen - what else is writing a novel but that? - and my work

has progressed slowly and steadily in one direction. At a certain point I found the Church squarely in the path. I couldn't jump over it and wouldn't go around it, so had to go into it.³⁶

In that statement, Gordon acknowledges a parallel between her religious convictions and her own writing. She links the mysteries inherent in Catholicism with the role of imagination in crafting fiction. She deplores Luther, for example, because she is convinced that he is a man "whose imagination was too coarse to comprehend what little our finite natures allow us to comprehend of the mysteries of religion."³⁷ What intrigued her about Catholicism was the idea that accepting the doctrines of the religion required an acceptance of the mysteries of the faith. According to Gordon's logic, the crafting of fiction also demands the kind of faith that religious belief requires because novels are written on "the evidence of things not seen."

She makes this logic clear in a letter to Walker Percy in December 1951, when she writes that she is

convinced that the writing of fiction is a religious impulse, which is one reason many people who would be better employed praying 'want to write.' But if one does write one's task is to imitate the Almighty, to make one's word flesh and dwell among men. If you can't do that you'd better not try to write fiction.³⁸

Gordon's contention that the proper role for the artist is to "imitate the Almighty" testifies to the ways her conception of the novelist's role became more restricted after her conversion as a consequence of her preference for the Catholic artist. Yet while her apprehension of a

writer's function and duty narrowed-- because of her insistence upon the Christian orientation of the writer-- her convictions intensified. Her controlled definition of the Christian artist enabled Gordon to clarify her own position as a writer and critic because it allowed her to establish herself as an arbiter of good and bad writing.³⁹ Gordon elevated her role to that of a critic who evaluated talent according to the skill and piety of the artist. Her judgements were based on the assumption that artists without natural talent were wasting their time by writing without technical knowledge and expertise. Other artists, Gordon would argue, misused their talents by ignoring the call to "Imitate the Almighty" in the crafting of fiction.

According to Gordon's formulations, while all Christians are called to imitate the life of Christ in their day-to-day lives, novelists must also attempt to "imitate Christ" within the scope of a novel. Gordon articulates her idea of the appropriate subject matter for fiction when she writes to Walker Percy that

The proper subject of a novel, then, is love, and it must be incarnated, as Christ was. Christ could not have accomplished the redemption of mankind if he had stayed in Heaven with His Father. He had to come to earth and take human shape. So does every idea in your head that goes into your novel. It cannot float in the ether - that is, you cannot have a scene that is not located in time and space. Your business as a novelist is to imitate Christ. He is about his Father's business every moment of His life. As a good novelist you must be about yours: Incarnation, making your word flesh and making it dwell among men.⁴⁰

While denying anyone but the Christian novelist legitimacy, Gordon clearly uses religion to empower her vision of the function of the Catholic artist. In her view, the task of the "good novelist" becomes nothing less than that of creating a work that will "accomplish the redemption of mankind."

Gordon's conception of the role of the Christian artist reflects her strong preference for Christian artists. At the same time, her distinct convictions enabled her to approach her role as a critic with confidence in her own critical standards. In the fall of 1933, Gordon writes to Sally Wood, "I don't feel the slightest confidence in any reaction I have to my own or anybody else's book."⁴¹ Clearly, this is the younger and less experienced Gordon speaking. Writing after her conversion more than twenty years later, her sense that the good novelist would "imitate Christ" and "accomplish redemption" illustrates her vision that the Christian artist could appropriate the power of Christ. Her ability to envision the novelist's appropriation of Christ-like authority, I would argue, testifies to how her conversion empowered her as a novelist and a literary critic.

Gordon's judgement that Catholic writers were more fortunate than other artists originated in her belief in the advantages the Catholic ordering of the universe. She writes to Percy in December of 1951, asserting:

You have an enormous - an incalculable advantage over most people writing today: you know what it is all about. The saints, the mystics are the proper comparisons of the fiction writer, for, as Jacques Maritain points out in Art and Scholasticism, "they alone know what is in the human heart."⁴²

Her Christian vision required that an artist strive to imitate the saints in the writing of fiction. Her argument implies, moreover, that the successful Catholic writer achieves a kind of sainthood by his ability to "understand the human heart" and thereby to represent human struggles within the scope of a novel. Catholics, in her view, also understand that they occupy a certain place in the universe.

Important to the success of the Catholic novelist, according to Gordon, is an ability to recreate the Christian order of the universe within the scope of a novel. She explains to Percy that the writer

has the responsibility of setting up a new heaven and earth as one goes. But the Catholic knows that God already created the universe and that his job is to find his proper place in it. I imagine that Dostoyevsky's devoutness accounts in part for the amazing variety and spontaneity of his creations. Very little of his energy was mis-spent in figuring out the things that our contemporaries feel it is their duty to figure out. Therefore he had his energies left for the real task.⁴³

Depending on her hierarchial outlook, Gordon recognized Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor as exemplary Catholic authors, owing to their understanding of their "place" in the Christian ordering of the universe.

Gordon's traditional perceptions about Christian hierarchy, moreover, would not inspire her to relegate women to "second rate" status, as her critics argue.⁴⁴ Her correspondence instead reveals the degree to which she admired and respected the writing of both Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter, to name two of her closest literary friends. Recognizing how Gordon willingly sacrificed her time and energy to cultivate the talents of a Catholic novelist, Sally Fitzgerald explains that Gordon offered sustained support throughout O'Connor's life:

at a considerable cost to herself in time and strength, Caroline Gordon Tate commented on every short story and novel that Flannery wrote thereafter, and Flannery never felt that she had outgrown her mentor, although she admitted that she was too ill and exhausted to act on her criticisms of "Parker's Back."⁴⁵

O'Connor's gender did not spur Gordon to provide extended criticism for a writer she considered of the "first order."⁴⁶ Rather, Gordon supported O'Connor more because of the Catholic themes in her work. Gordon, for example, admired O'Connor's portrayal of "original sin." In a letter to O'Connor she writes:

you are giving us a terrifying picture of the modern world, so your book is full of freaks. They seem to me, however, normal people who have been maimed or crippled and your main characters, Sabbath, Enoch and Haze, are all going about their Father's business, as best they can. It is a terrifying picture. I don't know any other contemporary who gets just such effects. Genet achieves remarkable effects but for me they are all marred, finally, [by] his sentimentality. You are never sentimental.⁴⁷

O'Connor's ability to show the perversion of the modern world in Christian terms, combined with her unapologetic tone and powerful "effects," accounts for Gordon's praise. Her sustained support of O'Connor was based on their Catholic world views as well as mutual respect.

