

# Embodying Conflicted Faith and Questionable Grace: The Women of Robert Stone's "Helping" and "Miserere"

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“I see this enormous empty space from which God has absented himself,” states Robert Stone, who died in January 2015 (qtd. in Weber). He goes on to add, “I see this enormous mystery that I can’t penetrate, a mystery before which I’m silent and uncomprehending” (qtd. in Weber). At the end of his short story “Miserere,” Stone presents his readers with a haunting image of “this enormous mystery”: after blessing and burying aborted fetuses, the Catholic convert Mary Urquhart stands before the altar of St. Macarius questioning what it means to be created in God’s image. Offering the Divine “[i]ts due” (24), she whispers words from the prayer *Miserere mei, Deus*, the title of Psalm 51, one of the seven Penitential Psalms, well known to believing Catholics. Stone tells the reader that she is torn between adoration and disgust.

Stone is not known for his female characters. Even the last book he published before he died, *Death of the Black-Haired Girl* (2013), the title of which suggests that its focus is on a woman, is really about the professor with whom the woman has an affair. Partly answering his own question of why women do not read Stone to the extent that men do, Patrick Smith states, “Stone’s women are never quite the subject; they never quite embody what is at issue” (33), and for most of his

novels and short stories, this assertion rings true. A quick reading of his first collection of short fiction, *Bear and His Daughter* (1997), reveals that many of his female characters lie on the stories' peripheries, functioning solely to complicate their males' struggles. For example, in the earliest of Stone's published short stories, "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta," the expatriated, plague-ridden Marge cheats on her husband, Fletch, with his friend, Fencer. Likewise, the reader encounters the helpless, middle-aged, and elderly women who call Kieran and Mackay to action to devastating effects in "Absence of Mercy." In the story "Under the Pitons," "bimbo" Gillian, with an "irritating accent," is left to drown to death by her boyfriend, Blessington (124).

Some of Stone's females do, however, take center stage, such as the pill-popping, "deluded" (170), former topless dancer Alison in "Aquarius Obscured," but what the reader learns about her undermines her credibility—she is having a conversation with a dolphin she thinks has plans to overtake the world, and at the story's end she turns out to be something of a thief. If one had read just those four stories, one might be inclined to think that Stone stereotypes his female characters as utterly flawed beings who are to be mistrusted and do not deserve to be granted full humanity. If such were the case, one might be discouraged from reading more of his work.

Yet Gregory Stephenson calls attention to some female characters in Stone's short stories who cling to their religion in a merciless world. Stephenson praises these women for their strong religious convictions. Specifically, he compliments Grace Elliot from "Helping" and Mary Urquhart from "Miserere" for their commitment to their Catholic faith. According to Stephenson, these women are devoted to "active compassion and to the service of the supernatural principles" (218). Moreover, they "seek to counter the disorder of the world" (219), and they embody the true Church, "the Christian spirit of sacrifice and charity" (221). Stephenson even sees Mary as a Job-like character, a victim who suffers from unfortunate circumstances, as a miscalculated frozen ice-skating pond claimed the lives of her loved ones. What his analysis fails to mention, however, is that Grace, although mostly true to her name, essentially helps her alcoholic husband to keep drinking, and Mary, who does perform

selfless acts, is somewhat responsible for her family members' deaths and is most likely grieving over her loss by having affairs with priests. Thus, Stephenson's reading also borders on presenting these female characters as stereotypes—albeit as better women than they really are.

In an attempt to shed more light on Smith's question, one not yet properly answered by literary critics, and to engage with Stephenson's insightful commentary, revisiting the stories "Helping" and "Miserere" from Stone's 1997 collection may prove helpful. Dedicated to his wife, Janice, the collection casts female characters who are complex and ambivalent, emerging as stronger than their male counterparts in Stone's hypermasculine landscape where drinking, drugging, and fighting abound. These developed female characters edge beyond the margins and refuse to play the victims they initially seem assigned, simultaneously functioning as forces of destruction as well as bearers of grace, and, in so doing, embodying, despite what Smith argues, a significant issue—their author's ambivalent moral outlook.

## I.

Stone cultivated his craft for almost a half-century, publishing eight novels, two collections of short stories, two screenplays, and a memoir and spawning two films.<sup>1</sup> With his series of accomplished

<sup>1</sup>Along the way he also garnered many literary awards. The book that launched his career, *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), won the Faulkner Foundation Award for Notable First Novel of the year and the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. *Dog Soldiers* (1974), his second novel and the work for which he is best known, won the National Book Award and was made into the film *Who'll Stop the Rain?* His third novel, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), enjoyed the reputation of being the only book published in 1981 that was nominated for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It won the PEN Faulkner Prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Award for best novel of the year. His fifth and sixth novels, *Outerbridge Reach* (1992) and *Damascus Gate* (1998), were both finalists for the National Book Award, and *Bear and His Daughter* was a Pulitzer finalist.

