

Spiritual Redemption Through Love as a Recurring Theme in 20th Century American Literature

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, it appeared that religious faith would soon be obsolete. Advances in science and technology had rendered belief in supernatural causes for natural phenomena untenable and had cast doubt on the idea that there's a divine plan for human lives. Instead, the latter half of the twentieth century brought a backlash of renewed religious fervor both in America and in the Middle East. The rise of Islamic extremism in the Middle East is in many respects the mirror image of the rise of the Christian Right in the United States; both reject science in favor of faith and would like to turn back the clock to a time when science served religious dogma. Although the events of 9/11/2001 have been interpreted as an attack on Christianity by Islam, in fact, the destruction of the twin towers was a blow by a religious culture against the central symbols of a predominantly secular one. The Christian Right shares radical Islam's rejection of secularism and has explained the 9/11 attacks and various natural disasters since then as being God's way of punishing America for its corrupt and godless culture. Even more important than their shared abhorrence of secularism is the fact that both the Islamic extremists and the Christian Right have moved away from the "Ethic of Reciprocity," or the Golden Rule as it is more commonly called, as the guiding principle of human behavior. Right wing fundamentalists have returned to the God of the Old Testament as the model of how to handle differences in belief at home and abroad. Today, America seems more deeply divided than at any time since the Civil War and more profoundly alienated from most of the rest of the world than at any previous time in its history. Both at home and abroad, America has become embroiled in what many people interpret as a holy war between believers and infidels—whether it's the Judeo-Christian West against Islamic jihadists in the Middle East or the "religious right" against "godless humanists" here in America. The religious right claims to hold a monopoly on moral values, arguing that morality cannot exist without belief in God. In their view, "Godless liberals" are by definition amoral, sinful, and corrupt—the main source of moral decay within American society. These two factions are in conflict over virtually every aspect of America's domestic and foreign policies.

In the context of this apparently irreconcilable split in American culture, what the study of twentieth century American literature can offer is a renewed understanding of the profound similarities in the core values of Judaism, Christianity, Native American spiritualism, secular humanism, and existentialism. These core values are expressed in the works of writers whose perspectives range from devoutly religious to atheistic. "The Magic Barrel" by Bernard Malamud, *Ironweed* by William Kennedy, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Dangling Man* by Saul Bellow, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, and

The Sirens of Titan by Kurt Vonnegut all address the impact of war, the disintegration of cultural values, the loss of a sense of community, and the search for a source of meaning and transcendence in individual lives. Each of these works portrays love as a powerful and essential spiritual force in human lives, with significance and consequences that go far beyond the emotional bonds between individuals. The ability to love is strongly linked to emotional and spiritual health, and the failure to love is a symptom of moral or spiritual inadequacy. What is most striking about these works is that they all arrive at the same answers to the essential questions: “What is the meaning of life?” and “How should a good man live?” The answer is that we must love one another. Love is the foundation of moral action, love creates meaning and purpose in people’s lives, and love makes spiritual transcendence possible, whether it is within a religious or “post-religious” context.

Bernard Malamud’s short story, “The Magic Barrel” has an overtly religious topic: the preparation of a young man to assume spiritual leadership within the Jewish faith.¹ Having completed six years of rabbinical study, Leo Finkle believes that he is ready to assume the position of rabbi. However, his years of diligent study have provided only intellectual preparation; in all his years of studying the scriptures, Leo has never had to confront the emotional climate of his own heart and soul. Emotionally and spiritually, he is far from ready to provide spiritual guidance for others. When Leo decides to find a wife so that he will have a better chance of finding a congregation, he is concerned only with surface

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appearances: his bride must be young, pretty, and intelligent; above all, she must be “suitable” for her future status as the wife of a rabbi. Leo’s first discovery is that he knows as little about divine love as he does about earthly love: “‘I think, he said in a strained manner,’ that I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not” (723). Thus, Leo discovers “the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was—unloved and loveless”(724). Leo must learn to love other people in order to love God. After weeks of desperate and moody contemplation, he realizes that he is unwilling to marry without love; his decision to find a wife has been transformed into a desire to find love.

The fact that Leo falls in love with a “fallen” woman is at the heart of the meaning of the story. Leo is first attracted to the unidentified photo because of the emotional depth he sees in the woman’s face; the tormented expression in her eyes captures his imagination:

Her face deeply moved him. . . . It gave him the impression of youth—spring flowers, yet age—a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange. . . . *something* about her moved him. . . . she leaped forth to his heart—had *lived*, or wanted to—more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived—

had somehow deeply suffered: it could be seen in the depths of those reluctant eyes, and from the way the light enclosed and shone from her, and within her, opening realms of possibility: this was her own. Her he desired. (725-726)

Her face shows that she has sinned, that she has experienced the potential for darkness in mankind and in herself. She needs forgiveness, unconditional acceptance, and love. Looking at her picture, “he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow of evil. He shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all” (726). Leo believes that unlike the virtuous women in the matchmaker’s files, any one of whom would have been far more suitable to be a rabbi’s wife, this one will be able to understand him on a deeper level: “again with excitement he examined the face and found it good: good for Leo Finkle. Only such a one could understand him and help him seek whatever he was seeking. She might, perhaps, love him” (726).

After Leo learns that this desperate young woman is Salzman’s own daughter, who turned to prostitution to escape her family’s poverty, Leo tries to stop loving her: “Though he prayed to be rid of her, his prayers went unanswered. Through days of torment he endlessly struggled not to love her; fearing success, he escaped it. He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God” (727). In contrast to his earlier expectations regarding marriage, Leo now seeks a relationship based not on superficial appearances but on a far deeper kind of shared need and mutual understanding. He has learned that genuine love is unconditional, unchanged by the person’s faults or failings. The prospect is both terrifying and irresistible; it will demand more than has ever been asked of him before, but the potential reward is nothing less than salvation for them both.