The literary friendship between Gordon and O'Connor argues that Gordon's adoption of a traditional religious faith would not interfere with her dedication toward another woman artist. Rather, she would celebrate her discovery of O'Connor, declaring her joy at having found another competent Catholic novelist along with Walker Percy.⁴⁸ In short, when judging other artists, Gordon concerned herself more with issues of technique and piety and less with matters of gender. At the same time, her sustained support of O'Connor illustrates that she did not view gender as an obstacle for a gifted writer.⁴⁹

In view of her personal ambitions, however, Gordon was acutely aware of the obstacles that she faced in combining her writing with domestic responsibilities. In a letter to Ward Dorrence, she acknowledges that her attempts to combine domestic responsibilities with the life of an artist constituted an "impossible" task. She writes that she has been

on the rack ever since I started writing. I've always felt that I hadn't an hour to lose - and I still know damn well that I haven't, though I'm beginning to see that hours may be put in in different ways to bring good results. One thing that kept me more on the rack than I'd otherwise

have been was my determination not to let my family cushion me the way some women writers are cushioned. Nancy [Gordon's daughter] has never hesitated to interrupt me at a crucial moment. Nobody ever thought of not having people staying in the house when I was at a crucial stage in a book. And that was the way I wanted it. But it didn't work. John Bishop told me years ago that I was trying to do something that was impossible.⁵⁰

As that quotation suggests, Gordon resented the ways in which her domestic responsibilities interfered with her career. Her attempts to play the role of competent hostess and wife, combined with her determination to write, heightened her awareness of the sacrificial nature of the task she had set herself as a woman writer.⁵¹

Her belief in the connection between art and sacrifice would manifest itself in her idea to start a religious retreat for writers. In Gordon's view, a religious retreat would teach the student about the mysteries of faith so that the artist could then incorporate religion into the writing of fiction. She modeled her idea for a school for writers after Dorothy Day's Christian commune for vagrants and the disenfranchised.⁵² Gordon's retreat, however, would be for aspiring artists and would require the participants to live hand to mouth, thereby ensuring that the students gained the experience of participating in a spiritual community.

Although she does not insist that the teachers and students be Catholic, she writes that "the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and the opportunity to live the liturgical life for, say, a week, or two weeks, even, would do something for

the students that cannot be done in any other way and that needs to be done."⁵³ Her motivation for the retreat was less to convert the students than to allow them to experience the kind of humble existence she considered appropriate for the artist. Her task as the teacher, moreover, would be diminished by the fact that "the teaching will be done by the Holy Ghost."⁵⁴ In her letter to Walker Percy she admits that teaching exhausted her, but her somewhat eccentric plan would promise to relieve her of the substantial responsibility of "spilling out her life blood" by rigorous instructing.⁵⁵

Gordon's religious retreat would also relieve her of the draining responsibility of providing criticism for writers with no familiarity with how a Christian apprehension of the universe would enrich their writing. At the same time, the participants' exposure to "the liturgical life" would permit students to experience the kind of freedom Gordon associated with combining artistic endeavors with a Catholic understanding of the universe.⁵⁶ By teaching about religious commitment and the possibility for redemption, Gordon believed the participants would learn what they needed to reach their full potential as writers.

Gordon's convictions convey the degree to which her religious conversion emboldened her to depict her fictional female characters in more authoritative roles. By

converting to Catholicism, Gordon not only adopted an historically powerful and influential belief system, but she internalized the authority she derived from becoming a Catholic. Ironically, her tone in speaking about religion is hardly one of a self-effacing and humble Christian. Rather, Gordon appropriated the Christ-like authority for herself as a writer, for other Catholic artists, and for those characters in The Malefactors who submit to conversion.

In marked contrast to The Women on the Porch, in The Malefactors Gordon uses the framework of Catholicism to explore alternative roles for women within the realm of the historically male-dominated Catholic Church. In contrast to the women at Swan Quarter, who lack a Christian vision and isolate themselves from the outside world, the Catholic Church provides women in The Malefactors with the opportunity to occupy positions of authority. Catherine Pollard, for instance, supervises both a charity house in New York City and a religious commune in the country called Mary Farm. According to Tom Claiborne, a gifted poet with an exalted opinion of his status in the literary world, Sister Immaculata--a nun and literary critic--has a formidable intellect and an imposing presence. She also operates as a "Big Wheel" within the Church.

Vera, Claiborne's wife, is similarly empowered by her decision to embrace the faith she abandoned for the sake of her husband following their marriage. Her conversion allows her psychological, spiritual, and physical independence from Claiborne. Her complete indifference to him following her conversion culminates with her declaration that she has a new "holy family" to replace her unsatisfactory marriage to Claiborne. In this way, Vera's conversion provides her with the strength to rebuild her life after her husband's infidelity. Vera gains her husband's respect, finally, only after she establishes a sense of autonomy that enables her to envision a life independent from her husband. The Christian atmosphere at Mary Farm, in essence, enables her to make herself anew.

As Vera's conversion illustrates, Gordon's Christian vision becomes a vehicle by which women escape patriarchal standards outside the Church. The Catholic Church, as she portrays it, also provides women with a forum wherein they can occupy positions that require activity and leadership. She constructs, in effect, a Church where male authority is quiescent. While she suggests that Sister Immaculata and Catherine Pollard are governed by the patriarchal authority of the Church, this authority never materializes in the novel; neither do the women's decisions appear to be dictated by patriarchal authority within the Church. In Gordon's fictional representation of the Catholic Church,

she empowers her female characters by allowing them to usurp the authority traditionally in the hands of the male clergy. In this way, The Malefactors offers an appropriate contrast to The Women on the Porch, where the absence of effective male authority and a redemptive vision condemns all the women at Swan Quarter to a life of spiritual emptiness and inaction.

In The Malefactors, as in The Women on the Porch, the male characters also suffer from spiritual stagnation. The protagonist in The Malefactors, Tom Claiborne, has lost his inspiration to write and finds himself unable to rejuvenate his talents amidst his wealthy wife's farm, Blenker's Brook. In an attempt to shake off his depression, he succumbs to his passion for a budding poet and classicist, Cynthia Vale, whose intellect and charm promise to awaken his own creativity. At the closing of the novel, however, Claiborne discovers that leaving Vera was a mistake. Ultimately, he listens to his internal "voices" and the wisdom of both Sister Immaculata and Catherine Pollard and follows his wife into the Church. Claiborne, in effect, sheds his inflated intellectual persona and embraces a redemptive vision. In keeping with Gordon's vision of the Christian artist, Claiborne's conversion signals his ability to make the connection between his artistic creativity and the need for religious sacrifice. In this way, his conversion promises artistic and intellectual renewal.