novels and potent short fiction, Stone fought his way to becoming one of the foremost of modern writers. Mark Bautz, for example, considers him “one of contemporary fiction’s big talents” (33). Similarly, Smith, who notes that Stone has always been respectfully yet superficially reviewed, states, “Nobody of Stone’s generation comes near him—not in the elegant clarity of his sentences and not in terms of the thematic whale he has pursued from one book to another” (30). Yet Stone has neither been widely read nor achieved the recognition from literary critics that his work merits. To date, only two monographs on him, by Stephenson and Robert Solotaroff, have appeared along with a handful of scholarly articles, and *Dog Soldiers* has earned him a spot in studies of Vietnam War literature. Most critical response, however, appeared before the publication of *Bear and His Daughter*, which, aside from Stephenson’s commentary, has received almost no critical attention, and even less has been written about Stone’s female characters.

More, although not much, has been written about Stone’s religious ambivalence. Claiming that Stone’s “characters have always been tormented by a religious itch,” Robert Fredrickson refutes the argument that his protagonists are postmodern and maintains, instead, that his work seemingly clings to a “search for an elusive God,” characteristic of the modernist writer (“Robert Stone’s Opium” 45, 49). Stone writes in the realist tradition and explores man’s possible connection with a higher being. Ken Lopez and Bev Chaney argue that he is “widely considered to be the American novelist who has most thoroughly picked up the strand of modern literature that begins with Joseph Conrad, in which the moral fiber at the core of man is tested under stress” (123). With characteristically modern ambivalence, he revisits the theme of man spiritually struggling and seeking to actualize himself in a complexly flawed world where humans are more disposed to violence than to love. Like Conrad’s Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Stone’s protagonists question whether life is merely a “mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose” (Lopez and Chaney 71).

In his review of *Bear and His Daughter*, Leon Lewis notes that Stone’s “often grim but hardly solemn vision of ‘American reality’

has been based on characters (usually male) who are essentially alone, often angry or rootless, tempted or touched by violence, and inclined [to] or deeply involved with alcohol and/or drugs." The cast of characters in his plot-heavy stories includes "drug smugglers, gun runners, alcoholics, drug addicts, schizophrenics, murderers, and sadistic law enforcers" who yet are surprisingly well read and well versed in classical music (Solotaroff x). Characters are probed to their existential core, and clear-cut answers are replaced with questions about the absence of innate, positive, moral structures.

Stone's uncertain outlook is understandable in light of what has been documented about his life. As he says, "My early life was very strange" (qtd. in Weber). Abandoned by his father as an infant, Stone was reared by his schizophrenic mother, Gladys Grant. When he was six, his mother was institutionalized, and he was placed in a Roman Catholic orphanage, St. Ann's, run by the Marist Brothers, where he remained until he was ten years old, an experience he fictionalizes in "Absence of Mercy." A member of a West Side gang in New York, he was thrown out of high school, joined the Merchant Marine, and is said to have become an atheist at the age of seventeen (Solotaroff 5). Yet his religious stance has not always been so clear, especially in light of characters who seem unable to leave their Catholicism behind them. In his memoir *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties* (2007), in which he discusses his involvement with Ken Kesey and the psychedelic scene, Stone states, "belief fascinated me, because of my own experience of lost faith" (168). Certainly, the questioning of a higher being ruling over what appears to be an irrational and indifferent universe permeates his works.

Even though he claimed to be "the only American novelist addressing theological questions," his works and other statements offer a less doctrinaire view of the subject (Fredrickson, "Robert Stone's Opium" 44). Heralded by Roger Sale as "a nineteenth century moralist," Stone often seems "as eager as Carlyle or George Eliot to make the precise assessments required to judge the choices made by an individual or society" (9). Arguably, "The Reason for Stories: Toward a Moral Fiction," Stone's response to William Gass's "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty," provides the best insight

into his thinking at the time he crafted "Helping," first published in 1986. In the essay he argues that serious fiction depends on morality and that art and morality are not mutually exclusive but intimately intertwined. Citing the Bible, he states that "[i]t's hard to overestimate the impact of the Bible on our civilization and on our language" (73). For Stone the Bible has been "the great primer" (73). Moreover, he declares that the "laws of both language and art impose choices that are unavoidably moral" (75). Yet seven years later in 1995, a year before "Miserere" appeared, Stone said, "I'm certainly not the kind of writer who has a moral, as it were. It's just a process of reflection on the human condition" (Pink and Lewis 128). Typically, Stone's religious questioning manifests itself through his characters, who "usually disdain theological questions, even while implicitly asking them" (Fredrickson, "Robert Stone's Opium" 43). For example, in "Miserere," the recovering alcoholic Mary asks Father Hooke, who is refusing at this point in the story to bless and bury aborted fetuses, "Oh Frank, you lamb . . . what did your poor mama tell you? Did she say that a world with God was easier than one without him?" (21). Father Hooke does not have an answer, and the story cuts to a new scene with a new priest, who, although not asked, would also not know.

