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The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Patterns in Spiritual Awakening:  
A Study of Augustine, Coleridge and Eliot**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of  
English and Comparative Literature  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

**Lucy Shafik**

Under the supervision of  
**Dr. William Melaney**

**May 2017**

The American University in Cairo

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Has been approved by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the role of the self in spiritual narratives, adopting the philosophical perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, and Kierkegaard as modes of apprehending the reader's inward response to literature. I examine patterns of spiritual awakening in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, tracing and retracing phases in the protagonist's life, which lead to a crucial moment of conversion. I attempt to show how each character's experience acquires spiritual meaning on the basis of transformative insights and demonstrates its potential to shape the self. The purpose of the thesis is to allow the religious point of view to cast light on secular literature and to address various ways of approaching religious truths on a textual basis. In offering a religious response to secular spheres of culture, including art and philosophy, the thesis indicates how theology provides insights into literary texts that are concerned with ultimate meaning.

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## **Introduction**

Geoffrey H. Hartman writes this in an essay in honor of I. A. Richards, “The therapy which art—the work of art—suggests is de-obstruction rather than a destructive conversion-experience” (Hartman quoted in Brower 166). With this in mind, we may begin exploring how spiritual narratives allow for a formative imagination, prompting transformation and freedom through an active ordering of the disparate threads of our experiences into a unified whole, as opposed to an unrelated interpretation, which excludes various elements of the spiritual experience. Spiritual transformations come in as many forms as there are people; some occur gradually in silence, some are lightning conversions, some are aesthetic, some through intercession, and some are lengthy formations. What follows conversion is also interesting, but the common thread is a feeling of liberation and a reorientation of one’s aesthetic and moral disposition.

Most spiritual experiences involve a certain level of divine grace, manifested in different forms, extended to the individual, from which the individual is invited to respond. Through the ages, people have responded to these promptings of the spirit and were therefore admitted into the realm of spiritual truths in varying degrees. Spiritual experiences are illuminating not only for being our pathway to understanding God and thereby consolidating our identity, but for the way we are invited to revisit stages of our life through the lens of the spiritual awakenings we encounter along this, occasionally, arduous journey. Every spiritual stirring brings a fresh understanding of one’s relation to the divine, as it opens up a new stage in one’s life and a desire to look to the future in light of the past.

In this thesis, I examine patterns of spiritual awakening in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*. The components of these patterns are formulated and reinstated through the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Kierkegaard. In the case of the Platonist ascent, I discuss the role of transgression and the movement from the senses to what is insensible with a view from above that allows us to revisit our transgressions redemptively. In the case of Aristotle's system of causes, I note the role of recognition and reversal in spiritual fulfillment and moral enlightenment. Finally, Kierkegaard clarifies the faith that requires a leap beyond the aesthetic and the ethical. These theorists will complement each other and serve as signposts in different texts, illuminating and shaping our understanding of each character's spiritual experience and by extension our own experiences. These works clearly indicate how spiritual journeys can acquire spiritual meaning on the basis of transformative insights.

Augustine's *Confessions* narrates how the errant soul moves towards spiritual fulfillment. Thus, from one standpoint, what looks immoral can be the key to a higher standard of life. A similar process is at work in the literature that dramatizes how actual wrong-doings can lead to ethical insight. Coleridge's Mariner commits terrible wrongs that point to ethical truths that are not always grasped by the characters themselves. The poetry and drama of T. S. Eliot also demonstrate the possibility of experiencing the limits of immediate situations, allowing the reader to imagine spiritual goals. Eliot employs literary narratives to open up the possibility of spiritual understanding. In each case, an act of transgression joins with a more sublime narrative to suggest how literary texts follow goals that may or may not be evident to those who participate in them. We will

explore how literary narratives include moments of insight that have transformative power, when viewed in different, but sometimes complementary, ways.

James Olney in *Metaphors of Self* signifies how art can be a means of consciousness and therefore personal transformation, “the act of autobiography and the act of poetry, both as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 44). As we delve into the moments that lead up to each character’s conversion, the moment of recognition and subsequent self-surrender, we are invited to revisit our own experiences. We may experience cathartic moments or become convinced regarding our own unresponsive attitude to what until now have been unacknowledged promptings.

Spiritual life is imagined life. It is apprehended on a more personal level and therefore requires deep feeling and reflection in order to be incorporated meaningfully into one’s character and actions. Robert McMahon highlights this inward aspect of the spiritual life in this way: “The meditative journey into our own depths leads to progressively more universal aspects of being on the way to encountering the Ground of all being” (McMahon 13). Spiritual material necessarily involves meditation, which draws one inward into self-examination, and “with the proper guidance and grace one eventually comes to the Divine presence above him” (McMahon 9). In such a situation, our understanding “must at all costs be exercised on spiritual objects if it is to attain complete enlightenment and generate that purity of heart which enables us to love virtue for its own sake” (Lessing 237).



One way of revisiting our experiences is through memory, which makes the jumbled scenes of life more intelligible, as John Dewey explains in his famous book, *Art as Experience*, “by presenting their meanings as the matter of a clarified, coherent, and intensified or ‘impassioned’ experience” (Dewey 290). Augustine was able to find redemption after reaching a higher level of existence and looking back and seeing how divine grace demonstrated the spiritual truth of “eternal design hidden in past error” (Spengemann 22). Since a definition of grace always falls short of its true meaning, “in this world, grace endures only as long as it is enacted imaginatively in a form of words” (Spengemann 23). Redemption means looking back at those moments not with shame and regret but as experiences and places where divine grace never failed to enter and transform. Through memory, the past for Augustine “had its own, peculiarly potent kind of reality in the present” (Olney, *Memory and Narrative* 38). Beginning with St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, we are constantly aware of the ‘fallen self’ of the protagonist and the “faith which he could have embraced at any time” (Spengemann 11). We do not participate in Augustine’s sins but in the redemptive outlook of the narrator.

Let us conclude with a few references to William James and what he has to say about the dynamics of conversion narratives. James has an illuminating phrase for the spiritual process in which events in our life acquire meaning in retrospect, termed “subconscious maturing”, in which “a man’s conscious wit and will are aiming at something only dimly and inaccurately imagined. Yet all the while the forces of mere organic ripening within him are going on their own prefigured result” (James 150). These workings are beneath the surface of which we are not entirely conscious, for the acts seem independent of each other, yet “they work together, and finally something is born in

spite of conscious personality” (Dewey 73). Peter Brooks calls it ‘the anticipation of retrospection’, “as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic” (Brooks 23).

Finally, it may be helpful to suggest what conversion implies to the individual believer within the context of a spiritual narrative. James claimed that “to say that a man is converted means that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy” (James 142). This thesis will not only be concerned with the event of conversion but also with the way that this event enters everyday life in a manner that changes one’s apprehension of the common world and allows one to see it in a new way:

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects; they thrill with remoter values (James 102).

Conversion involves an act of re-evaluation that paradoxically leads to liberation, for a transformed life is no longer an arbitrary sequence of happenings but is geared towards a higher sense of purpose.

## Chapter 1:

### *Saint Augustine's Confessions*

Saint Augustine sets the stage for all subsequent autobiographies by emphasizing how the self may come to know itself in time. His incisive introspection into his past self and passionate meditations on God allow readers to ask questions about their own spiritual condition. As we read Augustine's *Confessions*, we are involved in what Wolfgang Iser called "a dialectic of pretension and retentions", which involves a "continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories" (Iser 111). This movement between involvement and observation becomes an aesthetic experience, which "makes us conscious of the acquisition of experience and is accompanied by continual insight into the conditions that give rise to it" (Iser 133). As we enter into this movement, we also discover how certain underlying meanings have been given new significance in a narrative that goes beyond what the author experienced in his own time. In this discussion of Augustine's well-known autobiography, I intend to examine how personal insight and the transformation of meaning go together in illuminating a great spiritual adventure.

Augustine challenges our carnal reading of a text. In differentiating between carnal and spiritual readings, Frank Kermode taps onto this idea of interpretation being a divinatory process, writing, "Our divinatory powers grow as the primary reading, carnal, manifest, loses its compelling forces, its obviousness" (Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* 10). Augustine helps us see the connectedness of life and the relation of parts to whole. Wilhelm Dilthey argued that certain categories enable us to understand life in a connected sense. More precisely, he claimed that "meaning, value, purpose, development,

ideal, are such categories. But they all depend on the fact that the connectedness of a life can only be understood through the meaning individual parts have for understanding the whole” (Dilthey 105). Augustine’s approach to self-knowledge involves the recollection of the past, thoughtful self-reflection and the performance of symbolic actions that enable an ineffable self to be given unique poetic expression (Spengemann 32). Memory for Augustine was the key to shaping and giving meaning to his past self, so that the past is not discarded but given “the enduring form of truth” (Spengemann 43). We recollect the past in order to plan our path into the future and to discover patterns that are consonant “with an absolute, eternal law already in force and known through some immediate source outside the life that illustrates it” (Spengemann 60). Hence, life’s moments are not to be conceived as arbitrary occurrences but as events that entail specific consequences in relation to an existing self.

In *Confessions*, particularly Books I-IX, Augustine emphasizes his struggle to reconcile the flesh with the spirit and the process where the flesh is brought under the aegis of the spirit. Whilst indulging in the world’s pleasures, Augustine always felt that lurking beneath the surface was a desire for more, and eventually, after his conversion, he discovers that it is the divine that ultimately fulfills. He is interested in philosophy and concerns himself with questions that deal with complex issues such as the origin of evil. His questions lead him down many paths, including Manichaeism, until he found fulfillment in Christianity. A major intellectual obstacle prevented him from accepting Christianity. He was unable to accept the stories of the Old Testament because he originally assumed that they had to be interpreted literally. In overcoming this obstacle, Augustine was fortunate to have encountered “a lucky introduction to some newly

translated Neo-Platonic works” that opened up the allegorical reading of scripture (McCabe 452). Spiritual interpretation was crucial to his conversion. However, Augustine’s conversion was not due to sudden insight like the conversions of Paul or Anthony. It assumed the form of a gradual religious enlightenment that was accompanied by intense self-reflection, which led up to the moment of conversion in the garden.

