LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING THROUGH SUFFERING AND LOSS - BUDDHIST, DAOIST, AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

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LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING THROUGH SUFFERING AND LOSS - BUDDHIST, DAOIST, AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

A Thesis Presented

by

Robert G. Canning

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2020

Chinese
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DEDICATION

To Family
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor David K. Schneider for all of his time, help, and encouragement over the course of this thesis project. He has been enthusiastically supportive, has suggested supplementary reading that has greatly-enhanced my own learning, and has helped me greatly with the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank committee members Professor Shen Zhongwei and Professor Jessica Barr for all of their help and patience in reviewing and commenting on my thesis. Their advice, suggestions, questions, and comments have also helped greatly to enhance the quality of this project.

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ABSTRACT

LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING THROUGH SUFFERING AND LOSS - BUDDHIST, DAOIST, AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

September 2020

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The focus of this study is on portrayals of religious awakening in four short works of literature: a Chinese play, two Chinese short stories, and an American short story. In all of these works, the protagonists attain religious awakening, but only do so because they experience suffering and loss.

The experience of suffering and loss in these works helps to bring about the protagonists’ willingness to leave the worldly life. This is because the experience of suffering and loss clears the minds of the protagonists and helps them to realize the bitter nature of worldly existence.

In addition, these works portray worldly concepts from the perspective of a mystical, transcendent order of reality. Things that appear normal from a worldly perspective are abnormal from the mystical perspective, and vice versa. Thus, the wise may appear foolish, the sane crazy, and the successful materially destitute, to name a few examples.
In these works, religious heroism (a characteristic of the protagonists) also appears unheroic because of this distorted perspective. Religious heroism may appear cowardly, for example, and religious success may appear to be a failure or a tragedy.

These literary portrayals of religious awakening through suffering and loss may thus help to shed light on religious concepts common to Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity, and also on the differences between the worldly and mystical perspectives.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on three short Chinese works, and one English work, all dealing with the protagonists’ realization of enlightenment, or of some form of transformative religious awakening. In these literary works that portray enlightenment themes, there are a number of factors that help bring about enlightenment for the protagonists, yet in none of them is enlightenment achieved without either some form of suffering, or the threat of suffering. In addition, the willingness of the protagonist is a necessary prerequisite to enlightenment in each of these stories, and it is through suffering and loss that the protagonists’ minds are changed, and that they become willing to give up the worldly life and accept enlightenment.

The protagonists of these stories may be religious people, and may profess religious beliefs, but they may still not fully comprehend the true nature and depth of what those beliefs entail. Like most of us, they do not want to leave their everyday lives for a life of religious contemplation and asceticism. They may well see doing so as insane, and have no interest in committing their lives to it. Thus, they must experience suffering and loss in order to become aware of the true nature of the world, and become willing to open their minds to the possibility of abandoning worldly pursuits. This is the crux for most of these protagonists. It is only the experience of suffering and loss that brings about this change of mind. Without it, they would not be willing to take the next step toward enlightenment.

Such a perspective does not seem to not make sense, and its concepts counter our instinctive, worldly ones. One example would be the practice of asceticism. Giving up
wealth and possessions in order to live a life of contemplation and religious devotion
(entering the monastic life, for example) is a practice that can be found around the world,
in all of the world’s major religious traditions. While this is a well-established practice, it
goes against our worldly instincts. We want to have the wherewithal to provide for
ourselves, and when we make something other than providing for ourselves the priority,
it seems like a huge leap of faith.

In addition, religious heroism can take a form that is very different from that of
traditional heroism, for traditional heroism is not compatible with the type of religious
heroism found in most of these stories. The form of heroism we see in these stories is not
the sort that would ordinarily provide the vicarious satisfaction that comes with the
protagonist’s defeating evil. Most of these protagonists are the victims of evil
circumstances. Instead of defying antagonists, they might beg for their lives, or give in
and confess to things they have not even done. On the surface, this kind of behavior
seems far from heroic, but it is part and parcel of this perspective on religious heroism in
that it implies characteristics that are invisible to most of us, but which supersede worldly
bravery, and which are heroic from the perspective of the unseen order of reality.

The idea of loss as a form of gain is a theme that appears in these stories, as well. In
these stories, loss goes hand in hand with suffering, and seems to have the effect of
clearing the protagonists’ minds. This suggests the theme of asceticism, the renouncing of
the worldly life. Without material things, people can focus more clearly on the spiritual
life. However, asceticism and loss are arguably most important in the realm of the mind,
meaning that loss of one’s mental “baggage” is also necessary in order to clear the mind
as a prerequisite for enlightenment. This happens, gradually or abruptly, in most of these
stories. Without encountering suffering and loss, these protagonists would not be able to
clear their minds and achieve religious awakening.

The view of morality in these stories also seems to conflict with conventional concepts
of morality. Simply put, the protagonists who attain some form of religious realization do
not do so by going out and doing good deeds, or by adhering to moral standards. These
characters are not evil people, either, to be sure, but their attainment seems to come from
qualities within them that are hard to recognize or notice. Righteousness and a rigid
emphasis on morality do not seem to be among those qualities. The idea that characters
who appear cowardly - and, in one case, even manipulative and sneaky - can also be seen
as religious exemplars does not seem to be a moral premise, either. While cowardliness is
not an admirable quality, it may be that in focusing on superficial qualities like
cowardliness we are missing more fundamental qualities, ones that also exist side by side
with the protagonists’ weaknesses. It is these characteristics that are easy to miss, and yet
which help bring the protagonists of these stories to religious realization. Flannery
O’Connor, in her essay “On Her Own Work” wrote the following about her story, “A
Good Man is Hard to Find”:

Now the lines of motion that interest the writer are usually invisible. They
are the lines of spiritual motion. And in this story you should be on the
lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother’s soul,
and not for the dead bodies.¹

Thus, much of what works in these stories is arguably unseen, especially when the
reader’s attention is focused on the superficial. If we focus on that which is less obvious,

less noticeable, we begin to appreciate the presence of another order of reality that exists in these works, and which is arguably fundamental to their perspective.

1.1 The “Unseen Order of Reality”

With regard to a religious basis, all of the stories in this study treat religion as a means to transcending the mundane world and attaining immortality, enlightenment, or salvation. Therefore, I have chosen to use a religious frame of reference that treats religion as the writers of these works arguably saw it - an expression of, and a means to, fundamental truth. Daniel Pals, in his book *Nine Theories of Religion*, introduces the ideas of a number of influential religious theorists, among whom the ideas of William James are especially relevant to the themes we will be considering in this study. As to a definition of religion, James writes:

> Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.²

James’s “unseen order” would seem to indicate a mystical interpretation of religion, in which religious experience transcends worldly perception. Pals elaborates on James’s “unseen order”:

> The first attribute of all religious experience is an intuition, a certitude that beyond our conventional experience, beyond the routine events of daily life, stands another, unseen order of reality. This reality does not immediately stand out in the specific events or occasions of ordinary life because it lies in, under, around, and beyond them. It impinges invisibly on visible things, calling us to look past the dreary round of our daily tasks and troubles and seek harmony with what lies beyond.³

We will consider how the dynamics of this “unseen order” differ from those of the everyday world. I will argue that the struggle to “adjust” to this order, or perhaps the unsuccessful struggle to avoid adjusting to it by the protagonists, is the focus of the stories that we will be considering in this study. I will sometimes use religious terms specific to the different belief systems represented in these works for an absolute truth or a higher state of being interchangeably with the “unseen order of reality” where these terms coincide with the description given above.

The stories which we will consider in this study are all, to some extent, concerned with James’s “unseen order of reality.” They take place at the boundary of the mundane and the mysterious. The worldly expression of James’s so-called unseen order of reality as seen in these works may, in some cases, seem puzzling and backward. It is, after all, a mystical, spiritual realm, not generally perceivable by means of the physical senses. In addition, unlike the everyday world, which is constantly in flux, the unseen order of reality is arguably fundamental and unchanging.

From the perspective of the unseen order of reality, worldly concepts may be reversed. For example, misfortune may be good fortune in disguise. From its perspective, what appears to be loss, may be a form of gain, and vice versa. Its morality may seem to be nonexistent, or even immoral. As to those who have attained religious wisdom, and who share the mystical perspective of the unseen order of reality, they may appear ugly, deformed, or insane. In Zhuangzi’s “The Signs of the Fullness of Power,” there are several examples of such people, including the following:
‘Cripple Lipless with the crooked legs advised Duke Ling of Wey; the Duke was so pleased with him that when he looked at normal men their legs were too lanky. Pitcherneck with the big goitre advised Duke Huan of Ch’i; the Duke was so pleased with him that when he looked at normal men their necks were too scrawny. To the extent then that Power stands out, we lose sight of the bodily shape. When men do not lose sight of what is out of sight, but do lose sight of what is in plain sight, we may speak of ‘the oversight which is seeing things as they are’.6

The Buddhist monk and the Daoist Priest from The Dream of the Red Chamber are dishevelled, diseased, and crippled. They also seem insane:

Just when he [Zhen Shiyin] was thinking about going back in, he saw a Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest coming toward him from down the road a way. The skin on the monk’s head was diseased, and he was barefoot. The Daoist priest was lame, with a foot that was crooked, and his hair was dishevelled. They looked like mad men, talking and laughing in a free and easy way, as they approached. When they got to the doorway, and saw Shiyin holding Yinglian [Shiyin’s daughter], the monk burst into tears, and asked Shiyin, ‘Patron, why are you embracing this creature who has life, but lacks good fortune, and who will entangle her father and mother [in the world of suffering]?’ Shiyin heard this, knew that it was deranged babbling, and ignored him.

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4 This is a variant of the character in the text.
7 Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (Part I 上), (Taipei: San min shu ju, 2014), 6.
Zhen Shiyin is one of the wiser, more decent, and likeable people among the protagonists discussed in this study. Nonetheless, he is a reluctant protagonist, and he is made uncomfortable by the Daoist priest and the Buddhist monk. He applies his worldly standards to them based on their strange appearances and eccentric behavior, and, therefore, dismisses what the monk says as insane. They are not insane, though, as Shiyin will find out later, after he has his own experience of suffering and loss. Rather, it is the world in which he lives that is insane. The unseen order of reality does not appear as one might think it should, and these characters’ preconceptions often blind them to its presence in these works.

Another theorist whose ideas have relevance to this study is Frederick Streng, who describes religion as the “...means to ultimate transformation.” All of the protagonists of these stories undergo transformation which leads them to transcend the confines of the mundane world. Streng also brings up a theme that we will consider throughout this study - the distorted nature of existence in the mundane world:

A final aspect of the problematic character of human existence is the tendency toward disorder. Profane existence robs humanity of its true, essential nature. In this state, human beings are deformed, by contrast, to their original state, and those without access to the sacred reality hidden within the conventional forms of existence take the distorted forms, that is, the deformed images, of human life as the normative way for people to live together. However, because the deformed images are only partial expressions of the true reality, they lead people astray. What appears to work for human benefit in the short term often turns out to lead to self-destruction in the long run. What appears to give one security, happiness, and understanding turns out later to result in fear, suffering, and delusion. Thus, say some contemporary spokespersons, the hope of the world is not found in planned economies, military superiority, and technological

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discovery. These false solutions simply lead to social unrest, greater fear of war (or maybe despair), and technological control of people’s lives.⁹

Aside from the social and political implications of Streng’s remarks here, we will see numerous examples in these works of how concepts of good fortune, morality, and heroism (to name a few) are very different things when viewed from the perspective of the mundane world, on the one hand, and viewed from that of the unseen order of reality, on the other. For example, good fortune and “the good life” (in the form of wealth, physical pleasure, and achieving one’s ambitions, to name a couple of examples) almost always distract characters in these works from what is fundamentally true and good, while suffering and loss - even danger and the threat of death help to open their eyes and liberate them from worldly ties.

1.2 Characteristics of Religious Heroism

The attainment of any goal arguably involves transformation, and the attainment of religious truth would seem to be a prime example of transformation. Rodney Taylor, in his book, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, provides a definition of what he terms “ultimate transformation” that is based on Frederick Streng’s definition of religion above:

Religion provides not only for a relationship with what is defined as the absolute, but provides as well a way for the individual to move toward that which is identified as the absolute. This movement toward the absolute is a process of transformation, and because the goal is the absolute, the process can be spoken of as ultimate transformation.¹⁰

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⁹ Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, 46.
¹⁰ Taylor states, “The direction of this argument depends heavily upon Frederick Streng’s definition of religion as a means toward ultimate transformation…” (Taylor, p. 3). Streng’s definition is: "Religion is a means to ultimate transformation." (Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*).
The characters in these stories all undergo some sort of transformation similar to that described here by Taylor. If the unseen order of reality is synonymous with the ultimate in terms of religious attainment, then its attainment may also be viewed as a form of religious heroism.

For the purposes of this study, we will consider religious heroism to be the discovery of some sort of religious truth, usually through loss and struggle, and through a gradual or sudden realization of the futility of worldly pursuits, culminating in the attainment of, union with, or awakening to the unseen order of reality. We will also try to define the characteristics of the protagonist who makes progress toward such attainment of, union with, or knowledge of, or awakening to the unseen order of reality. In addition, we will consider religious heroism in these works as a process of transformation.

As the unseen order of reality, or “absolute,” as Taylor describes it, may not reflect our worldly principles and concepts, religious heroism may not always reflect worldly principles and concepts, either. Religious heroism may appear unheroic. The protagonists in the stories that we will consider in this study often seem to be physically weak, cowardly, and passive. Most of them seem to be victims of circumstance, being affected by events, as opposed to taking control and exercising leadership. Furthermore, they may not seem to be moral people. However, these apparent weaknesses often mask spiritual strengths, qualities which may have brought them to the point where they now find themselves, to the verge of awareness of the unseen order of reality. Indeed, such timid and passive characters may help illuminate Jesus’ meaning in statements like:

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,...’

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11 Matt. 5:5 (New International Version Online).
And,

‘But I say to you, resist not him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.’

However, turning the other cheek may well represent a level of religious commitment and awareness that most of these characters have not yet achieved, as most of them appear to be doing their best to avoid religious transformation. It should also be noted that religious heroism may bring about an end that does not appear to be successful by worldly standards. It may appear that the protagonist has not achieved anything, or has even caused things to go terribly wrong. The religious “triumph” (the term used by Flannery O’Connor) may, to all appearances, be a tragedy.

Religious heroism also requires willingness, that is, a willingness to let go of one’s worldly concepts and attachments, and also a willingness to leave the everyday life and pursue a life of religious contemplation, or even to leave life altogether. The prospect of such a momentous decision naturally will produce fear, resistance, and unwillingness. Without a certain “push,” these protagonists would, understandably, not be willing to consider it. This brings us to the turning point of each of the works in this study: the imposition of suffering and loss. It is the imposition of suffering and loss that gives these protagonists the impetus required to open their minds. It may merely help make them become willing to leave their everyday lives, or it may actually bring them to enlightenment. It is, however, necessary in all of these stories in order to help the protagonists get past their resistance to whatever the step happens to be. Without suffering and loss, they would not be able to progress further.

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1.3 Suffering as a Means to Religious Awakening

Suffering, or the threat of it, takes place in all of these stories. The protagonists attain enlightenment of one form or another in all of them, but it is always through suffering or the fear of suffering that they do so. This can be seen as reflecting religious ideas regarding the nature of this world as a place of suffering. To quote Flannery O’Connor:

‘This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.’

O’Connor’s story, “A Good man is Hard to Find,” shows strong parallels with the Chinese stories with respect to all of the major thematic elements we will explore in this study: a reluctant protagonist, suffering as a means to enlightenment or religious awakening; unconventional religious heroism; a morality that transcends the conventional, worldly morality; and a lack of emphasis on worldly goals (as renunciation of the world is the goal that emerges).

While O’Connor’s outlook is explicitly Christian, the idea that reality is found somewhere other than this world, and that it is not easily attained, sounds almost as Buddhist as it does Christian. For example, in The Lotus Sutra, the Buddha says:

一切諸法，空無所有。無有常住，亦無起滅。

‘All phenomena
are empty, without being,
without any constant abiding,
without arising or extinction.’

---

As to the idea that the world is inherently a place of suffering, in *The Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha states:

我見諸眾生，沒在於苦惱...  

‘When I look at living beings  
I see them drowned in a sea of suffering...’

If suffering is inextricably linked to life in this world, then, in these stories, it is also suffering that forces people to confront the true nature of the world.

As to the necessity of suffering as a means of bringing about willingness to embrace the unseen order of reality, in the Daoist play, “Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment,” the need for the protagonist to experience hardship (which can be read as suffering) in order to change his mind is explicitly stated on more than one occasion.

1.3.1 Pedagogical Suffering

The role of suffering in religious awakening is central to all four of these stories. In his book, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, Rodney Taylor discusses suffering. In Chapter Eight, “The Problem of Suffering: Christian and Confucian Dimensions,” he outlines four different types of suffering: “retributive suffering,” “pedagogical suffering,” “sacrificial suffering,” and the concept of “the suffering servant.” I will argue that the suffering endured by the protagonists of these works generally falls under the category of "pedagogical suffering," as described by Taylor, though with a qualification. To start

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with, let us consider Taylor’s definition of pedagogical suffering. Taylor uses an excerpt from *The Works of Mencius* 孟子 in order to illustrate his definition of pedagogical suffering as a means of preparing one for the trials of leadership:

Mencius said, ‘Shun rose from the fields; Fu Yüeh was raised to office from amongst the builders; Chiao Ke from amidst the fish and salt; Kuan Chung from the hands of the prison officer; Sun Shu-ao from the sea and Po-li Hsi from the market. That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great burden upon a man, always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from mental lassitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies. As a rule, a man can mend his ways only after he has made mistakes. It is only when a man is frustrated in mind and in his deliberations that he is able to innovate…As a rule, a state without law-abiding families and reliable Gentlemen on the one hand, and, on the other, without the threat of foreign invasion, will perish. Only then do we learn the lesson that we survive in adversity and perish in ease and comfort.  

Note here the active role of Heaven in shaping character. Taylor goes on to explain:

The passage itself suggests that a number of prominent persons from antiquity came from humble circumstances, and they were tested by Heaven before assuming their positions. Heaven puts the person in conditions of adversity to test and discipline the individual to a point where they will have the capacity for leadership and thus assume their
rightful position. A great burden is placed upon the individual by Heaven. He must endure adversity and learn from his sufferings. This is pedagogical suffering.  

In the works covered in this study, the protagonists undergo suffering of one sort or another, and the suffering that they undergo is both purposeful and efficacious. It happens for a reason, and it is thrust upon these characters, not chosen by them. In each case, it achieves a definite result: it changes the characters’ minds, and makes them willing to leave the secular life (or to leave life altogether, by dying). Suffering teaches these characters. However, unlike the pedagogical suffering described above by Taylor, this suffering is not for the purpose of preparing the protagonists for the rigors of public service. Quite the contrary, it prepares them to leave the worldly life behind. In addition, rather than taking place during the formative years of the protagonist, it might take place over the course of several years, of one year (as in the case of Chen Kechang 陳可常), or of merely an hour or two (as it does in the case of “A Good Man is Hard to Find”). It might occur in middle age, or even old age. As a result of their suffering, the protagonists then either become enlightened, saved, leave the secular life 出家, or leave the mortal world to become immortal beings. Some of the characters die in the process (not always of their own choice). This suffering can still be seen as pedagogical in nature; however, rather than preparing the protagonist for a life of selfless public service, it prepares the often-reluctant protagonist to open his or her mind, embrace spiritual awakening, and eventually leave the worldly life.