Contradictions proliferate not just in Stone's art but also in his life. He painted a damning portrait of his Catholic orphanage (where even the military pales in comparison to the violence suffered at the hands of Prefect Brother Francis), spoke poorly about St. Ann's "anti-intellectualism," but also credited "the school with deepening his respect for literature" (Steinberg 72). Although calling his mother "absolutely batty," he said that she was "well-spoken and refined . . . very fond of me . . . educated," and the one who instilled in him a love of reading (qtd. in Chapple 40). He also attributed his acumen with language to "the curious luck to be raised by a schizophrenic," which gave him a "tremendous advantage in understanding the relationship of language to reality": "Life wasn't providing [coherent] narrative so I had to" (qtd. in Words 43).

Tellingly, Stone credits F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer with deeply contrasting views of morality and women, as his inspiration to write

his first novel. During his high school years, he read the modernist male literary canon, as described in his memoir:

I had started out under the influence of the first generation of literary moderns. Hemingway bestrode the world then, inescapable. Instead of learning algebra and long division, I had spent my high school years reading and goofing, in the manner of bookish under-achievers then as now. I read the books then read, Hardy, Conrad, Waugh, Dos Passos, Wolfe, Fitzgerald. (*Prime* 83)

Although Stone acknowledges Hemingway as a towering literary giant, it was a reread of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) that made him want to become a writer.<sup>2</sup> According to Solotaroff, "Stone has described in different ways the moment late in 1961 when, as a twenty-four-year-old college dropout with a wife, a child, and a job writing copy for low-end furniture stores, he finished reading *The Great Gatsby* and said to himself, 'This is what I want to do. I want to write novels'" (2). On that day he decided that he "understood patterns in life. I figured, I can't sell this understanding, or smoke it, so I will write a novel. I then started to write *A Hall of Mirrors*" (18).

Write he did. After five novels—long ones—he deviated from that form and published his first collection of short stories, which spans almost thirty years of his career and includes six stories previously published in magazines plus the title work "Bear and His Daughter." Commenting on the short story form, Stone says:

Well, I started out writing quite a few. I find that I'm difficult to satisfy in terms of my own stories. I think I have destroyed many more than I have ever submitted. My stories are rather different from my novels. They're a bit more surreal, perhaps there's more

<sup>2</sup>Maureen Karagueuzian compares *Dog Soldiers* to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); Fredrickson cleverly states that "Stone's characters, however, obviously seek more than Hemingway's pleasure in things pleasant, clean, and well lighted" ("Robert Stone's Opium" 45).

humor in the short stories. The concerns, though, are the same.  
(qtd. in Solotaroff 173)

As his words suggest, he prefers a larger scale than the short story affords. When *Bear and His Daughter* was published, readers were curious as to how Stone would approach a tighter space and also whether the themes that marked his novels would be repeated or “tamed to fit the more restrictive form” (McGraw 790). The answer: as in his novels, his short fiction shows violence and corruption endemic to American life, close personal relationships difficult, if not impossible, to maintain, and happiness or peace coming from drugs or death. Writers, especially poets, feature as principal characters. The American reality that Stone presents is based on characters who are essentially alone, angry, rootless, uprooted, blocked, paralyzed. As Fredrickson observes, “There’s a sort of negative quest motif,” “the trip gone bad” (“Robert Stone’s Decadent” 320). As Fredrickson puts it, “they make odd pilgrims, these men, since they seem not to want to find anything” (“Robert Stone’s Opium” 42). Yet both Stone’s men and women embark on these strange journeys.

## II.

First published in *New Yorker* on June 8, 1987, “Helping” is one of the earliest examples in Stone’s short stories in which a female character embodies his conflicted moral stance. Grace is a not-so-sly wink at what she is supposed to represent for her husband, Chas Elliot. Despite focusing on Grace’s husband’s struggles with the traumatic effects of being a Vietnam War combat soldier, this is the most hopeful of the stories in the collection, which may not be saying much. It follows Elliot, a troubled soul with a mean edge, some twenty years after the war. He has done time in jail for an undisclosed crime but now has a master’s in social work and is employed as a counselor for veterans at the state hospital, earning slightly more than the PhDs he works alongside. Like many a Stone character, Elliot is a recovering alcoholic, eighteen months sober, fifteen in Alcoholics Anonymous. Throughout their marriage Grace has aided



her husband, as Stephenson states, "in summoning sufficient moral strength to resist being overwhelmed by his destructive impulses," eliciting in him "feelings of sympathy and contrition" (208). During the course of the story, Elliot embarks on a physical and spiritual journey that culminates in an epiphany fostered by Grace (Stone, "Helping" 89). The story, however, ends ambiguously, leaving readers guessing at Grace's final actions and whether her aid is partly responsible for his drinking.