Falling in love with Stella transforms Leo. The first time Salzman came to Leo’s home, Leo didn’t even think to offer him a cup of tea, and when Salzman asked for some refreshment, Leo felt chagrined yet resentful. By contrast, after Leo has fallen in love with Stella, he treats Salzman with kindness and consideration. When he unexpectedly finds Salzman waiting for him at his door step, he invites him in and immediately makes tea and prepares a sandwich for him. Later, after he has had to come to terms with Stella’s sinful past, Leo is even more greatly changed: “Salzman looked up at first without recognizing him. Leo had grown a pointed beard and his eyes were weighted with wisdom” (727). This time when Leo asks Salzman to arrange a meeting with Stella, he is no longer thinking only of himself: “‘Put me in touch with her, Salzman,’ Leo said humbly. ‘Perhaps I can be of service’” (727). Salzman, who is still unable to forgive his own daughter, tells Leo, “If you can love her, then you can love anybody” (727), precisely the quality of spirit Leo will need to be a rabbi. When Leo sees Stella for the first time, she presents a classic image of a prostitute standing under a street light smoking, yet Leo immediately sees beneath the tawdry surface to the soul within: “From afar he saw that her eyes—clearly her father’s—were filled with desperate innocence. He pictured, in hers, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky. Leo ran forward with the flowers outthrust” (728). In choosing to

love Stella unconditionally, Leo demonstrates the capacity for love and compassion that will enable him not only to find his own path to God but to guide others to salvation as well.

Whereas love and religious faith work together to bring about salvation in “The Magic Barrel,” in *Ironweed* and *Ceremony*, institutionalized religion often leads to beliefs that do more harm than good to the people who follow them. In these novels, Christianity is associated with sexual shame and prudery, a harshly judgmental and unforgiving attitude toward others, a pervasive feeling of guilt, and a tendency toward self-martyrdom. The protagonists find redemption—forgiveness of sins, emotional healing, a renewed sense of identity and purpose, spiritual transcendence and joy—not through religion but through love.

In *Ironweed*, religion offers Francis Phelan no help at all in his quest to redeem himself.² Kennedy portrays Catholicism as the source misplaced guilt and shame that has transformed natural love and affection into something repulsive. Francis’s mother “perennially resisted her husband,” and “hated the fact that people even knew that she had committed intercourse in order to have children” (98). As an adult, Francis finally understands the role religion has played in making his mother an unhappy and mean-spirited person: “the virginal mother of six recoiled with what Francis recognized for the first time to be spiritually induced terror . . . She has been dead all her life, Francis thought, and for the first time in years he felt pity for this woman, who had been spayed by self-neutered nuns and self-gelded priests” (99). Her religion has so distorted her idea of purity that Kathryn Phelan cannot allow herself physical pleasure, love, or affection. Catholicism also encourages a harsh, judgmental attitude toward others so that when Francis marries Annie, Kathryn refuses to allow “his common little woman” inside her home. Francis “never set foot again in the god-damned house until the old battle-ax (sad, twisted, wrong-headed, pitiable woman) died” (147). Even in her grave, Kathryn continues her self-imposed martyrdom: “Francis’s mother wove crosses from the dead dandelions and other deep-rooted weeds; careful to preserve their fullest length, she wove them while they were still in the green stage of death, then ate them with an insatiable revulsion. . . . Weeds appealed to Kathryn Phelan in direct ratio to the length of their roots. The longer the weed, the more repulsive the cross” (2, 9).

Kathryn Phelan’s rigid, judgmental attitude is echoed in the behavior of Reverend Chester of the Methodist mission, who gives food and warm clothing to transients, but only if they will sit through his sermon and follow his rules. Because Sandra is a drunk, he turns her away from the mission, indifferent to the fact that she is clearly at risk of dying of exposure. His version of Christian charity is self-righteous and self-serving. Unlike Reverend Chester, Francis recognizes Sandra’s essential humanity despite what she has become—first a whore and then a bum: “Nobody’s a bum all their life; she hada been somethin’ once. . . . A little kid’s somethin’ that ain’t a bum or a whore” (31). Francis brings Sandra some soup, puts her shoe back on, carries her to a more sheltered place out of the wind, and manages to scrounge up a

blanket to help her stay warm. Only after Sandra has frozen to death and been chewed by dogs does the mission let Francis carry her inside until she can be transported to the morgue. In addition to trying to help Sandra, Francis consistently exhibits true charity and compassion for others. He tries to save Aldo Campione, gives food to the homeless man with a wife and baby, protects Helen as best he can, rescues Rudy from the vigilantes, and finally carries Rudy all the way to the hospital. He tries to fulfill Rudy's last wish by providing a suitable epitaph for him.

Given his upbringing, it's no surprise that Francis Phelan carries a heavy burden of guilt, much of which is either wholly undeserved or is out of proportion to his true guilt. Overwhelmed by grief and unable to face his guilt for having dropped his infant son, has spent over twenty years in self-imposed exile, a downward spiral that has reduced him to a drunken bum who does odd jobs for a few dollars and often winds up sleeping in the weeds. Over the course of three days in 1938—Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day, Francis finally returns home to face his "dead"—all the people he has "killed" in one way or another: his father, Aldo Campione, Harold Allen, Rowdy Dick, and Gerald. At Gerald's grave, he asks, "You suppose now that I can remember this stuff out in the open, I can finally start to forget it?" (19). When Francis finally makes a public confession of his role in Gerald's death, no one understands the emotional significance of what he is saying and he gets no relief from it: "Francis's confession seemed wasted. . . . it did not diminish his own guilt but merely cheapened the utterance . . . He felt certain now that he would never attain the balance that allowed so many other men to live peaceful, nonviolent, nonfugitive lives, lives that spawned at least a modicum of happiness in old age" (215).

Where religion fails, love succeeds. Francis is redeemed by love—Helen's love for him, the love he still feels for his wife and children, and the love they feel for him. Helen's death from cancer is presented as a voluntary act intended to free Francis from his sense of obligation to her so that he can return to Annie with a clear conscience. The love Francis has always felt toward Annie has repeatedly drawn him back to Albany over the years, but it is only after Francis finds out that Annie never blamed him for Gerald's death and, in fact, never told anyone that it was Francis who dropped Gerald that he can actually bring himself to show up on her doorstep. When Francis assures Annie that despite his relationship with Helen, he "only had one wife," he is stunned by her response: "'And I only had one husband. I only had one man.' Which froze Francis's gizzard. 'That's what religion does,' he said, when he could talk (161). Annie replies, 'It wasn't the religion' (161), thus reassuring Francis that it wasn't the Catholic ban on divorce nor an unhealthy shame about sex that caused her to reject other suitors. In spite of everything—the death of Gerald, the long years of abandonment, his relationship with Helen, his encounters with countless other women—Annie's love has never wavered.