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1.4 Four Portrayals of the Unseen Order of Reality

The works we will consider in this study have emerged from Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Other religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism (to name a few) are not discussed here, though they also have equally profound and venerable mystical traditions. Including them would undoubtedly enrich this study greatly, but would also expand its scope far beyond what it is now. Therefore, I have chosen to keep the focus here on Chinese works with enlightenment themes, and also included one American story that happens to fit well into this framework of stories about religious awakening through suffering and loss.

In “Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment” 漢鍾離度脫藍采和, it is the realm of Daoist immortals, usually existing beyond the perception of most ordinary mortal beings, that influences events in the mortal world. In this play, a Daoist immortal, Zhongli of the Han 漢鍾離, sees that Lan Caihe 藍采和 is ready to become an immortal, and therefore takes it upon himself to enter the mortal world and enlighten him.

In the two stories from Feng Menglong’s collection, Stories to Caution the World, it is the realm of karmic forces and fate, employing both Buddhist and Daoist concepts and terminology, which influences events in the everyday lives of the characters. It might be karmic forces taking effect, and thus directing a character toward his destiny. It might be a character’s becoming entrapped by a legendary monster, and the misfortune that this entails, causing him to change the course of his life, and to leave the secular life in order to find freedom.
In Flannery O’Connor’s story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” it is grace that visits the heroine of the story during her encounter with an escaped convict and murderer called “The Misfit.” In Flannery O’Connor’s essay “On Her Own Work,” she also suggests this “unseen order of reality” and its coming into contact with the everyday world:

> Our age does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.²⁵

The unseen order of reality intrudes upon the lives of the protagonists of all of the stories in this study. Its intrusions are in some ways surprisingly similar, despite the differences in religious backgrounds among the stories. Its intrusions also often defy conventional worldly thinking.

### 1.5 Perspectives on Suffering

A brief, general overview of some perspectives on suffering in each religion can help us to better understand the portrayals of suffering in the works in this study, and provide context with regard to the role of suffering in religious awakening in these stories.

#### 1.5.1 Buddhism

In Chapter One of their book *The Buddhist Religion*, “Gautama’s Enlightenment,” Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson outline “The World View of Early North Indian Thought.” Regarding the nature of the world:

> It was believed that the world system into which the individual is repeatedly born is transient and ever-changing, perilous, like an ocean or a swiftly-moving stream. Called samsāra, “that which turns around forever,” it is the mortal realm into which karma-laden beings are born to experience endlessly transforming destinies determined totally by their prior choices and actions in this and previous lives.²⁶

Regarding the perspective on how to deal with suffering, they write:

Yet another belief was the existence of an alternative to samsāra, an escape from endlessly recurrent death and karma. This nirvāṇa or moksha (release), the transcendent, deathless state, salvation, the ultimate goal, respite from suffering and the trials of mortality.\(^{27}\)

The world is seen here as inherently dangerous, and only escape from its karmic cycles can bring people true relief from their troubles and suffering.

The Buddhist Four Noble Truths also offer insight into the mystical perspective on the conditional world and the suffering that is inherently a part of it:

The Buddha then declared the Four Holy Truths.\(^{28}\) The first is the truth of duhkha, or suffering, found in every aspect of existence. Birth, illness, decay, death, conjunction with the hated, and separation from the dear -- in short, the experienced world, made up of the five skandhas (groups of material and mental forces), entails suffering. The second Holy Truth is the truth of the source of suffering. This is thirst or craving for sensual pleasure, for coming to be, and for ceasing to be. The third is the truth of the cessation of suffering. When craving ceases entirely through dispassion, renunciation, and nondependence, then suffering ceases. The fourth is the truth of the path leading to cessation of suffering, the Holy Eightfold Path.\(^{29}\)

Here we again see that existence in this world must involve suffering. We also see that suffering comes from dynamics related to physical existence: “craving for sensual pleasure, for coming to be, and for ceasing to be.” It is the body which is subject to cravings, and which can come to be, or cease to be. Lastly, suffering does not cease through doing something to improve the world, it ceases through “dispassion, renunciation, and nondependence…” The implication here is that existence in this world, and the cravings that spring from it, are the real problems. Fixing them can only be done

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\(^{28}\) Also commonly referred to as “The Four Noble Truths.”

by stepping back from the world, from giving up one’s worldly attachments. This may be
the lesson that suffering teaches the protagonists of these stories.

The Twelve-Linked Chain of Causation (as it appears in *The Lotus Sutra*) further
emphasizes this theme:

及廣說十二因緣法：無明緣行，行緣識，識緣名色，名色緣六入，
六入緣觸，觸緣受，受緣愛，愛緣取，取緣有，有緣生，生緣老死
憂悲苦惱。無明滅則行滅，行滅則識滅，識滅則名色滅，名色滅則
六入滅，六入滅則觸滅，觸滅則受滅，受滅則愛滅，愛滅則取滅，
有滅則生滅，生滅則老死憂悲苦惱滅。

‘Then he broadly expounded the Law of the twelve-linked chain of
causation: ignorance causes action, action causes consciousness,
consciousness causes name and form, name and form cause the six sense
organs, the six sense organs cause contact, contact causes sensation,
sensation causes desire, desire causes attachment, attachment causes
existence, existence causes birth, birth causes old age and death, worry
and grief, suffering and anguish. If ignorance is wiped out, then action
will be wiped out. If action is wiped out, then consciousness will be
wiped out. If consciousness is wiped out, then name and form will be
wiped out. If name and form are wiped out, then the six sense organs will
be wiped out. If the six sense organs are wiped out, then contact will be
wiped out. If contact is wiped out, then sensation will be wiped out. If
sensation is wiped out, then desire will be wiped out. If desire is wiped
out, then attachment will be wiped out. If attachment is wiped out, then
existence will be wiped out. If existence is wiped out, then birth will be
wiped out. If birth is wiped out, then old age and death, worry and grief,
suffering and anguish will be wiped out.’

Here, existence itself (one part of the chain beginning with ignorance, and ending with
suffering and anguish) is listed as one of the root causes of suffering. This also clearly
asserts that physical existence can, and should, be wiped out, if one is to end suffering.

Furthermore, while the religious heroes and heroines in these works are meek, the following passage from The Lotus Sutra seems to emphasize power and might (emphasis is my own), the existence of evil, and even implies violence:

佛告諸比丘：‘大通智勝佛壽五百四十萬億那由他劫。其佛本坐道場，破魔軍已，垂得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，而諸佛法不現在前...’

The Buddha announced to the monks: ‘The Buddha Great Universal [Universal] Wisdom Wisdom Excellence had a life span of five hundred and forty ten thousand million nayutas of kalpas. This Buddha at first sat in the place of practice and, having smashed the armies of the devil, was on the point of attaining anuttara-samypa-sambodhi, but the doctrines of the Buddhas did not appear before him.’

The existence of “armies of devils” implies the existence of evil as a malevolent force determined to undermine good. “Smashing” armies of devils implies that evil needs to be defeated by using force. This would seem to reinforce a religious point of view that sees the world as real, and evil as a threat to that world. This relates to the theme of “the unseen order of reality,” and how the existence of evil fits into that paradigm. Does evil exist other than as an illusion, a manifestation of worldly attachments that has no reality? Is it something that is dissipated once one relinquishes worldly attachments, or is evil a reality that must be defeated and destroyed?

There is another possible interpretation of this passage, though, which sees this “battle” in terms of an inner struggle, and this perspective applies better to the works in this study. In the commentary on this passage in the Chinese version of The Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華經, with regard to the term “armies of the devil” 魔軍, Zhang Songhui writes:

32 Zhang Songhui, trans., Miaofa lianhua jing, 196.
33 Burton Watson, trans., The Lotus Sutra, 119.
When all Buddhas are nearing true enlightenment, it must be that the devil king will lead [his] armies onward to obstruct [their attainment of] the way. Therefore, [the Buddhas] must smash\(^{35}\) them, and then [they can] complete [their attainment of] the way.

The imagery here can be interpreted physically (as an actual battle) or mentally (as a struggle with temptation or attachments). The latter interpretation seems to work better in the context of this study, as the protagonists are not traditional heroes, and do no physical “smashing” of anyone. Indeed, it is they who are more likely to be subjected to violence themselves. Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson give the following commentary on the Buddha’s defeat of the armies of the devil:

According to the legend, on the fourteenth of Vaiśākha, Gautama dreamed five dreams indicating that he was about to become a Buddha. The next day, he accepted a meal from Sujātā. He went and sat under the Bodhi tree, facing east, and resolved not to arise until he attained enlightenment. Māra (“Death”) was alarmed at the prospect of the Bodhisattva’s victory, which would allow him to escape from Death’s realm, and came to assail him with an army of fearful demons. The Bodhisattva was protected, though, by his accumulated merit and his friendly love (maitrī). After failing to shake him, the hosts of demons fled in defeat.\(^{36}\)

In this passage, while there is still an attack by “an army of fearful demons,” the imagery of retaliatory physical destruction is absent. The authors go on to describe a final attempt by Māra to use temptation, which also fails. They describe this last attempt as a “a quite late addition and entirely mythical.”\(^{37}\) In this case, the demons are also seen as figurative:

The myth, though, is a suitable expression of an experience common to most contemplatives. The seeker eventually is committed to an integral attempt, overcomes doubt and inertia, and sets to work. This conjures up the demons of fear from the unconscious. All the habit-hardened

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\(^{34}\) Zhang Songhui, trans., Miaofa lianhua jing, 199.

\(^{35}\) The Chinese character can also be translated as “to break.” I have used Watson’s translation here to correspond to Watson’s translation above.


dispositions protest against their coming destruction. But good habits sustain the seeker’s resolve. The waves of fear pass, and doubts arise about whether the candidate is really equal to the challenge. If the seeker possesses genuine self-confidence, the doubts are vanquished.  

The idea of this battle being an internal, mental one, as opposed to an external, physical one, in which the defeat is of one’s own bad habits and temptations, as opposed to the killing of enemies, is close to the paradigm that we will see in these stories (though Madam White is physically subdued in “Madam White Is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Tower”). In some cases, the “demons,” or enemies, actually help the protagonists to attain enlightenment by helping them realize that suffering is the nature of existence in this world. External enemies can thus help one defeat the true, internal enemies.

1.4.2 Daoism

A straightforward definition of the nature of suffering and evil is more elusive when it comes to Daoism. Tao Te Ching (Daode Jing) and Zhuangzi do not seem to concern themselves with the idea of evil other than as the discord that arises when people stray away from what is natural, the Dao (or the Way). By the same token, they seem to reinforce the idea that the state of nature that is in harmony with the Dao is one of peace, implying what we would most certainly consider the “good.”

Chapter Thirteen of Tao Te Ching (Daode Jing, 道德經) introduces a theme that has relevance to the Daoist perspective on suffering, as it seems to equate the physical world, and physical existence, with trouble. The chapter begins as follows:

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寵辱若驚；
貴大患若身。

In D.C. Lau’s translation, the chapter begins:

Favour and disgrace are things that startle;
High rank is, like one’s body, a source of great trouble.

The chapter continues with an explanation of the counterintuitive premise:

何謂寵辱若驚？寵，為下得之若驚，失之若驚。是謂寵辱若驚。
何謂貴大患若身？吾所以有大患者，為吾有身。及吾無身，吾有何患？

Lau’s translation of this section is as follows:

What is meant by saying favour and disgrace are things that startle?
Favour when it is bestowed on a subject serves to startle as much as when
it is withdrawn. This is what is meant by saying that favour and disgrace
are things that startle. What is meant by saying high rank is, like one’s
body, a source of great trouble? The reason I have great trouble is that I
have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?

The chapter ends as follows:

故貴以身為天下，若可寄天下，愛以身為天下，若可託天下。

Lau’s translation suggests a selfish-seeming outlook, and a goal of imperial leadership:

Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the empire can
be entrusted with the empire. He who loves his body more than dominion
over the empire can be given the custody of the empire.

40 In Wu’s book, there is a period here, instead of a semicolon.
42 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 19.
43 There is no comma here in Wu’s book.
44 Wu puts a period here, making a complete sentence out of the three characters: “寵為下。” These are
not the only differences between the two translators’ punctuation of the Chinese text, and can help explain
some of the differences between the two English translations.
45 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 18.
46 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 19.
47 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 18.
48 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 19.
According to Lau’s translation, the end of Chapter Thirteen seems to have a decidedly worldly, even Macchiavellian tone. This seems inconsistent with the beginning of the chapter. In the introduction, Lau cites this part of Chapter Thirteen as asserting the view that a truly selfish man would be best-suited to lead the empire. Describing this perspective on selfishness as found in the *Tao Te Ching*, he writes:

   In fact, true selfishness is a very rare thing and when it is found in a man it makes him eminently suitable to be a ruler."\(^{49}\)

Nonetheless, Lau also cites the middle of this chapter as one of the clear examples of mysticism in the book:

   ‘The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?’\(^{50}\)

Regarding the above excerpt, he writes:

   ‘This is enlightenment, indeed, but does not fit well into the *Lao tzu*, where survival is assumed, without question, to be the supreme goal in life.’\(^{51}\)

What is important to this study is this view regarding the body. If lacking a body implies enlightenment, and not death, then there must be a facet of existence that transcends the physical, and which is free from the troubles inherent to the physical existence. Suffering, then, may be a way of realizing the true nature of physical existence. The idea that physical existence is a cause of trouble seems to parallel the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, which assert that life in this world is characterized by *duhka*, suffering.

\(^{49}\) D.C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, xxxii.
\(^{50}\) *Tao Te Ching*, C. 13.
\(^{51}\) D.C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, xxxiv.
In Zhuangzi’s “Shan Mu” 山木 “The Tree in the Mountains,” another Daoist perspective relevant to suffering (or the avoidance of it) can be found:

When Chuang-tzü was travelling in the mountains he saw a great tree with flourishing leaves and branches. A woodcutter stopped at its side but did not choose it. He asked him why, and was told
‘There’s nothing you can use it for.’
‘This tree,’ said Chuang-tzü, ‘by its timber being good for nothing, will get to last out Heaven’s term for it, wouldn’t you say?’
Coming down from the mountains, he lodged at a friend’s house. The friend was delighted, and ordered a boy to kill a goose in his honour. The boy had a question:
‘One of them can cackle, one of them can’t. Which shall I kill please?’
‘The one that can’t.’
Next day a disciple asked Chuang-tzü
‘Yesterday, because its timber was good for nothing, the tree in the mountains could last out Heaven’s term for it. Today, because the stuff it’s made of is good for nothing, our host’s goose is dead. Which side are you going to settle for, sir?’
Chuang-tzü smiled.
‘I should be inclined to settle midway between being good for something and being good for nothing. That seems to be the thing to do

52 Zhang Songhui, trans., Zhuangzi duben, 325-326.
yet it is not, and so one still fails to shake off ties. But in roaming adrift with the Way and the Power as your chariot, that’s not so.

\[
\begin{align*}
Without praises, without curses, \\
Now a dragon, now a snake, \\
You transform together with the times. \\
And never consent to be one thing alone.
\end{align*}
\]

Now up, now down, you take as your measure the degree which is in harmony; and if roaming adrift over the Ancestor of the myriad things you treat things as things and refuse to be turned into a thing by things, how can you ever be tied? This was the rule for Shen-nung and the Yellow Emperor. But when it comes to the facts about the myriad things or the code of conduct handed down for men, that’s not so.

\[
\begin{align*}
What you join together will part, \\
What you achieve will decay. \\
Honesty’s hard corners will get blunted, \\
If you are esteemed you are criticised, \\
Do anything and there’s something you leave out.
\end{align*}
\]

Be clever and they’ll plot against you, be stupid and they’ll cheat you, how can you get to be certain of anything? Sad, isn’t it? Make a note of it, my disciples. Is there any direction to take except by the Way and the Power?\(^\text{53}\)

What is pertinent to this study here is the view of the world and its implications for the nature of suffering. It is a place where one can come to harm for either being of use, or not being of use. The tree, for example, is saved by its perceived uselessness, but the goose is killed and eaten because it is not seen as useful. The world is not only a dangerous place, but it is also a place where there is no clear way to be safe. No matter what one’s qualities, one can be hurt or targeted. And while Zhuangzi has a way of living safely in this world, the world itself remains a dangerous place. Furthermore, this danger is not just incidental, it is arguably a fundamental dynamic of worldly existence. Here, it is possible to see another parallel to the Buddhist concept of duhka. Zhuangzi does not

directly mention suffering here, but the concept of vicissitudes, constant changes in circumstance, which can lead to sudden and unexpected danger, and thus make it difficult to find peace of mind, is implicit in this story. In this existence, one is never completely safe, regardless of the person’s occupation, status, or level of skill. The constant worry and anxiety that this engenders can be considered a form of suffering inherent to this existence.

Another theme that comes up in Zhuangzi is that of the perception of misfortune. In “The Tree in the Mountains,” Zhuangzi offers a means of avoiding danger in the world. Zhuangzi, however, does not just consider the avoidance of danger, he also considers the way that danger (or misfortune in general) might best be viewed. If the potter’s wheel of Heaven is the peaceful axis at the center of the maelstrom, perhaps moving inward past the whirling bands revolving around that circle it is the way to enlightenment. In other words, one must make one’s way through the turbulence before one can find peace. If one can employ this sort of perception, then it is possible to see the vicissitudes of the world as not being fundamentally different in nature. This sort of perception would then seem to bring a sort of equanimity, not unlike that which the old man at the frontier exemplifies in the story “The Old Man at the Frontier Lost His Horse” 塞翁失馬.

夫禍福之轉而相生，其變難見也。近塞上之人有善術者，馬無故亡而入胡。人皆吊之。其父曰：「此何遽不為福乎？」居數月，其馬將胡駿馬而歸。人皆賀之。其父曰：「此何遽不能為禍乎？」家富良馬，其子好騎，墜而折其髀。人皆吊之。其父曰：「此何遽不為福乎？」居一年，胡人大入塞，丁壯者引弦而戰，近塞之人，死者
As to the revolutions of calamity and good fortune and their mutually generating each other, their changes are not easily observed. Near the frontier there lived a man who was very skilled at numerology. One of his horses once, for no reason, ran off into the territory of the Hu people. All of the people in the village were sorry for the man, but he said, ‘How can we say that this is not a good thing?’ After several months, that horse came back with a fine steed from the Hu territory. Everyone then congratulated him. However, he said, ‘How can we say that this is not a bad thing?’ His family had many good horses, and his son liked riding horseback, but one day he fell and broke his leg. Then everyone again felt sorry for the man. The man only said, ‘How can we say that this is not a good thing?’ After a year, the Hu people made a large incursion into the frontier, and the young and strong had to take up arms and go to battle. Of the people living near the frontier, nine out of ten were killed. It was only because of the son’s lame leg that the father and son were spared. Therefore, as to good fortune’s acting as calamity and calamity’s acting as good fortune, the extent of these transformations is unreachable, and their depth is unfathomable.

In Chapter Two of A.C. Graham’s translation of and commentary on Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzu - The Inner Chapters*, titled “Chuang-tzu and the origins of Taoism,”

Graham writes:

‘In the nearer background of Chuang-tzu’s thought are philosophers of the fourth century BC, whose writings do not survive. A minor one is Sung Hsing (also called Sung Jung), who in spite of his moralism is respected by Chuang-tzu for his thesis that ‘To be insulted is not disgraceful’, implying that a man’s worth has nothing to do with the approval or disapproval of others.’