The story's February day is significant because it marks the end of Elliot's sobriety. Set in New England just outside Boston, "Helping" reflects the Elliots' childless state, something that Stone notes more than once but never fully explains, leaving the reader to assume that Elliot fears bringing new life into a senseless existence. Stone supplies some details about Grace: she is a churchgoing, loyal woman. She attends Christmas Mass and sleeps beside her restless husband, who listens to dog packs chasing undernourished deer, symbolizing one of the central themes of the story: a cruel and savage world. She is a lawyer who takes on worthy, but often lost, causes. In short, both Elliot and Grace are in the business of "helping" people.

The world Stone portrays here is one of corruption, dishonesty, and disease. In this post-Vietnam War landscape, Elliot works the welfare system to his advantage and ministers to men like the undiagnosed Blankenship, who is doing much the same as Elliot as "a sponger and petty thief," whose specialty is suing companies by claiming to have slipped on their ice cubes (84). What his family "could not extort at law [it] stole" (84). Recently abandoned by family members, Blankenship was last arrested for the petty crimes of stealing hot-dog rolls from Woolworth's and showering at midnight in the regional high school. But his worst offense, according to Elliot, is his claim to nightmares about Vietnam, a place he has never been, let alone fought in. Perhaps this is Stone's way of suggesting that no one was immune to the trauma caused by that war, or he may be criticizing those who saw a picture or read a news story and wrongly cried PTSD. But the fantasy that Blankenship fashions, especially the sensation and black smoke, is too close to Elliot's reality. Elliot "had caught dengue in Vietnam and during his weeks of

delirium had felt vaguely as though he were floating in rubber" (86). The black smoke that Blankenship invents but that Elliot experienced symbolizes a universe without design, purpose, or mercy.

Before Grace enters the narrative, Stone introduces a secondary female character, whom Stephenson describes as "a gentle and generous-spirited woman," but who played a role in Elliot's alcoholic undoing (21). Candace Music is a sixty-some-year-old librarian at Packard Conway Library, a Quaker of socialist convictions, and Elliot's cousin. Described as tall and plain, Candace is the daughter of a medical missionary. She is "a classicist's widow and [knows] some Greek" (93). She and Elliot even used to work together, translating fragments of Sophocles into English verse for the sake of art and beauty. He used to enjoy talking with her, but when the conversation turned to Vietnam one too many times, he stopped, getting the impression that he was being used by Candace, pumped for information about the war that she would then pass on at her East Ilford Friends meeting. On this particular day Elliot pays Candace a visit. Although his motives are unclear, Stone suggests that he first attempts to cure his restless anxiety with something civilized and edifying, like the library, which should be "an oasis of human dignity and harmony" (Stephenson 210). The roles reverse in this scene, and it is Elliot, like Blankenship, who plays the patient on Candace's chair by the fire. This, however, proves futile, and when she leaves to answer her phone, Elliot seizes the opportunity to exit and go to Midway Tavern for drinks after which he proceeds to drive home drunk, his car blaring a recording of "Handel's Largo," a solemn aria often played at funerals (Stone, "Helping" 95).

Unlike Candace, Grace has no desire to hear Elliot's gruesome stories, especially the one about his plans to decapitate their neighbors, the Anderson family, children included, when they are cross-country skiing. After crying upon learning of her husband's failed sobriety, Grace in an interesting turn pours a whiskey for herself and proceeds to dump her problems at work on Elliot. Instead of letting Elliot sulk in his own misery, Grace tells him about her morning in court where she lost an important case. Elliot thinks to himself that "once again my troubles are going to be obviated by

those of the deserving poor" (101). Like Elliot, who allows himself to be affected by Blankenship, Grace also is too involved with her clients. She prosecuted the Vopotiks, a young couple—an obese mother and biker father—for harming their three-year-old son. She lost the case when three witnesses, who were going to testify that the couple had burned the child on a radiator and broken his fingers, failed to show up, rendering their depositions void. Elliot does not view the parents' depraved behavior as unique or exceptional in this bleak, fatalistic world: "'You go messing into anybody's life . . . that's what you'll find'" (104). Losing the case leads Grace to ask the "unaskable" question that has certainly haunted her husband, whose life has been a battle against loss of purpose (103): what difference does it make? Neither provides an answer.

The story suggests that Grace wants to believe that life is not a series of random events to test mortal people. During the conversation with her husband, Grace's, and perhaps Stone's, moral stance is portrayed in contrasting terms through the eyes of Elliot, who, knowing that he needs her help, resents her for it. Earlier, Stone paints her as a victim of a bad marriage, since Elliot spends every weekend in his office reading all day, while she does something at the church: "Every night he's at A.A. and she's home alone" (91). Moreover, in this scene where Grace threatens to walk out, Elliot pictures her in court, looking "like the schoolteachers who had tormented their childhoods, earnest and tight-assed, humorless and self-righteous" (104). He proceeds to nastily mock Grace's concern for others and for him, sarcastically calling her a "'friend of the unfortunate'" and "'the Christian Queen of Calvary'" (100). Yet Elliot has a high opinion of his wife, whom he also calls hopeful, knowing she clings to her religion and holds a "'sense of the divine plan,'" something Elliot is incapable of doing on his own (105). Telling her she should have been a nun, Elliot acknowledges her saving grace, thinking, "if it had not been for her he might not have survived" (105). Grace, more than any other character, is committed to upholding mercy and bringing order to her husband's anarchy. But her intentions become suspect when she admits that in her family "'we stay until the fella dies. That's the tradition. We stay and pour it for

them and they die'" (100). With these words Grace acknowledges that she is not only powerless in the face of Elliot's addiction but is his enabler.