Annie's unconditional love finally enables Francis to come to terms with all the ways he has let his family and himself down over the years: "He stared and he knew that he was in the throes of flight, not outward this time but upward" (163). As he washes for dinner, Francis feels "blessed," and ". . . a great sunburst entered the darkening skies, a radiance so sudden that it seemed like a bolt of lightning; yet its brilliance remained, as if some angel of beatific lucidity were hovering outside the bathroom window" (171). Because Annie has forgiven him, Francis can finally begin to forgive himself. Francis reaches his moment of truth as he is about to ride the train out of town once again, thinking that the police are after him for injuring the vigilante during the raid on the tramps' camp. When Strawberry Bill assures him, "no cops chasin' you, pal," Francis is filled with a vision of Annie's attic that causes him to throw away the empty whisky bottle. "The bottle and the moon made music like a soulful banjo when they moved through the heavens, divine harmonies that impelled Francis to leap off the train and seek sanctuary under the holy Phelan eaves" (225). Leo Finkle gets candles and violins; Francis Phelan gets the moon and a soulful banjo; Leo learns how to love unconditionally and Francis discovers that he can receive unconditional love and forgiveness. Both are saved by love.

Catholicism is also portrayed negatively in *Ceremony*, in which Silko shows how conversion to Catholicism has alienated the Lagunas and other Native Americans from their spiritual heritage, leaving them with a sense of shame and inferiority.³ It destroys the sense of community within the tribe, isolating each "soul" so that instead of gaining strength from their shared traditions and sense of unity, each person is on his own spiritually: "Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family" (68). When the young Native Americans try to assimilate, they inevitably fail, often turning to alcohol and prostitution when they discover that adopting white culture does not result in acceptance into white society. Their sense of shame and failure prevents them from returning to their tribal community, even when the community wants them back. Even those Native Americans who haven't converted to Christianity see that their traditional stories and rituals are regarded as primitive superstitions by the dominant white culture, and they lose faith in "the world made of stories" (95) that is the spiritual center of their traditional culture without gaining anything fill the void.

Like Kathryn Phelan, Tayo's Auntie has developed sexual prudery, an unforgiving attitude toward others, and a flair for playing the martyr through her conversion to Catholicism. Although she pretends to be providing a loving home for Tayo, her sister's illegitimate child by an unknown white man, Auntie makes sure that everyone knows what a heavy burden of shame she has to carry because of him and makes sure that Tayo feels like an outsider within the family: "She was careful that Rocky did not share these things with Tayo, that they kept a distance between themselves and him. But she would not

let Tayo go outside or play in another room alone. She wanted him close enough to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them” (67). She teaches him to be ashamed of his mother, taking away the only photograph he has of her and instead describing for him a shameful scene of his mother standing “naked except for high heeled shoes” beneath the cottonwood tree, where she dropped her purse, which was “empty except for a lipstick” (70). After Tayo comes back from fighting in the Pacific, Auntie blames him for failing to save Rocky. The burden of caring for her dead sister’s son, now just another crazy Indian veteran, gives Auntie another chance to relish her role as martyr, and “she never let them forget what she had endured. . . . he knew that he would see her probing for new shame, the anticipation of what she might find swelling inside her . . . she needed a new struggle, another opportunity to show those who might gossip that she had still another unfortunate burden which proved that, above all else, she was a Christian woman” (30).

Like Francis Phelan, Tayo carries a crushing load of guilt. Layered on top of the guilt, shame, and alienation he learned as a child are the guilt and horror he feels over his experiences during the war. He feels responsible for the deaths of Rocky in the jungle and of Josiah back home; he thinks that he “prayed the rain away,” thereby causing the post-war drought on the reservation. Tayo is still reeling from the horrors of “white warfare,” impersonal slaughter that destroyed the earth as well as the people on it: “killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehend . . . the fallen jungle trees and muddy craters of torn earth . . . the dismembered corpses and the atomic heat-flash outlines, where human bodies had evaporated” (36-37).

Tayo suffers a complete emotional breakdown during the war in large part because he seems to be the only person who recognizes that the human family transcends racial and national boundaries, so that when they kill Japanese soldiers, it is like killing members of their own family. He first notices that the corpses of soldiers of different races are nearly indistinguishable: “That was the first time Tayo had realized that the man’s skin was not much different from his own. The skin. He saw the skin of the corpses again and again, in ditches on either side of the long muddy road—skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands; even white men were darker after death. There was no difference when they were swollen and covered with flies. That had become the worst thing for Tayo: they looked too familiar even when they were alive” (7). When Tayo is ordered to shoot Japanese prisoners, he is unable to do so because he suddenly sees not the face of an enemy, but the face of the man he loves as a father, his uncle Josiah:

When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. . . . in that instant he saw Josiah standing there; the face was dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo. So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah lying there. . . . Rocky made him look at the corpse and said, ‘Tayo, this is a *Jap*! This is a *Jap* uniform!’ And then he rolled the body

over with his boot and said, 'Look, Tayo, look at the face,' and that was when Tayo started screaming because it wasn't a Jap, it was Josiah, eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death. (7-8)

Even after the Japanese soldiers kill Rocky, Tayo doesn't hate them; they are simply too much like himself.

Each step in Tayo's healing journey involves renewing his sense of love, trust, and connectedness. All of the healers that help him on his path to emotional health—Night Swan, Betonie, and Ts'eh—are of mixed heritage and have hazel eyes like Tayo's, and they teach him to see the potential for strength in his dual heritage, which is mirrored in the success of Josiah's mixed-breed cattle. Unlike the pure-bred cattle that die under the harsh conditions of the reservation, the mixed-breed cattle will "grow up heavy and covered with meat like Herefords, but tough, too, like the Mexican cows, able to withstand hard winters and many dry years" (80). Night Swan is the first person that Tayo ever talks to about how he feels about not having dark eyes like the other children, about how the color of his eyes reminds people of his mother and what she did. Night Swan helps Tayo understand that the prejudice has nothing to do with him; it expresses people's innate fears of change and of their loss of control over the world around them: "Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing.' She laughed softly. 'They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves'" (99-100). When Tayo returns after the war, Night Swan is gone, but visiting her room and remembering the afternoon he spent in her arms gives him the first night of sleep unbroken by nightmares or vomiting that he has had since he left the hospital.

