5-2022

Visions of Christ in The Dollmaker

Ray Fine
East Tennessee State University

Visions of Christ in *The Dollmaker*

_____

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

_____

by

Ray Fine

May 2022

_____

Michael Cody, Ph.D., Chair

Jesse Graves, Ph.D.

Matthew Fehskens, Ph.D.

Keywords: Appalachia, Christianity, Christ, The Dollmaker, Harriette Arnow

ABSTRACT

Visions of Christ in *The Dollmaker*

by

Ray Fine

Through the characters' ideas of religion as seen in *The Dollmaker* by Harriette Arnow, a full image of who Christ is in World War II America is shown. While the text appears to critique certain images of Christ through the characters' representations, the greater, more conclusive argument advocating religious diversity is proven. The characters, instead of having their representation of Christ based in only the Christian denomination from which they come, represent Christ through their character traits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the professors who have supported me throughout my academic career. Special thanks to Drs. Cody, Fehskens, and Graves for their help and support on this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Introduction

The religious aspect of *The Dollmaker* can seem two-dimensional at first glance, but with a more detailed look into the novel and the religious background, the representations of Christ come to life to make a more conclusive image of who he is in the popular culture of the time. Through looking at the different ideas of Christ that each of the characters has, one can see that instead of representing the idea that entire denominations have of Christ, Arnow represents different fragments of the characters' personalities and how those fragments make a whole image of Christ. These images of Christ may conflict, but they speak to a more significant problem of human nature and religion—specifically, how miscommunication and misappropriation of the divine cause separation between different groups of people.

The idea of displaying the conflicting differences between people is a pervasive theme in the novel. The main conflict happens as Gertie Nevels, a mother of five children, moves to Detroit from Kentucky following her husband, who has gotten a new job. The novel illustrates the differences between people from the northern United States and Appalachia through personality, customs, and religious beliefs. The novel focuses on the Nevels family's struggle to become acclimated to life in Detroit and attempt to leave their lives in Kentucky behind.

The novel also has a running motif of describing the characters' religious ideas of Christ, as all characters adhere to some form of the Christian faith. While Christ unites these ostensibly Christian characters, their ideas of him differ significantly based on each character's biases and personality traits. The three main types of religion seen in the novel are Catholicism, Standard Appalachian Protestantism, and a folk-influenced version of Christianity based on Protestantism.

Gertie herself tends to follow a more folk-based faith that has formed because of both her literal reading of the Bible and the way she interacts with people. At times, for example, this

faith manifests as Appalachian witchcraft, even though Gertie isn't an actual practitioner of this. While this and other types of Christianity influence the novel and religious interpretations drawn from it, the most important religious element is the characters' representation of Christ and how that is affected by the denomination they have experience in and their subjective personalities.

The characters' personalities often have historical context behind them, such as how most characters in the novel fear the communists. No characters in the novel express disdain for communists like Mr. Daly. His disdain for communists is tightly linked to his Catholic faith, given that the novel is set in the time shortly after Pope Pius XI's papacy ended. Pius XI's shadow looms large over the novel, as his work "Divini Redemptoris," a document denouncing "atheistic Communism" (Higginson), affected the way that the Church presented its saints as well as Christ himself. This issue of institutional church and how it affects the adherents' beliefs about the divine is seen almost constantly in the novel. The novel doesn't critique any specific religious institution but rather how a person's biases can blur their faith and taint the innocence in that faith.

Agrarian Idealism and Appalachian Religion

In his article "Agrarian Tragedy: Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," Steve Mooney describes the basic premise of the novel: "Survival brings a painful knowledge of the cost of acquiescence, but it also brings a revelation: the essential divinity of all humans, even those caught in the industrial order of Detroit" (34). This essential divinity drives the novel as all of the characters are humanized and their personalities revealed by their different visions of Christ.

This "essential divinity" has its roots in Appalachian culture, as Appalachians are known for their resilience and self-sufficiency. Mooney goes on to describe how "crushing is Gertie's loss of independence. Although Clovis had been the ostensible head of the household in rural

Kentucky, Gertie had really been the one who held the family together" (37). Although this describes the plight of the fictional characters, the idea rings true in for Appalachian culture and history. Independence connects with the concept of "essential divinity" by placing the center of one's religion in the individual instead of in a hierarchical church setting, thereby placing the self in contact with the divine.

As seen in the novel, agrarian idealism is defined as the idea that the agrarian world left in the past will always be the best form of life. The characters look back at the past to find happiness while their future is tied to the misery of the present. The Nevels family is ultimately unable to return to the life they once had because their livelihoods are tied to Detroit. As Granma Kendrick sells the farm that was to be Gertie's inheritance, the Nevels family is forever separated from that life they once knew.

In the book *Talking Appalachian: Voice, Identity, and Community*, Michael Ellis explains the vision of both Appalachian culture and Appalachian English from the outside as tied together mainly by a common opinion:

> Stereotypes about Appalachian culture and Appalachian English have been around so long that it is hard to imagine a time when they did not exist. . . . However, long before the first linguistic studies were published, many Americans thought they were already familiar with the language of the southern highlands and had formed opinions about it—mostly negative. (163)

Although it references the language found in Appalachia, this concept can be universally applied to the region, especially as *The Dollmaker* portrays it. The idea of outsiders feeling assured that they understand Appalachia without a good base of knowledge about the area is shown by the constant anti-Appalachian prejudice that the characters present in the novel. While some

characters are understanding towards Gertie and her family, they still have a prejudice about Appalachian people that they do not confront. Their worlds remain separated by the lack of understanding that both parties have toward one another. Whether it's the schoolteachers talking to Gertie about her children's integration into the Detroit society or Mr. Daly speaking on the supposed political beliefs of the "hillbillies," this widespread ignorance and negativity surrounding Appalachian culture partially causes the concept of agrarian idealism in Appalachia that haunts the novel. It is indicative of a desire of return for the people of Detroit and the Nevels family, but for different reasons. The people from Detroit in the novel often see their society as having been taken over by Appalachians, so they want them to return to Appalachia. The Nevels family, however, continuously wants to return to Kentucky to be where they feel at home, as seen by Reuben's eventual return to the family farm.