Grace as a redeeming figure is further questioned when Vopotik calls their home, informing Elliot that his wife has a destructive side, evident when she tried to break up his family. Elliot defends her by refusing to put Grace on the phone. Significantly, there is a change in Elliot: instead of feeling "helpless in the face of human misery," he is "ready to reach out" (108). As she literally stands behind him, he is ready to fight for his wife: "He was still standing by the window when she came up behind him. It seemed strange and fateful to be standing in the dark near her, holding the shotgun. He felt ready for anything" (109). However, they are not battle buddies for long; in a clever evasion of his pain and vulnerability Elliot sends her upstairs.

In the story's final pages, Elliot's reliance on Grace's help becomes evident. After spending the night clutching his shotgun and whiskey in the dark living room, in the black smoke he has created, Elliot has a showdown, not with Vopotik but with Loyall Anderson, his self-assured neighbor, who is taking his "brisk morning glide" (98). Going so far as to remove the safety from his shotgun, Elliot subtly threatens Anderson when he mentions that he has been up drinking all night, which quickly ends their conversation. Even more than Blankenship and Vopotik, Elliot hates Anderson, a full professor of government at the state university, whose entire family are tall blondes, and whose children qualified for the gifted class but "attended regular classes in token of Anderson's opposition to elitism," none of which the Vietnam vet finds respectable (98). "Elliot hates the Andersons' collective self-satisfaction, their smug certainty of the rightness of their politically correct behavior in a complexly flawed world, more than he does the Vopotiks' psychology or Blankenship's uncanny parasitism," states Solotaroff; "[m]uch more than he wanted to, he identified with Blankenship's dream, and his fantasy of killing the Anderson children aligns him with the Vopotiks" (193). What stops Elliot from shooting Anderson is the fear he hears in his voice, which arouses pity in him. Elliot is literally disarmed by "the aspect of true

fear" (Stone, "Helping" 87). Instead of an enemy, Anderson becomes a "fearful fellow human" (Stephenson 213).

In the story's final passage with a newfound perspective of helping others, Elliot longs for divine grace, embodied in his wife. After Anderson skis away, Elliot does take a shot, but it is at a bird and misses. Solotaroff notes, "Having armed himself against the violent rabble, quietly but successfully threatened a member of the ranks of the virtuous, and tried to take life, Elliot now wishes 'no harm to any creature'" (194). Suppressing his emotions, Elliot hears the shot echo, turns toward his house, and

looked up to see his wife at the bedroom window. She stood perfectly still, and the morning sun lit her nakedness. He stopped where he was. She had heard the shot and run to the window. What had she thought to see? Burnt rags and blood on the snow. How relieved was she now? How disappointed?

Elliot thought he could feel his wife trembling at the window. She was hugging herself. Her hands clasped her shoulders. (Stone, "Helping" 115)

Although throughout much of the story Elliot desires to be free from the burden of consciousness, after these thoughts of his wife, he experiences an epiphany. When "his attempts to anesthetize himself with alcohol, irony, and anger" prove futile, he embraces his half-hearted tenderness and compassion and wishes for redemption (Stephenson 213). He sees his wife through the vinegar-cleaned window, which symbolizes his clarity. Acknowledging that the "length of the gun was between them," he understands that he has unfairly taken the effects of the war out on her: "Somehow she had got out in front of it" (Stone, "Helping" 115). She had become the enemy, but he now acknowledges that his worst adversary is himself. He seems to know that he failed her by breaking his promise not to drink. Thinking of how strikingly beautiful she is and how much help she has to give, he begins to hope for her forgiveness, perhaps realizing just how much he needs her. The story ends ambiguously with Elliot reaching not for the shotgun but for his wife's hand. He waves to

her, desiring nothing so much as a show of hands to gesture that she was still behind him, still wanted to work on their marriage: "It seemed to him that he could build another day on [that gesture]" (115). He is left waiting for her reply at the end.

Does she wave back? Stone leaves the reader to decide what Grace will do. When she runs to the window after hearing the shot, Elliot is not sure whether she is relieved or disappointed that he has not killed Vopotik, Anderson, or perhaps even himself. Although hungover and uncertain about their future, Grace will likely continue to support Elliot, who seems to have a better understanding that she needs his help too. Grace is the force that has kept Elliot alive, if just, as the slogan at AA states, for one more day. Stone suggests that searching for grace is a daily struggle that comes with the risk of reaching out to the Divine, only to be left hanging.