When Tayo goes to the medicine man Betonie, his initial feeling is one of fear and distrust; the thought that his family has sent him to the medicine man to get rid of him fills him with despair: "He blinked back the tears, but he didn't move. He was tired of fighting. If there was no one left to trust, then he had no more reason to live" (122). Betonie gains Tayo's trust by telling his own story of being a mixed-race child, and he explains that the reason Tayo saw Josiah's face on the Japanese soldier was that Tayo had recognized the prehistoric kinship between Asians and Native Americans: "You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers" (124). Betonie also helps Tayo recognize that, contrary to what the white doctors told him in the hospital, emotional health is not something that exists in isolation; it involves one's ability to connect with other people and with the whole fragile web of life:

He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us.' But he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way, because the world didn't work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything. (125-126)

Tayo must overcome the internalized racism that makes him see Indians as inferior to whites, but at the same time, he must not hate whites, despite the fact that they have stolen the land and are responsible for destroying it. Betonie tells him, “Nothing is that simple . . . you don’t write off all the white people, just like you don’t trust all the Indians” (128). Later, when Tayo is feeling helpless against “their wars, their bombs, their lies,” Betonie says, “That is the trickery of the witchcraft . . . They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction” (132). The healing ritual that Betonie performs for Tayo reconnects Tayo to his Native American heritage and to a sense of connectedness to the elements of nature that are animated by the Native American stories. It validates his belief in the stories and ceremonies he learned as a child and restores his sense of belonging to his community and to the earth. After the ceremony, Tayo no longer feels dead inside. He accepts his right to live in the world.

Ts’eh’s love for Tayo reconnects him to the loved ones he has lost and to the possibility of joy. After his first night with Ts’eh, Tayo wakes up happy; he creates a ceremony of renewal that begins and ends with sunrise, symbolic of a new beginning. When he finds the cattle penned up on a white man’s land, he finally recognizes how internalized racism has distorted his thinking not only about others but about himself: “He knew then he had learned the lie by heart—the lie which they had wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted. The lie. He cut into the wire as if cutting away at the lie inside himself” (191). He lies down on the earth, feeling himself pulled to the center, “sinking into the elemental arms of mountain silence” (201). He gathers up Josiah’s cattle and takes them home to Joseph.

The most important lesson Tayo learns from Ts’eh is that love can survive separation; her love stays with him and is undiminished even when they are apart: “He dreamed with her, dreams that lasted all night, dreams full of warm deep caressing and lingering desire which left him sleeping peacefully until dawn, and the feeling that she had been with him all night. . . .He was dreaming of her arms around him strong, when the rain on the tin roof woke him up. But the feeling he had, the love he felt from her, remained. . . . He was overwhelmed by the love he felt for her . . . and he knew he would find her again” (215, 217-218). Even when he returns home and sleeps again in Rocky’s bed, Ts’eh’s love stays with him, protecting him from grief and despair: “The terror of the dreaming he had done on this bed was gone, uprooted from his belly; and the woman had filled the hollow spaces with new dreams” (219). The knowledge that love transcends time, space, and death reconnects Tayo to the loved ones he has lost and restores Tayo’s sense of wholeness:

The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones; Josiah and Rocky were not far away. They were close; they had always been close. And he loved them then as he had always loved

them, the feeling pulsing over him as strong as it had ever been. They loved him that way; he could still feel the love they had for him. The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained. (219-220)

Tayo finally understands that his connection to the people he loves, to the earth, and to his cultural heritage cannot be broken by anything outside himself. Tayo's regeneration is echoed in the renewal of life he sees around him as the drought finally ends: "As far as he could see, in all directions, the world was alive. He could feel the motion pushing out of the damp earth into the sunshine—the yellow spotted snake the first to emerge, carrying this message on his back to the people. . . . as far as he could see, the land was green again" (221, 234). With the new, stronger breed of cattle, the knowledge of plants and medicinal herbs that Ts'eh has taught him, and his new understanding of internalized racism, Tayo is ready to return to the reservation with both tangible and intangible sources of hope and renewal.

The witchery is ultimate source of evil that Tayo must overcome. It breaks the bonds of love and compassion between people, destroying their sense of community and causing them to become cruel and indifferent to the suffering of others. It tricked the whites into believing that they could own the land that once belonged to the Indians, and it is responsible for the whites' I-It attitude toward nature that leads them to destroy the natural environment and to create weapons of mass destruction, represented by the testing of the first atomic bomb at Trinity Site and the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The "destroyers" represent the antithesis of love, encompassing both hatred and indifference: "They destroy the feeling people have for each other. . . . Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again" (229). The destroyers numb human emotions so completely that "Only destruction is capable of arousing a sensation, the remains of something alive in them; and each time they do it, the scar thickens, and they feel less and less, yet still hungering for more" (229-230).

The final step in Tayo's healing journey is to resist the potential for hatred and violence within himself, and he must do it under circumstances of rage, grief, and despair after he discovers that his closest friends have conspired to turn him over to the white authorities. The showdown occurs near the mine shaft where the uranium for the atomic bomb was mined: "The gray stone was streaked with powdery yellow uranium, bright and alive as pollen But they had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only *they* could have dreamed" (246). Tayo sees how all the lines of the whole pattern converge at a single point, the whole history of white domination leading to this site where the first weapon of mass destruction had been created. Even though he knows that Harley intended to betray him and is now enduring the death that they had planned for Tayo, it requires all of Tayo's strength to resist the urge to kill Emo to stop the torture of Harley: "He was certain his own sanity would be destroyed if he did not stop them and all the

suffering and dying they caused—the people incinerated and exploded, and little children asleep on streets outside Gallup bars” (252). In the true spirit of the destroyers, in which each act of destruction generates the urge for more, Emo and Pinkie kill Leroy as well as Harley; later, Emo kills Pinkie as well. When Tayo resists the urge to give in to violence and hatred, his healing journey is complete, and he prevents the witchery from completing its ritual of destruction.