Although completely different for each party, this desire to return to Appalachia adds to the agrarian idealist vision that can be seen in the Nevels family throughout the novel. Because none of them experience any kind of welcome in Detroit, they often feel lost and bring up memories from the farm in Kentucky; Gertie compares life in Detroit to the life that she and her family left behind in small vignettes such as this: "Quiet, forever quiet, was Cassie. She showed no sign of loving school and feeling at home there as did Clytie and Enoch, or of half-hating it like Reuben. More lost and lonesome than afraid, she always seemed like a child away from home" (232). This looking back becomes the main mode of the novel.

In the novel, the ideal existence as Gertie and her family understand it is always placed in the past and in Kentucky. As the text moves forward in plot, the ideal natural form of life becomes further removed from the reality that they live in but that still haunts the characters as the agrarian wholeness they can never fully return to. In *The Dollmaker*, the only way that the

family can find wholeness is to go back to their agrarian way of life as a family. This agrarian ideal is at the root of Appalachian witchcraft and Appalachian belief systems as a whole. The conflict, then, is the disappearance of wholeness that comes with disillusionment from religion, family, and tradition. Detroit swallows the Nevels family whole.

This disillusionment about the future has a large historical precedent as well as a reason that Appalachians often apply witchcraft to their lives. According to Jack Richards, witchcraft is often seen in communities where the people tend to have little agency regarding their circumstances:

> Every man was his own doctor and priest back in the day, until as recently as the early to mid-twentieth century, when Western medicine and stationary preachers became more abundant. Before that, every family or community had usually one to three people who helped with a range of ailments, from bleeding and infections to nightmares and supposed curses. . . . God listens to our prayers and knows what we need. But we Appalachian Americans have a certain self-reliance. We were left to fend for ourselves for the longest time while simultaneously being robbed of resources by outsiders. (*Doctoring the Devil* 5)

This inclination for self-reliance is what leads Gertie to make her hobby of carving into a job that can earn her much needed money in Detroit. Even her method of saving Amos from suffocation from his case of diphtheria comes from that need to provide for oneself in an emergency. This method of healing and Richards's reference to the community doctor comes from a larger tradition of Appalachian witchcraft that originates from "wives' tales" of common cures for ailments. Her idea of what she should do is based entirely on this very idea that Appalachians must use what resources they have to make the best of any given situation. Although the family

does its best to survive in Detroit, the effort is, in the end, squandered by the fast-paced life that they cannot bring themselves to love like their lives in the past. This is the main tragedy of the Nevels family.

Appalachian Christianity

In the study of the Appalachian dialect, a popular myth of the region's language is that it originates from an older form of English. Michael Montgomery writes:

> By the end of the nineteenth century, it was commonly held that exported (or transplanted language as found in a colony often displayed an arrested development when compared with that of the mother country. That the English of Appalachia was four or more centuries old became the most prevalent version of this idea. Dozens of articles claiming Elizabethan, Shakespearean, or Chaucerian holdovers in the southern mountains have appeared since 1889. (31)

This idea of the age of Appalachian English applies directly to its culture being influenced by the words of the King James Version of the Bible. He continues: "Pride, romanticism, and a desire for cultural validation through associating local speech with prestigious writers and King James English are what underlie most claims about the speaking of Elizabethan or older English in Appalachia" (32). Montgomery's mention of the Bible in his article is not by accident: the Bible has an unmistakably important hold on not only the Appalachian religion, but also on Appalachian culture as a whole. Not only does it encapsulate the religious life of the area but can also live as a physical record of events, as can be seen with a family Bible.

Next to the Bible, one of the more important aspects of Appalachian Christianity is the representations of Christ that can be seen and how they affect the structure of the religion

underneath. While the religious sects in Appalachia have a bit of control over how Christ is seen, one of the more common ideas is “relationship, not religion,” which is one of the trademark ideas of the Evangelical Christian movement, as explained in a PBS interview with Dr. Amy Black, a professor at Wheaton College of Illinois. She goes on to explain this idea of a relationship with Christ rather than a “religious” tie:

> When I think of a definition of evangelical, one of the things that makes an evangelical faith look different, perhaps, than others, [is] there's an emphasis on the personal. There’s an emphasis on the individual nature of salvation.
>
> There are different phrases for having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But it’s ultimately about each person as an individual making what we would call a faith decision: deciding if indeed you ascribe to this theology or not, if indeed you believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be, and that he is divine, and if that makes a difference in your life. (PBS)

This relationship emphasis is a main theme of the novel, *The Dollmaker* by Harriette Arnow, as it follows Gertie Nevels and her relationship with Christ.

What Is Pentecostalism?

According to Grant Wacker, Pentecostals are known for their extreme piety (Ch.1). While all other Christian sects as well as world religions can fall into this category, the Pentecostal point of view on piety is unique as it has a strict set of guidelines that a believer must follow. They are said to be absolutist in nature. Wacker gives an example: “disagreements that most folk, even most evangelical folk, interpreted as honest differences of opinion, Pentecostals saw as vast differences of judgment, shadowed with eternal consequences” (Ch.1). This absolutism can be best seen in the character of Granma Kendrick, Gertie’s mother. Granma

Kendrick's idea of religion differs entirely from Gertie's but stands as the representation of the traditionalist ideas of Appalachian religious culture. Gertie's mother works as a vision of the Appalachia that can never leave the past behind even as the world evolves around it. Her attachment to the past and to her strict moral code causes her a great amount of pain as she grieves for her son who died in World War II and whose soul she is sure is damned to Hell (65). This is a grave representation of the Pentecostal sect as it seemingly presents the religion as stuck in the past and something that torments its adherents.