The original quote is as follows:

“故夫知效一官，行比一鄉，德合一君，而徵一國者，其自視也，亦若此矣。而送榮子猶然笑之。且舉世而譽之而不加勸，舉世而非之而不加沮。”

55 I have consulted the website Fanti gushi while translating this passage. Any mistakes are my own.
56 A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang Tzu*, 4-5.
而不加沮，定乎内外之分，辯乎榮辱之境，斯已矣。彼其於世未數
數然也。雖然猶有未樹也。57

Those, then, who are clever enough to do well in one office or efficient
enough to protect one district, whose powers suit one prince and are put to
the test in one state, are seeing themselves as the little birds did, and Sung
Jung [Song Rong] smiled at them in disdain. Not only that, he refused to
be encouraged though the whole world praised him, he was unwavering
about the division between inward and outward, discriminating about the
boundary between honour and disgrace -- but then he soared no higher.
(He was too concerned about the world to break clean away.) 58

On the one hand, people’s opinions can be fickle, and one should not make too much of
them, whether they are complimentary or critical.

On a more profound level, that fickleness may reflect departure from a basic truth that
is centered and unchanging. This seems relevant to the pointless disputation Zhuangzi

describes in “The Sorting Which Evens Things Out” 齊物論:

是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非，果且有彼是乎
哉？果且無彼是乎哉？彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞，樞始得其環中，
以應無窮。是亦一無窮，非亦一無窮也。59

What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. There they say ‘That’s it,
that’s not’ from one point of view, here we say ‘That’s it, that’s not’ from
another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Where neither It nor
Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When once the axis
is found at the centre of the circle there is no limit to responding with
either, on the one hand, no limit to what is it, on the other no limit to what
is not.60

This passage also relates to the idea that our worldly perceptions and concepts may not
always be in accord with the truth.

Zhuangzi further illustrates the point with the story of “Three every morning”:

57 Zhang Songhui, trans., Zhuangzi duben, 7.
58 A.C. Graham, trans., Chuang Tzu, 44.
60 A.C. Graham, trans., Chuang Tzu, p. 53.
A monkey keeper handing out nuts said, ‘Three every morning and four every evening.’ The monkeys were all in a rage. ‘All right then,’ he said, ‘four every morning and three every evening.’ The monkeys were delighted. Without anything being missed out either in name or in substance, their pleasure and anger were put to use; his too was the ‘That’s it’ which goes by circumstance. This is why the sage smooths things out with his ‘That’s it, that’s not’, and stays at the point of rest on the potter’s wheel of Heaven. It is this that is called ‘Letting both alternatives proceed.’

The foolishness of the monkeys is obvious. They are angry about getting three nuts in the morning and four in the evening, but happy about getting four in the morning and three in the evening. In each case, they are clearly getting the same amount, and only the arrangement is different. While it is easy to laugh at the monkeys’ foolishness, our human perception about disputes and opinions may not be altogether different from their perspective.

Insisting on differentiation where things are all of one source and one nature may be a characteristic of worldly perception. Staying near to the “potter’s wheel of Heaven” can perhaps help one to perceive things more realistically, and with more equanimity. This can be applied to the theme of good fortune and misfortune not always being as they seem, as is the case in almost all of these stories. Ultimately, though, it is misfortune and suffering that bring the opportunity to gain wisdom in the stories in this study.

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62 A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang Tzu*, p. 54.
The Daoist classics also address the topic of loss. Loss arguably has the effect of clearing one’s vision by removing the mental “clutter” that blocks one’s spiritual progress. One aspect of loss is in the everyday sense of deprivation of that which we consider to belong to us, and which we desire and cherish. Loss in this sense can be concrete or abstract: one can lose an item, like a misplaced pair of gloves, or one can lose a feeling, or a sense of something, like losing one’s sense of security or safety during a crisis. Both can obviously lead to vexation or even mental anguish.

Another sense in which loss can be understood is that of willfully ridding oneself of preoccupations that impede perception. The second form of loss clearly is an aspect of cultivation, but even the first form can also help one to make progress if one views it with equanimity. Thus, both forms of loss have the potential to ultimately help lead one to the same end. The theme of relinquishing one’s preoccupations can be found in both Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi.

For example, in Chapter 48 of Tao Te Ching, the paradox of losing as a form of gaining is presented:

為學日益，為道日損。
損之又損，以致於無為。
無為而無不為。  

In the pursuit of learning, one knows more every day.
In the pursuit of the way one does less every day.

One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all, there is nothing that is undone.”

63 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 68.
64 D.C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching, 69-71; (There is a page of Chinese text between the beginning and end of the English translation.)
The character “損” can also be translated as “to decrease” or “to lose.” John C.H. Wu translates the same passage in such a way as to reflect this meaning:

Learning consists in daily accumulating;  
The practice of Tao consists in daily diminishing.

Keep on diminishing and diminishing,  
Until you reach the state of No-Ado.  
No-ado, and yet nothing is left undone.65

Another example of the perspective on loss as a step toward spiritual awakening can be found at the beginning of “Man in the World, Associated with other Men,” 人間世 in the Inner Chapters of Zhuangzi, in the dialogue between Confucius and Yen Hui (Yan Hui). Here, Yen Hui states his intention to go to the land of Wei to try to reform a corrupt and tyrannical ruler. Confucius expresses doubt regarding Yen Hui’s prospects for survival, much less success. Finally, he tells Yen Hui about “the fasting of the mind” 心齋 as a means of approaching the situation:

仲尼曰：「若一志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心，無聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。」66

‘Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the heart. Rather than listen with the heart, listen with the energies. Listening stops at the ear, the heart at what tallies with the thought. As for ‘energy’, it is the tenuous that waits to be roused by other things. Only the Way accumulates the tenuous. The attenuating is the fasting of the heart.’67

67 A.C. Graham, trans., Chuang Tzu, 68.
James Legge’s translation of the same excerpt puts more emphasis on the idea of a state in which one’s mind is clear and free of distraction:

...Zhongni answered, ‘Maintain a perfect unity in every movement of your will, You [sic] will not wait for the hearing of your ears about it, but for the hearing of your mind. You will not wait even for the hearing of your mind, but for the hearing of the spirit. Let the hearing (of the ears) rest with the ears. Let the mind rest in the verification (of the rightness of what is in the will). But the spirit is free from all pre-occupation and so waits for (the appearance of) things. Where the (proper) course is, there is freedom from all pre-occupation; such freedom is the fasting of the mind.’

Here, freeing one’s mind from pre-occupation is the process of losing, of getting rid of one’s mental baggage. It is precisely this process of losing that brings with it new awareness. The character "虛" in this passage is the very character which Legge translates into “freedom.” In fact, 虛 literally means “emptiness” or “void.” The connection made by Legge, and one that makes sense in this context, is that in attaining this state of emptiness, there is a freedom from the things that occupy one’s mind otherwise. Indeed, in this passage, freedom can be seen as more profound than just a temporary freedom from worries. It is, rather, a state of mind that brings with it a higher state of awareness.

Yen Hui’s response to Confucius suggests the transformation that comes with this new state of awareness, and also implies that this transformation is itself a form of loss:

‘回之未始得使，實自回也；得使之也，未始有回也。可謂虛乎？’

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When Hui has never yet succeeded in being the agent, a deed arrives from Hui. When he does succeed in being its agent, there has never yet begun to be a Hui. -- Would you call that attenuating?  

Loss here is a form of returning to one’s origins, a process that requires letting go of the identity one has acquired through worldly gain. Loss may, therefore, be as much the goal as it is the means.

Later in the same passage, Confucius states:

聞以有翼飛者矣，未聞以無翼飛者也；聞以有知知者矣，未聞以无知知者也。  

‘You have heard of using wings to fly. You have not yet heard of flying by being wingless; you have heard of using the wits to know, you have not yet heard of using ignorance to know.’

“Using ignorance to know” seems to be a paradox. In the verse that follows, though, the metaphor of an empty room clarifies the seeming contradiction. If clearing one’s mind is like emptying out a room, then this becomes a powerful symbol of enlightenment:

瞻彼闋者，虛室生白...  

‘Look up to the easer of our toils. In the empty room, the brightness grows.’

Here, the English “unwise” is a translation of “无知” meaning literally “without knowledge,” or “ignorant.” This sounds negative in English, but it is meant in the context of getting rid of one’s “preoccupations” as a means of helping one to become more

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71 Zhang Songhui, trans., *Zhuangzi duben*, 56.
72 A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 69.
73 Zhang Songhui, trans., *Zhuangzi duben*, 56.
74 A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 69.
receptive to the “(appearance of) things.” The implication seems to be that the “things” that appear are things blocked out by our preconceptions. The metaphor of the aperture allowing the empty apartment to be filled with light suggests that these things are of an enlightening, transforming nature.

In a later passage in the Chapter “The Teacher Who Is the Ultimate Ancestor,” the idea of loss as a means to wisdom and religious awakening is further emphasized in another dialogue between Confucius and Yen Hui:

顏回曰：‘回益矣。’
仲尼曰：‘何謂也？’
曰：‘回忘仁義矣。’
曰：‘可矣，猶未也。’
他日復見，曰：‘回益矣。’
曰：‘何謂也？’
曰：‘回忘禮樂矣。’
曰：‘可矣，猶未也。’
它日復見，曰：‘回益矣。’
曰：‘何謂也？’
曰：‘回坐忘矣。’
仲尼蹴然曰：‘何謂坐忘？’
顏回曰：‘墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘。’
仲尼曰：‘同則無好也，化則無常也，而果其賢乎！丘也請從而後也。’

‘I make progress, said Yen Hui.
‘Where?’ said Confucius.
‘I have forgotten about rites and music.’
‘Satisfactory. But you still have far to go.’
Another day, he saw Confucius again.
‘I make progress.’

75 Zhang Songhui, trans., Zhuangzi duben, 117.
‘Where?’
‘I have forgotten about Goodwill and Duty.’
‘Satisfactory. But you still have far to go.’

Another day, he saw Confucius again.
‘I make progress.’
‘Where?’
‘I just sit and forget.’

Confucius was taken aback.
‘What do you mean, just sit and forget?’
‘I let organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, and go along with the universal thoroughfare. This is what I mean by ‘just sit and forget’.’
‘If you go along with it, you have no preferences; if you let yourself transform, you have no norms. Has it really turned out that you are the better of us? Oblige me by accepting me as your disciple.’

In this passage, loss again implies spiritual progress. Also, aspects of ritual and worldly morality and obligation (‘Goodwill and Duty’) are portrayed as blocks to progress.

Lastly, some of the loss that occurs is mental, in the form of forgetting, while some appears to have the nature of an out-of-body experience.

In the stories we will examine in this study, we will be able to see how suffering and loss allow other things to enter into the minds of the protagonists, things which they would have resisted without going through the process of suffering and loss.

1.5.3 Christianity

In discussing the Christian view of suffering, I have relied a great deal on the essays of Flannery O’Connor regarding her works, as it is her outlook on Christianity, that shapes the worlds of her stories. However, it is also helpful to understand her views in light of some basic Christian concepts relevant to this study. Therefore, we will also examine some parts of the Bible that deal with the themes of suffering and loss, and of the roles suffering and loss play in facilitating awareness of the unseen order of reality.

\[76\] A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 92.
In the Bible, suffering begins soon after people are put on earth. As to the nature of suffering, it is something that is brought upon them as a punishment for their disobedience. The Book of Genesis narrates God’s punishment of Eve and Adam:

Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself. And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you not to eat?” And the man said, “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.”

Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

God punishes the serpent, and then punishes Eve and Adam:

And the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly shall you go, And dust you shall eat All the days of your life; And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.” To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall bring forth children; Yet your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.” Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’: Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. “Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you shall eat the plants of the field;

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By the sweat of your face
You shall eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.” 78

In Augustine’s Early Thought on the Redemptive Function of Divine Judgement, Bart Van Egmond writes:

In the writings that Augustine produced during his time in Rome and Thagaste, he begins to discuss God’s judgement of sin in the context of the fall and its consequences. The theme of divine pedagogy through the fear of suffering of punishment becomes embedded in the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption. In his polemics with the Manichees, Augustine stresses that humanity’s entanglement in habit and its liability to death are not to be explained as the consequences of the divine soul’s entrapment in matter, but rather as punishments for the first sin (and for subsequent sins).79

Suffering here is the punishment for disobedience, and it will become an aspect of life on earth for all the generations. When God says that there will be enmity “between your [the serpent’s] seed and her [Eve’s] seed,” the implication is that this punishment will be for all the ensuing generations. Suffering will become a part of existence for life on earth. The excerpts from Genesis above show how suffering came into the world in Christianity, but much of our understanding of the nature of suffering here will come from Flannery O’Connor’s own words regarding her beliefs and how these views on her faith shaped her stories.

O’Connor, as a devout Catholic, almost certainly accepted the Christian belief in the fall, and in its legacy of suffering. She, however, also asserts a view about violence (which we will also consider a form of suffering) as a means of helping people realize

salvation (to use Christian terminology). In her essay, “On Her Own Work,” O’Connor writes:

…in my own stories, I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.  

Despite the differences in religious backgrounds, cultures, and time periods between China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and the American South of Flannery O’Connor’s time, her view of suffering (through encountering violent situations) fits well into the framework of this study, and the themes that she brings up are strikingly similar to some of the themes we are exploring in this study. O’Connor emphasizes the necessity of violence (which brings with it suffering and mental anguish) as a means to spiritual awakening, does not portray her protagonist as a conventional hero (her protagonist in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” does not seem heroic at all), does not seem to put an overt emphasis on morality, and seems to portray evil as helping the protagonist “awaken.”

The Biblical story of Job helps illuminate how suffering and loss bring greater awareness of the meaning of religious life to one who already seems to understand its meaning. Job is arguably more religious than the protagonists of these stories. He is clearly and unambiguously religious, as the first sentence in The Book of Job attests:

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil.

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81 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 112.
83 Job 1:1 (New American Standard Bible).
Job has a large family, and he is wealthy:

And seven sons and three daughters were born to him.
His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east.\(^{84}\)

Even God recognizes Job’s religious devotion:

And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.’\(^{85}\)

Satan, however, insists that Job’s faith is merely based on his material wealth, and that his faith will vanish if he loses that.\(^{86}\) Therefore, God accepts Satan’s challenge, and allows Satan to take away all that Job has.\(^{87}\)

The loss that Job then experiences is devastating. Several of his servants and many of his animals are killed by raiders and by the “fire of God,” and his sons and daughters are killed when a “great wind” causes the house they are in to collapse.\(^{88}\)

Despite this, though, his reaction, is to maintain his faith:

The Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.
And he said,

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
And naked I shall return there.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.’

Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.\(^{89}\)

\(^{84}\) Job 1: 2-3 (New American Standard Bible).
\(^{85}\) Job 1: 8 (New American Standard Bible).
\(^{86}\) Job 1:9-11 (New American Standard Bible).
\(^{87}\) Job 1:12 (New American Standard Bible).
\(^{89}\) Job 1:20-22 (New American Standard Bible).
Thus, through loss, Job appears to show that his faith is sincere, and that it is not just based on his worldly well-being and wealth.

After this, Satan returns to challenge God again. God commends Job’s faith, but Satan contends that physical suffering will cause Job to renounce his faith:

And Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. ‘However, put forth thy hand, now, and touch his bone and flesh; he will curse thee to thy face’.91

God accepts Satan’s challenge, and Satan then afflicts Job:

Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.93

Job’s wife, in light of his troubles, tells him:

‘Curse God and die!’94

He responds, though, by saying:

‘You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not adversity?’95

So far, therefore, it would appear that Job’s faith has withstood the test of loss and suffering. However, when his three friends come to see him, Job begins to lament his situation:

Afterward, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.
And Job said,
‘Let the day perish on which I was to be born,
And the night which said, ‘A boy is conceived.’
‘May that day be darkness;
Let not God above care for it,
Nor light shine on it.’96

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90 Job 2:3 (New American Standard Bible).
95 Job 2:10 (New American Standard Bible).
His friends test his faith, as well. For example, his friend Eliphaz the Temanite suggests that maybe this is his fault:

‘Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?
Or where were the upright destroyed?
‘According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity
And those who sow trouble harvest it.
‘By the breath of God they perish,
And by the blast of his anger they come to an end.’

Eventually, Elihu, a younger man, speaks up, and suggests that Job and his three friends might be mistaken:

So Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite spoke out and said,
‘I am younger in years and you are old;
Therefore I was shy and afraid to tell you what I think.
‘I thought age should speak,
And increased years should teach wisdom.
‘But it is a spirit in man,
And the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding.
‘The abundant in years may not be wise,
Nor may elders understand justice.
‘So I say, ‘Listen to me,
I too will tell what I think.’

Thus, even those who claim to have faith can still learn, and even the “wise” do not know all there is to know. Or perhaps we can infer from this that the wise know so much that it gets in the way of a more fundamental awareness? When Elihu says, “And the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding,” he is stating that understanding comes from God. Perhaps he himself is expressing this divinely-inspired understanding in saying so. The idea that the highest knowledge or understanding comes from the divine is one we have seen expressed before. For example, in the Daoist classics Daodejing and Zhuangzi, knowledge and preoccupations must be emptied out before this higher

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knowledge can flood in. In any event, the wise can still learn from those who are younger and less experienced.

Eventually, after God himself speaks to Job and admonishes him for his presumption, Job responds:

Then Job answered the Lord and said, ‘I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ ‘Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.’ ‘Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask Thee, and do Thou instruct me.’ ‘I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees Thee…’

This seems to suggest wisdom gained through suffering, an idea that can be found in all of the religious stories in this study in one form or another.

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto discusses Chapter Thirty-Eight of The Book of Job and its Theodicy:

In the 38th chapter of Job we have the element of the mysterious displayed in rare purity and completeness, and this chapter may well rank among the most remarkable in the history of religion. Job has been reasoning with his friends against Elohim, and - as far as concerns them - he has been obviously in the right. They are compelled to be dumb before him. And then Elohim Himself appears to conduct His own defence in person. And He conducts it to such effect that Job avows himself to be overpowered, truly and rightly overpowered, not merely silenced by superior strength. Then he confesses: ‘Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.’ That is an admission of inward *convincement* and conviction, not of impotent collapse and submission to merely superior power. Nor is there here at all the frame of mind to which St. Paul now and then gives utterance; e.g. Rom. ix. 20: ‘Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?’ To interpret the passage in Job thus would be a misunderstanding of it. This chapter does not proclaim, as

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Paul does, the renunciation of, the realization of the impossibility of, a ‘theodicy’; rather, it aims at putting forward a real theodicy of its own, and a better one than that of Job’s friends; a theodicy able to convict even a Job, and not only to convict him, but utterly to still every inward doubt that assailed his soul.\textsuperscript{100}

This new theodicy has been achieved through Job’s suffering. If it can “convict” even such a man as Job, and “still every inward doubt that assails his soul,” then it must be a theodicy that somehow shows him the truth, the truth about himself (with the implication that he is not as good a man as he may think), and about his faith.

In his commentary, \textit{The Book of Job}, Norman C. Habel raises a question about Job’s blessings, and whether or not they are, in fact, obstacles to his religious awakening:

There is also a bite to the Satan’s\textsuperscript{101} assertion that that Yaweh has ‘blessed’ (brk) Job, since the Satan uses the same verb as a euphemism to predict that Job will ‘curse’ Yahweh (v. 11). Is the Satan implying, by using ‘bless’ in the place of its antonym ‘curse,’ that the extensive blessings of Job scattered across the ‘earth’... are tantamount to ‘curses’ which hinder true wisdom and righteousness?\textsuperscript{102}

Just as suffering seems to prompt religious awareness in the stories in this study, Habel’s question here implies its corollary. Blessings may cause one to become complacent, as Taylor observed with regard to the statement by Mencius about pedagogical suffering.