Like *Ceremony*, *Dangling Man* by Bellow and *All My Sons* by Miller explore the problem of war and its meaning for individual lives. Both Bellow and Miller focus on the difficulty of achieving an appropriate balance between self-love and love for mankind, which in times of war often requires self-sacrifice. Robert, Bellow’s *Dangling Man*, is “dangling” because he cannot decide which is more important, protecting his own life or participating in the central experience of his generation by allowing himself to be drafted into the army.⁴ As a resident alien in the U.S., he could easily avoid getting caught up in the war; at the same time, he wonders whether being a Jew gives him a particular responsibility to help save the Jews in Hitler’s concentration camps. The choice of whether or not to fight is fraught with moral implications for Joseph as he struggles to answer the question, “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” (27).

The more he focuses on his own private dilemma, the lonelier and more emotionally isolated Joseph becomes, and he sinks deeper and deeper into his own “inner climate of darkness” (60): “It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will” (9). Joseph’s wife and in-laws pressure him to use the opportunities that are available to him to get ahead in life, but he is sickened by those who take advantage of the wartime shortages and economic boom to increase their profits; he finds the idea of profiting from the war to be the most repugnant choice of all: “Myself, I would rather die in the war than consume its benefits. . . . of course, I hope to survive. But I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary” (56).

Searching for some basis for making his choice, Joseph briefly considers turning to religion, but he rejects using the dictates of faith to arrive at a decision as being “a miserable surrender . . . born out of disheartenment and chaos; and out of fear, bodily and imperious, that like a disease asked for a remedy and did not care how it was supplied” (46). Religion offers an easy answer, but it would require that he “sacrifice the mind that sought to be satisfied . . . Out of my own strength it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender” (46). Joseph wants to find a rational basis for making such a life-changing decision.

Ultimately, Joseph decides that he does not have a “separate identity” (112); his sense of himself is inextricable from his sense of connection to his friends, family, and generational peers; consequently, he must be willing to participate in the most important experience of his generation. Since he cannot hope to escape the universal human experiences of suffering and humiliation, his goal must be to meet

them “with grace, without meanness” (45). Joseph’s decision to request immediate induction into the armed forces is based on an insight that he derives from the philosophy of Spinoza: Protecting “one’s life”—the “preservation of the animal”—is less important than saving “oneself”—not the soul or spirit, but “The mind. . . . It is our humanity that we are responsible for, our dignity, our freedom” (111). The answer Joseph comes to, that satisfies his mind as well as his heart, is that he can only be fully human and truly himself when he is connected to other people. He concludes that “goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love” (61).

The tragic flaw that destroys Joe Keller, the protagonist of Arthur Miller’s play *All My Sons*, is his failure to recognize this fundamental insight that Joseph comes to.⁵ Keller fails to understand that he has a responsibility not only to his own family but to the larger community as well. The central conflict of the play is the clash of two value systems: the “every man for himself,” dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest mentality of capitalism, which validates individual economic success above all else, and the Christ-like ideal of love, which values brotherly love and self-sacrifice. Keller tries to justify his decision to conceal the cracks and ship the defective airplane parts on the grounds that he did it for his family, to be able to leave a prosperous business to his sons. When Mother tries to tell Keller that “There’s something bigger than the family to him [Chris],” Keller replies, “Nothin’ is bigger! . . . I’m his father and he’s my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head!” (Act Three/77). Keller argues that it simply isn’t possible to live up to a Christ-like ideal of self-sacrifice: “Chris, a man can’t be a Jesus in this world” (Act Three/83).

Chris attempts to explain the moral imperative that should preclude putting other people’s lives at risk for personal gain, and that when Keller’s endangered other young men, it was no different than if he had done it to Chris himself: “For me!—I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world—the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the world? What the hell are you? You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you?” (Act Two/70). Keller clings to the fact that his son Larry didn’t fly a P-40; he can live with the deaths of strangers and not consider himself of murderer so long as his own son wasn’t in one of those planes. Even Mother can overlook the fact that her husband caused the deaths of other people’s sons, but she clings to the illusion that Larry must still be alive because she cannot face the possibility that Keller caused their own son’s death. She tells Chris, “Your brother’s alive, darling, because if he’s dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father” (Act Two/68). Chris argues, “Once and for all you can know there’s a universe of people outside and you’re responsible to it, and unless you know that you threw away your son because that’s why he died” (Act Three/84). When Keller does,

indeed, put a bullet in his head at the end of the play, it is because he is finally able to see his connection to all those other young men; his suicide is his acknowledgement that there is something bigger and more important than the relationship between father and son.

Ironically, the only place where the Christian ideal of love seems to be followed is on the front lines during the war. Chris says, “one time it’d been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That’s only a little thing . . . but . . . that’s the kind of guys I had. They didn’t die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they’d’ve been here today” (Act one/35). Chris is disillusioned when he returns from the war to find business as usual on the home front; he contrasts the idealism he experienced during the war with the pragmatism and self-interest he sees all around him at home: “We used to shoot a man who acted like a dog, but honor was real there, you were protecting something. But here? This is the land of the great big dogs, you don’t love a man here, you eat him!” (Act Three/81). Like Bellow’s Joseph, Chris sees that the most people on the home front are oblivious to the sacrifices of others that make their comfort and prosperity possible:

And then I came home and it was incredible. I . . . there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a—bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt . . . what you said . . . ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you’ve got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you’ve got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there’s blood on it. (Act One/36)

Larry expresses a similar sentiment in his suicide note when he tells Ann that he is going to crash his plane because he can’t face what his father has done: “Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business” (Act Three/83). Larry kills himself rather than face the fact that his father put profits above human lives, and Chris suffers survivor’s guilt after experiencing the brotherly love and self-sacrifice of his fellow soldiers. He struggles to reconnect to the values of peacetime society, which seem selfish, shallow, and materialistic by comparison.

Miller makes clear how difficult it is to live up to the ideal of Christian charity in daily life. Jim Bayliss also gave up his ideals to get ahead; instead of doing medical research to benefit mankind, he now treats wealthy hypochondriacs to earn enough money to please his wife. The price to his sense of himself and of what his life means has been high: “now I live in the usual darkness; I can’t find myself; it’s even hard sometimes to remember the kind of man I wanted to be” (Act Three/74-75). Ultimately, even Chris compromises his ideals. He has known or at least strongly suspected all along that his father was guilty, but even after Keller confesses, Chris cannot bring himself to turn his father in: “I could jail him! I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I’m like everybody else now. I’m practical now. You [Ann] made me practical” (Act Three/80). Still struggling with his conscience, Chris tells his father, “I know

you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself!" (Act Three/84). Keller's suicide is, in part, an effort to free Chris of guilt for his part in concealing Keller's crime.