Augustine’s struggle was largely an intellectual one that involved consulting different authorities and sources about his many perplexities. He talked to the Manichean bishop, Faustus, who failed to convince him due to an inconsistent interpretation of good and evil. Even after speaking with St. Ambrose, who possessed a mastery of language and profound knowledge of theology, Augustine was still not able to commit fully to Christianity. Nevertheless, Saint Ambrose argued that the Bible should not be read as purely literal but as allegorical, at least in part. An example of this would be the Old Testament’s ‘Song of Solomon’, which concerns a human relationship and perhaps also God’s love for His Church or the individual believer. Augustine’s philosophical queries were an attempt to make connections between Platonism and Christianity. In his quest for theological truth, Augustine affirmed the idea that the physical world is not complete in itself but that “the timeless quality of another world provided the basis of the world of the senses”, as Peter Brown asserts (Brown 96). In examining the life patterns that prepared him for his conversion, we will be concerned with how “art, both autobiographic and poetic, mediates between the transient world of sensation and feeling, of event and emotion, and a constant, stable realm of pattern and significance” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 45).

Augustine’s autobiography can be read as an outreach to the Manichaeans and

Platonists who are still restricted to a circular way of thought with no sense of closure. The *Confessions* seems to be addressed to God, as Augustine repeatedly contends that it is for His glory, more so than to other human beings, while perhaps serving as an appeal to self-examination that is intended for all readers. Augustine's *Confessions* is "a prolonged exploration of the nature of God, written in the form of a prayer in order, as St. Augustine says, 'to stir up towards Him the intellect and feelings of men'" (Brown 166). His struggle with God through the vehicle of prayer reveals the personal nature of this work. In addition, the author's use of self-expression allows readers to feel his struggle as their own.

Augustine struggled against lust among other vices. He was sexually interested in a woman whom he would not marry, citing marriage as a constraint upon his freedom and pursuit of knowledge. He writes that "in those days I lived with a woman, not my lawful wedded wife, but a mistress whom I have chosen for no special reason but that my restless passions had alighted on her . . . [and] living with her I found by my own experience the restraint of the marriage alliance" (Augustine, *Confessions* 72). He would like to go on living with this woman without the obligations of marriage and children. Augustine felt that marriage is an impediment to his independent goals. However, he is not prepared to give up altogether the physical intimacies of this relationship. He later says, "because I was more a slave of lust than a true lover of marriage, I took another mistress" (Augustine, *Confessions* 131). Clearly, the allure of sin and profane love still lingered, and "the sacrifice of all love" seemed too high a price to pay for religious faith. During this period in his life, he longed for God but could not commit himself to a life without sin. Occasionally, he would appeal to God, famously saying, "give me chastity

and continence, but not yet” (Augustine, *Confessions* 169). Augustine was not in a place where he could ‘sacrifice all love’ for discipleship.

Eventually, the intellect complemented faith and Augustine was able to accept things through reason, rather than by faith alone. At some point referring to the books he studied and perused, that they “served to remind me to return to my own self . . . I saw the Light that never changes casting its rays...over my mind”, until in a moment of revelation, “far off, I heard your voice saying I am the God who IS . . . I caught sight of the Truth” (Augustine, *Confessions* 146; 147). That does not necessarily mean that one must be learned in order to have faith, but reason must supplement the revelations of God’s grace to the soul.

Repeatedly, Augustine reminds us that God is for him the true object of love. In Carthage, Augustine maintains, “I began to look around for some object for my love, since I badly wanted to love something”, highlighting that it was ‘the idea of love’ that he wished to embrace, however his pursuit of love was misguided. So he “muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell’s black river of lust” (Augustine, *Confessions* 55). These strong words exemplify his deep conviction of sin. He tried to satiate his hunger for mutual love through acts of carnality.

During this period in his life, Augustine wavers between love and lust, trying to find fulfillment in carnal desire but desiring to walk with God, indicating how the will is caught between the inner self and the promptings of the flesh. Saint Paul says in Romans 7:24-25, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” For Paul, Christ alone rescues, “so then, on the one hand, I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” When Augustine

tries to make a decision about serving the Lord, he expresses his struggle thus, “But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it with my full will. So I was at odds with myself” (Augustine, *Confessions* 173).

Augustine’s conversion was due to several factors, namely, his mother’s prayers, his ardent search for Truth, the role of the saints and thinkers in his life, the conversations he had with his friends, and most importantly, God’s grace as present in each moment. The precise moment of conversion takes place in Book VIII when Augustine is in the garden, reaching the epitome of his inner struggles, flinging himself beneath a fig tree, and giving way to a flow of tears, and then he hears a child chanting, “Take it and read, take it and read” (Augustine, *Confessions* 177). Stirred by the story of St. Anthony’s conversion, told to him by Ponticianus just before this, he runs back to the spot in the garden where he had left the Scriptures open, and the first passage he alights on becomes for Augustine a personal admonition. After reading Paul’s passage in Romans, Augustine says, “I had not wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled” (Augustine, *Confessions* 178).

I believe one of the reasons Augustine was able to take delight in his conversion and actually let it penetrate his life was because he felt that God delights in *him*, that God actually desires *him* to share in His presence: “You were my true Joy while I was subject to you, and you had made subject to me all the things that you had created inferior to me” (Augustine, *Confessions* 143). Jonathan Edwards writes in *Religious Affections* that “a very high affection towards God, may, and often does arise in men, from an opinion of the favor and love of God to them, as the first foundation of their love to him” (Edwards



245). A similar experience is perhaps best described by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English during the fourteenth century. The claim is made in that text that the moment we surrender to grace, we rise above ourselves and reach by grace what cannot be achieved by nature (Wolters 141). Moreover, the same text maintains that “it is not your will or desire that moves you, but something you are completely ignorant of, stirring you to will and desire you know not what” (Wolters 101). When Augustine presents us with his moving narrative, he never ceases to remind us that his purpose is to celebrate the greater glory of God: “I shall repeat a story here, because it shows the great glory of your grace and for your glory I must tell it” (Augustine, *Confessions* 159).

Augustine’s *Confessions* explores the condition of man alienated from his true self. In the end, Augustine abandons carnal pleasure for the pursuit of a higher, more fulfilling life. He comes to invoke a moral abstinence for the sake of the divine. By dwelling on past experience, Augustine and the reader develop hermeneutical insights through which “the new object contains the truth about the old one” (Gadamer 349). His true self is the self that God created, and until he embraces that self, the soul remains lost and divided. It would be very difficult to talk about Augustine without reiterating the notion of grace, for his whole autobiography calls attention to the impossibility of his conversion apart from grace, wherein “grace gives all, since without it the will, though free, lacks the power to do good” (Chadwick 81). Additionally, Henry Chadwick maintains that “there is no proud ascent to God by the unaided reason. Therefore to know God and to love him is a gift of his grace” (Chadwick 122). Hence, the new object could not be known unaided.

Now let us return to Plato and the parallels we find between him and Augustine. Both Plato and Augustine develop systems that privilege a spiritual component in human experience. The myth of the cave is a profound allegory of Plato's metaphysical system, demonstrating the relationship between physical things and ideal reality. The man who leaves the cave and the shadows and steps into the light is confronted with the reality of the ideal forms. The shadows, which he normally considered real, are only a reflection of the real, so now after acquiring knowledge of the forms, the man who has left the cave can make meaningful connections between the shadows he sees underground and his newfound knowledge of the forms outside. He has come to possess in this way true knowledge by which we understand everything else. Plato writes in *Republic*: "The region which is accessible to sight should be equated with the prison cell, and the firelight there with the light of the sun" (Plato 243).

Plato goes on to say: "Its [the eye's] orientation has to be accompanied by turning the mind as a whole away from the world of becoming, until it becomes capable of bearing the sight of real being and reality at its most bright, which we're saying is goodness" (Plato 245). Evelyn Underhill delineates in her great book on mysticism that man longs for an experience of this reality: "[H]e does not want to peep, but live. Hence he cannot be satisfied with anything less than a total and permanent adjustment of his being to the greater life of reality. This alone can resolve the disharmonies between the self and the world, and give meaning and value to human life" (Underhill 33). In the Platonic scheme, we move from the unintelligible to the true through the process of dialectics, which is sometimes represented as a ladder. This movement can be witnessed

in the stages of Augustine's life, which can be compared to the different stages in any life that seeks the truth.

This narrative pattern is profoundly important to the Western tradition and re-emerges in later religious thought and literature. Meister Eckhart in Sermon 52 writes about the *true* as our essence that is found in God's essence, which is above "being and distinction...therefore I am my own cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal" (Meister Eckhart quoted in McGinn 442). Dante's *Divine Comedy* also shows how stages in an individual's life are paired to universals in an allegory that has an overall spiritual meaning. Dante must also cast aside the false self in order to reach paradise. He goes through all the circles of hell witnessing sinners in such unbearable agony. In the second circle, Canto V, where the lustful reside, Dante writes, "I reached a place where every light is muted, which bellows like a sea beneath a tempest, when it is battered by opposing winds" (Alighieri 41). Sin is illustrated as residing in a place of muted light, where the wind becomes a force that counters the will to resist. Dante's spiritual journey allows him to ultimately go beyond the senses and transports him from the dark and into a mode of dialectics. Thus, Dante demonstrates how the spiritual quest can be undertaken on Earth, as an opening up of the mind and heart to a genuine search for God.

The allegory of the cave can be read as the narrative of a person with spiritual insight. The allegory survives in theology as a moral quest, interpreted in ways that Christianize Plato. Augustine takes this classical allegory and turns it in a religious direction. The peculiar thing is that Plato defines the Forms in a way that demobilizes the possibility of using language to support some notion of truth. He works with a model of

truth that is non-verbal. This model may have bearing on Augustine's difficulty in communicating his thoughts in times of spiritual ecstasy; hence the paradoxical nature of his thoughts and words, as when he says, "You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present amongst us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you" (Augustine, *Confessions* 23). However, the difficulty of putting into words rapturous spiritual experiences is something mystics know all too well. Like the earthly artist who longs to express his perceptions in various media, "the mystic too tries very hard to tell an unwilling world his secret" (Underhill 76). Nevertheless, in the mystic's case, we are often confronted with "the huge disparity between his unspeakable experience and the language which will most nearly suggest it" (Underhill 76).