### III.

"Miserere," originally published in *New Yorker* on June 24, 1996, features a female protagonist with far less grace to offer her male counterparts than the Grace of "Helping." Although appearing virtuous and concerned with the spiritual welfare of others, Mary is also partly to blame for her family's deaths and engages in affairs with Catholic clergymen. The story's title is a shortened form of *Miserere mei, Deus*. Significantly, Stone deletes God from his title. Turning to each other, even to the clergy whose job it is to be bearers of grace, is shown to lead to major disappointment; as in the ending of "Helping," turning to God is full of uncertainty. Stone's title refers to the musical setting of Psalm 51, one of the Penitential Psalms frequently used in Catholic liturgical rituals to foster a spirit of humility and repentance, such as in the *Tenebrae* service on Good Friday and Ash Wednesday. Normally sung at dusk, while candles are extinguished one by one, save for the last, which is hidden while still burning, the text calls for the repentant to ask God to "[w]ash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (v. 2). After being delivered from sin and granted a clean heart, the individual vows to teach other sinners about God's mercy and

forgiveness. Instead of sacrifices and burnt offerings, the repentant acknowledges that God wants a contrite heart.

Stone's story is a retelling of the Miserere in the modern world. Appropriately, most of its action takes place in a snow-soiled New Jersey city on a "darkening winter afternoon" that's approaching nightfall (4). In place of sacramental candles Stone provides broken streetlights with fixtures "torn away by junkies for sale to scrap dealers," "faint neon beer" signs in the windows of bodegas, and cheap lamp stores in strip malls next to Mashona's Beauty Shoppe (5). Throughout the story Stone questions what it means to be made in the image of God, quickly establishing that this is a corrupt land, full of wickedness and sinfulness, where even the police, priests, and protagonist are corrupt.

As in "Helping," the society Stone depicts here is marked by immorality. As the story opens, Mary and her friend Camille Innaurato, like Grace, are preparing for a worthy, although lost, cause—burying four aborted fetuses, the interment being something that they have done before. Mary receives a call from Camille, informing her that Camille has "more babies" (3). Not coincidentally, the phone rings just as Mary finishes reading to underprivileged children during the library's story hour from C. S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian* (1951), the only book in the Narnia sequence in which men dominate, and talking animals and mythical creatures are oppressed and even endangered—an appropriate epigraph for a short story about dishonest Church leaders and aborted babies.

Mary, like Elliot, is a recovering alcoholic who embarks on a journey of sorts, both physical and spiritual. Also, like most of Stone's protagonists, Mary is uprooted—a fifty-year-old North Carolina native who now calls "a modest house in what had once been a suburb" of a New Jersey city her home, and who, despite living in this town for "many years," still is awoken by planes flying into and out of the Newark airport (Stone, "Miserere" 8). As Mary drives to Camille's house, she passes the symbolically named Temple Street, which proves to be anything but a high place of worship and a site for sacrificial offerings: "About every fifth house was derelict and inside some of these candlelight was already flickering. They were crack houses. . . .

Many of the houses were in worse condition inside than out. The official census description for all of them was ‘Dilapidated’” (5).

After Mary arrives at Camille’s house, Stone makes clear that even the police are not immune to corrupt practices. Earlier, the reader learns that the place is “largely a city of racial minorities, in the late stages of passing from the control of a corrupt white political machine to that of a corrupt black one” (4). Moreover, “its schools were warrens of pathology and patronage. Its police, still mainly white, were frequently criminals” (4–5). Camille receives the aborted fetuses from her younger brother, August, a rare policeman because he is “not an actively corrupt one” (9). Stone discloses that

he had no particular constabulary duties. The family had had enough political connections to secure him a clerical job with the department. He was a timid, excitable man, married, with grown children, who lived with his domineering wife in an outer suburb. But as a police insider he knew the secrets of the city. (9)

One of those secrets is that the state’s abortion clinics have no incinerators of their own. August had been successful in discovering that the scavenger company that handles the county’s medical waste also services abortion clinics. He “fixed it with the scavengers to report specimens and set them aside,” maybe even earning money from this business venture (11). He then hands over the fetuses to Camille, who with a friend—usually Mary—brings them to a church for proper blessing and burial. It is never quite clear why Mary buries the fetuses. Stephenson maintains that she does so because of “a compelling impulse to guard and honor the human image . . . of God” (220). As Mary says to Camille, “‘This is Mass,’” as their actions are a “sacrifice,” a mass in itself (Stone, “Miserere” 21). But Stone complicates this reading by suggesting that Mary’s actions are part of her penance.