Vonnegut extends the community to whom one is responsible beyond the limits of Joe Keller's imagination. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut addresses the problem of what it means to kill other people who, regardless of their race or nationality, are fundamentally similar to ourselves. He shows that war is the ultimate failure to extend one's love beyond the limits of one's own "family,"—beyond one's own community, race, or nationality.⁶ For Vonnegut, like Silko, our enemies are indistinguishable from ourselves. Vonnegut makes this point most vividly when the Martian armies, controlled by Rumfoord, invade the earth. These reluctant soldiers are human beings who have been shanghaied into service as soldiers on Mars; virtually un-armed and untrained for combat, they are quickly slaughtered as they emerge from their spaceships. The final wave consists of nothing but "unarmed women and children" (175). Thus, there are no "Martians," only other people.

Whereas for Miller, the problem is the failure of individuals to understand and live up to the religious ideals that should guide their behavior, in *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut dismisses all religions as mankind's misguided attempts to find the meaning of life outside themselves. The novel is narrated during an imaginary present when "Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself" (7), but it is set during "the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression" (8), an era during which "Gimcrack religions were big business" (7) and when "Mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward—and pushed ever outward. What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what creation was all about" (7). Vonnegut ridicules the idea of God as "a big eye in the sky" who spends all his time watching and shaping human lives: "The Earthlings behaved at all times as though there were a big eye in the sky—as though that big eye were ravenous for entertainment. . . . The big eye was the only audience the Earthlings cared about. The fanciest performances that Salo had seen had been put on by Earthlings who were terribly alone. The imagined big eye was their only audience" (276).

Vonnegut satirizes institutionalized religion through caricatures like Bobby Denton and his Love Crusade and mocks the idea that God intervenes in individual lives through Noel Constant's use of Biblical passages to pick stock purchases and through Rumfoord's new religion, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which teaches that "Luck is not the hand of God" (180) and whose members all adopt handicaps that nullify any natural advantages they were born with in order to make life "fair." Because god pays no attention to human beings and their activities, everything happens by blind chance and has no larger meaning. The motto of the church consists of Unk's explanation of what has happened to him: "I

was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all” 229). Vonnegut shows how religions can breed violence and conflict when he describes the techniques Reverend Redwine has used to spread Rumfoord’s new religion: “There crept into his voice a beatifically threatening tone that he had not used much since the earliest days of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, since the thrilling mass conversions that had followed the war with Mars. In those days, Redwine and the other young proselytizers had threatened unbelievers with the righteous displeasure of crowds—righteously displeased crowds that did not then exist. The righteously displeased crowds existed now in every part of the world” (227).

By the end of the novel, the idea of God has been reduced to an absurdity—it’s the Tralfamadorians, or, more precisely, not the Tralfamadorians themselves, but the sentient machines created by these now-extinct inhabitants of another planet that are watching and manipulating mankind’s destiny. The most remarkable achievements of human history—such as Stonehenge and the great wall of China—turn out to be trivial messages from these latter day Tralfamadorians to their stranded emissary who is trying to deliver a message—a single dot meaning “Greetings”—from “One Rim of the Universe to theOther” (269), an endeavor that he eventually describes as “a fool’s errand” (313). The vast reaches of space are revealed to be “a nightmare of meaninglessness without end” (8), and mankind exists in “a Universe composed of one trillionth part matter to one decillion parts black velvet futility” (303).

The theme of the redemptive power of love is integrally connected to the question of where fate ends and a person’s free will begins, where a person ceases to be merely a pawn in the grip of external circumstances and becomes responsible for the consequences of his or her actions. By the end of the novel, all of the characters except Rumfoord have found a purpose for living and spiritual transcendence through love. They have learned to love unconditionally, to recognize the role of free will in how they have responded to the circumstances that control their lives, and to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This is true of secondary characters like Chrono, Boaz, and Salo, as well as the Constant and Beatrice, the hero and heroine. Only Rumfoord, the villain of the novel, fails to find meaning and purpose in life through love and service to others and never acknowledges any personal responsibility for the suffering that he has caused for other people.

Born as the result of the rape of Beatrice by Constant and having grown up on Mars and in the Amazon jungle, Chrono approaches life with rage, bravado, and cynicism. After being stranded on Titan, he undergoes a spiritual transformation. He joins the Titanic bluebirds, “the most admirable creatures on Titan” (304). He learns their language and builds hundreds of little shrines for them. After his mother dies, thousands of the Titanic bluebirds fill the sky above her grave, and Chrono “appeared on the knoll overlooking the new grave. He wore a feather cape which he flapped like wings. He was gorgeous and strong. ‘Thank you, Mother and Father,’ he shouted, ‘for the gift of life. Good-by!’ He was gone, and the birds went with him” (312). Thus, under appalling conditions of isolation from human society and

prevented from pursuing the normal avenues of fulfillment in human life, Chrono finds a community to join and a source of purpose and spiritual significance that give his life meaning. No longer angry and hostile, he feels gratitude toward his parents, seeing life as a gift and not a burden.

In a similarly isolated environment, Boaz finds meaning and purpose through his relationship with the harmoniums. As one of the “real” commanders on Mars, Boaz delighted in his ability to control others and make them do whatever he wanted; he was not really happy, though, because he had no idea who was really in charge or why he had been given so much power, something he never had on earth. On Mercury, he gives up his power, deciding that he needs a friend more than he needs power: “Boaz had decided that he needed a buddy far more than he needed a means of making people do exactly what he wanted them to. . . . Not to be lonely, not to be scared—Boaz had decided that those were the important things in life” (182). His greatest transformation, however, comes when he realizes that he can make the harmoniums happy simply by letting them feel his pulse or playing music for them. He becomes stronger, healthier, and more serene than he has ever been before. When he tells Unk that he has decided to stay on Mercury, Boaz is “a wise, decent, weeping brown Hercules . . . a thoroughly great human being” (212). In choosing to stay on Mercury, Boaz has achieved the ultimate karmic goal—a life of peace and harmony where he can do only good for others: “I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I’m doing good, and then I’m doing good for know I’m doing it, and they love me, Unk, as best they can. I found me a home” (214). Boaz has found a way to love others, and in so doing, he has learned to love himself as well: “‘And when I die down here some day,’ said Boaz, ‘I’m going to be able to say to myself, ‘Boaz—you made millions of lives worth living. Ain’t nobody ever spread more joy. You ain’t got an enemy in the Universe.’” Boaz became for himself the affectionate Mama and Papa he’d never had. ‘You go to sleep now’, he said to himself, imagining himself on a stone deathbed in the caves. ‘You’re a good boy, Boaz,’ he said. ‘Good night’” (214).