Platonic metaphysics argues that the Forms are more real than the shadows so that knowledge of a Form enables us to identify the things in the shadows that are derived from it. Knowledge involves dialectics, which enables us to discover the Truth and then to explore how it maps onto the world. Dialectics is a guide to understanding the world correctly by identifying all the Forms. In dialectical experience, our new experience of any object "must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before, i.e., of a universal" (Gadamer 348). The man in the cave who desires knowledge is no longer satisfied with the shadows and acquires a knowledge of the Forms that cannot be taken away through a return to the cave; in fact, his desire for knowledge is now heightened, and since the shadows are a reflection of the abundant realm of Forms, making connections between the ideal and the shadows can be a life-long pursuit. Plato also argues that Truth is born in us, but then in

the course of life we fall into modes of experience that take us farther away from it. It is unclear, however, if the cave dweller has to make a deliberate decision to step out of the cave, or if he is called to do so by some other force.

We find echoes of Plato's allegory of the cave and much of Platonism in Augustine's thoughts. One such example is when Augustine feels he is accomplished in his studies but does not know the source of his knowledge, "I had my back to the light and my face was turned towards the things which it illumined, so that my eyes, by which I saw the things which stood in the light, were themselves in darkness" (Augustine, *Confessions* 88). Like the Platonists, Augustine sees "that God is the sunlight of the soul, which cannot find happiness except by participation in God's light, and therefore needs purification to find its way to the immutable Good" (Chadwick 132). Moreover, Augustine acquires self-knowledge through memory, which is a form of intelligibility, not just of one's life but a means for fathoming the structure of human kind, and, later in *Confessions*, for his elaborate conceptions of Time: "Narrative is driven forward by origins, not pulled along by ends . . . and the use of memory is to recall origins, to return us by way of recollection, imagination, and invention to the human beginning, whence one can see unfolding, as by inner necessity, the course of the life of an individual" (Olney, *Memory and Narrative* 97). Memory is a way of gathering the scattered pieces of our life so as to realize the potentialities of our future and "search again into the possibilities of conversion", as Dominic Manganiello astutely points out in reference to the notion of memory in Eliot's work (Manganiello 116).

The influence of Platonism on Augustine's reading of scripture is all-pervasive. In his approach to scripture through dialectics, Augustine was able to find the Truth. After

abandoning scripture as simple and containing little insight, and having taken detours through Manichaean doctrines, Augustine's full embrace "of the truth revealed in Scripture was at least facilitated by, if not entirely dependent upon, his earlier reading of the Platonists" (Spengemann 22). The allegory of the cave is echoed in Augustine's thoughts on signs and the reading of religious writings. In his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine's interpretation of scripture serves as a model for reading other texts. If you can learn how to interpret scripture by looking at the context and distinguishing between figurative and literal language, then you can use that same approach in interpreting any text.

Interpreting various modes of expression in biblical writing can be a useful hermeneutical model when reading many texts. Gadamer argues that faith and historical interpretation are often complementary guides for reading Scripture. What cannot be understood through 'naturalness' in scripture can often be understood historically, that is to say, through different contexts. The need for hermeneutics thus increases "with the decline of self-evident truth" (Gadamer 183). A historical view applies to one's life as well, for the more one "is able to recognize the unique, indestructible value of every phenomenon, think historically, the more his thought is God-like" (Gadamer 207). In addition, we should use our imaginations in reading, for instance, when thinking of our neighbor whom in scripture we are exhorted to love. Perhaps this opens up a certain "transcendental" use of the imagination. Finally, imagery is also important when we examine certain biblical texts, such as the 'Song of Songs'. Here the reader might look beyond the obvious sexual content and realize that the bridegroom represents God and

the bride represents the individual believer or the Church. Such a reading goes beyond sexual intimacy to offer a representation of love between God and the soul.

This brings us to a discussion of signs. Augustine says that the act of turning a sign into a thing is a kind of idolatry that leaves us in the cave, so to speak, because it allows the sign to become an end in itself. Such an act does not foster belief but rather allows us to cling to temporal things and remain satisfied with them. Augustine is drawing an analogy here between the idolatrous reading, restricted to the literal, and the condition of being restricted to the world of the shadows that preside over the cave. The sign becomes true when I can understand it in an eternal light. Therefore, the spiritual foundation of a sign is necessary, while the material or literal form of the sign is limited. Understanding texts spiritually requires ‘sensory failure’—“an interruption in the conventional processing of information, in our knowing dully, for the sake of convenience, where and what we are, may make for momentary strangeness in the world” (Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* 14). Spiritual sense varies from one interpreter to the next, whereas carnal sense is more or less constant and predictable.

Augustine, like Plato, induces people to “exercise their minds by the discipline of understanding signs spiritually” (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 146). He goes on to say that “a person enslaved by a sign is one who worships some thing which is meaningful but remains unaware of its meaning.” He contrasts such a person to someone who is able to read spiritually because he or she “does not worship a thing that is only apparent and transitory but rather the thing to which all such things are to be related. Such a person is spiritual and free” (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 147). Freedom is defined through knowledge, rather than through action in the limited sense. Furthermore,

it can be interpreted as a movement out of the cave of unknowing. For both Plato and Augustine, the quest for truth is identified with liberation from the untrue: those who believe that the shadows or signs are real remain unenlightened, whereas those who have seen beyond them interpret the world accordingly. Man now sees that the nature of goodness and truth is determined by God and will embrace it in proportion to how clearly he sees it. Truth is given value as divinely instituted, rather than as purely subjective. Plato differs from Augustine, however, in that Plato restricts happiness to this life, whereas Augustine posits a truer, more complete happiness to be found in the afterlife.

Plotinus also provided Augustine with an important tool in articulating his faith. Echoing Plato, Plotinus writes in the *Enneads*: “[M]en have forgotten That which from the beginning, and now still, they want and long for. For everything reaches out to That and longs for It by necessity of nature, as if divining by instinct that it cannot exist without It” (Plotinus quoted in Armstrong 66). Referring to God drawing near the soul, Plotinus claims: “His coming is without approach. He appears not as having come but as being there before all things, even before *Nous*” (Plotinus quoted in Armstrong 71). Since for Augustine the inner world was the true portal to self-knowledge, and for Plotinus, “the inner world was a reassuring continuum”, we can already see the parallels between the two thinkers (Brown 178). Augustine constantly struggled with a divided self, one that craved the things of this world and one that felt drawn inward to a self made in the image of God, that which is ‘beyond being’ or ‘before matter’, suggesting that “matter itself is not real” (Plotinus quoted in Armstrong 121). How does one reconcile this image with the self that constantly longs for the false things of the world? For Plotinus, “the real self of a man lay in its depths; and this real self was divine, it had merely separated itself



from its own latent divinity, by concentrating too narrowly” (Brown 178). The ‘other world’ for Plato and Plotinus was the source of the world of the senses and “charged the passing spectacle of material things with an intensity and permanence” (Brown 178). Echoing again Plato’s cave allegory, Plotinus writes, “If then it (Nous) does not possess the true reality, but only receives in itself images of the truth, it will have falsities and nothing true” (Plotinus quoted in Armstrong 84). Such an argument is in many respects close to that of Augustine.

Augustine did not know where all the moments of his life tended to, but each stage of his life seemed to bring him either closer or further from the moment of conversion. Augustine acknowledges the power of reason throughout his journey, claiming that, “the power of reason, to which the facts communicated by the bodily senses are submitted for judgment” (Augustine, *Confessions* 151). He even maintains that by exploring the source of the mind’s understanding, he was able “to attain to the sight of the God who IS” (Augustine, *Confessions* 151). But this process is not to be grasped through the intellect alone. What some would call predestination, I would call the disposition of character towards faith and a divine grace extended to all. Augustine’s narrative is transformational, “predicating the material of the life story in a changed context” and petitioning our entry into the story (Brooks 60). It begins with a response to promptings of the spirit and a willingness to look inward to explore the meaning behind life patterns, a task for the reader as much as the narrator: “The reader, like the poet, extends the possibilities of meaning-pattern in himself; he extends the pattern, or the adequacy of the pattern, which in turn may be taken for a metaphor of his self” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 31). Augustine claims that God made us for Him and that our hearts do

not find rest until they find Him, echoing Plato's remembrance of the Forms. But if this means that the world is fixed according to Plato's changeless pattern, why are the patterns of our life always evolving? Where do our experiences, actions, and errors, fit into this changeless pattern? Perhaps just as earlier texts often acquire meaning when read to prefigure what was written later on, our lives make sense only insofar as they prefigure an eternal design; the rest is "deafness, blindness, forgetfulness" (Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* 18).

## Chapter 2:

### Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Upon reading "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the reader is immediately overwhelmed by a sense of horror. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem pierces through the fog of our dulled senses and demands a forceful response from the reader. Throttled from apathy and plunged into the horrifying world of the Mariner, the reader navigates the supernatural mysteries of the sea. The imagery is powerful and tends to linger long after we have read the poem. The poem is a narrative, meaning that it follows a plot, and using Aristotle's model of plot structure, we will look at how this poem invites us to revisit our own experiences in a transformative way. Peter Brooks defines plot as "the logic and dynamic of narrative" (Brooks 10). Brooks talks about how plot "stands as a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge . . . [indicating how] the development of narrative shows that the tension is maintained as an ever more complicated postponement or *detour*" (Brooks 103). In Coleridge's poem, we have a long detour in the middle, which leads to quiescence, followed by jolts backwards and forwards, as the Mariner's ship is carried southwards and northwards by polar spirits, and the unbearable agony the Mariner experiences along the way. The purpose of this chapter is to make sense of how the poem uses narrative to convey spiritual truths and meanings.

Coleridge's poem begins with the Mariner detaining a wedding guest in order to narrate his story. The Mariner's "glittering eye" transfixes the wedding guest who stops to listen. One is reminded of Joan of Arc, as depicted in the 1928 silent film. In the trial scene, she too seems transfixed by a vision only available to her, staring with glazed eyes past the objects and individuals around her, and for someone supposedly communicating

with God, she exhibits too much angst, a type of “brainless ecstasy”, far from the peaceful demeanor one would expect from a liberating spiritual experience. We imagine in the Mariner a Joan of Arc, with glittering, dull eyes, and bent form, and one is left with the question of how liberating or to what extent has the Mariner moved beyond the divided self after being transported to such immense heights of feeling. We may take this further and imagine Coleridge as the Mariner, in light of the conflicted persona we see reflected in his late confessional poems, his troubled and nostalgic experiences as a poet.