Job now sees more clearly. He was originally recognized for having strong faith - by God - and yet his faith was made stronger by the loss and suffering that he was made to endure. If he had not been through this ordeal, he would not have attained the greater wisdom that he has now. And, to reiterate, he started out as a man of strong faith already.


\textsuperscript{101} Habel explains that “the Satan” is a title, and not a name here: “The designation ‘the Satan’ (haśṣāṭān) is not the personal name Satan but a role specification meaning ‘the accuser/adversary/doubter...’ ” Norman C. Habel, \textit{The Book of Job: A Commentary} by Norman C. Habel (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1985), 89.

\textsuperscript{102} Norman C. Habel, \textit{The Book of Job}, 90.
Perhaps, by extension, one can conclude that loss and suffering, like Taylor’s pedagogical suffering, clarify and focus one’s faith, and perhaps bring one closer to the unseen order of reality. The characters in all of these stories have some connection to religion. Some of them almost certainly consider themselves religious, and yet none of them seem to comprehend fully the depth of true religious experience. It is their experiences of loss and suffering that transform their religious beliefs from the superficial to the profound, from the worldly to the mystical.

1.6 The Nature of Evil

Understanding the nature of evil in the religious traditions portrayed in these stories can help the reader to understand the meaning of suffering in them. In the story of Job, we see something about the nature of Evil in Christianity. Satan is the embodiment of evil. He attempts to undermine God’s works, and also to undermine faith. In this story, we see him specifically questioning Job’s faith, implying that it is superficial, based merely on a transactional sort of arrangement in which Job gives his faith in return for God’s bestowing good fortune on him. This view of a willful and personified evil, having goals and objectives, seems to be in contrast to some of the ideas about evil in Buddhism and Daoism, though it would be a mistake to suggest that any of these three religions has a single set and concrete concept of evil. It is also important that evil, perhaps inadvertently, strengthens Job’s faith in the end by putting it to the test.

In Augustine’s Early Thought on the Redemptive Function of Divine Judgement, Bart van Egmond discusses Augustine’s Christian perspective on evil (in the form of misfortune):
Augustine perceives the soul in its present situation as deeply fallen. Humanity has lost the sight of wisdom, and has become unable to return to it by its own knowledge and strength.\(^{103}\) In his analysis of Romanianus’ situation, Augustine emphasizes that in his seeming misfortunes God himself is at work to draw Romanianus back into order. As a Roman aristocrat, Romanianus might experience fortune as a malevolent force, aimed at his destruction. Fortune robs him of his public standing and honour for which he has worked so hard. From the perspective of a Roman aristocrat this could be a reason to despise oneself, but Augustine admonishes Romanianus to resist that inclination (\textit{ne comnas te}). He should acknowledge that his soul is made for a destiny higher than the enjoyment of temporal goods and honours. By depriving him of temporal goods, God makes him experience ‘how fleeting, unreliable and full of misery is all that which mortals think to be good.’ He would never have acknowledged this if he had continued to prosper.\(^{104}\)

While this is only one Christian perspective on evil, it comes about as close as possible to describing the operation of the unseen order of reality and the nature of suffering in the stories in this study. Like Romanianus, none of these protagonists would acknowledge their higher purposes without encountering ‘fortune.’

In Buddhism, evil (in the form of suffering) can be seen as part and parcel of this worldly existence, as is stated in the Four Noble Truths. While Satan may both cause and wish for people to suffer in Christianity, as we have seen in the story of Job, it is arguably the nature of the world, and of people’s attachment to the world, that brings about suffering in Buddhism. Evil in this case is not so much a personified entity as a dynamic, or even just a perspective. In \textit{What the Buddha Taught}, Walpola Rahula writes:

\textit{According to the Buddha’s teaching, doubt (\textit{vicikiccha}) is one of the five hindrances (\textit{nivarana}) to the clear understanding of Truth and to spiritual progress (or for that matter to any progress). Doubt, however, is not a ‘sin’, because there are no articles of faith in Buddhism. In fact, there is no ‘sin’ in Buddhism as sin is understood in some religions. The root of all evil is ignorance (\textit{avijja}) and false views (\textit{micchd [sic] ditthi [miccha ditthi]}).} \(^{105}\)

\(^{103}\) Bart van Egmond, \textit{Augustine’s Early Thought}, 26.
\(^{104}\) Bart van Egmond, \textit{Augustine’s Early Thought}, 36.
This conception of evil seems to be oversimplified, and yet if reality lies in the mind, as some Buddhist schools and some sutras assert, then ignorance and false views corrupt one’s entire view of reality. In *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, for example, Huineng uses the following metaphor to describe how ignorance and false views affect the world of the thinker:

善知識，世人性本自淨，萬法在自姓（性）。思量一切 [惡] 事，即行衣（於）惡。思量一切善事，便修於善行。知如是一切法盡在自姓（性），自姓（性）常清靜。日月常名（明），只為雲覆蓋，上名（明）下暗，不能了見日月西辰，忽遇惠（慧）風吹散，卷盡雲霧，萬象參（森）羅，一時皆現。世人性淨，猶如清天，慧如日，智如月。智慧常名（明），於外看敬（著境），妄念浮雲蓋覆，自姓（性）不能明。

‘Good friends, although the nature of people in this world is from the outset pure in itself, the ten thousand things are all within their own natures. If people think of all the evil things, then they will practice evil; if they think of all the good things, then they will practice good. Thus it is clear that in this way all the dharmas are within your own natures, yet your own natures are always pure. The sun and the moon are always bright, yet if they are covered by clouds, although above they are bright, below they are darkened, and the sun, moon, stars and planets cannot be seen clearly. But if suddenly the wind of wisdom should blow and roll away the clouds of mists, all forms in the universe appear at once. The purity of the nature of man in this world is like the blue sky; wisdom is like the sun, knowledge like the moon. Although knowledge and wisdom are always clear, if you cling to external environments, the floating clouds

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107 The Vimalakirti Sutra and The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch are two examples of sutras that contain passages emphasizing that reality is influenced by one’s state of mind, or even that reality is within the mind.

of false thoughts will create a cover, and your own natures cannot become clear.'"\(^{109}\)

With regard to Daoism, in “Lao Tzu’s Conception of Evil,” Sung-peng Hsu proposes a four-step argument in order to define evil:

1. Tao is the *summum bonum*.
2. Tao is the ultimate source of all things and events.
3. All things and events are good if they are not the results of some interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao.
4. The assertive use of the human will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao.
   Therefore, every thing or event that is caused by the assertive use of the will is evil."\(^{110}\)

Hsu then states:

Premise 4 can be revised to say that *only* the assertive use of the will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao. In that case, all evils are either some assertive uses of the will or their consequences."\(^{111}\)

In Daoism, as well, evil can be seen as straying too far from the Way, by not living spontaneously, and by trying to impose their wills in order to influence the course of events. Evil, in this case, is not an enemy to be defeated, but an existential dynamic, similar to the concept of evil in Buddhism; it is of one’s own making and nurturing, rather than being a separate entity that wishes to do one harm.

Most relevant to this study, though, is the idea that evil is a reminder to these protagonists. Although evil and suffering are not to be desired, it is evil and suffering that also push these protagonists back to the right way (or Way). At some level, each of these

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\(^{111}\) Sung-peng Hsu, “Lao Tzu’s Conception of Evil,”: 313.
stories seems to acknowledge that aspect of the dual nature of evil. It is harmful, and yet at the same time, it provides the impetus to achieve greater wisdom, and freedom.

These stories also undermine the idea that evil can be defeated through force. Most of these protagonists are meek and powerless, and they usually must endure the suffering that is brought on by evil circumstances, sometimes with no hope of worldly justice. They would probably not make good soldiers. However, buoyed by inner qualities that are not apparent to the casual observer, they go far beyond where the world’s most powerful people go, and achieve what the world’s movers and shakers do not.

1.7 Conventional Heroism and Unconventional Religious Heroism

In her article “Zhang Fei in Yuan Vernacular Literature: Legend, Heroism, and History in the Reproduction of the Three Kingdoms Story Cycle,” Kimberly Besio describes Zhang Fei’s heroic characteristics:

In all of these works Zhang Fei is a heroic figure, a man of action who relies on his martial skills and physical strength to defy his enemies. His values are those of a warrior — straightforward to the point of rudeness, he himself never shrinks from battle, and he prizes fearlessness in others.

The significance of Zhang Fei’s qualities is in the emphasis on the worldly perspective that they imply. Heroism here is physical: being a “man of action,” having “martial skills,” and having “physical strength.” As to the hero’s purpose, part of the implied significance of the hero’s having strength - in order to “defy his enemies” - is that there are (always) enemies. As to his values, in his very outlook there is the assumption that others intend to disrespect or attack him somehow, thus, even in his demeanor, he

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maintains his defensiveness, being “straightforward to the point of rudeness.” That he “never shrinks from battle” seems to indicate a concern with being viewed as brave, even at the risk of his life. His name, and the honor associated with it are matters of concern. That sense of honor also entails his prizing “fearlessness in others.” Even an enemy who is brave would likely earn his respect.

In *The Secular Scripture*, Northrop Frye notes that romantic heroism is often associated with violence (and also trickery). He quotes a poem praising the depredations of a ruthless king, Harold Hardradi, as heroic, and then goes on to state:

> The corresponding pattern in romance is the story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, for instance, appears to have been uniformly successful up to the moment of his death. But even death is a defeat of sorts, hence there is an inner dialectic in the eulogy of power which tends to make all heroes of action ultimately tragic heroes. Often a hero seems to be trying to achieve some kind of liberation for himself through his physical strength.

The emphasis on these elements - on military victory, on death as tragic, and on “liberation...through...physical strength” - highlights what I will argue is a major difference between romantic heroism (or what I refer to as “conventional heroism”) and religious heroism. Zhang Fei clearly embodies the former. This is not meant to belittle Zhang Fei or the sort of heroism he represents, but rather to consider him as a representative of conventional worldly heroism, and also to consider him as a foil for the unconventional religious hero. As to unconventional religious heroism, it is meekness, as opposed to physical strength and martial prowess, that is defining. As to defying enemies, it is very unusual in these stories. Even the concept of the enemy itself is somewhat

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undermined. For example, some of these protagonists treat their enemies with compassion or gratitude, as opposed to hatred. In addition, as perpetrators of suffering and loss, these “enemies” are helping the protagonists to attain wisdom and enlightenment. As to bravery, these protagonists are more likely to cower and beg (and, to be fair, understandably so), even admit to things they have not done, in order to escape their various predicaments. Most of these protagonists would probably “shrink from battle” if they were able to do so. Moreover, if death is a form of defeat in terms of conventional heroism, in three of the stories in this study, death can be seen as coinciding with religious awakening, which Flannery O’Connor termed a “triumph.”

If unconventional religious heroism does not seem admirable or heroic, it is because its admirable qualities are often hidden, and are in accord with a very different set of standards than those associated with conventional heroism. For one, religious heroism, if we assume it to be about the attainment of a realm that transcends the physical world, may not be expressed well by physical qualities such as strength and martial skill. If action is required to attain worldly goals, then being a “man of action” might cause one to confuse worldly goals with religious ones. If unconventional religious heroism makes its focus the innate nature (assumed to be benevolent) of people, then perceiving other people as evil, or as enemies, may be blinding one to the person’s true nature. With these principles in mind, we might begin to better understand the unheroic appearance of unconventional religious heroism. Its bravery may appear cowardly. Its justice may appear unjust. It may not appear to have achieved any goal. Its success may appear to be failure, even disaster.

116 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 111.
With this in mind, let us consider the characteristics of two protagonists, both religious. The first one arguably exemplifies heroism in the conventional sense, while the second exemplifies heroism in the less conventional sense, in which heroism reflects not worldly concepts and principles, but those of the unseen order of reality. The first protagonist is Xu Xun of “An Iron Tree Suppresses Demons at Jingyang Palace.” The second is Zhen Zhiyin of Chapter One of Dream of the Red Chamber.

1.7.1 Conventional Heroism: Xu Xun 許遜

We will consider Xu Xun as an example of a religious hero in the conventional sense. Xu Xun is a Daoist sage who is asked by the gods to fight evil monsters. He is given magical spells to help him in this endeavor, and he spends years fighting monsters and protecting the people. He is not reluctant at all in agreeing to do as he is asked. The gods, in this case, are tangible perceivable beings, and they communicate directly with Xu Xun. Upon completion of his monumental task, he and his followers and family members are granted immortality. None of them is reluctant to leave the world, and Xu Xun even negotiates with the gods to make sure that certain of his followers and family are granted immortality, as well. 117

While Xu Xun is clearly a religious hero, he fits well into a conventional heroic paradigm (though he is not a tragic hero). Regarding his religious qualities, one aspect of

117 Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, Jingyang gong tieshu zhen yao 旌陽宮鐵樹鎮妖, in Jingshi Tongyan 警世通言 (Taipei: San min shu ju), 568-625.
his birth is reminiscent of the birth of Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*:  

Upon hearing the memorial, the Jade Emperor issued an imperial edict, declaring that the Immortal of the Jade Cave be fetched, and to order him to change his body into that of a golden phoenix, and, holding a piece of precious jade in his mouth, to fly down to the the house of one Xu Su to reincarnate [as Xu Su’s son].

When he is born, the circumstances of his birth are miraculous:

Time flew by like an arrow, and soon the fifteenth day of the eighth month, Mid-Autumn, had arrived. On that night, the sky was bright, the air was clear, and there appeared a brilliant moon, shining, clear, and unobscured. Squire Xu and Lady He took delight in the panorama, and gazed at it for some time. Before they realized it, the second watch was almost over, and the ringing of the bells for the third-watch began. Suddenly, the moonlight began to radiate out in all the colors of the rainbow, and, in mid-air, celestial melodies arose, resonant and clear. Lady He felt a brief pain in her abdomen, and gave birth to a son. A strange fragrance filled the room, and a crimson radiance shone on them. Indeed:

‘From the midst of the five-colored cloud, issues forth one roc after another,  
From on the highest firmament is sent the qilin.’  

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118 In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the protagonist, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉, is born with a piece of jade in his mouth.  
119 Feng Menglong, *Jingyang gong*, 574.  
120 Feng Menglong, *Jingyang gong*, 575.
When grown up, Xu Xun asks a question that is reminiscent of a question asked by the Buddha in the Dīrghāgama Sutra:

真君曰：‘病，老，死，苦，將何卻之？’

The Sage asked, ‘As to sickness, old age, death, and suffering, what can stop them?’

In the Dīrghāgama Sutra, the prince asks:

‘緣此苦陰，流轉 無窮，我當何時曉了苦陰，滅生、老、死？’

‘When will I understand the accumulation of suffering, and the extinguishing of birth, old age, and death?’

Thus, this story is not without the imagery and language of the miraculous and the mystical. And themes like the ones above are absolutely relevant to the stories we will be examining. Where this story departs from our framework, though, is in its inclusion of what I will argue are elements of conventional heroism. For one, Xu Xun is not meek. He faces legendary monsters without hesitation. We can see an example of this when Xu Xun faces off against a dragon. The dragon magically transforms into becomes a “yaksa” (a kind of demon) while doing battle with Xu Xun:

真君提著寶劍逕斬孽龍，那孽龍變作一個巡海夜叉，持鎗相迎，這一場好殺...

The Sage brandished a bejeweled sword, and rushed forward to attack the evil dragon. That evil dragon turned into an ocean-patrolling yaksa, holding up a spear while joining in the battle...

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121 Feng Menglong, Jingyang gong, 577.
122 With regard to this appellation, I have used the translation here that is used by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang in Stories to Caution the World.
124 Feng Menglong, Jingyang gong, 590
In addition, there is arguably a clearer dichotomy between good and evil in this story than in the stories featured in this study. In a line of verse describing the above battle, the natures of both opponents are clearly delineated:

一個是揚子江生成的惡怪，一個是靈霄殿差下的真仙。125

One was an evil monster, born from the waters of the Yangtze, one was a true immortal, sent down from the Heavenly Spirit Palace.

Here, evil appears to be an inherently malevolent presence that is bent on bringing about chaos and destruction, in some respects reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor’s ideas about the devil. I will argue that the line between good and evil is much less clearly defined in the stories we will consider in this study, as a concept of inherent evil does not seem to be in harmony with a mystical religious perspective.

In addition, Xu Xun, as we can see, is a mighty and fearless warrior. He does not shrink from battle, even when it is with an evil, shape-changing monster. By today’s standards, he is a superhero. The protagonists we will be considering, on the other hand, are meek, and would have no chance in a situation like this. While Xu Xun’s strengths are readily apparent, the strengths these protagonists possess are not.

Like our other protagonists, Xu Xun is enlightened at the end of the story:

言罷，揖真君上了龍車，仙眷四十二口，同時昇舉。126

When he [Cui Ziwen] had finished speaking, he welcomed the Sage to get onto the dragon chariot. Forty-two immortals and relatives ascended with him at the same time.

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125 Feng Menglong, *Jingyang gong*, 590
126 Feng Menglong, *Jingyang gong*, 622 (I consulted the translation by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang here regarding the character “揖,” which usually translates as “to salute.” Their translation “to invite” makes more sense here than the common current usage. I have used a near synonym, “to welcome.”)
Xu Xun has been sent down from Heaven to reincarnate. After completing his earthly task of protecting the people of earth from evil monsters, he is taken back up to Heaven. He is both brave and powerful. He would not be out of place next to a character like Zhang Fei in terms of his bravery and willingness to risk his life. For all of these reasons, Xu Xun is an admirable protagonist. He does, indeed, exemplify heroism. His heroism, despite its religious nature, though, is conventional - he fights evil and brings safety to people. Despite the abundance of religious imagery and magic in this story, it does not fit well into the conceptual framework of the unseen order of reality. For an example of unconventional religious heroism, the sort that we will be focusing on, let us look now to the example of Zhen Shiyin.

### 1.7.2 Unconventional Religious Heroism: Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱

Zhen Shiyin is an admirable protagonist, whether one considers him in the light of a worldly perspective or the perspective of the unseen order of reality. Unlike Xu Xun, he is not a fighter who protects people from evil monsters, nor does he speak with the gods or have magical powers. He is a former official. He is also a husband and father, and is a decent, generous man. Zhen’s religiously heroic qualities are noted when he is introduced for the first time:

因這甄士隱稟性恬淡，不以功名為念，每日只以觀花種竹，酌酒吟詩為樂，倒是神仙一流人物。

Because this man, Zhen Shiyin, was by disposition indifferent to fame and fortune, did not make a big deal of scholarly honors or government rank, and took pleasure in merely spending his days looking at flowers and planting bamboo, as well as in drinking wine and reciting poetry, he was of a kind with the celestial beings.\(^\text{127}\)

\(^{127}\) Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢, Part One (Taipei: San min shu ju, 2014), 4.
Zhen, however, like many of the protagonists in these works, seems to be utterly unaware of his proximity to enlightenment. Nor does his enlightenment come without loss and suffering. One day, he has a strange dream about a Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest. He hears them talking about a stone left over by Nü Wa (女媧) that will eventually be born into the world as Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉), and also about the celestial plant-being that will be born into the world as Lin Daiyu (林黛玉). He then approaches the monk and the priest and expresses his desire to become enlightened:

卻說甄士隱聽得明白，遂不禁上前施禮，笑問道：‘二位仙師請了。’那僧道也忙答禮相問。士隱因說道：‘適聞仙師所談因果，實人世罕聞者。但弟子愚拙，不能洞悉明白。若蒙大開癡頑，備細一聞，弟子洗耳諦聽，稍能警省，亦可免沉淪之苦了。’

And so Zhen Shiyin understood, and asked them with a smile: ‘Celestial Masters [仙師], please [go ahead].’ The Buddhist monk and the Daoist priest quickly bowed in response [答禮] and greeted him [相問]. Shiyin therefore said: ‘I just heard the Celestial Masters discussing karma, truly something rarely heard about in the world of people. However, your humble disciple is stupid and clumsy, and cannot completely understand. If I could have opened wide my foolishness, and have this explained to me in detail, your humble disciple would wash his ears and listen attentively; I would become just a little more alert, and I could also avoid the suffering that comes with sinking into depravity.’