Stone saves the most corrupt entity for the Catholic Church itself, represented by priests characterized more by weak flesh than willing spirit. Although never stated, sexual relationships between Mary and Father Frank of Our Lady of Fatima and also between her and Monsignor Danilo of St. Macarius are implied. Stone hints at



this at the beginning of the story when, in describing Camille, he mentions "her counterpart in *Traviata*" (3). *La Traviata* (1853), Verdi's opera based on *La Dame aux Camélias* (1851) by Alexandre Dumas, is a novel about a woman with many lovers, frequently more than one at a time. Although one might assume that Camille is being referred to here, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Mary who has many lovers, including clergymen. Frank and Mary are close friends. He received Mary, who had been a "good Protestant," into the Catholic Church (Stone, "Miserere" 12). "They had known each other for years. Frank had been in a somewhat superficial way Mary's spiritual counselor," *superficial* indicating that he is something other than a religious guide to her (11). He had helped her "through her last stage of her regained abstinence" (12). Stone writes, "she had been a friend to him. Lately, though, there had been tension between them"—tension not just from the aborted fetuses (12).

Dialogue between Mary and Frank suggests far more than a parishioner/priest relationship. Mary calls him, using Camille's phone, tellingly not her own for fear that he might be dodging her calls, immediately addresses him by first name, and blurts out, "'we have some children'" (12). Frank responds with dead silence, perhaps thinking Mary is referring to children they have conceived. Mary then addresses him as Father and explains the situation. Frank dismisses her request with one of the most famous lines in Catholic theological writing, "'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'" (12), first enunciated by Julian of Norwich, a medieval English anchoress and Christian mystic, who saw no wrath in God but held that He wanted to save, not punish, all humans—perhaps wishful thinking on Frank's part for his guilty conscience. Moreover, Julian exalted the role of mother for her love, wisdom, and protection, qualities that do not come naturally to Mary. Mary tells Frank that they can talk after the interment, although it is unclear what they will talk about. Frank then tells her that the bishop "'has been hearing things that trouble him'" (12). The "'things'" in this case are most likely their affair. However, Mary dismisses him, calling him a "'little boy'" and instructing him to "'take up your cross'" (12).

The actual meeting between Mary and Frank is no less con-

tentious. Although the “parlor lights were lighted in the rectory,” which suggests Frank was prepared to receive Mary and Camille, he answers the door in street clothes, indicating that he has no intention of performing priestly duties at this hour (15). Again addressing him by first name, she elicits a confession of sorts from Frank, who says, “It isn’t just the interments. . . . It’s the whole thing. Our whole position’” (16). He continues, noting that the Church’s teaching may be wrong, that “‘women have a right’” (17). By this point in the conversation, it does not seem as though Frank is referring to abortions, if he, in fact, ever was. He seems to be saying that Mary has a right to pursue a relationship with a man, although not with a priest. “‘Sometimes I’m ashamed to wear my collar,’” he tells her (17).

As the two continue their heated discussion, Frank brings up Mary’s grief, and the reader finally learns that Mary, the lady from the story’s opening, has quite a story of her own. The story of Mary burying fetuses and the story of her dead motherhood and wifehood come together about halfway through “Miserere.” Although hints of it are given earlier, Stone discloses the full story when Mary confronts Frank. An unlucky thirteen years ago, on December 23 on a lake outside Boston, “almost Christmas,” her husband and three children drowned to death while skating on thin ice, clinging to the ice “for hours” (18, 19). Despite being well-lighted, there was a dark corner, “where the light failed, a lonely bay bordered with dark blue German pine where even then maybe some junkie had come out from Roxbury or Southie or Lowell or God knew where and destroyed the light for the metal around it” (18–19). Mary had been within earshot but was drinking and only too late had questioned their cries. Unlike Elliot, who reaches out to his spouse by the story’s end, Mary has neither husband nor children to turn to.

Mary as a force of destruction is further seen in her final dealings with Frank. Attacking his masculinity, she says in a confusingly fused sentence, “‘it would appear to me that you are a man—and I know men, I was married to a man—who is a little boy, a little boy-man. A tiny boy-man, afraid to touch the cross or look in God’s direction’” (19). The blurring of Frank and Mary’s husband, Charles, is even more direct when she says, “‘You have to try to forgive me, Charles.’”

Had she called him Charles? How very strange. Poor old Charles would turn in his grave. 'Frank, I mean. You have to try to forgive me, Frank'" (20). The scene ends with Frank weeping, threatening to call the police and telling Mary that she is "'violence'" (20).

Mary and Camille waste no time in driving to the final resting place of the fetuses, St. Macarius, which is also where another of her lovers lives. When questioned regarding what they will do, Mary laughs and tells Camille, "'as it happens, I have another fella up my sleeve'" (21). Although it is after ten o'clock when Mary calls Monsignor Danilo, he "hurriedly agreed to do what she required," for he was "always ready to accommodate her" (21). After the hour drive, they arrive at the church where, as in the *Miserere* ceremony, "candles were flickering" (22). A "tall, very thin, expressionless young man," who Mary thinks is an illegal immigrant, assists the monsignor. After Danilo says something to this man in his native language, most likely telling him about their affair, the man "looked at Mary with a smirk and shrugged and smiled in a vulgar manner" (23). Danilo then performs the ritual. Although Danilo, unlike Frank, does this service for the fetuses—or really for Mary—he emerges as no nobler than Frank. Mary lumps together all of the priests as "self-indulgent, boneless men" (16). Frank is a "snob" who is embarrassed by the ethnic name of the parish to which he ministers (15). Moreover, he says the world would be better off without "'a few million more black, alienated, unwanted children'" (17). Although Danilo readily accepts the task at hand, he is described through Mary's eyes as "the reeking model of every Jew-baiting, clerical fascist murderer who ever took orders east of the Danube. His merry countenance was crass hypocrisy. His hands were huge, thick-knuckled, the hands of a brute, as his face was the face of a smiling Cain" (23). Furthermore, Danilo will demand money, time, and perhaps sexual favors for the services rendered.