Even Salo, the Tralfamadorian machine, learns to love and serve others. Salo began his journey across space as a machine with rigid programming and a clear mission: to carry a sealed message to the far side of the universe; he was everything a machine should be: “dependable, efficient, predictable, and durable” (299). His friendship with Rumfoord transforms him; in his desire to please Rumfoord by revealing the message, he overcomes the prime directive of his programming; he has become capable of unconditional love and devotion: “‘You asked the impossible of a machine,’ said Salo, ‘and the machine complied. The machine is no longer a machine . . . His mind buzzes and pops like the mind of an Earthling—fizzes and overheats with thoughts of love, honor, dignity, rights, accomplishment, integrity, independence—’” (300). Salo is so distraught over Rumfoord’s rejection of him and the fact that he didn’t get the message open in time to tell Rumfoord that “He killed himself out there. He took himself apart and threw his parts in all directions” (301). After he has been reassembled, Salo decides to continue

his mission, becoming a modern Sisyphus, willingly taking up his “fool’s errand” (313). Salo’s capacity for kindness and compassion is shown by the care he takes in returning Constant to earth and in giving Constant a post-hypnotic suggestion so that Constant “would imagine, as he died, that he saw his best and only friend, Stony Stevenson” (319).

Winston Niles Rumfoord, the quintessential American “aristocrat,” presents the greatest possible contrast to Salo and the other characters. Although Rumfoord appears to possess a rare combination of intelligence, courage and class, from the outset he reveals a mean streak, taking delight in making his wife as miserable as possible and enjoying the distress she feels when he gives her glimpses of her future life as Constant’s “mate.” He creates and controls the “Martian army,” and he arranges the Martian invasion of earth so that the Martians will be easily slaughtered as they emerge from their space ships. Rumfoord explains and justifies his plan in his *Pocket History of Mars*: “Any man who would change the World in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people’s blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repentance and horror that usually follows bloodshed” (174).

Unlike the other characters in the book, Rumfoord learns nothing from his experiences and remains essentially unchanged; if anything, gaining the ability to foresee the future and control other people’s lives only increases his sense of self-importance and entitlement. Rumfoord never sees himself as responsible for his actions or the suffering that has resulted from them; he never views his manipulation of others as much more than an amusing game: “When Rumfoord staged a passion play, he used nothing but real people in real hells” (239). He becomes increasingly resentful of the fact that he has been used by the Tralfamadorians, but he sees nothing wrong with the ways in which he has used other people. Rumfoord repeatedly demonstrates his capacity for needless cruelty. For example, he reveals to Constant that Stony Stevenson was the man Constant unwittingly killed on Mars. This revelation serves Tralfamador, so it’s clearly a voluntary act on Rumfoord’s part. Rumfoord is particularly nasty to Salo, who genuinely loves him and has helped him unselfishly: “Through a thin veil of noblesse oblige, Rumfoord let Salo know that to be a machine was to be insensitive, was to be *unimaginative*, was to be vulgar, was to be purposeful without a shred of conscience—” (283). Rumfoord even denies that they were ever friends: “‘Let’s say we’ve managed to be of some *use* to each other, and let it go at that . . . Let’s say,’ said Rumfoord acidly, ‘that we discovered in each other a means to our separate ends’” (282). This is true only of Rumfoord’s own behavior, which has been wholly selfish and self-centered; he has no use for friendship, and when Salo recounts all that he has done on Rumfoord’s behalf, Rumfoord’s sneering response is “Yes . . . But what have you done for me lately?” (828).

Unlike Beatrice, Constant, Chrono, Boaz, and Salo, who accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, choose kindness over power, and live out their lives surrounded by the love

and purpose they have chosen to create for themselves, Rumfoord winds up alone and purposeless, bereft even of his faithful hound, in the meaningless void of space: “An explosion on the Sun had separated man and dog. A Universe schemed in mercy would have kept man and dog together. The Universe inhabited by Winston Niles Rumfoord and his dog was not schemed in mercy. Kazak had been sent ahead of his master on the great mission to nowhere and nothing” (295). Although the universe is merciless, Rumfoord’s own merciless behavior makes his fate appropriate.

By contrast, Constant and Beatrice, Rumfoord’s favorite victims, are utterly transformed by their experiences. When the novel opens, Malachi Constant has unlimited wealth and freedom, but he is a base, vulgar, self-indulgent playboy. The one thing Constant yearns for is a worthy purpose for his life, but he expects it to come from outside himself: “In the depressions that always followed his taking of alcohol, narcotics, and women, Constant pined for just one thing—a single message that was sufficiently dignified and important to merit his carrying it humbly between two points” (17). While he is waiting to discover his message, he wastes his riches in debauchery, takes pleasure in offending Beatrice Rumfoord with his crudity, and later boasts of “his amatory exploits with gorgeous women—all of which had left his heart absolutely untouched” (160). Challenged to prove his manhood, he rapes a helpless, terrified woman in a darkened stateroom aboard the spaceship bound for Mars. This action, which expresses his lowest, most selfish and brutish impulses, brings about Constant’s transformation. When he realizes how much harm his behavior has done, he is permanently changed: “The lieutenant-colonel realized for the first time what most people never realize about themselves—that he was not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but one of outrageous fortune’s cruelest agents as well. . . . He became hopelessly engrossed in the intricate tactics of causing less rather than more pain. Proof of his success would be his winning of the woman’s forgiveness and understanding” (162). On Mars Constant learns courage, determination, and the value of friendship when he and Stony Stevenson work together to try to regain their memories and figure out what is really going on. Later, when Rumfoord challenges Constant to name one single good thing he has ever done in his life, Constant replies, “I had a friend” (295).