This dark vision of Pentecostalism that can be viewed on the surface matches with the rest of the novel's supposed critique on organized religion. The novel, however, when looked at more closely, does not condemn organized religion but rather the different types of Christ that can be made by the interpretation of one's religious sect combined with a person's prejudices and character flaws. *The Dollmaker* speaks to the creation of a Christ reflected on personality rather than a more moderate representation of Christ. The novel, in this way, hearkens back to the Evangelical idea of "relationship, not religion." Organized religion, then, is not the enemy in the novel. The enemy is how the word of Christ became muddled according to personal interpretation based on bias rather than personal interpretation based on advocacy for others.

Application of Appalachian Religious Culture to The Dollmaker

The history and cultural impact of Appalachian folk religion presents itself in the novel through Gertie's relationship to Christ. Gertie's understanding of Christ is informed by the ideals and application of Appalachian witchcraft not necessarily seen in her family but in her natural and self-developed idea of the Bible. Her self-developed vision of Christ causes her to struggle against both the Catholic and Protestant images of Christ around her.

Christianity, being the tie that keeps those from Detroit and those from Appalachia joined in cultural understanding, differs significantly in the application between Protestants and Catholics. This is what tends to cause the gaps of understanding from one person to the other. Even Gertie's children's schoolteachers mention their representation of religion in one way or the other, so it becomes essential to the plot to understand these gaps and the standard differences between Protestant and Catholic practice.

The representation of Christ is a central theme that *The Dollmaker* continuously considers. The novel spends much time differentiating Gertie's image of Christ from the images of others that follow a more standardized and organized religion such as Catholicism or one of the many Protestant branches that can be found in Kentucky and Detroit. This differentiation is what ultimately causes the end of the novel: Gertie being completely disillusioned by her own image of Christ being crushed by the reality of the city and modern belief systems around her. The main enemy of the novel becomes modernity and how it has crushed the traditional Appalachian understanding of the Bible and who Christ was and what he means to them in their lives.

One of the main ideas of religion in Appalachia is the literal reading of the Bible and how that applies to a person's daily life. This idea is spread generously throughout the novel, as the Bible is one of Gertie's most used methods of speaking with people in everyday life. Gertie uses Bible verses to give her children and herself an ideological standpoint to take based on her interpretation as well as using it to help teach her children the basic skill of reading. This importance of the Bible in Appalachian culture as represented in the novel is not exaggerated as Jake Richards explains in his book *Backwoods Witchcraft: Conjure and Folk Magic from Appalachia*:

> Regardless of your own preferences or beliefs, the Bible plays a major role In Appalachian folk magic, as it is set into the religious traditions of the Southern Baptists and Protestants. . . . In Appalachia, the family Bible was often used to record births, deaths, marriages, and other events. Important dates and names would fill the blank pages inside as would makeshift family trees, pictures, certificates, and newspaper clippings, and locks of baby hair or a baby's hospital bracelet. (xviii)

By his definition, the Bible was not only used as a reference to daily struggles or triumphs but also as a physical record book of a family's lineage. It's not only the Word of God to the Appalachian Christian, but also a physical representation of their own lives, as well as those of family members. It goes past the realm of the object itself when it is used between characters to communicate their ideals and values.

This attachment to the Bible acts as a reference both to how things were done in the Christian agrarian past and to the social implications of having a different understanding of the Bible. Because Gertie's interpretation of Christ is markedly different than those in Detroit, her Bible commentaries and quotations do not often go as well for her as it might have in Kentucky. It becomes a problem because of the different interpretations of Christ that people have which influences their tolerance for Bible quotations.

This understanding of the Bible is important to the communications that happen in the novel. The consistent reference to the Bible becomes an important part of the novel because of its role in Appalachian culture. The gaps of interpretation can be seen in one of Gertie's conversations with Mr. Daly. He is noticeable by his strong prejudice toward those of different social backgrounds including Appalachians. His prejudice influences his interpretation of the

Bible as much as any organized religion. It is quite clear that Mr. Daly's understanding of Christianity comes from the Catholic Church which understands Christianhood as follows:

> Catholics believe, Christ created a Church, the Catholic Church, which was to provide a way for God's grace to flow to people via the seven Sacraments, created by Christ, which the Catholic Church administers through its ordained clergy…In addition to this Sacramental Grace, Catholics believe that baptized persons, who are free of serious sin, can also receive Actual Grace for their prayers and good works. (Murray 6)

This is important both because it comes through when he speaks to Gertie about her identity as a Christian and because it directly contradicts Gertie's understanding of her own Christianity. The exchange between the two that ends up in miscommunication is as follows:

> "An why for because didjas beat up mu wife, a great big overgrown hillbilly woman like youse on a little woman like mu wife? Why, because she barred da evil doctrine a communism from her door—yu call yuself a Christian, I prasume."
>
> Gertie gave a slow headshake. "I recken I try tu be, but, . . . whether I'm a Christian or not is somethin' fer God to decide, not me" (349-50).

This idea of Gertie not recognizing her own Christianity, but God instead recognizing her Christianity, is a trademark of several strands of Protestant Christianity. This reference likely has something in common with the belief in Pentecostalism of the baptism of the Holy Spirit which is seen as a signal of salvation. Wacker describes in his book how this affected the vision of salvation in the distant and recent past:

> "Baptism with the Spirit," American higher life preacher Reuben A. Torrey testily remarked, "is not primarily intended to make believers happy nor holy, but to make them useful." By the end of the century Christians in each of these three tributary traditions had

> come to label the postconversion experience (or experiences) the "baptism with the Holy Ghost" (Introduction).