Shiyin’s tragic experience of loss and suffering begins soon after. To start with, his daughter disappears during the Lantern Festival:

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真是閒處光陰易過，倏忽又是元宵佳節。士隱令家人霍啟抱了英蓮去看社火花燈。半夜中，霍啟因要小解，便將英蓮放在一家門檻上坐著。待他小解完了來抱時，那有英蓮的踪影？急的霍啟直尋了半夜，至天明不見。那霍啟也不敢回來見主人，便逃往他鄉去了。130

Indeed, when things are going well, time goes by quickly, and suddenly it was once again the time of the Lantern Festival. Shiyan asked a servant, Huo Qi, to take Yinglian in his arms to see the festivities and the decorated lanterns. At midnight, Huo Qi needed to take a leak, and set Yinglian on the threshold of the front door of a house to sit there. [Yet,] when he had finished, and came back to take Yinglian in his arms, where was Yinglian? Frantically, he searched half the night, until the sky began to brighten, but Yinglian was gone. Huo Qi did not dare to return and face his master, so he fled to a different town.

As if the terrible loss of their daughter is not tragic enough, later that year, a monk at the temple near their house accidentally starts a fire that burns through the neighborhood, and burns their house down:

不想這日，三月十五，葫蘆廟中炸供，那和尚不小心，油鍋火逸，便燒著窗紙。此方人家俱用竹籬木壁，也是劫數應當如此，於是接二連三，牽五掛四，將一條街燒得如火焰山一般。彼時雖有軍民來救，那火已成了勢了，如何救得下！直燒了一夜方息，也不知燒了多少人家。只可憐甄家在隔壁，早成了一堆瓦礫場了，只有他夫婦並幾個家人的性命不曾傷了。131

Unexpectedly, on the fifteenth day of the third month, a monk at Hulu Temple was deep-frying food for offerings, and the fire leapt out of the oil-filled pan and started the window-paper on fire. The people around here had bamboo fences, and wooden walls, so the rest was a mere matter of predestined fate playing out in this way, as it was meant to do. Consequently, one house burned after another, and each house’s burning only caused the others to keep burning. The entire street was caused to burn, as if it were a mountain of flames. At that time, even though there were soldiers and civilians who came to the rescue, the fire had already gained momentum, and how could it successfully be put out? It burned for the entire night before going out, and who knows how many were burned.

in it? One could only pity the Zhen family. Their house was right next-door, and it became a pile of rubble early on. Only he and his wife, and a number of their servants weren’t killed.

After more hardship, Zhen and his wife eventually move to the countryside to be near Zhen’s wife’s family. The life there is hard for Shiyin, though, and he begins to despair:

封肅見面時便説些現成話兒，且人前人後又怨他不善過活，只一味好吃懶做。士隱知投人不著，心中未免悔恨；再兼上年驚唬，急忿怨痛，暮年之人，那禁得貧病交攻？竟漸漸的露出那下世的光景來。132

Furthermore, Feng Su [Shiyin’s father-in-law], would give him unsolicited advice to his face. And, whether it was to his face or behind his back, would complain that he was no good at making a living, and that he was persistently good at eating, but lazy about working. Shiyin knew that he could not rely on his father-in-law, and in his heart, he could not help feeling a sense of bitter regret. On top of that, there was the shocking realization that he was getting older. He was hard-pressed, and resented the unfairness of it. As a man in his declining years, how was he to bear being bullied and humiliated in turn by both poverty and sickness? Unexpectedly, the prospect of death gradually began to make its presence known.

At this low point, however, the Daoist priest (whose companion Shiyin had ignored as a crazy man earlier) unexpectedly shows up again, and recites a poem for him. One line of the poem is:

世人都曉神仙好，惟有功名忘不了。
古今將相在何方？荒塚一堆草没了！133

People in the world know celestial beings are good,
They only cannot forget honor and rank.
Ancient and modern generals and ministers, where are they now?
In desolate grave mounds, covered with dead grass!

133 Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng*, 11
Shiyin, to his surprise, understands the cryptic poem, and is able to explain it to the Daoist priest. An excerpt from his explanation is as follows:

陋室空堂，當年笏滿床；衰草枯楊，曾為歌舞場。
蛛絲兒結滿雕樑，綠紗今又在蓬窗上。 134

*A plain room in an empty hall - there was a time when the bed was covered with the tablets of officials;现在 the grass is dying, and the poplar is withered - though this once was a venue for songs and dancing. The engraved rafters are bound up in cobwebs. Now the crude window is again covered with green gauze.*

His understanding of the poem causes Shiyin to decide on the spur of the moment to leave with the Daoist priest. 135 Shiyin must go through all of this loss and hardship before he is willing to even consider leaving the family life. As life has gotten worse and worse, he has come to see - and to feel - clearly the ephemeral nature of the “good” things in the world. If he had not encountered tragedy, and if things were still going well, he would not have cared to listen to what the Daoist priest had to say. When he has almost nothing left to lose, though, the allure of the worldly life is not so strong. Suffering and loss have made it so that he can understand the nature of the world more clearly, and also have made it so that he feels he has little left to lose. Shiyin is an educated man. He does not make any explicitly religious statements, but that does not mean he has no religious beliefs. He is intelligent enough to understand the Daoist’s poem, but only loss and suffering can help him to truly understand its underlying significance. It is only at that point when he becomes willing to leave with the Daoist priest. He would not have done so earlier.

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134 Cao Xueqin, *Hong lou meng*, 12
135 Cao Xueqin, *Hong lou meng*, 11-12
Zhen Shiyin is closer than Xu Xun is to the paradigm of religious heroism that we will be considering in this study. Zhen is a decent man, but the world does not reward his decency; it seems, rather, to punish it. After Shiyin has reached the depths of despair, his mind opens to the possibility of a path that he would not have considered before, and he makes the decision to follow it. We will see several examples of protagonists who, like Zhen Shiyin, experience loss and suffering, and who are brought to the point of despair by it. Because of this, they also do as he does. They become willing to set aside the things of this world and take the road less traveled - the path to enlightenment.

1.8 The Elements of the Story

Each of these stories contains certain elements that help to illuminate the religious themes in the stories. These elements include 1) a reluctant protagonist; 2) some form of intrusion by what we have been referring to as the unseen order of reality; and 3) a necessary change of mind that leads to, or is, religious transformation. They usually appear in this order.

1.8.1 The Reluctant Protagonist

While the journey toward enlightenment is arguably a “theme of ascent,” as described by Frye in The Secular Scripture,136 Some of these stories also involve elements of what Frye terms “themes of descent.” In discussing the use of charms in descent themes, Frye observes:

This in turn is appropriate for a world where one progressively loses one’s freedom of action, the lowest stage of which is imprisonment or paralysis or death itself.137

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137 Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture, 110
Frye later notes that a desire to free oneself from such a sinister world is not to be taken for granted:

It is possible never to get out of this lower world, and some may not even want to. For it may also assume the form of a false paradise, like Spenser’s ‘Bower of Bliss.’

These stories all involve such reluctant protagonists; that is, despite any professed religious beliefs they may have, sincere or superficial, they are reluctant to leave behind the worldly life and its pleasures. As the unseen order of reality begins to intrude upon their lives, often manifested in the form of hardship and suffering, and they begin to see choices emerge (in some cases more clearly than in others), these protagonists resist the choice to leave behind the worldly life. This, of course, is perfectly understandable. Very few of us would leave behind the worldly life lightly, as it is all that most of us know and value.

1.8.2 The Intrusion of the Unseen Order of Reality

At some point - usually early - in each of these works, events occur that can be seen as manifestations of the intrusion of the unseen order of reality into the protagonist’s life, and that they happen because the protagonist was somehow ready for them (almost always at the subconscious level). This readiness may be expressed directly by the narrator or by a character in the story (other than the protagonist), or it may be hinted at in the ways that the character acts and responds to situations. It may also be expressed in the way that events affecting the protagonist unfold, suggesting that larger forces such as fate are involved in the intrusion of the unseen order of reality into the life of the

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138 Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 123
character. It should be emphasized that, despite the “readiness” of the protagonist, the intrusion of the unseen order of reality is abrupt, unexpected, and unwelcome.

1.8.3 Suffering and Loss

The intrusion of the unseen order of reality almost always brings with it suffering and loss of some sort. As Satan intrudes upon the life of Job, it may involve an agent that is evil, or seems evil, in nature. In some of these works, though, the forces behind the intrusion are less obvious and tangible than are God and Satan in the story of Job. Suffering and loss can be seen as helping the protagonists to understand the nature of the world better (to realize that it is fundamentally a place of suffering and loss), and they can help to clear the protagonists’ minds.

1.8.4 Change of Mind and Transformation

These works culminate in the change of mind, and the transformation of, the protagonists. Religious heroism in these works requires willingness, and none of these protagonists succeeds without, at some level, finding equanimity in the face of loss and suffering, and the willingness to change his or her mind. This may be a conscious decision, expressed in words, or it might be a transformative moment. It might take place over years, or it might occur suddenly, almost spontaneously. Sometimes the character’s change of mind is followed by transformation. In at least one case, the two seem to occur simultaneously. It is this aspect of each of these works that puts them in this unusual category.
CHAPTER 2

“Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment”

生我之門死我戸，幾個惺惺幾個悟。
夜來鐵漢自尋思，長生不死由人做。¹

The entryway through which I’m born, the door through which I leave,  
How many are clear-headed, how many are awakened?  
When night falls, strong men themselves ponder,  
Attaining immortality rests with people alone.

2.1 Note on Translations

In writing this chapter, I have regularly consulted the excellent translation of this play by
Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema, which is featured in their collection of Yuan zaju, titled:

Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals: Eleven Early Chinese Plays.² With regard to the title,
the names of the characters, some aspects of the format, and to many of the specialized terms and
puns used in the play, I have followed their translations and their style. In many other cases, I
have consulted their translations. Aside from this, I have translated the Chinese quotes from the
play myself, unless otherwise noted, and any mistakes or inaccuracies that appear in the
translations in this chapter are my own.

2.2 Introduction

“Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment” is a short drama. According to West and Idema, “Lan Caihe belongs to a distinct subgenre of Northern dramas called ‘deliverance plays.’” They list the ten extant deliverance plays, and then go on to define “deliverance”:

The term ‘deliverance’ (which we translate as ‘leading to enlightenment’) is a shortened form of a common Buddhist phrase, ‘to be delivered by transcending the world and liberated from the cycle of transmigration’ (chaodu jietuo  [超度解脫]).

Because of its enlightenment theme, and because it includes all of the themes we will be discussing, and also presents these themes in a way that is often so direct and straightforward as to leave little to the imagination, it fits well into this study. While it is a play about enlightenment, it contains the most tangible depiction of the unseen order of reality in any of these works (so much so that the term “unseen order of reality” may not apply in this case). The celestial realm as portrayed in this play is not unlike an earthly bureaucracy in this play. Its inhabitants appear as people, and interact with ordinary people. The Paradise, with its Jasper Pool and Purple Palace, appeals to the physical senses as much as to one’s sense of mysticism. Because of its clear and overt presentation of the themes we will be analyzing (a reluctant protagonist, the necessity of suffering to get the protagonist to realize true nature of worldly existence, unconventional religious heroism and a downplaying of the importance of morality, and a final change of mind by the protagonist to relinquish family ties and worldly attachments in order to embrace enlightenment), it will serve as the opening act of this sojourn into the realm of short works that portray religious awakening through suffering and loss.

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3 This is the title of the translation by West and Idema.
2.3 Synopsis

In “Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment,” the immortal Zhongli of the Han comes down from Heaven to help enlighten Lan Caihe, whom, he has noticed, is already close to enlightenment. Lan Caihe, however, initially refuses to accept Zhongli’s invitation to lead him to enlightenment, forcing Zhongli to enlist the help of his fellow immortal, Lü Dongbin. Dongbin takes the guise of a magistrate and threatens to have Lan Caihe beaten, which scares him enough that he is willing to then leave the family life with Zhongli of the Han in order to escape his punishment. After that, he spends a period of time training with Zhongli of the Han before finally ascending to the heavenly realm of Daoist immortals.

2.4 Sudden and Unwelcome Intrusion of the Unseen Order of Reality

The intrusion of the unseen order of reality into a protagonist’s life is not unlike the intrusion of Death into the narrator’s life in Emily Dicken’s poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”:

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  

The unseen order of reality, likewise, comes when it will, without regard for our schedules and priorities. Because we cannot (will not) stop for it, it “kindly” stops for us. In this work, it kindly stops for Lan Caihe in the form of Zhongli of the Han. Like Death (another representative of the supernatural realm), it will not leave empty-handed.

The theme of unwillingness to leave the family life (or any variation on that theme) is explicitly portrayed in this play, perhaps as explicitly and overtly as it is in any of the works in this study. The imposition of suffering on the unwilling protagonist as a means of bringing the

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protagonist around is also laid out in no uncertain terms. The process begins with the unwelcome and unexpected intrusion of the unseen order of reality into the life of Lan Caihe. The play has just started when Lan is noticed by the immortal Zhongli of the Han, who sees a sign from Heaven that there is a being on earth who is close to enlightenment:

因赴天齋已回，觀見下方一道青氣，衝於九霄。\(^7\)

Because I had returned from a vegetarian feast in Heaven, I looked down on the world below and saw a ray of blue-green qi\(^8\) shoot up from there to the highest reaches of the firmament.

This spectacular image is a sign that a mortal living on the earth is ready to become enlightened.

When Zhongli of the Han finds out Lan Caihe is the source of the light, he remarks:

...此人有半仙之分。\(^9\)

This man has half the qualities of a celestial being...

Despite the transcendent nature of the Daoist Immortals, some aspects of the unseen order of reality are quite tangible and visible in this play, resembling a celestial bureaucracy not unlike one on earth. For example, Zhongli of the Han has just been at a banquet, and before he can proceed with Lan Caihe’s enlightenment, he must take care of some bureaucratic housekeeping, namely dealing with Lan’s name registration:

我著他閻王簿上除生死，紫府宮中立姓名。\(^10\)

I will have King Yama\(^11\) remove his birth and death from the register,

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\(^8\) Life energy: 氣.

\(^9\) Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”

\(^10\) Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”

\(^11\) Yan Wang is the Chinese name of King Yama. In her article, “Yan Wang,” Mae Hamilton writes, “In Chinese mythology, Yan Wang (閻王) is the principal leader of the ten kings of Hell, overseer of the underworld, and
And I will have his surname established in the Purple Palace.

In this play, therefore, the portrayal of the unseen order of reality and of its manifestations are less mysterious than they are in the other works in this study. The reluctance of the protagonist to consider enlightenment, though, and the difficulty of knowing the qualities that “qualify” the protagonist for this distinction are features of all of the works in this study.

It is not explained how Lan Caihe has arrived at this point, or what qualities he has that put him on the threshold of enlightenment. (The characters in the other works in this study also find themselves facing enlightenment for reasons that are not always readily obvious.) In this case, we do know that Lan Caihe is one of the eight Daoist immortals,¹² and that his becoming an immortal is, therefore, not a matter of if, but of when. Lan Caihe, though, is himself quite oblivious to his immortal qualities. For example, near the end of Act I, Zhongli expresses surprise that Lan still does not recognize him:

今日我來度脫藍采和,那廝愚眉肉眼,不識貧道。¹³

Today I have come to enlighten Lan Caihe, but that mortal ignoramus doesn’t recognize me.

Indeed, it is hard to see anything about him that would clearly indicate that he is different from the other people around him. Perhaps it is because of this that he will require the assistance of Zhongli of the Han in order to find enlightenment. Right after noticing Lan, Zhongli of the Han says:

‘貧道直至下方梁園棚内, 引度此人, 走一遭去。’ ¹⁴

¹³ Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
¹⁴ Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
I will go straight down to the world below, I’ll make a trip to the Liangyuan Theater tent, to enlighten this man.

As soon as Zhongli arrives at the playhouse, he is seen as out of place:

(锺離上，雲)貧道按落雲頭，直至下方梁園棚內勾欄裏走一遭，可早來到也。(做見，樂牀坐科，淨雲)這個先生，你去那神樓上或腰棚上看去，這裏是婦人做排場的，不是你坐處。15

I16 will ride a cloud directly down - make a sojourn to the Liangyuan Theater. I will arrive soon. (He acts out seeing the musician’s seats17 and sitting down. A painted-face actor [Wang]18 says to him) Sir, you can go to the “deity floor” or the theater to watch. This is where the women put on performances. This is not a place for you to sit.

Instead of moving, as he was asked to do, he immediately inquires as to Lan’s whereabouts:

(锺雲)你那許堅末尼在家麼？(淨雲)老師父，略等一等便來也。師父有甚麼話說？(鐘雲)等他來時，我與他說話。(淨雲)師父略坐一坐，哥哥敢待來也。19

(Zhongli speaks:) Is that male lead Xu Jian [Lan Caihe] at home? (Painted-Face Role [Wang]:) Venerable Master, just wait, and he will be right here. Does the master have something to say to him? (Zhongli:) I’ll wait until he gets here, and then speak with him. (Painted-Face Role [Wang]:) Have a seat, sir. I’m sure my older brother will be here soon.

There is an awkwardness in Zhongli’s intrusion here. Zhongli does not do what he is asked and remains sitting where he is not supposed to sit. The troupe would probably prefer that he leave them alone, or at least follow their rules, so that they can have things as they are used to

15 Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
16 Zhongli almost always refers to himself as “貧道.” West and Idema translate this as “humble Daoist.” See Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema, trans., “Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals,” 291. I will translate “貧道” as “I” or “me” from here on.
17 I have consulted West and Idema’s translation here.
18 I have consulted West and Idema’s translation here, and on the translations regarding roles where the specific name of the role is not given throughout the play.
19 Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
having them. Later, he meets Lan Caihe. As Lan is preparing to perform, he also asks Zhongli to move, yet Zhongli again declines:

(Lan Caihe:) Venerable Master, go up to the side seats. These musician’s seats are not for you to sit in. These are for the women who will put on a show. They sit here. (Zhongli:) I’ll just sit in the musician’s seats here.

They speak for a while longer before Zhongli hints more clearly at his reason for coming:

You put on shows every day like this, all for your “burning guild,” but when will it be? You don’t know what a blessing and a joy it has been for me leaving the family.