Redemption, as John F. Desmond illuminates in "The Malefactors: Caroline Gordon's Redemptive Vision," serves as an "absolute model for both the theme and the artistic practice of conversion" in the novel.⁵⁷ He explains how Gordon contrasts the "natural order" with her Christian conception of history. Desmond defines the "natural order" as a conception of reality "which sees existence, including man in his fallen condition, as totally governed by the laws of nature - birth, fruition, death."⁵⁸ In The Malefactors, Gordon's use of different orders of reality, ranging from the "natural/classical to the Christian perspective," enables her to reach a Christian vision of reality that will illuminate the dangers of complete reliance upon a natural or classical order. Desmond explains that the

"classical order" envisions a higher world of human activity modeled on the heroic pattern and evoked through legend and memory. But even here the vision of history and the human situation, though exalted, is nevertheless circumscribed within the natural order. For as Romano Guardini has stated, "Classical man knew nothing of a being existing beyond the world; as a result he was neither able to view or shape his world from a vantage point which transcended it."⁵⁹

In The Malefactors, as Desmond argues, Gordon traces a progression from an agrarian scheme based on the "natural order" to a transcendent vision that allows for divine grace. Gordon exemplifies the inadequacy of a dependence upon an agrarian "natural ordering" of reality in her depiction of the aimless lives of Vera and Claiborne at

Blenker's Brook where their lives center around drinking and vacuous conversation. Blenker's Brook operates in opposition to Mary Farm, a Catholic commune where Vera and Claiborne both live at the conclusion of the novel. In contrast to the life of poverty and Christian service at Mary Farm, Blenker's Brook mirrors the perversion of the Manigault farm in The Women on the Porch, where Tom and Elsie live in accordance with pseudo-agrarian traditions. While Vera immerses herself in outdoor labor, she merely raises animals and farms as a source of amusement. Like Elsie Manigault, Vera supports the farm, not from actual agricultural production, but from inherited wealth. Blenker's Brook, like the Manigault farm, represents a perversion of the Agrarian ideal because neither farm is self-supporting.

The Malefactors opens with Vera's throwing a big party in honor of her prize bull. Her celebration of a bull parallels Elsie's obsession with Red, the stallion in The Women on the Porch. Vera's obsession with the bull contributes to her husband Claiborne's disgust with the superficiality of their lives at Blenker's Brook. Vera's behavior causes Claiborne to create a psychological distance between himself and his wife, which in turn drives her to pay more attention to the bull than to her husband. Vera's obsession with the bull is, in part, a reaction to her husband's renunciation of his dominant role within the

marriage. Vera now relies on the resident homosexual artist, Max Shull, for the advice that Claiborne denies her. In this way, Vera reveals her dependence on men and her inability to make independent decisions.

Vera's behavior, moreover, parallels Elsie and Willy's glorification of Red in The Women on the Porch. She copes with her husband's psychological abandonment by celebrating her ownership of a virile animal. Claiborne may reside at Blenker's Brook, but his inability to work, his empty schedule, and his brooding presence prevent him from acting in the traditional role as head of the farm. Between the characters of Claiborne and Max Shull, male authority is as absent at Blenker's Brook as it is at Swan Quarter and the Manigault farm.

Vera contributes to Claiborne's apathy and cynicism about Blenker's Brook by celebrating her bull. Claiborne also perceives that he and Vera's "pseudo-pastoral" lives contrast with his agrarian upbringing in the rural South. In John F. Desmond's words, Claiborne recognizes that they are

not farming in the sense of an appropriate use of nature, but instead, an idolatrous quasi-religion which elevates the natural order to the level of worship. It is a degradation of man and beast, one which Claiborne identifies with an example of madness and confusion in the moral order from pagan antiquity.⁶⁰

Despite his intolerance for the artificiality of Blenker's Brook, however, Claiborne seems incapable voicing his

objections to Vera except through occasional outbursts of rudeness. His frustration only mounts with the arrival of a man who loudly markets his technology for the artificial insemination of bulls. Claiborne recognizes artificial insemination as a crime against nature. As one of the old guests, Ed Appelkeller, explains to Claiborne, the relationship between the farmer to his husbandry should mirror God's relationship with people.⁶¹ Vera's obsession with her bull, therefore, also represents a perversion: Vera's bull stands between herself and Claiborne. Gordon would consider this situation symptomatic of an unnatural elevation of the "natural order" over the "Christian order" at Blenker's Brook.

Catherine Pollard's presence at the party at Blenker's Brook in honor of Vera's bull enables Claiborne to understand the acuteness of his depression and emptiness. Unlike other guests at the party, Pollard impresses Claiborne and inspires his admiration. He reflects, for example, that she has

an agreeable voice, low-pitched but full, a voice that could easily have made itself heard at a greater distance - the result, probably of experience in public speaking. Marcia had told him that she addressed religious groups all over the country, had said, even, that she was learned in theology. Cat Pollard! (72)

Claiborne's difficulty in reconciling Pollard's wild youth--when she experimented with alchemy, developed "extrasensory perceptions," and drank continuously--reflects his awe at

her transformation. In contrast to his own stagnation, Pollard now has an agenda that places her goals far beyond those of Claiborne or his intellectual peers. Her slow, confident, and deliberate movements reflect how she shoulders the awesome nature of her responsibilities with a sense of calm and security. Significantly, Gordon modeled Catherine Pollard after Dorothy Day, a woman who was becoming famous for having started the Catholic Worker movement in the United States.⁶² Pollard's involvement with the Catholic Church, mirroring Day's life, involves travelling and giving speeches.

Pollard's contact with the world through her work with the poor and disenfranchised, moreover, provides a startling contrast to the aimless and dissolute atmosphere at Blenker's Brook, where none of the residents has any meaningful long-term goals. The authority of Pollard's presence, furthermore, gives Claiborne the impression that

they had agreed to travel together to some other goal, a goal so splendid that he had glimpsed it only in dreams and then not often. This feeling was still so strong upon him that when they had emerged from the invalid chamber and stood in the dim hallway he half turned to her as if to ask "Which Way? (76)

Claiborne finds Pollard's presence so commanding that he instinctively looks to her for spiritual guidance and a way out of his current despair. While Pollard does not attempt to convert Claiborne, her actions distinguish her from the other guests by her complete disregard for propriety or

conventional living. Pollard, for example, insists on taking a dead woodchuck home for one of the Norwegian seaman who resides in her hospitality house and makes stew of the rodents (84). Claiborne's observations of Pollard's unpretentious behavior, significantly, precipitates the emergence of his own unconscious motivations.