He also describes a later form of Holy Spirit baptism that shows itself more in the Appalachian culture today:

> Led by an itinerant Methodist healer named Charles Fox Parham, the seekers read that on the day of Pentecost Jesus' followers experienced Holy Ghost baptism and "began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." This simple story, which had fascinated Christians for nearly 1900 years raised a question as disturbing as it was provocative. If speaking in tongues accompanied Holy Ghost baptism on the Day of Pentecost, why not now? (Introduction)

Gertie's understanding of salvation (or more widely, the understanding of salvation based in Appalachian culture), of who is able to call themselves a Christian, then, differs greatly from the Roman Catholic equivalent that Mr. Daly presents. Not only is Gertie's answer influenced by her idea of Protestant Christianity, but it is also influenced by her changing relationship to Christ when it comes to living in Detroit and processing the trauma that she suffers because of her displacement from Appalachia to Detroit. As Appalachians tend to be highly attached to the land around them (which can be proved by the examples of how Appalachian witchcraft is taken mostly from the land around them), it becomes a type of trauma that Gertie struggles with to be separated from her home.

CHAPTER 2. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DIVINE

The different interpretations of Christ permeate the novel and often illustrate different traits of the characters based on their personalities. Gertie's mother, Granma Kendrick, who is often stern and unforgiving, sees Christ as a god who is unforgiving and distant. Mr. Daly, who tends to have deep prejudices, sees Christ as someone who would agree with him in calling other characters "communists" or the like. These images of Christ have less to do with a person being from a given denomination in the novel and more to do with their ideas of how life should be as explained by their own theology, which is in turn affected by their own personality. They will often make their own image of Christ just as Gertie does in the novel based on their religion.

While the denominations represented in the novel can be used to create an image of the people who practice the given faith, the overriding message of the differing Christs has more to do with individuals than with groups. The problems of the novel often come from people who use their interpretation of Christ inappropriately to discriminate against or to shame others for their lack of belief in the same Christ. In this vision, people who are deemed to be ignored are humanized in a special way, such as when Gertie is seen defending the street preacher against Mr. Daly. These instances can be seen also as Gertie enacting her vision of Christ, bringing the representation further into reality and making it further humanized.

Granma Kendrick's Representation

The initial image of Christ in *The Dollmaker* is Gertie's mother's image. As explained before, because of her angry, oftentimes rude personality and implied religious upbringing, her idea of Christ is a harsher image than Gertie's. For Gertie's mother, Christ comes "with a sword" ready to annihilate any wrongdoer that threatens the sanctity of the believers (Arnow 66). While

the image of Christ matches her oftentimes strict and harsh personality, it also gives her pain by damning her son who passed away in the war.

The mother's image of the divine works as a representation of the harshness that can be found in old-time religion. While this may look like a critique of the Pentecostal or Calvinist denomination itself, it actually works as a critique of a harsh interpretation of Christ. The versions of Christ seen cannot be reduced to entire sects of Christianity. The critique roots itself in individually made representations of Christ instead of denomination-made representations of Christ. This critique hearkens back to the Appalachian witch's image of Christ as someone who gives divine power to those who believe for the good of others. The nature-based Christ and the popular angry Christ directly conflict with each other throughout Appalachian culture and through the novel. To say that one representation wins or loses would be to oversimplify the problem of the text.

Catholic Representation

One of the main conflicts of the text deals with how Gertie copes with carving figures of Christ that do not represent her view of him. This comes in the work she does on the rosaries to make some extra money. Throughout the text, she considers the ramifications of sacrificing her image of Christ in order to make money. Although the image of Christ in the Catholic faith is different from her personal view, its representation proves important in the text by forming an image of Christ that is in some ways inverted from Gertie's view, making the differences between her and the city even starker in comparison.

In the text, the Catholic image of Christ is represented through Gertie's vision, so she can only understand it through her own interpretation of Christ. This understanding, however, is notably differentiated from a Catholic view of Christ as she can only see the faith as an outsider.

As mentioned before, Gertie's view of Christ and the most common Catholic image of Christ are nearly perfectly inverted. Through studying a Catholic understanding of Christ as it relates to the novel, the images of Christ start to make a diverse collage of personal meaning.

In his book, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*, Bishop Robert Barron describes the traditional Catholic understanding of how the divine interacts with humanity: "The church fathers never tired of repeating this phrase as a sort of summary of Christian belief: *Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus* (God became human so that humans might become God)" (1). He goes on further to explain the purpose of the Communion of Saints as related to the purpose of the divine in human life: "The entire purpose of the Liturgy and the church is to make saints, to make people holy. This is why Catholicism takes the saints, in all their wild diversity, with such seriousness and why it presents them to us with such enthusiasm" (6). This image of God becoming human so that humans can become divine sits in opposition to Gertie's image of Christ, as Gertie's image is that of Christ becoming human to show people how to commune with others in a God-approved fashion— not necessarily to make people become saints.

While the Catholic image of Christ works mostly with a reverent and formal spirit because of their image of Christ as the divine, Gertie's image works at a more informal and human-natured representation of Christ. Her Christ, as well as other divine figures like the Virgin Mary, through her descriptions and musings, tends to be more human than divine. This is what surprises the Catholics around her—her supposed irreverence toward Christ and the other divine figures.