Lan, offended by Zhongli’s comments, finally asks him to leave. Zhongli, again, though, does not do as he is asked, further provoking Lan:

(Lan Caihe speaks:) Why, you disrespectful priest, get out of here! You’ve interrupted a day’s worth of performances. (Zhongli speaks:) I’ll watch the show. I’m not leaving.

Indeed, Zhongli is not leaving. He is a personification of the unseen order of reality, and he will stay on, no matter how unwelcome he becomes. Just as the unseen order of reality abruptly intrudes upon the world when it is least expected, and most unwelcome, so does Zhongli of the Han intrude upon the life and business of Lan Caihe. Furthermore, he will disrupt much more

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20 Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
21 Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
22 I have consulted and used the translation of West and Idema here. In their footnote on this term, they write: “A double-entendre on the term huo yuan [火院]: (1) ‘Your companions in the guild’: the people who rely on him as the lead performer; (2) ‘your burning guild’: akin to the Buddhist term ‘sea of bitterness,’ the trials and tribulations of being in and attached to the vulgar secular world.” West and Idema, Monks Bandits Lovers and Immortals, 296
23 Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
than a day of performances for Lan Caihe. He will insist that Lan Caihe leave the world that he has known for most of his life. He will ask Lan to leave everything and everyone he is familiar with - in exchange for immortality.

2.5 The Role of Suffering

The role of suffering is laid out as clearly here as it is in any of these works. Though Zhongli seems to be largely unaffected by the attitudes of the people he encounters in this world, Lan’s intransigence and inability to comprehend what is happening (despite his immortal nature) succeed in frustrating Zhongli. After trying unsuccessfully to get through to Lan, he states the role of suffering in the process of enlightenment explicitly:

此人若不見了惡境頭, 怎肯出家。24

If this man doesn’t encounter a bad situation, how will he be willing to leave the family?

Zhongli then notes the occasion, and calls upon a fellow immortal to help him in his cause:

明日是他生日, 疾, 洞賓你也下方來走一遭...25

Tomorrow is his birthday. Hurry, Dongbin, make a trip down here...

Zhongli then explains the urgency of his work:

...不脫塵凡俗世緣, 豈知就裏是神仙。26

...If he does not escape the causation of the vulgar world of dust, how will he know he is a celestial being within?

This theme arises, to some extent, in all of these works. The protagonists are either completely oblivious to the existence of the unseen order of reality and their place in it, or they

24 Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
25 Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
26 Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
may have some idea of its existence and functioning (as does Chen Kechang, even prior to his enlightenment), but live their lives daily lives generally unaware of it. Zhongli realizes that despite Lan’s immortal qualities, he will not become enlightened on his own, nor will he do so without a push.

Zhongli, after more back and forth with the recalcitrant Lan, remarks on Lan’s surprising obtuseness, and reiterates that Lan will need to suffer if he is to have any hope of gaining enlightenment:

他那裏肯省悟，他若不見惡境頭，他不肯出家。27

If he is willing to become enlightened, I don’t see it. If he does not encounter misfortune, he will not be willing to leave the family.

Yet, despite his frustration, Zhongli once again tries to appeal to Lan by emphasizing the positive:

兀那許堅，你若跟貧道出家去呵，逍遙散誕，清閒快樂，倒大來幽哉！28

Xu Jian, if you leave the family and go with me, free and unconstrained, leisurely and happy, how serene it would be!

Lan, unimpressed, responds:

我知你做神仙的道路。29

I am well aware of the way that you immortals follow!

Again, the characters in these works are not in any hurry to leave the worldly life, and Lan is no exception. Therefore, Zhongli appears to make up his mind about making Lan suffer:

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27 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
28 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
29 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
着此人見個惡境頭疾！

Make this guy suffer adversity, and quickly!

When all else fails, Zhongli must resort to disaster. This is reminiscent of what Flannery O’Connor, wrote regarding her use of violence in her works as a means of getting characters to come around:

...in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.

Zhongli’s plan to enlighten Lan is then explained in part by Lü Dongbin:

I am Lü Dongbin. I have received orders from my master Zhongli of the Han to dress up as a magistrate. This is because there is an actor here, whose surname is Xu, and whose given name is Jian. His stage name is Lan Caihe. He has the qualities of an immortal. He has not been awakened yet, therefore, because he missed his official service, I will send some men over to detain him. Men, bring Lan Caihe here!

Lan is brought in and sentenced to a beating. From Lan’s reaction to this development, it seems clear that Zhongli has finally got his attention. Lan sings:

I am so shocked that for a long time, I am as if dumbfounded, my spirit floats lazily away…

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30 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
32 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
33 I have consulted and followed the translation of West and Idema here.
34 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
Lan also alludes to another theme that comes up in this play. The real things that happen to him resemble the roles he has played in some respects:

偌來粗細荊仗子臨身，比俺那勾欄裏淡交疼。\(^35\)

Such thick and thin thorny clubs will soon be upon my body, more painful than the light exchanges of the theater.

Lan has spent much of his life performing, and, ironically, the various aspects of his past performances seem to transform into reality (or threaten to do so) at this point in his life.

Dongbin then orders the guards to beat Lan:

扣廳打四十，下下打着者！\(^36\)

Detain him in the central hall and give him forty strokes - let him have it!

In response, Lan alludes to other plays that his troupe has performed, remarking once more on how aspects of the plays he has performed in the past are now becoming real:

更過如包待制浧，幾曾見行院來負荊。\(^37\)

[This] surpasses even Edict Attendant Bao,\(^38\) since when has a guild member\(^39\) had to carry thorns?\(^40\)

Under the threat of a severe beating, Lan becomes desperate. Therefore, when Zhongli comes into the courthouse, Lan is ready to listen to him:

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35 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
36 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
37 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
38 I have consulted and followed West and Idema’s translation here. They note here that, “He is referring here to the performances of beatings in Judge Bao plays (such as Butterfly Dream).” West and Idema, Monks Bandits Lovers and Immortals. This reference is in footnote no. 33. See: West and Idema, Monks Bandits Lovers and Immortals, 303.
39 I have consulted, and followed, West and Idema’s translation here for the term “guild member.”
40 I have also consulted and followed West and Idema’s translation for this reference. They note: “He may be referencing the famous play The Black Whirlwind Li Kui Carries Thorns in which one of the heroes of the Water Margin atones for a crime by carrying thorns on his back.” This reference is in footnote no. 34. See: West and Idema, Monks Bandits Lovers and Immortals, 303.
(Zhongli enters and speaks:) Now he’s afraid. (Lan Caihe speaks:) Who can I call upon to save me? (Zhongli speaks:) Lan Caihe, are you awakened now? You didn’t believe what I said before. And now? [Wu ye ti] Lan Caihe: What this priest says is to be trusted. As he said, the Star of Longevity has become the Star of Calamity.

Lan’s words reveal that his mind is changing. When he says “The Star of Longevity will turn into the Star of Calamity,” he evokes the Daoist idea of worldly vicissitudes, in which what seems to be good fortune can quickly turn into bad fortune, and vice versa. An example of this would be in Chapter Fifty-Eight of *Tao Te Ching*, which includes the following lines:

禍兮福之所倚；福兮禍之所伏。  

It is on disaster that good fortune perches;  
It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches.

In addition to being frightened, Lan may also be beginning to sense that things are not as he always thought they were:

眼睜睜不敢往前進，不敢明聞。

My eyes are open, but I don’t dare take a step forward, I don’t dare make known what I am hearing.

Nonetheless, it is the threat of punishment and the fear it engenders in him that is the catalyst for any awakening that may be occurring in him, and his main concern at this point is to escape his punishment:

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41 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
42 I have consulted West and Idema’s translation here. This refers to the tune sung.
43 I have consulted West and Idema’s translations here.
44 D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 84.
46 Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
(Zhongli:) Why did you come here? (Lan Caihe:) Because I neglected to do my community service, his excellency will have me beaten forty times in the central hall. Master has saved me, though. (Zhongli:) In the event that I save you, will you leave the family and follow me as a disciple? (Lan Caihe:) If you save me, I will be willing to leave the family.

Lan agrees to follow Zhongli and leave his home in exchange for being released. Later, after being released, Lan gratefully addresses both Dongbin and Zhongli:

謝了師父大人，則今日跟着師父出家去也。\(^48\)

Thank you master, and your excellency. Today, I will become a disciple of the master here and leave the family.

Thus Lan agrees to leave the family life. He does this only when threatened with a severe flogging. Suffering, or the threat of suffering, is what changed his mind.

### 2.6 Religious Heroism

It is hard to see Lan as a particularly admirable character in light of his behavior leading up to this point. Lan is contemptuous of Zhongli at first, and eventually becomes threatening when it becomes clear that Zhongli will not leave:

我鎖了勾欄門，看你怎生出的去。

(唱)遮莫你駕雲軒，
白日昇天，怎敢相饒到面前。

(雲)你若惱了我，十日不開門，我直餓殺你。\(^49\)

I’ll lock the theater door and see if you can leave then.

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\(^{47}\) Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”

\(^{48}\) Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”

\(^{49}\) Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
(Sings:) Even if you ride a cloud sedan carriage, and ascend to Heaven in broad daylight, how dare you come begging to my face?

(Speaks:) If you keep bothering me, I will lock you in for ten days, and starve you to death.

However, when he himself is about to be beaten, he changes his mind almost immediately. In this respect, he seems more like a bully than a Daoist Immortal. Lan is close to enlightenment, but even still he seems unaware of it. Not only that, but his quickly changing his mind in order to escape a beating does not seem to be especially heroic. We will see similar behavior in the protagonists of the other stories in this study, as well, though. Religious heroism in these stories does not always appear honorable or valiant.

That being the case, why does the religious heroism of these characters not appear in a more conventionally heroic form? Furthermore, if they are going to be enlightened, why are they not braver, more honorable, more “moral” people? It may be that characters like Lan Caihe, in addition to their less likeable qualities, also have qualities that are not so easily noticeable, but which can still be seen as strengths of a sort. If the unseen order of reality operates outside of the realm of our senses and concepts, then perhaps we do not fully understand what its values are. If it is not a physical realm, but a spiritual one, then perhaps physical power and strength are not as meaningful in it as we might like to think they are. If that is the case, then the portrayal of heroism that is based on the defiance, or the physical defeat, of “evil” might reflect a worldly view more than it does a fundamentally religious one.

If physical strength and conventional heroism are not as important as we might think, then what about our ideas regarding morality? The unseen order of reality should at least have a moral dimension, should it not? Most religions are based on moral teachings, so it would seem to follow that morality would mean something in the perspective of the unseen order of reality. It
may also be, though, that our ideas about conventional morality are not so different from our ideas about conventional heroism. Perhaps there is a dimension of morality that is more fundamental than that which we impose upon the world. The *Tao Te Ching* (*Daode Jing*) takes a skeptical look at the idea of virtue, for example:

- **上德不德**，A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue,
- **是以有德**，and that is why he has virtue.
- **下德不失德**，A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue,
- **是以無德**，and that is why he is without virtue.\(^{50}\)

In *Laozi, with Annotation and Reviews* (*老子註釋及評介*), lines one and two are explained as follows (translations are my own):

- **壹** \[壹\] 上德不德：上德的人不自恃有德。
- **貳** \[貳\] 下德不失德：下德的人，恪守着形式上的德。\(^{51}\)

Line One: A person of the highest virtue is not conceited about having virtue.
Line Two: As to a person of the lowest virtue, [that person] dares not stray from a virtue that is [merely] formalistic.

The author continues:

- **老子將德分為上下：上德是無心的流露，下德則有了居心。**\(^{52}\)

  Laozi divided virtue into high [virtue] and low [virtue]: High virtue is revealed without intention; low virtue harbors evil intentions.

This suggests that a strict adherence to what we see as virtue can cause one to lose sight of what is fundamentally virtuous. The passage goes on to suggest that with the arising of worldly virtue, this more fundamental virtue is lost:

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\(^{50}\) D.C. Lau, trans. C. 38, in *Tao Te Ching*, 56-57.


\(^{52}\) Chen Guying, *Laozi zhushi ji pingjie*, 211.
In the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and in the short story “Young Goodman Brown,” we can see expressions of this theme, though from different perspectives. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, the protagonist writes a letter to Miss Watson to let her know where the slave Jim is, as he feels that it is his “moral” obligation to do so, but then he thinks of his friendship with Jim:

> I felt so good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking - thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moon-light, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind.

Huckleberry Finn’s “weakness” here, is clearly a strength. His inability to harden himself against Jim is an ability of another sort - to follow his conscience. In questioning the “virtue” that he has been taught, he is in accord with the highest virtue. He then consigns himself to “immorality”:

> It was a close place. I took it [the letter] up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’ - and tore it up.

> It was awful thoughts and words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn’t. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think of anything worse, I would do that.
too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.\footnote{Mark Twain, \textit{Huckleberry Finn}, 214.}

Huck Finn abandons the “morality” that has been ingrained in him, but in doing so, is clearly doing what is truly moral. As someone living on the fringes of society, it is perhaps also easier for him to see society from an outsider’s viewpoint, and thus he can more easily put its “morality” in perspective. Nonetheless, it is still not easy for him to do, and he internalizes the perspective of society by considering himself “wicked.”

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” another perspective on morality can be seen, in which an adherence to conventional morality makes one lose sight of true morality. In this story, the protagonist leaves his wife, Faith, to meet with the devil in the forest one night.\footnote{Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown,” in \textit{Hawthorne’s Short Stories}, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) 193-195.}

Goodman Brown meets the devil, but balks at spending more time with him:

‘Too far! Too far!’ Exclaimed the goodman, unconsciously resuming his walk. ‘My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs; and I shall be the first of the name of Brown that ever took this path and kept’\footnote{Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown,” 195-196.}

The devil then responds, trying to assuage Brown’s concerns:

‘Such company, thou wouldst say,’ observed the elder person, interpreting his pause. ‘Well said, Goodman Brown! I have been well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that’s no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip’s war. They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight. I would fain be friends with you for their sake.’\footnote{Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown,” 196.}
From their very name, the Puritans would seem to embody the highest standard of virtue, and yet it is that very “purity” that causes them to lose sight of their compassion. Goodman Brown’s father and grandfather probably saw themselves as moral and virtuous men, punishing people whom they saw as evil (the Quakers), and burning the villages of people whom they saw as enemies (the Native Americans). They might have been regarded as heroes by their peers, but it is clear that their “morality” was more a matter of harsh judgment than of compassion, and, from this passage, it is clear that the devil delighted in such misguided worldly “morality.”

Thus, it is possible to be misled by the standards that people set for morality. One can follow one’s conscience, like Huckleberry Finn does, and be considered “immoral,” while another can be cruel and ruthless, like the father and grandfather of Young Goodman Brown, and be considered “moral.” In the case of Lan Caihe, therefore, his seeming lack of moral qualities should not be taken in itself as a sign that he has no morality. After his enlightenment, we shall see what qualities emerge which are not apparent now. This will be the case with the other protagonists that we consider, as well, as none of them are outstandingly “moral.”

2.7 The Superficial Becomes Realized

As we have already seen, a recurring motif in this play is that of realization. Lan is an actor, and he has played many different roles, almost certainly including those of religious figures. Now he is about to realize the role of a Daoist Immortal. After agreeing to become Zhongli’s disciple, Lan states:

藍采和潑聲名貫滿州城，幾曾見那扮雜劇樂官頭得悟醒。⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
Lan Caihe’s lowly reputation is known throughout town and province. Who has ever seen a performer and singer of zaju drama become the first to become enlightened?

At the beginning of Act Two, as Lan’s birthday celebration begins, the religious imagery is evident. It is Lan’s birthday, and the troupe members wish Lan a long life. As Lan and his wife come in, he says:

(正末同旦上雲)今日是我生辰之日，眾火伴又送禮物來添壽。兄弟將壽星掛起，供養懸上，裝香來。今日喜慶之日，咱慢慢的吃幾杯。⑥¹

Today is my birthday, and all of my partners will be bringing me gifts in order to bring me longevity. My brothers will hang up the star of longevity, and put out offerings and incense. Today is a day of happiness and celebration, so let’s take our time and enjoy a few drinks.

The irony here is that while Lan’s troupe and family members wish him longevity, and he appears to wish it for himself, he has been resisting the true and fundamental longevity - immortality - offered him by Zhongli. He wants it in the abstract sense, but shows no interest in the possibility of following Zhongli in order to gain it for real. Wishing for longevity may seem like a mere custom to him, a custom that is repeated on a yearly basis; it is almost just a matter of going through the motions. However, he does not realize that he will gain true longevity, immortality, very soon. He may not believe Zhongli, and the prospect of leaving the family is not something he wants to consider, but he has no problem with making offerings to the Star of Longevity. This motif of showing belief in and expressing desire for religious ideals when there is no “danger” of gaining them, while resisting them when they are within reach, will appear again in all of the works in this study to some extent.

⑥¹ Anon., Act 2, in “Han zhongli.”
In addition, Lan’s superficial acceptance of these beliefs, attributes and roles becomes real acceptance, just as he goes from being an actor who portrays immortals to being an actual immortal. In Act One, while arguing with Zhongli, Lan sarcastically remarks:

大古裏你是廣成子漢鍾離...\(^6^2\)

And I presume you are the legendary Daoist sage Guan Chengzi, or Zhongli of the Han?

Lan does not even realize that he is speaking the truth, and by the same token, perhaps his other performances and religious observances, though superficial, also reflect an unrealized truth. When Lan is brought to the point where his most honest feelings are brought out, namely when he begs Zhongli of the Han to save him from punishment, we see him at his most honest and genuine before he becomes enlightened. Just as this is the point when he is suffering the greatest mental anguish of the entire play, this is also where we see him at his most unvarnished. If attaining enlightenment is a matter of getting as close as possible to one’s true nature, then this play can also be seen partly as a process of bringing Lan to this point, at which he becomes willing to be led onward by Zhongli. We will see variations of this theme in the other works in this study, as well.

Thus, Lan’s process of realization begins with the arrival of Zhongli. Lan goes from being outwardly polite to Zhongli on their first encounter, to being strained, being rude, and even to being threatening, before he finally breaks down and begs Zhongli for help under the threat of punishment.

As for Lan’s religious heroism, the qualities in him that help him realize religious awakening, those qualities are difficult to find even in a close reading of the play. Nonetheless, his

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\(^6^2\) Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
experiences as an actor, and his professed beliefs and traditions, however superficial his beliefs in them are, seem to have laid the foundation for his transformation.

One caveat here is that Lan Caihe is one of the Daoist immortals, so his enlightenment is a foregone conclusion. If he already possesses the qualities of an immortal, then it may not matter what exactly those qualities are. The principal conflict here is his resistance to enlightenment. He must be willing before he can progress further, despite his inherent qualities. However, while his willingness is a prerequisite for enlightenment, when his wife shows willingness, and even asks him to lead her to enlightenment at the end of the play, he does not do so:

(Lan’s Wife speaks:) Since you have left the family to become an immortal, I will go with you. How about it? (Lan speaks:) You cannot leave the family.

If she cannot leave the family, then willingness may not be the only prerequisite for enlightenment. Lan’s wife must not be ready yet, though it is not clear why not, nor is it necessarily much clearer why Lan himself is ready, aside from his being Lan Caihe.

2.8 A Personality Transformed

If Lan Caihe, prior to his enlightenment, does not reveal a great deal about his hidden immortal qualities, then perhaps what he says and does after leaving the family may be more revealing.