Like Constant, Beatrice undergoes a radical transformation as a result of her experiences, changing from a cold, withdrawn, and emotionally stunted person to one who is capable of unconditional love. The painting of her as a child depicts “a little girl holding the reins of a pure white pony. The little girl wore a white bonnet, a white, starched dress, white gloves, white socks, and white shoes. She was the cleanest, most frozen little girl that Malachi Constant had ever seen. There was a strange expression on her face, and Constant decided that she was worried about getting the least bit dirty” (23). When Constant meets Beatrice, she is “a frightened, lonely woman in a tremendous house” (42), a married woman who is still a virgin, terrified of the messiness and unpredictability of life. Despite her fears, Beatrice is determined to control her own fate, just as she did as a child at the Cape Cod amusement park:

“‘I took one look at the roller coaster,’ said Beatrice, ‘and it looked silly and dirty and dangerous, and I simply refused to get on. My own father couldn’t make me get on,’ said Beatrice, ‘even though he was Chairman of the Board of the New York Central Railroad. We turned around and came home,’ said Beatrice proudly. Her eyes glittered, and she nodded abruptly. ‘That’s the way to treat roller coasters,’ she said” (63). But the roller coaster of life cannot be avoided so easily, and Beatrice is helpless in the grip of the fate Rumfoord has predicted for her. Her transformation is in how she responds to the events she cannot control. As devastated as she is by the rape, Beatrice nevertheless loves Chrono unconditionally, and her attachment to him brings out her latent strength and determination. She protects him after their spaceship crashes in the Amazon jungle, and the two of them become a powerful team. As she and Chrono are boarding the space ship to be exiled from earth, Beatrice achieves a rare level of courage and class, repudiating Rumfoord and claiming her fate as her own:

‘. . . when my son and I walk together to that ladder and climb it, we will not be doing it for you, or for your silly crowd. We will be doing it for ourselves—and we will be proving to ourselves and to anybody who wants to watch that we aren’t afraid of anything. Our hearts won’t be breaking when we leave this planet. It disgusts us at least as much as we, under your guidance, disgust it.’

I do not recall the old days,’ said Beatrice, ‘when I was mistress of this estate, when I could not stand to do anything or have anything done to me. But I loved myself the instant you told me I’d been that way. The human race is a scummy thing, and so is Earth, and so are you.’ (262)

At this moment, Beatrice asserts her freedom by voluntarily choosing what she cannot avoid—Nietzsche’s “*amor fati*—or love of fate.”⁷ According to psychologist Carl Rogers, “The fully functioning person . . . not only experiences, but utilizes, the most absolute freedom when he spontaneously, freely, and voluntarily chooses and wills that which is absolutely determined.”⁸ In *Finding Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentihalyi explains that “the love of fate corresponds to a willingness to accept ownership of one’s actions, whether these are spontaneous or imposed from the outside. It is this acceptance that leads to personal growth, and provides the feeling of serene enjoyment which removes the burden of entropy from everyday life.”⁹ By the end of her life, Beatrice has embraced a philosophy of personal freedom and responsibility that enables her not only to forgive Constant but to love him and to be glad that he changed the course of her life: “‘The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody,’ she said, ‘would be to not be used for anything by anybody. . . . Thank you for using me,’ she said to Constant, ‘even though I didn’t want to be used by anybody’” (310-311).

In her book *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System*, which is “a refutation of Rumfoord’s notion that the purpose of human life in the Solar System was to get a grounded messenger from Tralfamadore on his way again” (308), Beatrice writes, “those persons who have served the interests of Tralfamadore have served them in such highly personalized ways that Tralfamadore can be said to have had practically nothing to do with the case” (309), and the entire novel backs up her claim. Although it

seems as though they have been jerked around like puppets, all of the characters have acted in ways that were totally consistent with the kind of people they were at the time; their responses to external circumstances and events clearly corresponded to their inner feelings and values. People may not control their fate, but they control their own inner state, which is what really determines the quality of their lives.

The affirmation of the Ethic of Reciprocity—the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself and do unto others as you would have them do unto you—is as strong in Vonnegut’s atheistic satire as it is in the works of Malamud, Kennedy, Silko, and Miller. For Malamud, love provides a pathway to God and renewed religious faith. For Vonnegut, at the opposite end of the spectrum, love fills the void left by the loss of religious faith. In the absence of God or any other external source of meaning and purpose in life, love becomes the means by which individuals can create joy and transcendence in their own lives. Vonnegut’s novel portrays the idea of God and His divine plan for humanity as a ludicrous and pathetic absurdity, yet the answer to the question of how to live a good life is the same as the one set forth by Christ in the Bible—“love one another.” At the end of *The Sirens of Titan*, Malachi Constant, Vonnegut’s “faithful messenger,” sums up Vonnegut’s message to his readers: “. . . a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (313).

According to the Dalai Lama, “Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people’s suffering. On these lines every religion had more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.”¹⁰ All of the world’s major religions provide essentially the same answer to the question, How should a good man live? The answer is the Golden Rule. The Religious Tolerance web site, www.religioustolerance.org, quotes the version of the Golden Rule found in each of twenty-one religions, the writings of five famous philosophers, and two other ethical systems that don’t include belief in God.¹¹ It wouldn’t matter how much the various factions in the world today disagree on the value of science versus religion in explaining the origin and workings of the universe if we could reconnect with this core value underlying all moral systems. By guiding our students through these works, we can help them understand the underlying unity of moral thought that is the foundation not only of traditional religious faith but of the godless philosophies of humanism and existentialism as well.

Notes

1. Malamud, Bernard. “The Magic Barrel.” *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, 4th edition. James H. Pickering, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 719-728.

2. Kennedy, William. *Ironweed*. (New York: Penguin, 1979).

3. Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. (New York: Penguin, 1986).

4. Bellow, Saul. *Dangling Man*. (New York: Signet, 1965).

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5. Miller, Arthur. "All My Sons: A Drama in Three Acts." (New York: Penguin, 1975).
6. Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr. *The Sirens of Titan*. (New York: Dell, 1959).
7. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 138.
8. Ibid., 138.
9. Ibid., 139.
10. "Versions of the Golden Rule in 21 World Religions." Religious Tolerance.org 7 July 2007. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>.
11. Ibid.

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