This can be seen in one of Gertie's interactions with Maggie, her neighbor's daughter, when they discuss Gertie's view of what the Virgin Mary might have looked like while she was on Earth. The two have a disagreement during which Maggie gets angry at Gertie's idea of Mary

not matching the images of her that can be seen on the different decorations that Maggie's family has in their house as well as claiming that Mary would not be beautiful because of her status as a worker: "Maggie was both sorrowful and angry as she asked: 'And how would she look, an how would you know? She's always looked like this'" (291). This anger is not something that is insignificant because of the emphasis put on the divinity of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic faith. To Maggie, Gertie's remark of Mary not being beautiful comes off as an insult to the divine; however, in Gertie's view, it is a great compliment to Mary that celebrates her hardworking and selfless nature. The split image of the divine that emerges from this one conversation between Maggie and Gertie shows that the characters, although bound together by being in one place and time, are always separated by the distance of their view of the divine. Both Gertie and Maggie have a reverent and favorable image of Mary, but neither of them can accept the other's representation.

However, a closer at the Catholic belief system suggest some comparisons that can be drawn between the common Appalachian vision of Christ as humanized by Gertie and the more iconic vision of the Catholic faith. Bishop Barron continues to analyze the double role of Christ as both human and God by explaining,

> As far as we can determine, Jesus was not formally trained in a rabbinic school, nor was he educated to be a temple priest or a scribe, nor was he a devotee of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or the Essenes—all recognized religious parties with particular convictions, practices, and doctrinal proclivities. He was, if I can use a somewhat anachronistic term, a layman. (10)

Because the writings on Jesus prove him to be a "layman" in terms of his societal role, Gertie's humanization and representation of him are not too far away from the doctrines that can be seen

in the Catholic Church. This takes on a great importance when doing a comparative study of the Catholic Christ and the Christ that an Appalachian might envision, as will be seen when looking at Gertie's representation of Christ.

Gertie's Representation

In her article "Feminine Heroism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," Barbara H. Rigney states the following about Gertie's representation of Christ:

> To depose the God of wrath, Gertie creates a humanistic vision of God as love. She names her youngest son Amos, after the prophet who preached that God is benevolent and just, and would lead his Children of Israel to their promised land. She envisions a Christ very different from that of her mother's apocalyptic being. Gertie sees him as a workingman, a carpenter like herself, who loves music and children. (Rigney 83)

She goes on to explain the feminist contexts for this reading of Gertie:

> The only meaning, Arnow says, is to be found in human relationships. The women in the alley form a kind of sisterhood in which all of them tend each other's children, mutually help to fill the emotional "holes" in their lives, and somehow preserve for themselves and for each other a human dignity. (Rigney 85)

The feminist reading helps to explain the relationships between not only women specifically but also between people in general. These relationships that she has with others and how she interacts with them shows up in her views of Christ. Gertie's image of Christ is not made from the religion that she grows up in but is a representation of how she relates with other people and how she reads the Bible. Since Gertie views humanity as the people that she is accustomed to in Kentucky, Christ takes the image of a worker in a field for her as she explains to her daughter, Cassie:

"When I seen him walken over th hill—he jist looked like a good-turned man. . . .

"Seemed like he wore overalls like a carpenter. . . .

"He'd been in th woods, though, a looken fer somethen, fer he was carryen a big branch a red leaves. I figgered he'd cut down a old holler black gum tree fer to make beehives, an th leaves was so pretty he took em with him." (81)

This image of Christ is not only beautiful, but representative of the peaceful nature that Gertie sees in him. As she has made Henley a Christ figure, she attributes some of his traits to Jesus, making Jesus all the more human to her. This human emphasis in Gertie's image of Christ is important for both her specific characterization as well as the image of Christ that Appalachia shares.

Gertie's relationship to the divine proves to be much less static than that of her mother, whose vision tends to stay distant and only available for punishment or reward. Gertie, as mentioned before, makes her representation of Christ more human than God. Along with her representation of Christ, her idea of the divine beings meets the expectations of humans rather than Christ and Mary's traditional understanding as perfect rather than human. This can be seen in Gertie's view of the Mother Mary.

When Gertie moves to Detroit, the importance placed on Mary is shocking for her as she is not accustomed to the Catholic representation of a deified Mary. Because of her Appalachian Protestant background, she is not as devout to Mary as a Catholic or Catholic-aligned Protestant may be, so seeing the devotions to Mary strike her as strange. Although her vision of Mary is not as devout as the Catholics around her, she still views her as a part of the divine. In the text, she personifies Mary at the level to where she is not a one-dimensional divine being removed from humanity. When asked by Maggie who her representation of Mary might most look like, Gertie

answers simply, “Mary would look like—like your mother” (290). This conversation is significant because Gertie shows not only her image of the divine but of motherhood as well and how those two traits overlap. She goes on to explain her reasoning for applying Mary’s looks to Maggie’s mother: “‘They both seen a lot a trouble, had a heap a youngens, an worked hard’” (290). Through this conversation, Gertie shares that her understanding of Mary is not that she is divine only for her relationship to Jesus, but because of the hardship and strife that she shares with all mothers. Her humanity is innately tied with the divine. This explains her vision of Jesus as the worker in the field instead of a figure of power and domination.

Another trait Gertie’s version of Jesus shows about her ideals is that she treasures the agrarian lifestyle that she has left in Kentucky. When her mother sells the family farm, there is no way to return to the past, making that image of Jesus even more precious to her as she can never again work in the same way that she imagined Jesus to work. Her representation of Christ is not only what she believes a good person is capable of in life, but it is also an ideal version of herself that is able to live in nature.

She uses her interpretation of life to understand the God, thereby making the divine human and the human divine. The way that humanity is placed in the divine, for Gertie, cannot be removed as the divine figures cannot be truly godly if they cannot understand human struggles. For Gertie, the profane is just as holy as the figures from the Bible because those figures can be found in the ordinary things around her. This is the embodiment of the application of an Appalachian folk-religion approach to Christianity.