Claiborne's inner desires surface as he walks with Pollard around the property at Blenker's Brook. He recalls an image of a barn in Connecticut where he had once observed the quarters of a hermit. The simplicity of the hermit's dwelling compares to Jim Chapman's apartment in The Women on the Porch, where Chapman had experienced his most inspired and dedicated moments as a scholar. Similarly, the hermit's quarters prompt Claiborne to envision a life of simplicity and sacrifice:

In the hermit's bedroom there was a rusted iron bed, which had no mattress, a deal table, two straight chairs, an old-fashioned Victrola cabinet, an old poker, and a broken shovel.... Claiborne, as soon as he entered the stable, had sustained a shock of recognition. It had seemed to him a place he had been in before or a place toward which he had been traveling for a long time. The feeling of recognition was so strong that he felt an ache in the pit of his stomach... Later, as he walked back across the fields with the others, a voice - the voice that spoke to him so often that, at times, his life seemed to him no more than a despairing dialogue with a companion, an opponent who would not, who could not, who could never even be imagined as ceasing to speak - that relentless voice had said: "That is the way you'd like to live. That is the way you want to live!" (85-86)

Claiborne's tormenting "voices" attest to the intuition that

guides him toward his own conversion. As the above passage illustrates, Pollard's presence reawakens Claiborne's own inner voices.

In this way, Gordon's women are not relegated to the role of "interpreters" as Boyle and Makowsky would argue. Pollard's example as a woman who lives with and for the poor reminds Claiborne that he has shut off his creative potential by passively living off the fruits of Vera's fortune. What he cannot fully realize at this stage, however, is the degree to which the hedonistic values that permeate Blenker's Brook constitute an "inferno" that he must escape if he wishes to reclaim his poetic voice. Desmond sums up the indolent atmosphere at Blenker's Brook when he writes that their life is a "decadent submission to the natural order...[where] Tom, a lapsed poet and critic, sinks into drunkenness and despair."⁶³

Claiborne's affair with Cynthia Vale, Vera's cousin, illustrates one of the many ways Claiborne tries to ignore his "inner voices," causing him to sink into a deeper depression at Blenker's Brook. Cynthia intends to use Claiborne's connections in New York City to penetrate the literary establishment. His attraction to her deepens after his discovery of her competence as a poet and translator. Yet, Gordon clearly uses Cynthia as an example of how artists should not employ their talents. While Claiborne's affair with Cynthia represents the culmination of his

gradual moral decline, Cynthia's more calculated ambitions render her guilty of misusing her God-given talents. Although she uses the English language with a precision that impresses Claiborne, her motivation to make a name for herself supersedes her love of the craft. Her relationship with Claiborne, for instance, is transparently artificial since she sees him as a valuable person to know in the profession. Her motivation to carry on an affair with him eventually causes his separation from Vera. Cynthia's flirtations with other men, however, force Claiborne to realize that her feelings for him are purely utilitarian. Furthermore, her insensitive response to Vera's attempted suicide only heightens his awareness that he has misconceived her character.

Gordon's disapproval of Cynthia is related to the way in which the character proves herself capable of repeatedly hurting others to advance her own career. Her purpose for creating Cynthia does not hinge on her intent to illustrate that women should ignore their artistic inclinations. Instead, she uses Cynthia to illustrate that striving for recognition, if one goes about it selfishly, constitutes a defilement of the artist's God-given talent. Anne Boyle, on the other hand, argues that because Gordon adopts the male-dominated values of the Catholic Church

in The Strange Children and The Malefactors, the women who deal in words are also the women who deal in deception; they use and seduce men for their convenience and bring disorder into the

community, and men must learn to turn from such women as Isabel Reardon, Edith Ross, and Cynthia Vale. In contrast, the women who nourish men become less and less articulate....⁶⁴

Cynthia Vale's capacity to use words to "deal in deception" stems from what Gordon would explain as her misguided objectives as an artist. She does not depict Cynthia as the resident errant female. Rather, she portrays most of Claiborne and Cynthia's peers as drifting intellectuals with stunted potential. Their urban friends resemble Chapman's intellectual peers in The Women on the Porch. Most of Claiborne's friends have wasted their artistic talent; they spend their days socializing, drinking, or working for publications.

The character of Carlos Vincent, moreover, functions as a male counterpart to Cynthia Vale in The Malefactors. Carlos Vincent, Vera's deceased father, apparently had the talent in Claiborne's eyes to become a well-known painter. Cynthia later reveals, however, that Vincent's retreat from the world did not mark a period of greatness. She discloses to Claiborne that Vincent's last paintings were "self-portraits, in the nude, or mostly in the nude. Sometimes he wears chain armor, sometimes a plumed hat.... In one he's St. George fighting the dragon ... naked" (164). Claiborne quickly condemns Vincent's narcissism, observing that "People thought he had retired from the world to do something that had never been done before - and all he was doing was looking in the mirror!" (164). As the examples of

Carlos Vincent and Cynthia Vale demonstrate, Gordon's beliefs about the Christian artist inspired her to condemn the artist, male or female, who transgressed against his or her own talents by indulging in self-aggrandizing projects. An artist's self-absorption, she would argue, amounts to a kind of blasphemy. Sister Immaculata, the intellectual nun and literary critic, operates in opposition to Cynthia Vale and Carlos Vincent: because her literary projects are informed by a Christian vision, she exemplifies Gordon's ideal of the intellectual. Her project is to understand the frenetic and dissolute life of the homosexual poet Horne Watts, modeled after Hart Crane, who committed suicide by jumping from a steamer.⁶⁵ Sister Immaculata intends to discover why Horne and his companions, including Catherine Pollard, performed "black magic" experiments using blood during their days in Paris.⁶⁶

To Claiborne's amazement, Sister Immaculata explains Horne's homosexuality and his thirst for "blood" as indicative of his striving for Christ. She makes an historical connection, moreover, between Horne's passion for the blood and Saint Catherine of Siena's Divine Dialogues. In this way, longing for the blood symbolizes a person's yearning for spiritual grace. She has Claiborne read part of the Divine Dialogues where Saint Catherine of Siena calls for

drowning yourself in blood of Christ crucified,
and bathe yourself in the blood; inebriate

yourself with the blood, and clothe yourself in the blood. If you have been unfaithful, baptize yourself again in the blood; if the demon has darkened the eye of your understanding, wash it in the blood.... Dissolve your tepidity in the heat of the blood, and cast off your darkness in the light of the blood. (237)

Saint Catherine's words accuse Claiborne through her reference to infidelity and suggest that he, along with Horne, might be purified if he would "cast off [his] darkness in the light of the blood." For the moment, however, Claiborne responds with disbelief when Sister Immaculata interprets Horne's poem, "The Bridge," as symbolic of "the bridge between earth and heaven" (242).