Before he leaves the family, for example, Lan Caihe prefers the world and its pleasures:

(鍾雲)...幾時是了。不知俺出家兒受用快活。(正末雲)俺世俗人要吃有珍羞百味，要穿有綾錦千箱，我見你出家兒受用來。64

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63 Anon., Act 3, in “Han zhongli.”
64 Anon., Act 1, in “Han zhongli.”
(Zhongli speaks:) When will all of this be over? You don’t know the joys of we who have left the family. (Lan Caihe speaks:) As to we who remain in the vulgar world, when we want to eat, we have a hundred flavors of delicacies to choose from, when we want something to wear, we have a thousand cases of damasks and brocades to choose from. And I am supposed to believe in the ‘joys’ of you who leave the family?

After he leaves, though, he seems kinder, and he shows an appreciation for things that he did not seem to value before, such as peace and harmony. For example, after leaving the family and becoming Zhongli’s disciple, he meets his wife again, and when she tries to get him to return to the family, he responds:

雖然俺便不得正果，把你個賢妻度脫。你且與我安樂守分隨緣過，只落得一日清閒兀的不快活殺我。65

Even though I can’t achieve the ‘right fruit,’ or if I don’t guide you, my good wife, to enlightenment, if you can - for my sake - live in peace and happiness, and take things as they come, and find even a mere day’s true peace and leisure, this would give me the greatest joy imaginable.

This seems to be a far cry from the man who earlier mocked Zhongli for living the simple life:

可知可知俺吃的是大饅頭廣片粉，你吃的是菜餃餡淡齏羹。66

Of course, of course. The things I eat are large steamed buns and broad noodles, while the things you eat are dumplings with vegetable filling and bland soup with minced vegetables.

However, after leaving, Lan extols the simple joys of his new life:

再不聽耳邊廂焦焦聒聒，兒女是金枷玉鎖，道不的兒女多來冤業多。閒時節手執着板，悶來時口揚着歌。誰似我快活。67

No more do I listen to the babbling right next to my ear. Sons and daughters are golden cangues and jade chains - the more of them, the greater the karmic
entanglements. When I am at leisure, I play the clappers. When I am feeling melancholy, I raise my voice in song. Who is as cheerful as I am?

While Lan Caihe’s religious heroism is not apparent at the beginning of this story, after he becomes an immortal, he seems to be much more pleasant and likeable. He appreciates the simple things in life, and cherishes peace and serenity. Are these the qualities Zhongli saw in him to start with? If so, is mere appreciation of people, and of peace and serenity religious heroism? Or is this not so much a special characteristic as a universal one, one which is obscured by people’s worldly desires? If so, perhaps enlightenment may not be more complicated than learning to appreciate that which is already there. If this is the case, though, Lan Caihe does not get to this point without having to suffer mental anguish first.

2.9 Attachments and Illusion

As the play nears its end, it reminds us that the relinquishing of attachment to the vulgar world is not easy. Even when one is on the verge of enlightenment, it is possible to lapse back into worldly ways. While this play features Daoist Immortals, and is arguably a “Daoist” play, it also makes use of some Buddhist terminology and concepts. (This sort of syncretism is seen in all of the Chinese works in this study, to some extent.) For example, in Act Three, Lan Caihe mentions:

你這火奶腥未落朱顏子，纏定那十二初分藍采和，養性無那。68

You kid, who still has the strong smell of mother’s milk on your red face, pestering Lan Caihe that he has ‘just escaped from the twelve links in the chain of causation.’69

Close to the end of the play, in Act Four, Lan is preparing to ascend to the Jasper Pool:

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68 Anon., Act 3, in “Han zhongli.”
69 I have followed West and Idema’s translation here. See: West and Idema, “Zhongli of the Han,” 306.
I cultivate and uphold the laws and rites of Daoism. My master has guided me - this performer-disciple. My master uses the Daoist arts openly, and speaks of Buddhist themes subtly. I look forward to his taking me to the Jasper Pool. How could I have expected that today would be the day?

As he looks forward to this, some people enter, and when Lan asks who they are, they reply that they are his wife and brothers:

(雲) 原來是一火行院，我問你是誰家？(旦雲) 俺是藍采和家。(正末雲) 你是藍采和家誰？(旦雲) 你是你渾家。他兩個是你兄弟王把色李薄頭。(正末雲) 可怎生都老了。(淨雲) 自從哥哥去了三十年光景，我八十歲，兄弟七十歲，嫂子九十歲，可知都老了也。(正末唱)

I see, it's a troupe of actors and actresses. May I ask who you are? (Lan’s Wife:) We are the family of Lan Caihe. (Lan:) What member of Lan Caihe’s family are you? (Lan’s Wife:) I am your wife. Those two are your brothers Wang Ba’s and Li Botou. (Lan Caihe:) How is it that you are so old? (Painted Face:) Older brother, since you left, thirty years have gone by. I am eighty, and my brother is seventy. Sister-in-law here is ninety. It is no wonder we are old.

As Lan is preparing to follow Zhongli of the Han to the Langyuan Orchard and the Jasper Pool, Bandleader Wang reminds him of his past as a performer, and asks him if he might perform once more:

我們都是老人家，你正是中年，還去勾欄裏做幾日雜劇，卻不好？

We are all old now, but you are just middle-aged. How about you go to the theater and perform zaju plays for a few days?

As Lan muses about his acting career, Bandleader Wang continues:

Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
West and Idema translate their names as “Bandleader Wang” and “Thinhead Li.”
Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
Big brother, your zaju costumes and other props are still in good shape. Big brother, lift the curtain and take a look at us…

Lan cannot help but do as Bandleader Wang asks:

听言罷心內喜，不由我笑微微，我揭開帳幔則。75

When I hear these words, the inside of my heart is happy, I can’t help but smile, and I lift the curtain.

When Lan lifts the curtain, though, he sees Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin. Zhongli chides him:

許堅，你凡心不退哩那！76

Xu Jian, your mortal heart has not withdrawn all the way yet!

Lan realizes that he has not really just seen his family members:

唬的我悠悠魂魄飛，我則道我哥哥我兄弟，我姊妹我姨姨，似南柯夢驚回。77

I’m so shocked that my soul flies slowly away. I thought it was my older brother, my brother, my younger sister, and my wife’s sister. This is like coming back from ‘the dream of the Southern Branch.’

This last encounter with temptation and illusion illustrate the pull of the attachments, and also the power of belief in that which does not exist. Even when on the verge of enlightenment, it is possible to be drawn back into the world, and Lan Caihe almost allows himself to be drawn back in by his pride, and by his lack of vigilance. He is tempted to believe in illusion, and the state of mind which believes in illusions is still not completely enlightened. In The Vimalakirti Sutra,

74 Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
75 Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
76 Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
77 Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”
Vimalakirti explains a Buddhist principle, one that seems applicable to Lan’s situation, to Subhuti when Subhuti comes begging at his door:

‘若須菩提,入諸邪見,不到彼岸;住於八難,不得無難;同於煩惱,離清淨法,汝得無諍三昧,一切眾生亦得是定;其施汝者不名福田,供養汝者墮三惡道;為與眾魔共一手,作諸勞侶,汝與眾魔及諸塵勞等無有異;於一切眾生而有怨心;謗諸佛,毀於法,不入眾數;終不得滅度,汝若如是,乃可取食。’


“Subhuti, if you can subscribe to erroneous views and thus never reach the ‘other shore’ of enlightenment; if you can remain among the eight difficulties and never escape from difficulty, and can make common cause with earthly desires and remove yourself from a state of purity; if when you attain the samadhi of nondisputation you allow all living beings to attain the same degree of concentration; if those who give you alms are not destined to gain good fortune thereby, and those who make offerings to you fall into the three evil paths of existence; if you are willing to join hands with a host of devils and make the defilements your companion; if you can be no different from all these devils and these dusts and defilements; if you can bear hatred toward all living beings, slander the Buddhas, vilify the Law, not be counted among the assembly of monks, and in the end never attain nirvana - if you can do all these things, then you will be worthy to receive food.’

‘At that time, World-Honored One, when I heard these words, I was dumbfounded, not knowing what sort of words they were or how to answer them. I put down my alms bowl, intending to leave the house, but Vimalakirti said to me, ‘Ah, Subhuti, pick up your alms bowl and do not be afraid. Why do I say this? If some phantom person conjured up by the Thus Come One were to reprimand you as I have done, you would not be afraid, would you?’

‘No,’ I replied.

‘Vimalakirti said, ‘All things in the phenomenal world are just such phantoms and conjured beings. So you have no cause to feel afraid. Why? Because all

78 This character differs slightly from the one in the text, which is a combination of the radicals “言” and “爭.”
79 Chen Yinchi and Lin Xiaoguang, trans., Weimojie jing (Taipei: San min shu ju, 2019), 48-49.
words and pronouncements too are no different from these other phantom forms. When a person is wise, he does not cling to words and hence is not afraid of them. Why? Because words are something apart from self-nature - words do not really exist. And this is emancipation. All things of the phenomenal world bear this mark of emancipation.\(^8^0\)

Vimalakirti asserts that the appearances of this world are all illusory, and therefore responding to them as if they are real is still a demonstration of one’s lack of wisdom. Lan Caihe shows that he, like Subhuti, has not completely relinquished his attachment to illusions yet. Only when he realizes their true nature is he finally ready to leave the world.\(^8^1\) This is the last test before Lan Caihe becomes enlightened, and he now sees that the people he thought were his family members were actually Zhongli of the Han and Lü Dongbin:

呀，原來是開壇闡教漢鍾離，有洞賓師父緊相隨。我這裏雲陽板撒上階基，你都來這裏，八仙相引赴瑤池。

(鍾雲)許堅，你不是凡人，乃上八仙數內藍采和是也。今日功成行滿，同登仙界。你聽者，許堅心下莫猜疑，仔細叮嚀說與伊，這位洞賓道號純陽子，則道是逍遙散誕漢鍾離。\(^8^2\)

(Lan Caihe:) Ah, so it was the founder of the sect, and the expounder of the Way\(^8^3\) - Han Zhongli, and Master Dongbin as well. I will drop my ‘Yunyang clappers’\(^8^4\) at the base of the stairs. Now that you, the Eight Immortals, have come here, to lead me to the Jasper Pool.

(Zhongli:) Xu Jian, you are not a mortal now, only now can you ascend and take your place among the Eight Immortals as Lan Caihe. Your merit is complete now, and we will ascend to the celestial realm together. Listen, Xujian, in your mind,


\(^8^1\) In *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals*, West and Idema write that this is a common plot feature in deliverance plays: “The disciple then leaves his family only to be confronted by them after years of wandering.” See: West, Idema, trans., *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals*, 287. However, in this case, the text of the play makes it seem that Lan has not encountered his real family.

\(^8^2\) Anon., Act 4, in “Han zhongli.”

\(^8^3\) I have consulted an followed West and Idema’s translation here.

\(^8^4\) I have followed West and Idema’s translation for this term. They explain its meaning in a footnote: “Yunyang is a common designation for the execution ground. The use of the term as the designation for his clappers is also commonplace. Are they meant to signal a sudden sound that startles people into the realization that the whole world, where people cling foolishly to pleasures, is an execution ground?” See: West and Idema, “Zhongli of the Han,” 305.
don’t have any doubts. I tell you, The Daoist name of Dongbin here is Master of the Pure Yang, and I am free and unfettered Han Zhongli.

Having recognized Zhongli of the Han and Lü Dongbin, and also having realized his mistake, Lan Caihe is now ready to go to the Jasper Pool with the Zhongli and Dongbin. In this play, there is an actual view of what one can expect after becoming enlightened. Indeed, the unseen order of reality in this play is more tangible than it will be in the remaining works in this study. In addition, none of the other stories in this study will offer nearly as much detail as this play does about what happens after the protagonist’s enlightenment.

2.10 Conclusion

“Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment” is in some ways not typical compared to the other works featured in this study. Its portrayal of the “unseen order of reality” is about as visible as can be, with its representatives appearing as human beings, and with its worldly bureaucratic and physical features. Therefore, the term “unseen order of reality” may not even really apply well here, as the transcendent realm and its manifestations are portrayed with visual imagery throughout the play. In addition, the protagonist’s mental progression leaves little to the imagination. In the upcoming stories in this study, the portrayals of the unseen order of reality will be less tangible and obvious than they are in this work.

Nonetheless, this play still has all of the plot features found in the other works in this study. It features a reluctant protagonist, who is not a conventional hero. It portrays suffering, or the threat of suffering, as the catalyst necessary for the protagonist’s change of mind, and it portrays the qualities of religious heroism that were previously hidden once the protagonist becomes willing to embrace enlightenment. It downplays morality, and it ends with the protagonist leaving behind the worldly life in order to embrace enlightenment. It also makes it clear that such a

85 I have followed West and Idema’s translation here.
transformation on the part of the protagonist is no easy matter, and that even up to the very point of realizing one’s spiritual transformation, it is still possible to be tempted by worldly attachments. The reluctant protagonist, suffering and loss, unconventional religious heroism, and a final relinquishing of the world are motifs that will appear some form or other in all of the stories in this study.
Chapter 3

“Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal During the Dragon Boat Festival”

Furthermore, Subhuti, if it be that good men and good women, who receive and retain this Discourse, are downtrodden, their evil destiny is the inevitable retributive result of sins committed in their past mortal lives. By virtue of their present misfortunes the reacting effects of their past will be thereby worked out, and they will be in a position to attain the Consummation of Incomparable Enlightenment.

Note on translations:

In Chapters Two and Three, I have translated the quotes from the stories in Feng Menglong’s *Stories to Caution the World* collection myself. In some cases, I have consulted the translations of Shuhui Yang and Yunqing Yang, especially with regard to special terms and titles. In such cases, I will note that I have consulted or followed their translation(s). With regard to the classical Chinese works cited in these chapters, I have used published academic translations. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are my own, and any inaccuracies or errors are also my own.

3.2 Introduction

In Chapter Three of *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, in the section entitled “Religious Story,” Patrick Hanan gives a brief synopsis of “Chen Kechang.” According to Hanan, “Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal During the Dragon Boat Festival” is a “middle period” story. He gives

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1 Xu Xingwu 徐興無, trans., *Jinggang jing 金剛經* (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2018), 92-93.
the dates for this period as “...the years between 1400 and 1575, and particularly the century from 1450 to 1550...”⁵ As to the characteristics of the religious story, Hanan writes:

Like the folly story, the religious type originates in the early period⁶ and is set in Hangchow [Hangzhou]. It tells of priests, their deaths, and sometimes their reincarnations.⁷

Hanan then continues:

These are not the bad priests caricatured in the vernacular literature but poet-priests, men of literary distinction. The priest’s death is self-willed, and the stories invariably give his valedictory poem and describe the funeral service and cremation, complete with funeral address. The reason for the death is related in some way to sex. The priest wills his own death from shame when his sexual conduct becomes known or because he has been falsely accused.⁸

“Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal during the Dragon Boat Festival”⁹ 陳可常端陽仙化 in Feng Menglong’s story collection Stories to Caution the World¹⁰ conforms to all of these characteristics. In addition, it is a story of enlightenment. It tells the story of Chen Kechang’s progress toward enlightenment, clearly showing the steps and factors involved (and the miraculous circumstances surrounding his enlightenment); it paints a picture of life during the Song Dynasty, giving the reader a glimpse into the lives and beliefs of people during that time, including the religious and cultural beliefs that facilitate acceptance of Buddhist and Daoist mysticism.

In Xiaoqiao Ling’s article, “Law in Sanyan and Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan,” the author discusses Feng Menglong’s views on the efficacy and function of stories:

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⁵ Patrick Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, 54.
⁶ According to Hanan, the early period stories were “written before about 1450...” Patrick Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, 28.
⁷ Patrick Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, 70.
⁸ Patrick Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, 70.
⁹ I have used the translation by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang in their translation of 警世通言: Stories to Caution the World.
In his preface to *Gujin xiaoshuo* [Stories Old and New], Feng establishes what I call a rhetoric of vernacular stories: in their power to edify, these stories are superior to the Confucian classics because they stage the storyteller’s performance in front of the illiterate audience. Feng’s advocacy of these stories epitomizes the view held by the highly educated writers, editors, and publishers that printed books have a moral mission.11

“Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal During the Dragon Boat Festival” does, indeed, make some moral points by means of its portrayal of events. Nonetheless, in many respects, it does not easily conform to what the reader might consider to be conventional morality. (In the context of this story we will consider conventional morality to include an adherence to a society’s moral rules, and the enforcement of the society’s ideas about justice as retribution for wrongdoing.) This is a story that subverts concepts such as morality and justice, and thus arguably initiates the process of challenging the reader’s worldly concepts, consciousness and instincts. In addition, this is a story about religious awakening, and about the role that suffering plays in helping one progress toward religious awakening, or enlightenment.

### 3.3 Synopsis

“Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal on the Day of the Dragon Boat Festival” begins with Chen Kechang’s having failed the provincial-level civil-service examination three times.

Frustrated, he consults a fortune-teller, who advises him to leave the family life and become a Buddhist monk. He does so, but without real enthusiasm. After a year, Chen Kechang becomes noticed for his talent at writing poetry by the local commandery chief, who is a patron of his monastery. Because of this, his tonsure is expedited by the commandery prince. He then enjoys the favor of the commandery prince. The following year, however, Chen Kechang is falsely accused of getting the prince’s concubine pregnant. The prince, furious with Kechang for

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deceiving him, and for violating the principles of his station as a monk, has him beaten and thrown in jail. Only the intercession of the elder at his temple gets Kechang freed. Near the end of the story, the woman who accused Chen Kechang admits that she was seduced by a steward in the prince’s employ. He had promised to support her financially if she falsely accused Kechang. When he fails to keep his promise to her, she tells the prince the truth. The prince, having realized that he unjustly imprisoned Kechang, hurries to the monastery to see Kechang, but Kechang has already passed from the world by the time the prince arrives. When the prince, the elder, the monks, and others gather to witness Kechang’s cremation, he arises amidst the flames and thanks them for helping him to achieve his destiny - enlightenment as a Buddhist arhat. His unjust persecution helped him to rid himself of bad karma from previous lives, and attain enlightenment.

3.4 The Intrusion of the Unseen Order of Reality: A Setback Leads to Leaving the Family

The unseen order of reality is at work from the beginning of this story, influencing the course of events in the life of the protagonist. As the poem above indicates, leaving the family life and becoming a Buddhist monk will occur in this story. “Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal on the Day of the Dragon Boat Festival” begins with a setback for the protagonist, and ends with the protagonist’s enlightenment. Chen’s visit to the fortune teller, and his recollection of a mystical

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13 Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, “Chen Kechang duanyang xianhua 陳可常端陽仙化,” in Jingshi tongyan 警世通言 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2018), 75.
dream his mother once had made it clear that his encounters with fortune are not mere
coincidences, but intrusions of the unseen order of reality. The vicissitudes of fortune that he
experiences later can also be seen as intrusions of the unseen order of reality, as they will lead
Chen Kechang to the realization of his fate. His final statement as he rises from the flames at the
end further confirms the role of the unseen order of reality in his life.