In Appalachia, the physical products of religion are also important. As mentioned before, the physical family Bible has a lot of power within an Appalachian household. It is not only the word of God to the family, but it is also a physical record of the family’s existence and

accomplishments. This belief in the power of the physical also agrees with the Catholic faith when considering the relationship between the faith and spiritual items like the rosaries that Gertie carves for her neighbors and acquaintances. This cultural tie in the importance of the physical world makes the hobby of carving religious items feel more like something that she might do while she was in Kentucky. On one hand, it separates her from the representation of Christ that she has built for herself based on her own understanding but brings her closer to the people that buy the rosaries from her. She comes closer to understanding them through a similar practice.

Between Jesus and Judas

One of the main concerns of the novel is Gertie's fear of being like Judas, but her constant relating to and sympathy for him as well. Kathleen Walsh describes in her article "Free Will and Determinism in Harriette Arnow's 'The Dollmaker,'" "Although she pities Judas, she does not entirely absolve him, and her recurring sense of identification with him is a measure of her feelings of guilt" (93). While Gertie strives to be like Jesus, she constantly finds herself looking more and more like Judas.

One of the main methods that shows her appearing to be like Judas rather than Christ is her carving of the rosaries although she finds that image of Christ to not be her own. Gertie states the following about the images of Christ on the crucifix in a conversation with a passenger on the train bringing the family to Detroit for the first time:

> Johala nodded, searching Gertie's face, "Christ?"
>
> Gertie nodded. "I've allus kind a hoped so—but I cain't seem tu find a face."
>
> "Maybe," Johala said, and she was smiling a little, "you'll find it in Detroit. In Detroit there are many Christs."

"Seems like they're all dead an hung on crosses," Gertie said. (262).

This version of Christ, to Gertie, is completely dead and not compatible with her vision of Christ being the carpenter she relates to Cassie. To carve this version of Jesus is to become like Judas by making a product that looks like Jesus only to betray her own view of Christ. While it is a holy image of the Catholics in the neighborhood, Gertie betrays her own individual divinity by giving in to an interpretation of the divine that doesn't come naturally do her. This becomes her struggle.

Throughout the novel, Gertie's vision of Christ stays the same; however, her relationship with that Christ changes. The primary mode of the changes in her relationship with Christ is through the tragedies of the text.

CHAPTER 3. TRAGEDY AND DECLINE OF THE FAITH:

Henley and the Ghosts of the Past

One of the very first conflicts seen in the novel is the death of Gertie's brother, Henley, in World War II and the inability of her and her family to cope with his loss. The family's religious beliefs frame how they look at Henley's life and death. The death of Henley elaborates not only on how the family sees him as a person but how they see their world as tied to their religion. Henley focuses the novel on how diverse the ideas of Appalachians can be when it comes to people who have turned away from the Christian faith: the central belief system of the region.

While not alive for the events of the story, Henley's character has one of the most important roles in the text. His comparison to Jesus and Judas works as a mirror for each character that interprets him. His comparisons also form the image of Christ that the person has who is interpreting him. As he is seen both as a Christ and Judas figure, his contradictory existence or lack thereof shows the cracks in the different interpretations of God that each character has. This understanding of Henley as a contradictory

When thinking of Henley, Gertie reverts to her religious understanding. When he is mentioned the most, verses from the Bible are spoken and different allusions to Biblical people. Gertie's thoughts contrast Henley to Biblical figures that had little to no control over their destiny.

> The old questions that had always been in the Bible for her came back with Henley's one question—Job's children, did they know or question why they died to test the patience of their father? And Jethro's daughter bewailing her fate in the mountains, had she ever, like Henley, asked, "Why me?" Did Judas ever ask, "Somebody has to sin to fulfill the prophecy, but why me?" (51)

In the passage above, Henley's comparison to Job's children who had to die "to test the patience of their father" speaks specifically to the usage of his character in the text to show the greater representation of religion in the characters.

The comparison between Henley and the people of the Bible in this passage elevates the importance of Henley's death in terms of how it showcases each character's religious beliefs. When it mentions that the Bible has always had the answers but in dealing with Henley's death Gertie cannot see a specific answer, it elaborates on Gertie's doubt and how it affects her image of God. Her idea of Henley as Judas also works as a mirror, as later in the text, her mother blames her for Henley's supposed bad afterlife. Her mother sees her as a Judas figure, albeit an unsympathetic one:

> "Maybe if'n it hadn't a been for you, Henley would ha give hissef to God. You was th oldest; he thought a sight a you, too much, I've thought many a time. He seen you stand stiff-necked and stubborn in th face uv th Almighty God. You never repented a your sin a dancen. If you an your father, too, but mostly you, had set Henley a good example, he might ha been singen in heaven now." (65)

By Granma Kendrick's response to Henley's death, her attachment to Pentecostal roots can be seen. Grant Wacker explains the following about Pentecostal beliefs in Appalachia:

> In the entire town of Falcon, North Carolina, an advertisement for the Falcon Holiness School boasted one could not buy tobacco or "dope drinks". . . or find "Theaters, Circuses, Moving Picture Shows, Base Ball Games, Social Parties, and Dances"—all "agencies of evil" hurling young people to their "eternal destruction." (Ch.1)

This fervor toward the afterlife that is present in this description of the religious beliefs that Gertie's mother holds in the novel in her criticism of Gertie dancing as well as her general claim

of Gertie being a “bad influence” for Henley and how it led to his supposed damnation. Henley’s role in his mother’s fear for his afterlife proves him even further to be a mirror to her belief system. Her deep-seated fears about her son’s afterlife that are rooted in her Pentecostal belief system shows the family’s traditional upbringing and contrasts significantly from Gertie’s view of Henley.