Although Claiborne arrives with the intention of knocking the "pious platitudes" out of Sister Immaculata, he leaves befuddled by her bizarre explanations about a man he considered depraved and immoral. Before Sister Immaculata ends the interview, however, Claiborne confronts her with the potentially explosive question of Horne's suicide. Would not that transgression, along with his numerous irreverent practices, condemn Horne in the eyes of the Church? Sister Immaculata responds only that Horne "wrote about the sea all his life and he cast himself into it in the end. We all have our own ways of abandoning ourselves to God's mercy" (242). Sister Immaculata's self-confidence and grace, in Gordon's view, would account for her forgiving attitude. Unlike Claiborne, who is self-absorbed and confused about his faith, Sister Immaculata is secure in her

identity and beliefs. These qualities alone make her a forbidding character in Claiborne's eyes.

On his way out of the interview, Claiborne meets Max Shull, who has converted and been commissioned by Catherine Pollard to complete a painting project in the chapel. The men watch Sister Immaculata "move majestically down the street towards the chapel" and both comment on her daunting knowledge and direct manner of communicating (243). After Max asks Claiborne if Sister Immaculata was rough on him, Claiborne responds that she was "formidable, as formidable a woman as I ever met" (243). Max explains to Claiborne that, within the Catholic Church, she operates as a "Big Wheel." She earned a D.Phil at Louvain and, according to Max,

When you get to be that big a wheel you can pretty well do as you please, provided, of course, ye [sic] have the proper reverence for your superiors, and humility, which is the groundwork of all the virtues. She's hell on humility. Has she given you her talk on humility yet? (244)

Max adds that Sister Immaculata has also "got the whole Middle Ages at her finger tips. I wish I knew half as much as that woman," he remarks (244). Claiborne, ironically, has also been humbled by the very woman he previously expected to rid of "pious platitudes" (223).

While Both Sister Immaculata and Catherine Pollard influence Claiborne's conversion through the spoken word, their actions, and their prayers, his final decision cannot be indebted to their roles as "interpreters" of the divine word. Although both women certainly have a well defined

Christian mission, neither would "empty" herself for the purpose of communicating her message to a man. As it stands, Claiborne's recognition that he has lost his wife hastens his decision to convert.

Claiborne approaches his trip to Mary Farm, where Vera has moved following the separation, with similar motivations as Jim Chapman approaches Catherine at Swan Quarter. Yet, whereas Chapman succeeds in retrieving Catherine from her unendurable existence at Swan Quarter, in The Malefactors the scenario is reversed. Claiborne hopes to reclaim Vera with the intention of resuming their conventional married lives. Instead, Claiborne follows Vera into the Church and moves to Mary Farm to be with her. With the introduction of Catholicism, the chemistry between man and wife is reversed. Vera develops a voice that empowers her to reverse the traditional formula of her marriage where, prior to her conversion, she would habitually acquiesce to her husband's demands. She gains an authority over her husband that Catherine Chapman is powerless to command at the conclusion of The Women on the Porch.

Claiborne's first encounter with Vera after their separation reveals that she is no longer the woman who, as in former days, thought he could "change the whole world" and relied upon him for affirmation of her sanity (27). At Mary Farm, Claiborne encounters Vera helping a young boy and an old man wash in a stream. She declares that she has

adopted a new "holy family" and asserts her intention to devote her life to serving them. Her new family consists of Joseph Tardieu, an intellectual and a saint who has recently lost his mind, and a "voiceless" young boy who has been burned in a tenement fire. While Claiborne first reacts with anger at the folly of her determination to adopt these grotesque figures, he soon realizes that Vera wants him to leave because she now perceives Claiborne as the "enemy" and a "satanic force."⁶⁷ Vera's piercing blue eyes, moreover, demand nothing of Claiborne:

His astonishment - and fear - were like a blow in the pit of the stomach. It is in her eyes, he thought. I was always afraid of them, of that straight look that asked more than I could give.... I did not know what it would be like to have her look at me and ask nothing.

He threw his head up sharply. His thoughts hummed in his skull like angry bees. Nothing. That is all she asks now. No more than she would ask of any other bum who strayed into this ravine. To go away. That was all I can do for her now, all she asks of me.... But where can I go? (303)

As this passage illustrates, Vera's ability to "ask nothing" of her husband shows that she considers her former life a burden she will no longer shoulder. Claiborne, on the other hand, stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that she might be making a wise choice for herself. His reaction is understandable considering that her new "holy family" excludes him.

One explanation for Claiborne's resistance to Vera's new life is his inability to look beyond Tardieu's repugnant appearance. In his complacent state, he cannot fathom the

magnitude of Vera's new responsibilities. Claiborne persists in his blindness and proves himself incapable of recognizing that the secret to his own artistic and spiritual redemption requires following the Christ-like example of Tardieu. Tardieu represents Gordon's conception of the quintessential Christian artist. As a woman at Pollard's hospitality house had explained to Claiborne earlier, Tardieu "was very brilliant, and taught Catherine and Ed Bulow all they know. But he stripped himself to put on Christ till his brain was all he had left. Catherine says that naturally he has to offer that to God too before dies" (230). Although Tardieu is essentially rendered ineffective by losing his mind, Pollard's admiration for Tardieu stems from his ability to view even the gravest of misfortunes as commensurate with God's larger plan, a plan he could not presume to comprehend. At this juncture, Claiborne cannot think beyond his own concerns to contemplate the value of a man such as Tardieu. It is the immediate prospect of losing Vera, rather, that finally provides the painful impetus inspiring him to return to Mary Farm. At Mary Farm, Claiborne will accept the life of poverty his "inner voices" have led him toward all along.

In the last hours before his conversion, Claiborne seeks guidance from Catherine Pollard regarding his relationship with Vera. She reveals that Vera, as a Catholic, is subject to him just as the "Church is subject

to Christ" (311). Catherine bestows a kiss on his lips, and he immediately returns to Mary Farm. Struck by his own ignorance about Vera's membership in the Church, Claiborne realizes how little they know of each other. His recognition brings with it the hope that, if the couple do reunite, perhaps they will communicate.