Mary is no victim of these priests, however. Her role as initiator of her affairs is never clear, but just as she is shown to have a violent, destructive streak, she is also portrayed with redeeming qualities. At the start of the story Camille calls on her, almost prayerfully, for help during this desperate time. Mary blesses the snow-soiled city and stolen fixtures, along with the drunk man from Floyd's rib house.

She prays for the deaths of four—Indian gas attendants, family members, fetuses. She attends anti-war, anti-apartheid, and anti-abortion clinic demonstrations. She even privately counsels pregnant women “over coffee and cake,” many of whom then decide to bring their pregnancies to term (17). She also volunteers her time in reading to underprivileged children and burying their aborted fetuses.

Mary’s ambivalent nature, along with Stone’s divided religious views, is most evident in the story’s final passage when she tries to connect to the Divine. As Stone notes,

Finally, she was alone with the ancient Thing before whose will she stood amazed, whose shadow and line and light they all were: the bad priest and the questionable young man and Camille Innaurato, she herself and the unleavened flesh fouling the floor. Adoring, defiant, in the crack-house flicker of that hideous, consecrated half-darkness, she offered It Its due, by old command. (24)

After likening the church to a crack house, Stone ends the story with Mary standing alone at God’s altar, referring to Him as an “ancient Thing” and “It” and contemplating how humans, including sinful ones, are made in His image. She reasons that the Eucharist therefore must be sinful and foul. She stands amazed before God’s will, “adoring” yet “defiant” (24). She tries to worship God but sees Him as a creature who has created a dark, merciless universe. As if rehearsed and ritualized, stripped of its meaning, Mary says, “‘by old command’”: “‘Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, Have mercy on us’” (24). It is unclear whether Mary’s words deliver her from sin and grant her a clean, contrite heart. As in most of Stone’s stories, such as “Helping,” the attempts to unite with God are just that—attempts—and, contrary to what Stephenson argues, no clear resolution is granted.

Perhaps the most Virginal woman in this story is not Mary but Camille. Just as Stone flips the *Traviata* reference, so too he may be inverting the Mary figure in his short story. Although at times portrayed as a frail woman in need of an inhaler, Camille reveals herself to be a holy woman. Middle-aged, unmarried, and unsophisticated,

she selflessly took care of her aging parents, helped rear her younger brother, and kept house while working in a garment-sewing shop. Even more than Mary, she regularly buries fetuses. Her eyes are described as “sparkling and shimmering with their infernal vision” (9). Displaying maternal qualities, she hugs Mary to her bosom upon greeting her and places a crucifix on the dead babies. She finds them “sweet,” unlike Mary, who thinks about how “disgusting” they are (11). She cries—the only one to show emotion—when Mary recites poetry on the drive to the interment. Moreover, she is obedient and shows respect for Father Frank by curtsying and sitting when he tells her to, unlike the “defiant” Mary. Even in the midst of the awful row between Mary and Frank, Camille remains “kind-hearted” (20). Stone’s secondary female character is a positive woman who commits herself to doing the good works that Mary and Grace only half-heartedly attempt.

#### IV.

Stone’s dynamic female characters are deeply flawed individuals, who also hold the potential for much saving grace. They have the capacity to feel compassion and love but also to hate and harm. Grace in “Helping” is a complex figure, described as the reason her husband has survived, but also enabling him to keep drinking—pouring the drink until the “fella dies” (100), as is her family’s motto. Although the reader does not know whether she accepts Elliot’s gesture at the story’s end, one can hazard a guess that she does and will continue to “help” her husband until he dies. Mary in “Miserere” is a redeeming figure who performs good works of charity as “[h]er piety expresses itself both in prayer and in action and sacrifice” (Stephenson 219). But her reputation becomes tarnished when the reader realizes that her lack of action resulted in the death of her husband and children and that she is most likely masking her loss by sleeping with priests. Deserving of more female readers, Stone’s stories offer a glimpse into the role of women in contemporary American society. The female experience portrayed in these two stories embodies Stone’s dual vision as they give much away regarding their author’s own moral

convictions, or lack thereof, suggesting that these characters, like their creator, are plagued by desires, fears, and vanities but are always in search of some spiritual or moral affirmation that, however much they seem to covet it, eludes them in the end.

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