The wedding guest symbolizes the listener, or reader, as implicated in the Mariner’s tale. The Mariner begins the story of how he and the sailors set sail “merrily” into the sunny sea when ice and fog quickly appear and the ship sails slowly southward, with no winds. Soon a beautiful albatross appears “as if it had been a Christian soul” and the fog disperses. The Mariner then shoots the Albatross for no apparent reason, and his action changes the entire course of the voyage and produces painful consequences. The sky changes color, and the voyage becomes unreal. The sailors are by nature superstitious, and they become even more so when they see their troubles compounded by the Mariner’s heinous action, so they make the Mariner wear the albatross around his neck as penance. The Mariner has violated a life concept. He has done violence to nature and has failed to respect the limits of human resources. At the beginning of the poem, the Mariner recognizes he has “done a hellish thing,/ And it would work ‘em woe:/ For all averred,/ I had killed the bird/ That made the breeze to blow” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 190). Transgression has a cataclysmic effect, precipitating the destruction of man’s relationship with nature. The relationship between man and nature underlies human activity and the Mariner has severed that tie. Throughout the poem,

Coleridge emphasizes a balance between man and nature as the basis for his belief in God, as opposed to following a certain religious creed.

After shooting the albatross, the ship is drawn into an unnatural world, “day after day,/ We stuck, nor breath nor motion;/ As idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 191). At the end of the second part of the poem, the albatross becomes a curse rather than a sign of redemption. After his transgression, the Mariner begins to see all forms of suffering around him; the sailors are surrounded by water they cannot drink, as “slimy things did crawl with legs/ Upon the slimy sea” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 191). The sailors are plunged into weariness, “Each throat/ Was parched, and glazed each eye./ A weary time!” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 192). In part four of the poem, we witness the death of all the sailors who participated indirectly in the death of the albatross, with their eyes fixed on the mariner, more horrible than “an orphan’s curse”. The Mariner is disgusted that he and a “thousand slimy things” should live, while the sailors lie dead. He tries to pray but his heart is “dry as dust”. Nature seems dead to him, “the sea and sky lay like a load on my weary eye” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 197).

The Mariner then has a vision of water snakes that is horrifying but also beautiful, perhaps symbolizing a religious illumination. He says, “Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,/ They coiled and swam; and every track/ Was a flash of golden fire./ O happy living things! No tongue/ Their beauty might declare:/ A spring of love gushed from my heart,/ And I blessed them unaware” (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 198). Here we notice that the Mariner’s perception of nature changes from the moment

when he thought of the sea snakes and himself as worthless, deserving to die, to the present moment when he blesses them ‘unaware’. Soon after, the albatross falls from his neck and he is able to pray. This is a moment of recognition and reversal, for “both reveal that the situation in which a character has been acting was misinterpreted”, and therefore the reader is invited to revisit the Mariner’s transgressive act in the light of the preceding and subsequent events (Heath quoted in Aristotle xxx). However, the Mariner remains suspended in a Life-in-Death state for a while, suggesting that he will need to do more penance before full recovery.

The Mariner’s transformed perception of the vision brings about redemption through sense experience, by allowing him to imagine things in a new way. This becomes a case of aesthetic redemption, rather than religious redemption. A transformed perception of the world will help the Mariner overcome the effects of his wrongdoing through a certain view of the world that entails imagination, beauty rather than faith. Redemption occurs in a way that changes the Mariner’s relationship with nature. Soon after his aesthetic vision of the sea snakes, the sailors come to life and appear as seraphims helping the Mariner steer the ship back on course and towards home. The lighthouse appears in the distance and another boat with a Hermit and a boy draws near. The Hermit has the ability to offer forgiveness for he expresses the inner life and possibly the world of the imagination. Finally, the Hermit rescues the Mariner.

“O Wedding-Guest! This soul hath been/ Alone on a wide wide sea:/ So lonely ‘twas, that God himself/ Scarce seemed there to be”, the Mariner cries (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 208). These long bouts of isolation aboard the ship and the Mariner’s experience of *difference* from others around him generates an ‘intensified

consciousness', "which goes beyond 'representation' to 'presence'" (Hartman quoted in Brower 173). As mentioned above, the extent of liberation is questionable since the memory of the agony of the experience is only relieved when he tells his tale to others, or else, "This heart within me burns" (Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" 208). A groaning that needs to be purged, but one is left with the question of the religious or existential function of the *telling* of the tale itself. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin claims that Aristotle's notion of narrative agency "excludes any authentic 'becoming' in character...The base remains the stable essence of an already completed character" (Bakhtin 140). In this sense, the Mariner's struggles serve to strengthen a virtue that already exists.

The Mariner then goes forth with new life from "land to land" sharing his experience, with "his strange power of speech", signifying the inexpressible nature of religious experiences. Truth is very difficult to communicate; it is a mystery that must be communicated with no clear mode and very few adherents. This hearkens back to Plato, for the person who leaves the cave and understands the Forms that shape experience may return to the cave to communicate his experience, but the cave-dwellers fail to respond in the same way. At the same time, religion is suggested through the power of the narrative, which restores a kind of natural world, including the world of the wedding guests who stand a few feet away from the Mariner, a place of communion between man, God, and nature. To the wedding guest, the Mariner gives this exhortation, "He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small" (Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" 209). This ending "suggests a return, a new beginning" (Brooks 109). The narrative as a whole describes a "movement back to origins, reversing meaning within

forward-moving time, serving to formalize the system of textual energies, offering the pleasurable possibility of ‘meaning’ wrested from ‘life’” (Brooks 108).

After listening to the Mariner, the wedding guest is “a sadder and a wiser man”, who has learned that religious knowledge may not be happy but is always transformative. As we undertake this journey alongside the Mariner and revisit it in light of moments of recognition and reversal, leading to the final exhortation, we recognize that our active involvement with the text has the potential to shape us. Ultimately, the Mariner is saved through beauty, through the vision of the snakes and the dead sailors springing to life. As he becomes a storyteller, repeating his story to others, he becomes free of the past and the curse of his crime. Moreover, on the basis of this poem, Coleridge emphasizes “that in order to recognize his place in nature, man must first learn to comprehend nature in himself, and its laws in the grounds of his own existence” (Read quoted in Coburn 102). In a similar vein, Read writes, “In man there is reflection, there is freedom, there is choice . . . this requires him to impose upon the images of nature the categories of moral reflection—to make thought nature, and nature thought” (Read quoted in Coburn 110).

Coleridge reaches beyond the facts to the symbolic level, reducing the world of nature to signs. The poem is therefore filled with images that are open to interpretation. Paul Tillich writes in *Theology of Culture*, “The main function of the symbol is the opening up of levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped any other way” (Tillich 56). Coleridge’s poetic imagination indicates a movement towards a Christian point of view that could be described generally as “[dwelling] on the unnaturalness of everything in the light of the supernatural” (Chesterton 71). But this movement crucially involves narrative. Coleridge argues that one evidence of



Christianity is “the inward feeling, in the soul of each believer of its exceeding *desirableness*—the experience, that he *needs* something, joined with the strong foretokening, that the redemption and the graces propounded to us in Christ are *what* he needs—this I hold to be the true foundation of the spiritual edifice” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 332). Coleridge goes on to say that in order to rightly believe in Christianity, we must cease attempting “to master by the reflex acts of the Understanding what we can only *know* by the act of *becoming*” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 332). In view of Aristotle’s definition of recognition as “a change from ignorance to knowledge”, readers are invited to reconsider the poem in retrospect (Aristotle 18).

In a different manner, the act of reading may be described as “an assemblage over time of partial integrations, guesses, and recognitions, with an inevitable residue of expectations unfulfilled and oblized words or passages” (Winkler 244). Drawing on *Great Expectations*, Peter Brooks relays the scene when Magwitch reappears in Pip’s life after many years of absence. Pip recognizes him with a surge of repressed emotions. Brooks writes: “The scene replays numerous details of their earlier encounter, and the central moment of recognition comes as a re-enactment and revival of the novel’s primal scene . . . staging recognition as a process of return to the inescapable past” (Brooks 128). Similarly, the Mariner returns to his past transgression in order to find redemption in the present, by reflecting on the moment of recognition, and the preceding events that led up to it. The moment of recognition implicit in a good plot “does not abolish the movement, the slidings, the mistakes, and partial recognitions of the middle . . . it brings illumination, which then can shed retrospective light” (Brooks 92).