Claiborne is invigorated once he becomes convinced that he can reclaim Vera. He envisions his reunion with her and imagines that "He could sleep in the hay if there was no bed. He could be sitting there on the bench with the other bums when she came down in the morning" (312). Claiborne's willingness to accept the burden of Christian sacrifice offers the hope that he has solved the internal dilemmas that torment him throughout the novel. In view of Gordon's conception of the Christian artist, moreover, Claiborne's life of sacrifice and poverty promises that he will finally see the connection between his silent muse and his former spiritual stagnation. Claiborne, then, also finds regeneration through his conversion to Catholicism. Significantly, however, it is his observation of Vera's transformed personality that leads him, finally, to convert.

While Vera's status as subject to her husband under the laws of the Church might require that she capitulate to her husband against her will, her earlier reaction to Claiborne shows that she now has the strength to resist his demands. After her conversion, she finds a voice and articulates her

intentions clearly for the first time, revealing that she no longer considers herself bound to her husband psychologically, physically, or in any other way. For this reason, the reader cannot be sure how Vera will react to her husband's return to Mary Farm. Far from becoming the "less and less articulate," "domesticated sibyl," as Boyle argues, Vera's conversion empowers her to defy convention and proclaim her independence for the first time.⁶⁸ While she may integrate Claiborne into her new "holy family," she would surely never renounce her commitment to the "voiceless" boy or to Tardieu.

My suggestion that Vera's conversion and her adoption of the "holy family" empowers her to resist her husband runs counter to the epitaph of the novel, "It is for Adam to interpret the voices Eve hears," and Pollard's proclamation toward the conclusion of the novel that Vera is subject to her husband as the "Church is subject to Christ." If Gordon viewed Catholicism as a vehicle through which she could envision her own independence from Tate, or empowerment for women in general, why would she find it necessary to mask Vera's hard-won independence from her husband behind the veil of ecclesiastical authority? I would suggest that, although Gordon's conversion enabled her to find a voice, and allowed her to envision women in more authoritative

positions, she remained unable directly to challenge the codes behavior demanded by her husband and the Southern Agrarians. How, then, does one explain the incendiary elements in her novels that challenge traditional notions of patriarchy within and outside of the Catholic Church?

Anne Goodwyn Jones, who writes about subversive strategies used by women writers from 1859-1936, offers an explanation that sheds light on the contradictions inherent in Gordon's life and work. Jones writes that "Southern women exploited the possibilities of fiction as a mask just as they did, in life, the mask of southern womanhood. In the plots, a heroine's rebellious urge toward autonomy could be punished at the end or placed behind the veil of an acceptable formula."⁶⁹ Vera's empowerment, I would argue, is placed behind the "acceptable formula" of Pollard's declaration that she is subject her husband under the laws of the Church. Catherine Pollard and Sister Immaculata's authority is likewise veiled behind the institution of the Catholic Church.

Owing to Gordon's marriage to Allen Tate and her close affiliations with a conservative and male-dominated literary community, it is not surprising that the subversive nature of her fiction is couched in conservative language. Gordon's conservative empowerment within the Catholic Church has roots in a long tradition of women negotiating their power within the Church. Dorothy Day is the most apt

example, and her example is cogent, because of her influence on Gordon.

While a discussion of Day's social activism within the Catholic Church is beyond the scope of this paper, Day and Gordon's mutual interest in the lives of Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila is illuminating.⁷⁰ Saint Teresa of Avila is particularly relevant because of her efforts to reform the Carmelite order of nuns.⁷¹ Her ambitions caused friction with diocesan authorities. Yet, like Dorothy Day and the character of Catherine Pollard, Saint Teresa's success hinged upon her complicity with ecclesiastical authorities. Upon hearing about the prospect of an inquisitional procedure, for instance, she exclaims,

I heard this with pleasure, and it made me laugh, because I was never afraid of them; for I knew
 enough
 that in matters of faith I would not break the least ceremony of the Church, that I would expose myself to die a thousand times rather than that anyone should see me go against it or against any truth of Holy Writ.⁷²

Day and Gordon's devotion to Saint Teresa was not coincidental. Saint Teresa, like Day, succeeded in combining her inner spiritual life with the talent of interacting with Church authorities that sought to deprive her of the power she needed to carry out her project of reform. In sum, Saint Teresa lived a life of devotion inseparable from her ambitions for "social" reform within the Carmelite order.

While Gordon did not have to maneuver within the

Catholic Church, she did operate as a woman writer within a male-dominated literary circle. As my earlier discussion of her exclusion from the Agrarian circle points out, the challenges she faced within this context were not significantly different from the resistance Dorothy Day or Saint Teresa of Avila encountered from Church authorities. These women all had to negotiate their status within patriarchy to carry out their ambitions. Day and Saint Teresa appealed to their devotion to a "Church" as the instrument of God's will in order to justify their resistance to clerical authorities. Following the strategy employed by Day and Saint Teresa, Gordon too developed the conviction that the Catholic artist appropriated Christ-like authority in the writing of fiction.⁷³

As Gordon struggled to gain recognition as a writer while shouldering family responsibilities, she would reach a point-- especially during the most tumultuous years of her marriage-- where she would be forced to break from her husband and formulate her own philosophy. While she and Tate both converted to Catholicism, her conversion would represent more than a shift in the philosophical grounding of her fiction. Gordon took Tate's reevaluation of the Agrarian project a step further. She parodied the idea of resurrecting a vanished way of life, thereby discrediting the Agrarian philosophy in her novel, The Women on the Porch.

The Malefactors illustrates her ability, finally, to envision women in dominant roles, representing a further stage in her break from the values of her husband and the Agrarians. Because she maintained the tradition of southern women writers, however, the subversive elements of her text can be easily overlooked. Consequently, and not without justification, she has earned the reputation of one of the most conservative women of letters in the twentieth century. Gordon's conservatism, however, is quite paradoxical. Unable to challenge patriarchal authority overtly in The Malefactors, she nevertheless depicts women's empowerment within patriarchy. She indirectly attacks the male world of letters by creating a Catholic Church where men do not exercise the authority traditionally granted to them. She also creates female characters that lead rather than follow. In this way, Gordon rewrites the history of the traditional Church, but not, of course, without couching her subversive story behind the "veil of an acceptable formula."

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Gordon's post-conversion novels and an explanation of The Malefactors as evidence of Gordon's submission to patriarchal standards see Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon: A Biography (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 206-210.