Gertie, however, does not always see Henley as a person from the Bible whose life is completely beyond their own control. When talking to her mother about Henley’s afterlife, she tries to calm her down by explaining her vision of who Henley was as a person. Gertie’s mother explains her image of Christ as Christ coming back to earth with the sword (67); however, Gertie explains both a piece of her image of Christ as well as how Henley relates to that image: “mebbe they’s another side to Christ. Recollect he went to th wedden feast, an had time to fool with little youngens, an speak to a thief an a bad woman. An Henley was like Christ—he worked an loved his fellowmen an—” (67). Henley being Christlike in Gertie’s mind shows a more human side to Christ. Christ isn’t an angry God that is far away and waiting for revenge against sinners. Instead, he takes the role of a human being who is easy to relate to because of how he interacts with other people.

This image of Christ develops throughout the novel through Gertie’s ever-changing lens on religion and life. The events that happen throughout the novel mold and shift her relationship to Christ, but her understanding of who Christ is never changes from this human-like, compassionate figure.

The novel deals with tragedy after tragedy that leads Gertie to question her faith and her worthiness to be able to represent Christ either in the rosaries or in the sculpture of Christ that she attempts to make out of wood. The presence of these tragedies itself creates friction both

between the characters as well as in Gertie's relationship with the divine itself. When Gertie first moves to Detroit and gets accustomed to the working life, she hears news of a woman who was killed by the machine that she had worked on because of the lack of a safe environment. This news startles Gertie as she sees that the way that people earn their money doesn't only differ entirely from the way that she earned a living in the past, but it also is able to take lives at a much faster pace.

> Gertie had never known there were so many ways for a workingman to die: burned, crushed, skinned alive, smothered, gassed, electrocuted, chopped to bits, blown to pieces. She heard tales of the ways of loose bolts or old belts with human arms, legs, and heads. She listened to stories of machines on a speed-up that, unable to bear the speed as did the men, flew with no warning into flying pieces of steel that blinded and crippled when they didn't kill. (355)

The deaths of the workers described are contrasted with the image of Christ on the crucifix that Gertie makes for Victor:

> The men left for work, but Gertie . . . went back to her work on Victor's Christ. The figure was almost finished now except for the face and the nail holes. It was a drooping, ribby-chested Christ that made her think, faceless as he was, of somebody she had once seen, but could not name. He was no kin at all of the Christ she had seen in her mother's field. (356-57)

The new fast pace of death in Detroit matches, to Gertie, the Catholic image of Christ as she understands it because Christ looks dead and miserable and unable to control his circumstances just like the workers in Detroit that die in accidents. Her humanization of Christ applies to every person that she comes into contact with as her goal in the book is to find the face of Christ for

her sculpture made of wood. It is consistently referenced in the novel that she has the chance to "[find] faces [of Christ] in Detroit" (165). With this application of Christ to people in Detroit, her vision of the Catholic image of Christ is tainted with the widespread death around her as well as the image of Christ (on the rosary) that matches that pace of death.

Cassie's death is the turning point of not only the novel but of Gertie's relationship with Christ. When Cassie dies by being run over by a train, Gertie becomes unable to relate with her woodworking hobby anymore. Through the mentions of her relationship with wood during her coping with her daughter's death, her shattering relationship with Christ can be seen.

When one looks at the beginning of the novel compared to the end of the novel, Gertie's vision of death morphs from a lack of experience with it to a relationship with death formed by the deaths that she has to see and experience along with the death of her relationship with Christ.

Christ and Wood

The main form of nature seen in Gertie's images of Christ is either in trees or by carving wood. This is not insignificant, as Gertie channels her faith through a natural medium. This makes her faith all the more based in nature and in humanity by extension. Wood, for Gertie in the beginning of the novel, becomes a coping mechanism for the tragedies that she experiences through her time in Detroit. However, later in the novel, her relationship to wood as well as Christ changes as she experiences the tragedies that unfold. This continuously morphing relationship to the natural elements shows the development of her character throughout the novel. If one tracks Gertie's relationship with wood, one will find the decline of her love for her pastime of whittling but also the decline of her faith in Christ.

Gertie and the teachers try to help Cassie get accustomed to life in Detroit because of her inability to let go of her past way of life. Cassie has the problem of talking to her imaginary

friend Callie Lou at inappropriate times when other people can see her such, as when she is in school and playing with the neighboring children. The adults in her life get frustrated with Cassie because she refuses to stop talking to Callie Lou. It shows both her inability to leave the freedom that she had in Kentucky but also the inability for her to pretend to be someone that she isn't. Her attachment to Callie Lou is closely tied with the idea of agrarian idealism in the novel.

Cassie as a character displays this tragic sense of agrarian idealism as the main character that is stuck in the past that cannot make amends with the progression of time and industry. Cassie never is able to learn fully how to read or how to integrate with the other children because she stands as a symbol of the irreconcilable past. Because Cassie is constantly living in the past or an imaginary world, she is the personification of everything that the Nevels family lost in Kentucky. Her existence in Detroit is a tragedy in itself because she can never cope with the life that they must leave behind forever.

Gertie's attempts to get Cassie to integrate herself and cope with the life in Detroit creates a separation between the two as Cassie finally learns that she needs to leave Callie Lou in the past. This separation, like the past that can never come back to life, haunts Gertie for the rest of the novel as the tragedies play out. Cassie cannot accept her need to leave Callie Lou and ends up running to the train tracks near their apartment to play with Callie Lou one last time after an argument that she has with Gertie.

While Cassie is on the train track, not knowing how to avoid the impending danger as she is unaware of the train itself, Gertie looks on from behind a wooden fence that keeps her separate from Cassie. Cassie's non-existent knowledge of the dangers of the train also hearken back to her role as a symbol of the past. Because she is so accustomed to life at the farm, she has no concept of what the train means or whether it can stop or not. This is important because of the

relationship she has to the city itself. If her role is taken as that of a symbol of the past or agrarian life (as she can stand for both roles), then her death by train becomes a literal metaphor for the destruction of traditional Appalachian agrarian life by the industrialization and need for the Appalachians to leave their home in the first place.