We read this poem through Aristotle for the way that it elicits moral conviction and its powerful exhortation to virtue. For Aristotle, imitation involves a happening, an action, and is not something static, and in this sense, experience serves as the origin of knowledge. The nature of the poetic is therefore about imitation, as M.H. Abrams notes, so that “the very objects of imitation become such as to guarantee the moral purpose . . . the poet is distinguished by his capacity to move his auditors more forcefully to virtue . . . while by disguising his doctrine in a tale, he entices even ‘harde harted evill men,’ unaware, into the love of goodness” (Abrams 15). Abrams advances the notion that a poem is effective if we are “not aloofly contemplative, but actively engaged...We are interested in a fashion that brings into play our entire moral economy and expresses itself continuously in attitudes of approval or disapproval, sympathy or antipathy” (Abrams quoted in Booth 140). The Mariner’s tale engages our faculties, primarily the imagination. We understand the Mariner’s plea to the wedding guest at the end of the poem through Aristotle’s final cause, which entails cognitive and moral insight into the behavior of the character; in this way, insight becomes personal. Paul Woodruff writes in an essay on Aristotle’s *Poetics* that mimesis takes fiction as its object and gives “that fiction the power of engaging our attention and our emotions almost as if it were real” (Woodruff quoted in Rorty 81). Art aims to make one self-aware, hence purifying and modifying exorbitant emotions.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* identifies drama as the key to understanding literature itself. Everything for him has a cause, and plot is the formal cause or presupposed unity of narrative. An overall plot means that the plot contributes to the overall meaning and unity of action. Actions, and subsequent reflection on the character’s actions, are crucial, as

Aristotle writes, “Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity” (Aristotle 11). The Aristotelian model also provides a way to examine transgression. In Coleridge’s poem, the moment of recognition and reversal allows the Mariner to realize that he has been going down the wrong road and needs to return to master the past in the light of the future. The energy of a text lies in the plot’s movement “through the vacillating play of the middle . . . toward recognition and the retrospective illumination that will allow us to grasp the text as total metaphor . . . repetition toward recognition constitutes the truth of narrative text” (Brooks 108). Through this experience, I understand myself from a certain standpoint and am motivated to re-examine myself, leading to moral redemption or enlightenment.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* can be useful when reading Coleridge, for it allows us to assess the importance of plot, recognition and reversal, leading to insights into the behavior of characters. For Aristotle, experience is the origin of knowledge, and drama enables us to reflect on personal experiences that ultimately lead to meaningful insights. Narrative can be aspirational, pointing to the potential of human action to transgress and the path to a different outcome. We are not called to over-identify with tragic characters, but rather their limitations and flaws caution us in certain ways. We are invited as readers to understand those limitations through knowledge and to assess them through insight. In his discussion of plot, Aristotle writes that “it should be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity” (Aristotle 20). The extent of our pity will depend on how much we are invested in the other’s suffering, and fear implies a fear for our own well-being in light of what we see the other enduring, all whilst maintaining aesthetic distance.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” follows the rebirth pattern, which involves the transition from crime to punishment and finally to potential redemption. The poem points to the perversity of human nature in the killing of the albatross. The killing of the albatross was motiveless, as was Augustine’s perverse stealing of the pears, but the poem also shows how the Mariner is capable of transcending his desperate situation. The Mariner discovers his defectiveness through his encounter with the other, in this case the Albatross. He discovers the absence of ‘presence’ in the very act of searching for a presence, which, as the supernatural events that follow demonstrate, is ultimately unattainable, except possibly through such an act. After acute physical and mental suffering, amidst the terrifying spectacles of the deep sea, the Mariner arrives at the simple exhortation to love all things, thus evincing a reverence for life. The turning point comes when the dead sailors spring to life and become like seraphims. The dead men rise in a symbolic resurrection, and “Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths”, as they, too, begin to appreciate nature. This moment triggers more moments of union between man and nature, as even the silence of the seraph-band “sank like music on my heart”, as the Mariner explains (Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 205). The Mariner starts to revisit his transgressive act and finds redemption in it; it becomes spiritual insight, not through divine intercession but through aesthetic experience. In telling the story to the wedding guest, the Mariner produces a cathartic effect on himself and the reader.

In catharsis, we not only have an emotional experience but we also acquire insight into the moral world. As Richard Janko writes, catharsis brings our emotions “nearer to virtue, which is the mean between the extremes relative to us” (Janko quoted in Rorty

347). By reflecting on our reactions to the character's dilemma, we can then move on to explore the substance of these emotions. Self-reflection has worldly consequences, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the world. A successful tragic plot, according to Aristotle, must include *hamartia*, which we are then invited to revisit in light of the devastation that befalls the main character and the emotions elicited thereof. We become aware of our own tendency to err, but we are not always aware of our emotional response to our behavior; therefore "dramatic mimesis leads us to the correct emotional response to the characters' plight via our moral and cognitive judgments about them, since their personalities and actions are vividly represented as universal patterns of action" (Janko quoted in Rorty 352). As the Mariner's ordeal is dramatized, we are afforded pleasure not only through expressive poetic language, but also by revisiting the plot through this structure. The poem thus becomes didactic, but as Aristotle explains, even painful images can be aesthetically pleasing.

The reader thus becomes involved in this experience on several planes—observation, rationality and insight—and since practical experience has a lot to do with reason, reason plays an important role in the reader's response to the plot. By evaluating the moral character of the Mariner, I am indirectly gaining insight into myself and the roots of my behavior, even though imagination, more so than any other faculty, is at play in this poem. Coleridge argues that works of the imagination "carry the mind out of self, and show the possible of the good and the great in the human character" (Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 165). The Mariner's outrageous behavior invites us to assess man's limitations through knowledge about ourselves, and, hence, gain insight into *our* potential path from sin to redemption. Coleridge, however, draws the line between

ancient and modern poetry, and therefore between Aristotle and the moderns: “It is this inwardness or subjectivity, which principally and most fundamentally distinguishes all the classic from all the modern poetry” (Coleridge quoted in Abrams 242). This suggests that Aristotle is problematic from certain religious standpoints because he advocates a grounding and re-grounding in the self, whereas conversion seems to require that one go beyond the self in accepting Divine grace. Aristotle’s system takes us to the limits of the self, but not beyond, a feature of the social character in antiquity.

Returning to the poem, the religious thematic opens up to redemption through the vehicle of the aesthetic, which ultimately allows the ancient Mariner to atone for his sin. However, there is no leap of faith, but rather an experience on the ship of life-in-death, which allows for some kind of perceptual transcendence of the world. The supernatural element allows for this transcendence. Speaking of the supernatural in poetry, Coleridge writes that “the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real”; this supernatural agency represented as real and in subjects from ordinary life serves to “transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief, which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 160; 161). I am not sure how Coleridge would distinguish between reverie and imagination, but “The Rime” does seem like a dream, a reverie of the mind, manifested as reality, shaping and transforming the Mariner’s relationship with nature. Perhaps Paul de Man can shed light on this, when he writes, “Poetics of ‘unmediated vision’ fuse matter and imagination by

amalgamating perception and reverie, sacrificing the demands of consciousness to the realities of the object” (de Man 7; 8).

It is interesting how Coleridge fuses the supernatural with the concrete in this poem. Coleridge seems to “possess the kind of double vision that allows him to see landscapes as objects, as well as entrance gates to a world lying beyond visible nature” (de Man 132). All the supernatural elements, even those that are horrifying, intensify our experience and “refine (our) desire out of existence”, towards God in nature (de Man 224). This brings in the notion of the sublime, as that which “raises, enlarges, and gives a social, and thus moral, significance to a psychic fact, or an act of any kind” (De Sanctis 128). Longinus writes that “Sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god”, and later, “Greatness of mind wanes, fades, and loses its attraction when men spend their admiration on their mortal parts and neglect to develop the immortal” (Longinus 218; 225).

Some such supernatural elements in the poem are the ghost ship, with Death and Life-in-Death dueling over the lives of the sailors, the dead sailors with their eyes wide open and fixed on the Mariner, who are later resurrected, the extraordinary sea creatures appearing along the surface of the water, the involvement of the daemons in the ship’s movement, and finally, the ship going “down like lead” in a sweeping current, as the Hermit’s boat saves the Mariner. These supernatural elements immerse the reader in an experience that he is shaping but cannot control. Since the imagination is vigorously employed, as Longinus points out, “the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because . . . amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer”

(Longinus 192). The supernatural opens the way for the sublime, and “real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong and ineffaceable impression on the memory” (Longinus 196). The imagination thus employed is “carried on either by conferring additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses, and thus enabling it to react upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence” (Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 209).

Overflowing with praise for all the beauty he sees through the eyes of an infant in an un-fallen state, the Mariner also spontaneously and “unawares” praises God for the blessings of His creation. In this context, nature has moral authority. As is often the case in Wordsworth’s poetry, belief in God is articulated through the vehicle of nature, combining the idea of nature with morality. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge is also recollecting his experience in this poem, establishing an emotional relationship with images that are emotionally compelling and personally binding. For both Coleridge and Wordsworth, imagination is a path to the real. Coleridge lays out an elaborate system regarding the faculty of imagination, as emphasized in his discussion of Wordsworth’s poetry in *Biographia Literaria*. He recognizes imagination as a “discovery that comes with a leap, and involves an irrevocable change of state” (Hill quoted in Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 7). Additionally, it is “the mental faculty that allows man to interpret the symbolic language in which God has written himself into the *natura naturata* and to discover an all-embracing unity extending through the multiform appearances of the material universe” (Hill quoted in Coleridge, *Imagination in*



Coleridge 10). Imagination is all that we can *believe* of creation as opposed to all we can *conceive* of creation, which is fancy (Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 50).

Speaking of poetry and religion, Coleridge writes, “By placing them in certain awful relations it merges the individual man in the whole species, and makes it impossible for any one man to think of his present condition, without at the same time comprising in his view his fellow-creatures” (Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 83). This explains why the Mariner feels compelled to share his story with others as a form of action complementing religious contemplation. Saint Bernard points out that contemplation should ultimately lead to action and a desire to help our neighbor. He writes, “[L]ove exists in action and in feeling . . . it would have been superfluous for him to warn us to act if love were but a matter of feeling” (Saint Bernard quoted in McGinn 526). In addition and more importantly, “[B]oth have for their object the perfecting, and the pointing out to us the indefinite improvement of our nature” (Coleridge, *Imagination in Coleridge* 83). The world of imagination elicits “a meditative pathos, a union of deep and subtle thought with sensibility; a sympathy with man as man; the sympathy indeed of a contemplator . . . from whose view no difference of rank conceals the sameness of the nature; no injuries of wind or weather, or toil, or even of ignorance, wholly disguise the human face divine” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 255).

The Mariner, like any tragic character, happened to do something “at an unpropitious moment”, as Nancy Sherman puts it in an essay on *Poetics* (Sherman quoted in Rorty 178). The important thing to keep in mind is that this is not accidental behavior but depends on the character’s fundamental act of will. This is why Aristotle’s notion of hamartia “focuses on agency” (Sherman quoted in Rorty 178). The Mariner is an ordinary

person; we do not know much about his morality, whether he “surpasses us in virtue or wickedness”, prior to shooting the albatross, but there is every indication that his transgression and his person are ordinary. Aristotle writes that in order to elicit fear and pity from the reader, the agent suffering must be “the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice . . . the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (Aristotle 21). The Mariner’s error seems uncalled for; there is no reason why he should have killed the albatross, but the nature of the transgressive points to the nature of human depravity, “a class of impediments that are internal to the conditions of human agency” (Sherman quoted in Rorty 178). There seems to be no outright evil intent, but rather the act is the result of a fallen human nature. In light of this, the error seems innocent, but the Mariner is not spared the terrible consequences of his horrible crime. The reader almost feels that the punishment does not fit the crime. Natural and supernatural agents revolt against the Mariner, and the reader is plunged into a horrifying spectacle that no human can endure, a state of hell comparable to the ‘hellish’ crime.