2. Caroline Gordon, The Woman on the Porch (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1944); Caroline Gordon, The Malefactors (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1956), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

3. Vivienne Koch notes that in Gordon's post-conversion novels she "exchanges the frame of reference of a vanished hierarchy of caste and grace, represented by the Old South, for the universe of order provided by more durable scheme of Catholicism and its idea of grace." She goes on to speculate that, after Gordon's conversion, "Alienation means no longer merely to be cast out from a social class or a local society, but a removal from God, to whom we have become the strange children." See Vivienne Koch, "The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon," in Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South ed. Louis D. Rubin and Robert Jacobs (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1953) 325-337.

4. For the biographical facts regarding Gordon's marriage to Tate and his influence upon her development as a literary artist see Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon; Ann Waldron, Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987). Gordon's literary friendship with Ford Madox Ford also helped to shape her literary career. See Deborah Core, "Caroline Gordon, Ford Madox Ford: A Shared Passion for the Novel," The Southern Quarterly, (Summer 1990).

5. Lucinda H. MacKethen, Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990) 78.

6. Anne Boyle, "The Promise of Polyphony, the Monotony of Monologue: Voice and Silence in Caroline Gordon's Later Novels," The Southern Quarterly, (Summer 1990): 75.

7. Boyle 76.

8. Boyle 84; Veronica Makowsky, "Caroline Gordon on Women Writing: A Contradiction in Terms?" The Southern Quarterly, (Summer 1990): 52.

9. qtd. in Boyle 84.
10. Boyle 84.
11. Boyle 84.
12. Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press) xxxvii.
13. Qtd in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) 223.
14. Rubin 41.
15. Rubin 43.
16. Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand 7.
17. Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand 6.
18. Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand 12.
19. Waldron 39.
20. For a discussion of these stories see Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon 99.
21. Waldron 38-39. For more information about Gordon's upbringing see Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon; For further information about her agrarian sensibility see Danforth Ross, "Caroline Gordon, Uncle Rob and My Mother," The Southern Quarterly (Summer 1990): 9-21. Gordon discusses her childhood and how she was influenced by the Civil War in her article "Cock-Crow," Southern Review, I, no. 3 (Summer 1965): 554-560.
22. Ed. by Sally Wood, The Southern Mandarins: Letters of Caroline Gordon to Sally Wood, 1924-1937 (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) 185.
23. Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon 95.
24. Despite Gordon's exclusion from the Agrarian inner circle, her writing commanded the respect of her husband and his intellectual companions, including John Crow Ransom, Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren. Significantly, Gordon was most often praised for her "masculine" style of writing. As Alicia Ostriker explains, however, "The belief that true poetry is genderless... [as the Agrarians would espouse] is a disguised form of believing that true poetry is masculine." See Alicia Suskin Ostriker,

Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 9. A letter to Allen Tate from Andrew Lytle sums up the critical acclaim Gordon received on account of her ability to write in a style that would obscure her gender. He writes: "Caroline's letter had the tone of an old campaigner who had seen many wars, and I can see she's writing at her best and that the book will be her best. I've been looking into Flowering Judas recently [reference is to K.A. Porter's book of short stories]. As fine as it is, it is not as tough as Caroline's work. There is a certain female impurity which Caroline lacks, and I believe this is the thing a woman writer will naturally find the greatest hazard. With a man it is easier to obliterate himself. His difficulty is to subdue the idea. At least I find it so. The love scenes between Outlaw and the girl in no way disclose either the sex or a writer [his reference is to Gordon's novel Green Centuries]. They are fully rendered. A man and a woman behave like a particular man and a particular woman under given conditions, so that the pages of the book disappear, the people come live in their world." See letter from Andrew Lytle to Allen Tate, 28 April, 1941, in The Lytle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and Elizabeth Sarcone (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) 170-171. Lytle praises Gordon for her ability to "obliterate" the female self. Porter's weakness as a writer, in Lytle's judgement, lay in her unwillingness to suppress her femininity resulting in an "impurity" of style. I wish to suggest some of the prejudices Gordon faced as a woman writing within a male-dominated literary circle. While I find Gordon's "tough" style and her strategies as a woman writer within this context fascinating, to do justice to this topic would constitute the material for another paper. For more information on Gordon's philosophy about technique and her emulation of the "masters," including Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, and Gustave Flaubert see Caroline Gordon, How to Read a Novel (New York: The Viking Press, 1957).

25. See introduction by Lewis Simpson in The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate, ed. John Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974) xvii.

26. Qtd in Simpson xvii.

27. Simpson xviii.

28. Rubin 326.

29. Rubin 326. An extensive discussion of Tate's conversion and his relationship to T.S. Eliot and literary modernism are beyond the scope of this thesis. For more information on this

subject see Rubin; Also see Daniel Joseph Singal, The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 234, 242, 248.

30. Ann C. Fraistat, Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters, (Baltimore: The University of Johns Hopkins Press, 1953) 103-118.

31. Boyle 79.

32. Fraistat 107.

33. Fraistat 110.

34. Fraistat 108.

35. Letter to Ward Dorrence dated (1950?). Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

36. Letter to Ward Dorrence, (1950?). Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

37. Letter to Ward Dorrence, (1950?). Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

38. Letter to Walker Percy, 11 December 1951. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

39. In a letter to Walker Percy, Gordon gives an amusing description as to why certain Catholic novelists have failed according to her stringent criteria. For Gordon, writing as a Catholic was not enough. She valued technical ability as highly as religious preference. As the following passage reveals, she gained considerable confidence in her ability to judge writers after her conversion. She remarks in her characteristically forthright tone that "Catholic fiction has not been much good up until now. Most Catholic writers are poor technicians. Mauriac is a powerful writer but one could hold up almost any passage of his as an example of bad technique. Graham Greene is fuzzy-minded. Evelyn Waugh got his best effects from explosions of righteous wrath, at the goings on in the Protestant world. Seems to take indignation to get up any steam under his boiler." Letter to Walker Percy, 11 December 1951. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