The most marked sections of the novel for Gertie's breaking point in her relationship with wood are during the scene of Cassie's death on the train tracks and the retelling of Cassie's funeral. In the scene of Cassie's death by the train, for the first time in the novel, wood becomes the enemy for Gertie. As she struggles against the fence between her and Cassie, she is held back by the wounds that the wood of the fence gives her: "Her hair, jerked down from her struggles to get through the little hole, had fallen across her face. Blood oozed from her forehead, her neck, her shoulders, her ears, from her battle with the wood and her torn hands dripped more blood" (455). That the wood acts as a barrier preventing Gertie from reaching Cassie works as a symbol for the distance that was wedged between them due to Cassie's constant interaction with her imaginary friend, Callie Lou.

After Cassie's death, Gertie experiences again what happened in an episode of relived trauma when a train passes by: "A train blew with a loud long screeching, and she sprang up. . . . Her whole body quivered as if the sound were waves of wind shaking her; and for an instant she was again by the fence, tearing at the boards, screaming, reaching; her arm was long, long; she had reached Cassie" (467). This struggle with the wood fence creates a significant addition to the tragedy. The medium that Gertie used for her art and escape from the harshness of her reality becomes the distance between herself and her child who is in imminent danger. It blocks her from being able to reach Cassie in time for her to be saved from death. Her daughter, too, has become one of the victims to the fast-paced cycle of death that shows itself in Detroit.

Because of the argument with Cassie before her death, Gertie blames herself for the accident. As Cassie is dying in her arms, Gertie says: "Cassie, honey, you can have Callie Lou—allus an forever you can have Callie Lou. I'll never run her off no more—never. Hear me—Cassie—never, never—you can talk all you please" (459). This cry to Cassie which she knows that she can never follow up on matches her relationship to her own image of Christ.

When looking at Callie Lou as a stand-in for a representation of Christ, Gertie can see that her own image of Christ will never return to her with the same level of innocence that Cassie has as shown by her believing in Callie Lou. After this point in the novel, Gertie's relationship to her image of Christ diminishes following the death of her daughter and other tragedies that happen to the family afterwards. Her relationship with Christ at the end of the novel can best be described in the scene of her sitting through Cassie's funeral, unable to take in anything due to her grief:

> She sat still and straight in a too small chair; her mouth a bleak straight line of determination under eyes that were bewildered as a lost child's eyes, some strange child who, even as it begs to find the way home, knows there is no finding the way, for the home and all other things at the end of the way are also lost. (470)

This loss of Cassie truly tests Gertie's faith as for the rest of the novel, she is seen struggling with deciding how to make the sculpture of Jesus.

Through the death of Cassie, Gertie becomes a Christ figure in her own rite. By being beaten by the wood and tasked to save her child, she, too, becomes like Christ who was tasked to save humanity by sacrificing himself on the cross. However, Gertie's Christ figure transformation is the opposite image of this, as she tries to save her daughter who dies instead. In

this way, she fails at becoming a true Christ figure because of the structures of modern life as symbolized by the train car that ends up killing Cassie.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

In the novel, the central religious motif is the “essential divinity” of all people, as Steve Mooney states. This essential divinity is shown through the different representations and understandings of Christ. Through these representations, one gets an entire image of who Christ is in WW2 America and how that influences the characters’ actions and how they interact with each other throughout the text. Not only do these representations show who Christ is, but they show who the Christians of Detroit and Kentucky are along with their differences and similarities.

WORKS CITED

Arnow, Harriette. *The Dollmaker,* Kindle ed., Scribner. 2010.

Auryn, Mat. Psychic Witch: *A Metaphysical Guide to Meditation, Magick, & Manifestation*. Llewellyn Publications. 2020.

Barron, Robert. *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith. Random House*. 2011.

Black, Amy. "Interview: Amy Black." Interview by PBS. 2004.

Clark, Amy D.; Hayward, Nancy M. *Talking Appalachian: Voice, Identity, and Community.* University Press of Kentucky. 2013.

Higginson, Paul. "The Vatican and Communism from 'Divini Redemptoris' to Pope Paul VI." *New Blackfriars*, vol. 61, no. 719, Wiley, 1980, pp. 158–71, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43247119.

Mooney, Steve. "Agrarian Tragedy: Harriette Arnow's 'The Dollmaker.'" *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, Appalachian Journal & Appalachian State University, 1991, pp. 34–42, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40933316.

Murray, Hugh. *Understanding Catholicism: Explanations of the Catholic Church for Non-Catholic Christians and Fallen Away Catholics*, Kindle ed., Independently Published, Amazon. 2018.

Richards, Jake. *Backwoods Witchcraft: Conjure and Folk Magic from Appalachia*, Kindle ed., Weiser Books. 2019.

---. *Doctoring the Devil: Notebooks from an Appalachian Conjure Man*, Kindle ed., Weiser Books. 2021.

Rigney, Barbara H. "Feminine Heroism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*." *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. 2008. pp. 81-85.

Wacker, Grant. *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, Kindle ed., Harvard University Press. 2003.

Walsh, Kathleen. "Free Will and Determinism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 49, no. 4, South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1984, pp. 91–106, https://doi.org/10.2307/3199591.

VITA

RAY FINE

Education:	M.A. English, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2022
	B.A. Foreign Language, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2020
	B.A. English, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2020
Professional Experience:	Contract Appalachian English Instructor, SumiRiko Tennessee Inc.; Midway, Tennessee, 2022
	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2020-2022