This debate about the sort of person who commits error and suffers intolerably makes us reflect on our own wrongdoings as we undergo the mental and physical agonies alongside the Mariner. The effect is not made easier by the awful and penetrating imagery, initiating a formative imagination. This rich symbolism is a result of strong passions, an essential ingredient in the creation of Coleridge’s poetry, which are “the natural expression of imagination when re-creating the world of sense under the stimulus of passion” (Abrams 297). Sherman describes this sort of moral interpretation in this way: “To be able to see how an agent came to make a mistake, how it followed in a

causally coherent way from judgment and character is to show that the mistake is a cause penetrable to human reasoning” (Sherman quoted in Rorty 187). It is important to note that Aristotle’s plot elements are the same in Coleridge’s poem as in tragedy, but the nature of the cathartic effect differs from tragedy. The cathartic moment for the Mariner, as well as the reader, comes not through regret and wishing to undo the killing, but rather through acceptance and, if possible, purifying action, such as when the Mariner in the end shares his experience with others. He simultaneously accepts his painful condition and rebuilds his world. This purifying experience establishes for the Mariner and the reader Janko’s “mean between the extremes”, so that our emotions strike a better chord as a result of our analysis of the Mariner’s metaphorical death and rebirth, his suffering and survival. In this sense, towards the end of the poem, fear and pity are offset by other emotions; thus, the emotional response to art in catharsis implies, as Northrop Frye astutely suggests, “the raising and casting out of actual emotion on a wave of something else...the vision of something liberated from experience” (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 93).

We not only have emotional experiences, but also are enlightened about the moral world. This explains how morality plays a role in our engagement with the Mariner, because catharsis moderates our emotional response and this act of reflecting on our emotions is itself a kind of virtue, in response to noble expressions of character. The Mariner is released from his oppressed condition to a state of recovered identity, which had been undermined at the start of the poem.

Amelie Rorty claims that “character virtues and their susceptibilities are simultaneously cognitive and conative: they affect a person’s passions and desires, as

well as his perceptions and inferences” (Rorty10). This means that hamartia results when the tendency of a character with his or her inclinations and susceptibilities comes into contact with the opportunity to waywardness. Hamartia in this case is the outright sin of killing the albatross, a symbol of nature, and man’s subsequent separation from nature. Paul Tillich defines sin as a “universal, tragic estrangement, based on freedom and destiny in all human beings. Sin is separation, estrangement from one’s essential being” (Tillich 123). Tillich highlights the role of depth psychology in illuminating the ‘demonic structures’ undercutting our conscious will: “existentialism and especially psychoanalysis and the whole philosophy of the unconscious have rediscovered the totality of the personality in which not only the conscious elements are decisive” (Tillich 124). Tillich points to how theology can provide explanations to the dilemmas of the human condition, while suggesting indirectly how the interplay between conscious and unconscious factors can enhance our reading of Coleridge’s tale of transgression and atonement.

### Chapter 3:

#### T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*

*The Family Reunion* is unlike many plays. The characters at times may resemble members of our own family and their conversations are like those we might have at our dinner tables. However, we come to realize that the distance between characters appears to be impassable. The language is at once comprehensible only to become impenetrable in the next instant. There is constantly a sense that things are not what they seem and we, as readers, are always being prepared for another dimension to the narrative. Frank Kermode expresses the notion of a “momentary radiance” during the process of interpreting narratives when he writes, “We glimpse the secrecy through the meshes of a text; this is divination, but what is divined is what is visible from our angle” (Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* 144). *The Family Reunion* can only be viewed from a particular angle and often evokes a state of inwardness. The clue as to why the play poses a challenge to interpretation lies in its theme, for as Agatha points out in the play, “What we have written is not a story of detection, of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 104).

The play starts out in the drawing room at the Wishwood estate, where the whole Monchensey family is gathered with Amy, Lady Monchensey, at the helm, trying to keep Wishwood alive. The other family members, Gerald, Charles, Ivy, Violet, and Mary discuss a conventional conversational topic, the negligence of the younger generation, as Mary looks on indifferently. After marrying and leaving Wishwood for eight years, Harry, one of Amy's three sons, shows up at the family reunion, following the death of his wife who has died mysteriously at sea. Amy wishes that Harry would start over by

adapting once again to life at Wishwood, but Agatha, her elder sister, sees that Harry has changed. Agatha believes that he can only look ahead in the light of his present self, while incorporating the past events of his life into the person he has become “[b]ecause the future can only be built upon the real past” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 17). Harry’s arrival at the reunion sets in motion the primary action of the play.

Harry is furious with his family for trying to pretend that nothing has changed since he last left Wishwood. He says, “Time and time and time, and change, no change! You all of you try to talk as if nothing had happened” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 27). Agatha pleads with Harry to try to make them understand, but Harry continues to be at a loss for words, sometimes speaking unintelligibly. He describes urban life as “suffering without feeling”, and then claims that “this is what matters, but it is unspeakable, untranslatable: I talk in general terms because the particular has no language” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 30). His experiences are unspeakable, and “it is the task of poetic language to transform mere desire into authentic vision” (de Man 224).

Harry imagines that he killed his wife, but he is uncertain. As he considers that night on the Atlantic when he might have pushed his wife into the sea, thus killing her, Harry says, “One is still alone/ In an overcrowded desert, jostled by ghosts” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 30). This moment is reminiscent of the Mariner’s sense of isolation and exile on the wide sea. Harry feels isolated from his family and the world, and “this isolation breaks his contact with reality and projects him into a private world without direction, purpose, or principle of conduct” (Hamalian 108). Agatha repeatedly implores Harry to try and understand his present self in terms of his past experiences, and that such

understanding may liberate him: “There is more to understand: hold fast to that as the way to freedom” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 32).

Harry’s condition and response to his predicament inescapably remind the literary reader of Aeschylus’s great drama, *The Eumenides*, which forms the concluding play in the classical trilogy. The relentless encouragement and subtle affronts by Agatha, and occasionally Mary, open the way for Harry’s confrontation with the Furies and subsequent liberation. Harry decides to face his own Furies, who appear to him at Wishwood in the windows when the blinds are drawn. In referring to Aeschylus’s classical drama, John Herington contends that “*The Eumenides* seem to attempt both a diagnosis of and a remedy for what was then a new and fearsome disease of human society” (Herington 137). Harry, like Orestes, also suffers from a disease that requires a diagnosis and a cure. The dreamlike projections of his mind offer him the beginning of a remedy when they initiate a progressive path to truth.

He is invited to undergo exile into another world, out of the present and into a different realm of time and space, for “the world of the present was a world of separation, heresy—an experiment in godlessness, a civilization that the saint and the intelligent man must banish, a time that must be redeemed” (Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry* 110). The notion of time and memory depicted in Eliot’s poetry is largely reminiscent of Book X of Augustine’s *Confessions*. In his discussion of a notion of time modeled on eternity, escaping the margins of future and past time, Augustine writes, “But if only their minds could be seized and held steady, they would be still for a while, and for that short moment, they would glimpse the splendor of eternity which is for ever still” (Augustine, *Confessions* 261).

Herington refers to how Aeschylean drama is “occupied with the interaction of all the forces that make up our world, all between the dome of heaven and the recesses of hell” (Herington 13). Herington elucidates that Aeschylus refuses to “disentangle a human being artificially from the seamless web of the material and spiritual universe” (Herington 12). These remarks on classical literature apply, in some regards, to Eliot’s play. Harry’s conversations with the family doctor, Warburton, and Agatha eventually disclose the fact that he did not kill his wife as he supposed, but they also reveal an unconscious wish that manifested itself as real. Things are revealed to Harry progressively about his family’s past, such as his father’s unconscious desire to kill his mother and become involved with Agatha, which call attention to similar dynamics in Harry’s own experience. It becomes apparent that “the inheritance for which he has returned (to Wishwood) turns out to be the knowledge of the past, and the knowledge that the past may be redeemable. The truth frees him from his guilt” (Hamalian 109).

We also discover the stark contrast between Harry’s inner struggles and the rest of the family’s blindness to the truths made available to Harry. We are left wondering how the others can be so indifferent to their own spiritual condition, not even attempting to probe into Harry’s unusual behavior. The chorus captures what Gerald, Ivy, Violet and Charles represent: “Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly open, the curtains be drawn . . . and we should cease to be sure of what is real or unreal? Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 45). They live in fear of the unknown and lack the capacity to ‘resign everything infinitely’ that Kierkegaard discusses under the heading of faith. The static



nature of their lives does not allow conflicts to emerge, let alone to reach a break point that might enable authentic change to alter a set relationship to a familiar world.

Harry, on the other hand, makes ‘movements of infinity’ that allow him to lose everything only to gain what he has lost and more in the very next instant. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that “to be able to lose one’s understanding and along with it everything finite, and then to win the very same finitude again by virtue of the absurd . . . is the one and only marvel” (Kierkegaard 36). When Agatha tells Harry that relief comes not from evasion, but through the “awful daring of a moment’s surrender”, we are again reminded of Kierkegaard’s knight of infinite resignation, the stage before faith, the stage before Harry leaves Wishwood to fulfill an unknown vocation, perhaps as a missionary, in obedience to his spirit, or in this case, the promptings of the Furies.

Before his conversion moment, Harry suffers even more and is antagonized by the Furies until he is led to an existential crisis that invites him to accept an unknown future. He becomes the “single individual in absolute relation to the absolute”, transcending ethics and achieving religious truth (Kierkegaard 98). Like Abraham, Harry represents “a teleological suspension of the ethical”, that is to say, a leap into the infinite that enables him to regain the finite on new terms (Kierkegaard 59). Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, was not aware of the result of his sacrifice of Isaac and, up to the last moment, he knew the result could be altered, but the point is not the result, but the narrative, which is moved along by acts of transgression, and the “distress, anxiety, and paradox” therein. Narratives often enable characters to transcend their conditions even when the goal is often unknowable. Harry’s return to Wishwood initiates a long process through which the quest for a new way of life involves an examination of the past, the

confrontation with guilt and an outcome that is not predetermined. This process is not something that he fully understands from the outset.