40. Letter to Walker Percy, (1951?). Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

41. Wood 155.
42. Letter to Walker Percy, 11 December 1951. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
43. Letter to Walker Percy, 11 December 1951. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
44. See Veronica Makowsky, "Caroline Gordon on Women Writing" 43-52.
45. Sally Fitzgerald, "A Master Class: From the Correspondence of Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor," Georgia Review 33.4 (1979): 846.
46. Fitzgerald 843.
47. Fitzgerald 832.
48. In a letter to Walker Percy, Gordon writes that "in the past month the two best first novels that I have ever read have come to me. Each one is a Catholic. I don't know how far Covington, Louisiana is from Milledgeville, Georgia but if you and your wife ever drive through Milledgeville stop and see Flannery O'Connor. Letter to Walker Percy dated (1951?). Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
49. Ann Waldron remarks upon an inconsistency between Gordon's actions and her public conservatism, arguing that "Everything in her life indicates that she was a strong, independent woman - who wanted to be something else. She kept her maiden name, worked all her life, was anything but a stay-at-home housewife. She acted like a feminist, talked like a Southern ninny." See Waldron 357.
50. Undated letter to Ward Dorrence. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
51. Katherine Anne Porter echoes Gordon's sentiments when she writes that "for the most part, writing is now just a horrible grim burden, I wouldn't do it if I were not morally engaged to do it; yet, I wonder sometimes if the mere moral engagement hasn't clamped down this smothering lid on me, as if I had to serve a term and then would be free.... I don't suppose this state of affairs really affects the actual performance. One writes no worse for having to. But it puts a log and chain on my spirits, let me tell you. Letter from Katherine Anne Porter to Caroline Gordon, 14 December 1931. Special Collections, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland.

52. Undated letter to Walker Percy. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

53. Undated letter to Walker Percy. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

54. Undated letter to Walker Percy. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

55. Undated letter to Ward Dorrence. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

56. In a letter to Ward Dorrence, Gordon writes, "To tell the truth I was pretty damn sick of teaching under Protestant aegis. It makes your heart sick at times - to contemplate the amount of creative energy that goes down that drain. In the last few years I have begun to wonder how I can go on pouring down it." Letter from Caroline Gordon to Ward Dorrence, 27 July 1950. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

57. John F. Desmond, "The Malefactors: Caroline Gordon's Redemptive Vision," Renaissance vol. xxxv, no. 1 (Autumn 1982): 17-38.

58. Desmond 18.

59. Desmond 18.

60. Desmond 22.

61. Desmond 23.

62. Dorothy Day's influence on Caroline Gordon, while important, would constitute the material for another paper. Veronica Makowsky describes Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate's encounter with Day after Day's conversion. Gordon apparently greeted Day with "mock severity" owing to Day's involvement with radical movements. Upon hearing that Day was now a Catholic, however, both Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon reacted to her with curiosity and respect. Both Tate and Gordon admired her for different reasons. While neither had converted yet, Gordon was more struck by Day's altered character and way of life while Tate admired the similarities of her agenda to that of the Southern Agrarians. Day describes the principles of her co-worker, Peter Maurin, in her autobiography. She writes that, "He wanted them [men] to stretch out their arms to their brothers, because he knew that the surest way to find God, to find the good, was through one's brothers. Peter wanted this striving to result in a better physical life in which all men would be able to fulfill

themselves, develop their capacities for love and worship, expressed in all the arts. He wanted them to be able to produce what was needed in the way of homes, food, clothing, so that there was enough of these necessities for everyone. A synthesis of 'cult, culture, and cultivation' he called it." Veronica Makowsky points out that Maurin's aims matched those of the Southern Agrarians, except for his concept of a "cult." Day's interest in Agrarian ideals would help to reconcile Day's radicalism with Gordon's more conservative agenda. See Veronica Makowsky, Caroline Gordon 132-133; Gordon also based the character of Joseph Tardieu in The Malefactors after Peter Maurin. Although Day was horrified with Gordon's depiction of Peter Maurin, "she was merely extending Day's own text on self-humiliation as the key to salvation." Significantly for Gordon, Day's radical approach to religion mirrored Gordon's views about how writers must sacrifice for the sake of their art. James Fisher also puts Gordon's admiration for Day within the context Gordon's intellectual peers who were drawn to Day. Gordon was accompanied by "Day's highly sophisticated refugees from Protestantism" (including Robert Lowell and Jean Stafford) and Gordon was "likewise drawn to the self-abandonment of the Catholic workers, but like Lowell, she had less experience with the movement itself than with its textual structure." See James Terence Fisher, The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962 (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press 1989) 67-68; For more information on how Day's example as a radical working within a conservative institution might have influenced Gordon, see Nancy L. Roberts, "Dorothy Day: Editor and Advocacy Journalist," A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker, ed. Patrick G. Coy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

63. Desmond 18-19.

64. Boyle 85.

65. Fisher, Catholic Counterculture 22.

66. Dorothy Day's days in Paris before her conversion became a subject of interest to young Catholics "raised far from bohemia," owing to Day's attraction to the works of the Dutch-French novelist J.K. Huysman, whose ideas offered a "peculiar conversion narrative" and one that "retained a weary contempt for ordinary Catholics and their uninspiring devotions." Day's attraction to his bizarre views about Catholicism added an element of intrigue to the woman who was considered "the most sophisticated lay woman in America" following her conversion. See James Terence Fisher, The Catholic Counterculture in America 18-24.

67. Desmond 37.

68. Boyle 85.

69. Anne Goodwyn Jones, Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936 (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 39.

70. Waldron 257-262; See Dorothy Day, The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952).

71. For more information about the life of Saint Teresa of Avila see Karl Joachim Weintraub, The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography, (Chicago & London: The Chicago University Press, 1978).

72. Weintraub 219.

73. After her conversion, Gordon would reevaluate her mother's religious beliefs, which she had formerly resisted. She had claimed that her mother had used religion as a way of manipulating her relationships with people, including her daughter, Caroline. Writing to Sally Wood in the fall of 1926, Gordon explains that her mother "uses theology - the theology of the first century church - as her weapon of offense and defense - in the affairs of every day life. She is enormously learned in this lore - before Nancy [Gordon's daughter] came she gave all her time to it for five years. Unless you have seen it in operation you cannot imagine what an effective weapon it is. After a week of mother's society I begin to think the fathers of the church were men of superhuman intelligence. The system really takes care of every human foible if, as Mother piously avers, you can just 'lay down your mind and take up the mind of God.' I, who want to keep what little mind I have can't agree with her there, so nothing I say has any weight with her, coming as it does from the 'carnal mind.'" See Wood 29. While Gordon resists her mother's logic as a new mother and a struggling writer, she certainly appropriates that logic after her conversion. The inexperienced Gordon who speaks in the passage quoted above appears strong in her resistance to her mother's eccentric behavior. The strength of that opposition, however, attests to the power her mother derived from her religion, using it as "her weapon of offense or defense." Once Gordon accepted religion, she would view her mother's beliefs in a new light. Both her mother and Day would represent female role models for a woman who had formerly given credit only to her father and husband for her achievements. I do not bring this up in the body of the text because, while interesting, it brings up a new argument that I have chosen not to discuss within the scope of this paper.

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