In *The Family Reunion*, we see Harry go through Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, beginning in the aesthetic and the ethical and finally making the leap into the religious. By entering the third stage, he masters the aesthetic and ethical, which make up the finite spheres of existence. One must first realize the inadequacy of the first two spheres apart from the religious in order to begin the transition. Kierkegaard specifically claims that faith explodes the bounds of the ethical when he claims "that it takes strength and energy and spiritual freedom to make the infinite movement of resignation . . . [but that] after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one's desire totally and completely . . . that is a marvel" (Kierkegaard 48). Harry is helped along by his visions of the Furies, which are the "powers beyond us", and by his conversations with Agatha and Mary, but ultimately it is Harry's "capacity for belief" which allows him to "have the vision to recognize the *higher function* of these spirits" (Hamalian 110). The Eumenides are employed by Eliot to show how the imagination has a certain cosmic significance which Antonin Artaud, in his own dramaturgy, optimistically identified as "anarchistic destruction generating a prodigious flight of forms which will constitute the whole spectacle, [and] they succeed in organically re-involving man, his ideas about reality, and his poetic place in reality" (Artaud 92).

It is important to mention how difficult it is to communicate these mystical experiences, which sometimes evokes the silence of Abraham as he embarks on his religious quest. When speaking about his visions, "always flickering at the corner of my

eye”, Harry breaks down in front of Mary and says, “You do not know, you cannot know, you cannot understand” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 57). He goes on to say in another scene with his family, “They don’t understand what it is to be awake, to be living on several planes at once, though one cannot speak with several voices at once” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 87). Harry, as opposed to the rest of the family, is open to spiritual disturbances, which allow him to respond to the forces within him. Perhaps this is true of all religious individuals, so that “their thoughts and feelings have more layers, are more entangled”, and therefore embody a soul torn “between desperate rebellion and hopeful expectation” (Auerbach quoted in Coburn 117).

Although Agatha and Mary are on a higher plane of consciousness than the rest of the family, they remain limited to the sphere of resignation where “the act of resignation does not require faith, for what I gain in resignation is my eternal consciousness. This is a purely philosophical movement that I venture to make when it is demanded and can discipline myself to make” (Kierkegaard 48). Agatha says she and Mary “are only watchers and waiters” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 50). They are able to face their weary inner condition and dull future prospects, Agatha with her unfulfilled hopes and Mary who remains unmarried and resigns herself to being a teacher like Agatha, because of the spiritual encounters with the powers that emerge in their own lives. Perhaps there will come a stage in their lives when they will be elected by the Eumenides to explore Harry’s ‘rose-garden experience’.

The language of Eliot’s late poem, *Burnt Norton*, and his early drama, *The Family Reunion* complement and illuminate each other. According to Helen Gardner, *The Family Reunion*, “coming between *Burnt Norton* and the remaining Quartets, attempts to present

dramatically the discovery which is their subject” (Gardner 129). For example, we hear Harry’s experience echoed in the lines from *Burnt Norton*, “time past and time future, allow but a little consciousness. To be conscious is not to be in time, but only in time can the moment in the rose-garden . . . be remembered . . . only through time time is conquered” (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 16). Only through memory is memory conquered; only by reflecting on his past at Wishwood and the essence of his relationship with his wife was Harry able to find salvation, and his exit from the house at the end of the play seems like an exit out of time, out of the realm the rest of his family lives in, a place of artificial light, of “disaffection...in a dim light...turning shadow into transient beauty...with slow rotation suggesting permanence” (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 17). Olney writes, “It is through the operation of memory, which draws all the significant past up into the focus of the present, that the poet succeeds in universalizing their experience and their meaning” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 263). This is what Eliot undertakes in *Four Quartets*, which, as Olney suggests, in the end is “both the meditative autobiography of the poet and a spiritual autobiography for his readers” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 264). Man is given a fuller proportion as “himself-in-becoming”, or as “the evolution of consciousness in humanity to the present epitomizing moment” (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 274).

*Burnt Norton*, as Gardner writes, “is a poem about the ‘private world’ of each one of us, the world in which what might have been persists in the consciousness as well as what was” (Gardner 59). But Eliot provides evidence of a kind of religious experience that reinterprets our individual experience in terms of an eternal present that is not to be confused with mere timelessness. Gadamer writes, “Every experience has implicit horizons of before and after, and finally fuses with the continuum of the experiences

present in the before and after to form a unified flow of experience” (Gadamer 237). This fusion also gives us a way of understanding the eternal present as a vital experience that points back to Augustine’s *Confessions*, where memory functions as “the seat of both self-consciousness and self-transcendence, that place in which all men retain their implicit awareness of God’s existence and in which the contemplative guards the residue of his vision of that which truly is” (Mazzeo quoted in Manganiello 101).

Like Eliot’s speaker in *Burnt Norton*, Harry follows the echoes of the rose garden to discover what might have been, “through the first gate, into our first world, shall we follow” (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 14). He is going through a cyclical movement, from beginning to end back to beginning, a beginning now illuminated by experience. Since Harry is dealing with his memories at Wishwood and revelations about his past, this is where the Eumenides reveal themselves, so that “their accumulation brings greater insight into another birth which took place in the fullness of time and looks forward to the end” (Manganiello 98). As opposed to Amy, who desires to remain in the past, and Agatha, who looks to the future, Harry’s ‘eternal present’ “redeems the time and loosens the fetters of past and future”, as Manganiello notes in his discussion of Time as depicted in Eliot’s work (Manganiello 101). The chains of time past and time future woven into a changeless body protect it from decay and give it a sort of immortality. As Harry moves forward, he acquires a new sense of time that separates him from the past and lifts him to a higher plane of existence.

*The Family Reunion* explores, through Harry, how one is to find that “still point” that gathers the flux of the past into a meaningful pattern and how we can learn to apprehend that pattern. As in Augustine, the notion of grace is introduced into the play in

the form of an “unsought experience” that prompts a deliberate ascent to spiritual insight. The moment of grace is grasped through memory, and the working out of that moment is aided by grace as well, by incorporating the flux of one’s life into a pattern modeled on eternity. Gardner reiterates, “In these apprehensions of the eternal, preserved in memory and fruitful beyond the moment in which they were first felt, we find freedom from the tyranny of past and future, and cease to feel ourselves the helpless victims of natural forces” (Gardner 175).

From an Aeschylean standpoint, the play can be read as ending the cycle of the family curse that visits the sins of the parents on the children. Harry finds redemption in his departure and for the sake of those in his family who have departed as well. Gardner writes that Harry “must go away into solitude and silence, like the scapegoat, laden with sin, driven out into the wilderness, so that years later, or months, he may find what ways of love are possible for him” (Gardner 154). We do not know what the future holds in store for Harry but we do know that he has embraced an uncertain life that will be nothing like the life he has been living. Memory performs a role in the play that “liberates desire from its earthly attachments in time, and helps it to reach out towards its timeless object whose unfamiliar name is Love” (Manganiello 109). Herington remarks that the Aeschylean model enables Eliot to explore “the unanalyzable forces that well up from the unconscious” (Herington 12).

Hence, through Harry’s interaction with the Furies, Eliot explores man’s sinful nature and “subjects it to the scrutiny of modern and ancient wisdom and tries to show it as consistent with both” (Hamalian 115). The confrontation with the Eumenides also involves a considerable amount of repetition. However, Kierkegaard maintained that

“true repetition is eternity” (Kierkegaard 324). Harry first goes through a stage of desiring change and then achieves it by breaking the cycle of sin in which he is trapped and which inevitably impacts his relationship with his family members. What he needs is a “continual striving to achieve true inwardness” that would turn repetition into a source of spiritual insight (Kierkegaard 328). Harry is not merely recollecting but through repetition, he is recovering the essence of his experience.

Towards the end of the play, Agatha and Harry are caught up in a profound spiritual conversation that casts light on the entire narrative. Agatha tells Harry, “[Y]ou are the consciousness of your unhappy family,” and also maintains that his knowledge as a family member “must precede the expiation”. Harry’s sense of carrying himself and his family through the ordeal of guilt leads to the moment of revelation: “I do not know why, I feel happy for a moment, as if I had come home . . . as if happiness did not consist in getting what one wanted . . . but in a different vision” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 105). The play seems simultaneously grounded in reality yet shut out from it when we look at Harry, Mary and Agatha, whose grounding and re-grounding in reality is expressed through various levels of consciousness. Agatha, too, wishes to be “liberated from the human wheel” that has trapped the other family members and therefore seems linked to Harry, even though they embark on separate paths.

From the perspective of Kierkegaard, Harry’s conversion seems like a leap into the unknown, a faith that requires him to leave all behind. It also defies communication and clear understanding, unless we understand faith in a certain way. In my discussion of the text, I have referred to Kierkegaard’s notion of the single individual who cannot be subsumed under categories. None of the other members of Harry’s family are able to

penetrate through their self-inflicted obscurities and see the same visions of the Eumenides or Furies.

In defining symbolic language, Paul Tillich describes how religious language opens up levels of reality, “levels of the soul, levels of our interior reality...the “opening up” is a two-sided function—namely, reality in deeper levels and the human soul in *special* levels” (Tillich 56). This would be a form of existential mysticism, which Tillich defines as “a venture of faith toward union with the depths of life” (Tillich 107). Harry’s striving for language points to the particularity of his being and his vocation, which Heidegger formalizes philosophically when he writes in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, “Because these more venturesome ones venture Being itself and therefore dare to venture into language, the province of Being, they are the sayers” (Heidegger 134).

In our discussion of the play, we might have discussed a few other plot developments, such as the two brother’s bizarre accident on the way to the reunion, Amy’s heart attack when Harry leaves the second time to pursue an unknown vocation, or the peculiar role of Warburton, the family physician. However, we have primarily concerned ourselves with plot elements that enhance our exploration of Harry’s suffering, leading to his salvation, an exploration that is important to literature that becomes “capable once more of entertaining a religious idea of the theater, capable of attaining awareness and a possession of certain dominant forces, of certain notions that control all others, and capable of recovering within ourselves those energies which ultimately create order and increase the value of life” (Artaud 80).

The spiritual progress we are invited to undergo with Harry dramatizes the quest for spiritual truth. There is a moment in the play when we are held in suspense because



we are not entirely sure if Mary, as well as Harry, sees the Furies. In the scene where the two of them converse, we recognize Mary's intuitive gifts. She constantly appeals to Harry's inner self, but Harry can only reply, "There is only one way for you to understand and that is by seeing" (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 57). He does not dismiss her easily, however, but wishes to continue their conversation, for she echoes his thoughts, saying, "I believe the moment of birth is when we have knowledge of death" (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 60). He then tells her: "You bring me news of a door that opens at the end of a corridor, sunlight and singing" (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 60). That suspenseful moment culminates when "the sleepless hunters" appear at the windows again and Harry goes into an uproar. In such a situation, Mary can only say, "If you will depend on me, it will be all right" (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 62). Harry then accuses Mary of having "dull senses". Does she see them and ignore them for the sake of Harry? Are they only meant for Harry and therefore does it matter whether Mary or anyone else sees them? In any case, Harry must respond to these promptings of the spirit in order to complete the journey from sin to salvation. The play, as echoed in *Four Quartets*, signifies the theme of oneness, of bringing together discordant aspects of one's consciousness into a meaningful center, subsuming "the reconciliation of warring opposites, and the integration of past and present, in a single, significant pattern; the atonement of human wills with the divine will; union among men and communion with God" (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 298). The play traces the stages of Harry's *becoming* with all that implies in shaping his character, and hence the process of *our* becoming, as our consciousness "expands in its questioning and meditation and discovering" (Olney, *Metaphors of Self* 313).

Antonin Artaud wrote that “the theater must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all the aspects of the objective and descriptive external world, but of the internal world, that is, of man considered metaphysically” (Artaud 92). *The Family Reunion* ends with Harry trying to explain to his mother why he must leave: “And now I know that my business is not to run away, but to pursue, not to avoid being found, but to seek”, and a few lines later, he claims, “Why I have this election I do not understand. It must have been preparing always, and I see it was what I always wanted” (Eliot, *Family Reunion* 113; 115). It seems these promptings have always been present beneath the surface, lurking in his mind. His election, and, more importantly, his acceptance of it, allowed Harry to move beyond the world of the aesthetic and ethical into the religious, prompting the religious to manifest itself in the realm of the finite, and finally allowing him to grasp the aesthetic and ethical in a life-transforming way as uniquely his own.

## Conclusion

Frye delineates that the threat to identity is “the feeling that one’s life is not related to a sufficiently articulate myth of concern, and so lacks an essential dimension of its meaning” (Frye, *The Critical Path* 154). The stories that I have discussed in this thesis allow for a fuller response to our most profound experiences, and invite us through imagination and reflection to participate in narratives that are coherent, even when they seem fragmented. Throughout this paper, I have used different philosophical methods, often as complementary, to show that a combination of approaches can help us understand religious narratives. My thesis explores the ways in which Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, either alone or in combination, can help us read various spiritual narratives; thus my method is adjusted to my subject matter.

A philosophical approach can accommodate an inward response to reading and its potential to shape the self. Therefore, when discussing Augustine’s spiritual ladder that ascends from the carnal to the spiritual, I gravitate towards Plato. On the other hand, I examine the Mariner and the moment of catharsis through the lens of Aristotle, which opens the way for a crisis in the identity of the self, but not transcendence. Finally, a somewhat synthetic approach is utilized to analyze Harry’s conversion experience, which demonstrates a movement from the realm of the finite to the infinite. Different approaches are used to clarify what are called spiritual narratives and provide a general hermeneutical model as a way of “arriving at truths that are of the highest importance to us if we are to become adequately human”, as L.C. Knights notes with regards to the function of literature (Knights quoted in Brower 278).

Spiritual meanings in texts have the potential to connect all our literary experiences, becoming a means of suggesting our feelings, not in a psychological sense, but through a certain kind of interpretation, which entails “spiritual understandings, compared with carnal, and available only to those who have circumcised ears” (Kermode, *Essays on Fiction* 183). Through this type of reflection, we are remembering a self shaped by experience but outside experience, transcending the boundaries demarcated by historical experience, or time, thus achieving the possibility of freedom. Augustine claims that God made us for Him and that our hearts do not find rest until we find Him, echoing Plato’s remembrance of the Forms. Augustine is passive in his quest for that real self that is outside the cave, and in searching through his memories, he discovers the grace of God communicating with him, ironically in the moments when he was furthest from the Truth. In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis provides an illuminating depiction of grace as the enabler of recognizing and accepting the need for the divine as the “full recognition, the sensible awareness, the complete acceptance . . . the glad acceptance, of this Need” (Lewis 130). Reflecting on the patterns of Augustine’s life, the reader is awakened to the “possibilities of self-direction and self-discipline” (Knights quoted in Brower 289). Hence, life acquires meaning only insofar as individual moments prefigure an eternal design. Frye writes in *Anatomy of Criticism* that “the culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life”, by which in a moment of recognition we perceive “the total cultural form of our present life” (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 346).

Although Plato’s dualistic methodology is about discovering an essence that was there in advance, I would argue that the remembrance of the Forms presupposes a potentiality, and the movement itself towards remembrance entertains the possibility for

transformation. Just as in Kierkegaard, we must embrace the ethical and aesthetic as a right of passage to the religious, so Plato's world of the senses is not disconnected from the spiritual, but rather the spiritual is for the sake of redeeming the senses. In his struggle to align the flesh with the spirit, Augustine takes us beyond our carnal reading of the text.

The excess of the Mariner's experience points to an uncertainty of where to situate the self in the presence of the albatross and, later, the supernatural elements. The Mariner's aesthetic experience aboard the ship positions him in relation to the self but does not allow for a complete transcendence of the self. Aesthetic experience does not translate itself into mature faith. The fierce encounter with the supernatural elements in Coleridge's poem does not take the Mariner beyond the self, but, I would argue, places him in a problematic relationship to the self. The Mariner's frenzied response to the new life he has attained at the end of the poem emphasizes the incompleteness of the experience, for, as Traherne would say, "You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins". In other words, the world cannot be fully enjoyed until the Truth manifests itself in both the ethical and aesthetic spheres. Perhaps this is why the Mariner feels free only after telling his tale to others: "At an uncertain hour,/That agony returns:/ And till my ghastly tale is told,/ This heart within me burns" (Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" 208). In this sense, the sustainability of faith is dependent upon action, as opposed to being enriched by action.

The cathartic moment for the Mariner, as well as the reader, comes through the purifying response demanded through moral action. Catharsis moderates our emotional response. This involves an act of reflection upon our emotions that is, in itself, a kind of virtue. In light of Aristotle, our engagement with the text becomes a serious involvement

that is not passive but involves moral conviction and moral judgment that makes for meaningful reading. This engagement allows us to revisit universal patterns that are revealed through a character's deeds. As a consequence, we are able to fit particulars into universals and experience cognitive truths in ways that have the potential to shape the human being in various ways.

Harry's conversion experience, aided by the Eumenides, is the search for, and ultimately active response to, that 'unmediated presence' which would qualify his existence and lend him power to attain freedom from the static nature of his family's lives and of his sense of isolation. As with Augustine, the promptings of the spirit, here assuming the form of the Furies, always seem to have been present beneath the surface, lurking in Harry's mind. His election and, later, his response to it allowed him to move beyond the world of the aesthetic and ethical into the religious, allowing him to grasp the realm of the finite in light of his religious experiences, adding a dimension of understanding and meaning to the finite that is uniquely his own. In addition, he was able to revisit the beginning of his life in an enlightened condition.

Kermode writes that writers and readers have a passion for fulfillment. This fulfillment manifests itself through the hermeneutic process that pertains to "a context unpredicted and remote from that of the original utterance", containing within it "narrative promises that will late be kept, though perhaps in unexpected ways" (Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* 106). Spiritual narratives often appeal to the reader to retrace the various components that dramatize and anticipate how major characters are able to rediscover themselves through the conversion experience. Spiritual narratives allow for a certain consciousness that allows one to see one's true measure, an imperfect

human nature, and under certain circumstances, make the leap from the self to the divine. Religious experiences often go beyond language, such as in the moment of epiphany, the blinding light of experience that explodes the frame, but we are able to talk about it on the basis of how it opens a new path to the believer. The focus of the thesis has been on how three different authors employed language to express spiritual meanings that can be related in different ways to the study of literature.

While reading the three narratives separately, I attempted to show how transformative experiences often overlap, demonstrating the possibilities of self-discovery that could entail a more meaningful existence. In three different texts, I examined how form is interwoven with moral judgments implicit in the work, thereby molding a public world of human values. Frye writes that criticism and art should strive to address “the inner drive of all concerned thinking to become encyclopaedic, covering every aspect of human life and destiny”, which includes addressing human values (Frye, *The Critical Path* 154). Plotting significant moments in the narrative, which anticipate and explain spiritual insights in retrospect, not necessarily in a theological sense, but a tracing and retracing, which involves “a complex, ordering, activity” of the conversion experiences that build up throughout the narrative, is a kind of active scrutiny which qualifies experience; thus one is able to glean meaning from the unspecified, potentially significant, moments along life’s path (Knights quoted in Brower 284). With all these protagonists we witness the familiar pattern of spiritual awakening, from death to rebirth, from a sense of isolation to salvation, and the trials encountered along this quest, a pattern that can be discerned in various narratives.

Some things are important to us existentially as human beings, and religion might prove to be one of them in a world where truth and beauty have largely gone unnoticed. A method of reading literature that refers back to moral concerns, drawing our attention to them as a valuable criterion, is indispensable. As Wayne C. Booth writes, “One possible reaction to a fragmented society may be to retreat to a private world of values, but another might be to build works of art that themselves help mold a new consensus” (Booth 393). The role of literature in such a situation is often to address the ‘sacred void’ left by a secular culture that is estranged from religion but not bereft of the possibility of change.



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