A setback in Chen Kechang’s ambitions sets the plot of the story in motion, and leads to
two strong indications that the unseen order of reality is influencing the course of events in his
life. Chen Yi 陳義, whose style name is Chen Kechang 陳可常, 14 is a scholar living “during the
reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Song Dynasty, in the Shaoxing Reign Period in Leqing
County, Wenzhou Prefecture.” 15 He is described as “having delicate features” 16 and as being
“intelligent and very well-read.” 17 He has passed the first level of the imperial civil service
examinations, but failed at the provincial level three times. Because of this setback in his
ambitions, he consults a fortune teller, 18 who tells him:

‘命有華蓋，卻無官星，只好出家.’ 19

‘Your fate involves the ‘Emperor’s Canopy,’ 20 and it is not in the stars for you to
become an official, so you will just have to leave the family.’ 21

Because of this, he reflects on the strange circumstances of his birth, as related to him by his
mother:

14 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
15 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
16 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
17 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
18 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
19 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
20 Cassiopeia
21 "Leave the family” in this case means to enter the monastic life and become a Buddhist monk.
From a young age, Scholar Chen had heard his mother say she dreamed that a golden arhat entered her womb at the time she gave birth to him. The fortune-teller’s advice may or may not indicate supernatural forces at work, but the mystical dream of his mother makes it seem that the events in this story are more than mere coincidence: all of the events from his setback on lead to his realizing his identity as an arhat, just as his mother dreamed. Kechang heeds the fortune teller’s advice and decides to seek out Elder “Iron Ox Yin” at Lingyin Monastery, entering the monastic life as the elder’s “second attendant.”

This convergence of the setback, the fortune teller’s advice, the memory of the mystical dream his mother recounted to him, and his decision to leave the household life demonstrate the cause and effect relationship between worldly setbacks and spiritual progress. Failing the exams causes Chen to decide to see the fortune teller, whose advice he follows. Upon being advised to leave the family life, he recalls his mother’s dream, which foreshadows his own destiny. Joining the monastery is what he is clearly meant to do, but it takes failure to push him to do that. Kechang may feel that he is just stumbling randomly from one thing to the next, but each step of his is leading him directly to his destiny.

3.5 The Reluctant Protagonist

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22 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
24 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
Chen Kechang is, like all the other protagonists in this study, a reluctant protagonist. Despite the memory of his mother’s auspicious dream, he does not leave the family life joyfully; rather, he does it with a sense of resignation, even of bitterness. When reflecting on his mother’s dream, Chen himself uses the term “setback” to describe his situation:

今日功名蹭蹬之際，又聞星家此言，忿一口氣...  

Today, with this setback to his scholarly ambition, and - on top of that - having heard what the fortune teller said, he snorted indignantly…

It will become clear in the stories in this study that it is not good fortune, but rather misfortune, that helps nudge these characters toward religious awakening. As to Chen Kechang’s reaction here, it is not an unusual one.

Moreover, while enlightenment is the ultimate goal of Buddhists - a goal that, in light of his mother’s dream, seems within reach of Chen Kechang, and which would seem to be an occasion for joy on his part - it still requires a setback to start him on this path, just as it took the threat of a beating to get Lan Caihe to change his mind. If Kechang had succeeded in the examinations and become a juren or even a jinshi,²⁶ he probably would not have considered leaving the household life. This underscores the pull of worldly attachments on people, and the difficulty for the ordinary person of embracing enlightenment. Despite enlightenment being the goal of Buddhists (and attaining immortality, or achieving harmony with the Way, for Daoists), when presented with the reality of leaving the worldly life, the decision is not so simple. Chen Kechang is not happy about abandoning his dream of passing the examinations, for which he had most likely spent years preparing. If he had succeeded, he could have had a good income, and

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²⁵ Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 75.
²⁶ “舉人” and “進士” These are, respectively, the titles for those who pass the provincial and national-level civil service exams.
prestige. He could have been someone important. Naturally, he would not want to cast all of that aside. His setback, therefore, is necessary to get him to consider leaving the family life. This is a theme that will come up again in the other works in this study.

Therefore, despite entering the monastery, Chen arguably still tends to cling to the worldly life and its attachments. This can be seen both in his continuing sense of grievance, and also in his later becoming something of a rising star, enjoying the commandery prince’s appreciation of his poetic talents. Not long after Chen enters the monastery, on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, the commandery prince and his retinue visit the temple to pay their respects and to make an offering of zongzi. While walking through the halls, the commandery prince notices a poem written on a wall:

齊國曾生一孟嘗，
晉朝鎮惡又高強；
五行偏我遭時蹇，
欲向星家問短長！

In the Country of Qi there was born one Mengchang,
Zhen’e of The Jin Dynasty also excelled and shone;
The Five Elements, though, would have me meet misfortune,
I want to ask a fortune teller what is going on!

This poem shows what Kechang is thinking, as all of his poems do. His poems underscore one of the roles of poetry in this story: providing a window into Chen’s thoughts. This story begins and ends in verse. Including the beginning and ending poems, there are twelve poems in this story. Of the story’s eight pages, only two do not have a single poem. These poems are the most detailed means the reader has of understanding Kechang’s thoughts. He does not engage in a great deal of conversation, and when he does talk, it is almost always in response to people’s questions. Therefore, these poems are the doors to Kechang’s perspective on life, the way to

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27 A kind of glutinous-rice dumpling eaten during the Dragon Boat Festival (粽子).
29 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 76.
understand his thinking and opinions. In addition, they convey Chen’s mental and spiritual progress. Without them, there would be much less insight into Chen’s thinking. Chen’s using poetry to express himself underscores that he is educated. It also reminds the reader of Chen’s belief, in this case, that life has been unfair to him. Perhaps most importantly, as this study is concerned with the role of suffering and loss in religious awakening, poetry in this story gives some helpful indications of Chen’s transformation.

In addition, the two historical figures, Lord Mengchang\(^{30}\) and Wang Zhen’e,\(^ {31}\) were both born on the same date as Kechang: the fifth day of the fifth month of the year, the day of the Dragon Boat Festival. The Dragon Boat Festival also commemorates the famous poet Qu Yuan, who committed suicide because he felt that his talents and advice were not appreciated.\(^ {32}\) In that Qu Yuan felt a sense of grievance at not being appreciated for his talents, he can be associated with Chen, who seems to feel the same way. Clearly, this is not lost on the protagonist. He feels that he has been short-changed by destiny, not knowing why he has not been able to make more of himself, and why he has not been able to achieve the greatness that he feels is due him.

Furthermore, the identical birth times and dates here are yet another example of the cultural importance placed on the significance of time, and of specific times. These seem to indicate the presence of a cosmic order that plays a role in people’s fates, and which is expressed through the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of specific times and dates. Dates indicate something about the fate of the person born then, and almost all of the turning points in this story occur on a

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\(^{31}\) For a brief biography of Wang Zhen’e, see: Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Historical Dictionary of Medieval China* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009), 532.

\(^{32}\) For a brief biography of Qu Yuan, see “Qu Yuan: Chinese Poet,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, [https://www.britannica.com/biography/Qu-Yuan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Qu-Yuan).
specific date: the fifth day of the fifth month of the year: The Dragon Boat Festival 端陽. Time has cosmic significance in this story, and there are arguably no coincidences here. All of this relates back to the presence of the unseen order of reality, and the role it plays in Chen’s life. However insignificant something may seem, it is arguably still an expression of the dynamics of fate, and, therefore, it can impact the most significant of events.

The other characters in the story also, perhaps for the benefit of the reader, note how Chen’s poetry indicates something about his state of mind. When the commandery prince sees Chen’s poem, for example, he remarks:

‘此詩有怨之意，不知何人所做？’

‘This poem implies a sense of grievance, who wrote it?’

When asked to explain the poem, Kechang’s reply confirms his sense of grievance, and thus his continuing sense of attachment to achievement and reputation:

‘齊國有個孟嘗君，養三千客，他是五月五日午時生。晉國有個大將王鎮惡，此人也是五月五日午時生。小侍者也是五月五日午時生，卻受此窮苦，以此做下四句自歎。’

‘In the country of Qi, there was a Lord Mengchang who had a retinue of 3,000. He was born on the fifth hour of the fifth day of the fifth month. In the land of Jin, there was a great general, Wang Zhen’e. This man was also born on the fifth hour of the fifth day of the fifth month. Your humble attendant [I] was also born on the fifth hour of the fifth day of the fifth month, and yet I must endure this bitter poverty. It was because of this I composed these four lines bemoaning my lot.’

33 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 76.
34 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 77.
While Kechang has left the family to enter a monastery, and will become a Buddhist monk, he has not fully renounced the world. From what he has written here, it appears that he still feels that he has not been given a fair chance to be recognized for his talents.\textsuperscript{35}

A poem written a year later by Kechang shows that his attitude has changed somewhat:

平生只被今朝誤\textsuperscript{36}, All my life, the here and now has held me back,
今朝卻把平生補; Yet now it is making up for this life held back;
重五一年期, ‘Double five’\textsuperscript{37} comes once a year,
齋僧只待時. Only then are these alms\textsuperscript{38} given monks.
主人恩義重, The master’s kindness is great,
兩載蒙恩寵, These two years have I enjoyed it,
清淨得為僧, Becoming a monk, I have found peace,
幽閒度此生.\textsuperscript{39} And, with leisure, go through this life.

Kechang’s poem shows that his sense of resentment has been mostly alleviated and that he has grown spiritually. However, the first line still hints at a sense of having been unfairly treated by fortune. As to realizing his religious destiny, while Kechang appears to appreciate being a monk, he is still reluctant to embrace religious awakening, and in order for him to fulfill his destiny, he will need to change his mind even more. This change of mind will be brought about through suffering and loss.

\textsuperscript{35} Patrick Hanan discusses Feng’s own attempts to pass the civil service exams in \textit{The Chinese Vernacular Story} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 80-81. Shuhui Yang cites Hanan, and refers to \textit{The Chinese Vernacular Story} stating, “...he [Feng] must have experienced a great deal of frustration and emotional suffering for his repeated failures. It is no wonder that this sense of exclusion from the political center found expression in his writings.” See Shuhui Yang, \textit{Appropriation and Representation: Feng Menglong and the Chinese Vernacular Story} (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Chinese Studies The University of Michigan, 1998), 125-126.

\textsuperscript{36} The character “誤” appears in its traditional form in the story, and not in this modified “言口天” form.

\textsuperscript{37} May 5th on the lunar calendar - the date of the Dragon Boat Festival

\textsuperscript{38} In the context of the story, the commandery prince gives 粽子, glutinous rice dumplings to the monks at the temple on 端陽, so I have interpreted “齋僧” in the sense of giving alms to monks, rather than in the sense of fasting.

\textsuperscript{39} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 77.
Suffering and Loss - Means to Transformation

While Chen Kechang’s three failed attempts to pass the provincial-level civil service exams played a role in his decision to enter the monastic life, it is only after his later experience with suffering and loss that he realizes his spiritual awakening. As we have seen, even after entering the monastery, he still retains a sense of resentment. After he becomes a monk, though, he begins to enjoy his special status as a favorite of the prince. Thus, it appears that he still would like to be recognized for his talents, and to make a name for himself. He still values his reputation. If this situation did not change, Kechang would arguably not attain enlightenment, as he would be content with things as they were. Therefore, it is only after he is falsely accused a year later that he is able to take the final steps in his religious journey.

Chen’s failure to pass the exams is followed by a short period in which, despite taking the tonsure, he arguably still clings to worldly attachments, namely the desire for recognition of his talents and desire for fame and reputation. Though he has become a monk, and thus assumed a life of asceticism, he begins to enjoy the favor of the commandery prince, who appreciates his poetic talents. The commandery prince can see that Chen is outstanding, and he decides to promote him. The prince, therefore, expedites Chen’s tonsure, making him a monk of the commandery prince’s prefecture:

郡王見侍者言語清亮，人才出眾，意欲犧舉他。當日差押番，去臨安府僧錄司討一道度牒，將乙侍者剃度為僧，就用他表字可常，為僧門中法號，就作郡王府內門僧。40

The commandery prince observed that the attendant’s voice was clear and resonant, that he was [an] outstanding [person], and he intended to promote him. That day, he sent an official in charge of escorting prisoners to the Department of Records for Monks of Ling’An Prefecture to procure a clerical certificate, thus tonsuring

40 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 77.
Attendant Yi as a monk, and using his style name “Kechang” as his dharma name, making him a monk of the commandery prince’s prefecture.

Now that Kechang has gained the favor of the commandery prince, who appreciates Chen’s poetic talents, it seems that things are finally looking up for him. It might appear to Kechang that the world is a better place than he thought it was. This period of good fortune for Kechang will not last long, though. The favor and patronage of the prince will become enmity before long, and Kechang’s real ordeal will begin.

Chen Kechang’s transformation may have begun with a setback, but only suffering and loss will complete it. Just as his initial setback, over a year earlier, was followed by his life-changing decision to leave the family and become a Buddhist monk, his promotion by the commandery prince is followed, a year later, by great misfortune. It is because of this misfortune, and the suffering and loss that it brings with it, that Kechang can realize his religious awakening.

His ordeal begins with the false accusation that will cause him to suffer torture, and to lose his good reputation and his freedom. On the day of the Dragon Boat Festival the year after his being noticed by the commandery prince, Chen is falsely accused by Lotus Sister of having an affair with her and getting her pregnant.\(^1\) Chen Kechang initially (and truthfully) denies the accusation,\(^2\) but he still receives a cruel beating:

> 左右將可常拖倒，打得皮開肉綻，鮮血迸流。\(^3\)

The assistants dragged Kechang to the ground, and beat him until his skin tore, his flesh was ripped open, and his blood gushed out.

Kechang then makes a false confession:

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\(^1\) Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
\(^2\) Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
\(^3\) Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
Kechang confessed: ‘I, this humble monk, slept with New Lotus. For just a brief while, I had impure thoughts. This confession is the truth.’

Chen’s sudden switch from denying the accusation to then “confessing” right after being beaten seems to be done out of fear of being beaten more. It is a natural reaction, and it is hard to blame him for doing what many people would probably do under similar circumstances, especially considering the brutality of it. On the other hand, though, it does not seem characteristic of a conventional hero.

It may not be apparent yet, but Chen has entered the final stage of his journey. After failing to pass the exams, he resigned himself to his fate as a monk in a monastery. Gradually, though, he came to appreciate his new situation, and the favor he received from the commandery prince. Now he has been accused and beaten. His reputation has been ruined and he has experienced real physical suffering. His setback in the exams began his process of spiritual transformation. Suffering will now help him to complete it.

3.7 Religious Heroism

Chen Kechang is an example of religious heroism, as are the other protagonists in this study. Like the other protagonists, his heroism is not always obvious. He seems meek and ineffectual - unable to influence events. He is not a man of action. Chen’s heroism, then, must derive from a different standard than that of such heroes as Zhang Fei and Xu Xun.

Worldly, conventional heroism is concerned with worldly goals: defeating enemies, avenging wrongs, achieving justice, and showing courage and determination when one knows one may not succeed. (Implicit in this perspective is the idea that there are

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44 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
enemies who must be resisted.) Chen does almost none of these things, though. He does not fight to clear his name, but rather gives in and confesses (to something he did not even do) after being beaten. He does not show defiance in the face of his persecutors. Aside from initially denying any wrongdoing when accused of having an affair with New Lotus, he appears to do almost nothing to defend himself.

As far as the reader knows, Kechang is not guilty. Why, then, does he initially deny the accusation, only to give in right afterward? It appears that he does so because he is being beaten, and is in agony. While this is understandable behavior, it does not seem heroic. We have considered the examples of Zhang Fei, and of Xu Xun. How might they, as conventional heroes, react to the same circumstances? It is probably safe to say that they would allow themselves to be beaten to death before admitting to anything.

Religious heroism is another matter, though. In this case, it is through being subjected to “evil” circumstances and “injustice,” and in showing forbearance, that Chen Kechang has the opportunity for redemption. Through forbearance, as we shall see, he can undo his own past wrongs and achieve enlightenment. In thanking his persecutors, he exercises this forbearance and also helps them (or, more importantly, the reader) to see their own actions in a different, non-judgmental light. At the end of the story, he says that if he had tried to defend himself against the accusations made against him, he would have harmed another. Thus, his apparent “cowardice” is, in fact, an expression of his compassion and his transcendent perspective. This is a form of heroism that is not obvious, nor is it a form of heroism that has much to offer in the form of worldly gratification. From another perspective, though, it is perhaps one of the highest forms of heroism.

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45 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
3.8 Rectifying an Injustice

What started out as a story that appeared to be about Chen Kechang’s frustrated ambitions now appears to become a story about an injustice, in which the wrongly-accused protagonist must fight to clear his name and regain his freedom. The attainment of worldly justice, however, is not the point of this story. While a semblance of worldly justice is achieved by the end of the story, a great deal of harm is also done to Kechang and Lotus Sister by those attempting to achieve justice. The flawed nature of worldly morality and justice is thus underscored.

Indeed, it is because of the very “morality” and “justice” that the prince seems to prize, that he subjects Kechang to such brutal, unjust treatment. Not only does Kechang suffer, but he almost loses his life:

郡王本要打殺可常，因他滿腹文章，不忍下手，監在獄中。 46

The commandery prince originally wanted to have Kechang beaten to death, but because he [Kechang] was so well-read, the prince did not have the heart to do it, and had Kechang imprisoned, instead.

Moreover, Kechang’s suffering is not merely physical, it also takes the form of mental anguish and of the loss of his good reputation. And while the commandery prince seems firm in his conviction that Kechang is guilty, Elder Yin questions the charges against Kechang, recalling his upstanding behavior:

卻說印長老自思：‘可常是個有德行的和尚，日常山門也不出，只在佛前看經，便是郡王府裏喚去半日，未晚就回，又不在府中宿歇，此奸從何而來？內中必有蹊蹺！’ 47

Elder Yin thought to himself: ‘Kechang is a virtuous monk, he does not normally go out, and just sits in front of the Buddha reading sutras. It is the commandery prince who calls him over to the palace for half the day, but he returns before it is

46 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
47 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
late. He does not sleep at the palace, so where could this affair have come from? Something strange is going on!’

Therefore, he goes to Chuanfa Temple in the city and asks Abbot Gao Dahui to go to the prince’s palace with him to beg for mercy on Kechang’s behalf.\textsuperscript{48}

Achieving justice for Kechang is a matter of great difficulty, as the prince holds the power of justice in his hands. When the two elders arrive at the palace, the prince complains about Kechang’s behavior:

郡王開口便說：‘可常無禮！我平日怎麼看待他，卻做下不仁之事！’ \textsuperscript{49}

The commandery prince spoke: ‘Kechang is vulgar! How did I always treat him, and then he does something so heartless!’

Nonetheless, the prince agrees to lighten the sentence, most likely out of respect for the two elders:

‘明日分付臨安府量輕發落。’ \textsuperscript{50}

‘Tomorrow, I will instruct the prefecture to lighten the punishment.’

The prince’s belief in Kechang’s guilt, which results in Kechang’s unjust punishment, and the prince’s deference to the Buddhist elders show that justice here is as much a matter of the whims of the powerful as it is a matter of truth. On one level, this clearly underscores the flaws of worldly “justice.” Chen Kechang is falsely accused, and punished for something he did not do. The righteousness and zeal for justice on the part of the commandery prince themselves create an injustice. On another level, though, this story takes things a step further by portraying worldly

\textsuperscript{48} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 79.
\textsuperscript{49} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
\textsuperscript{50} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
injustice as a means to achieving transcendent justice, and thus bringing about Chen’s spiritual awakening.

If the prince believed that Kechang was innocent, he might himself order a full investigation into the accusation, but he does not. If Kechang did not have advocates among the Buddhist clergy, he would almost certainly not have been given a lighter sentence. Even the prince’s decision not to have Kechang beaten to death was based on his personal feelings regarding Kechang’s erudition. Justice in this case is, therefore, based merely on the whims of the powerful. This becomes clearer when Elder Yin suggests that there has been an injustice:

'覆恩王，此事日久自名。’ 51

"Your Graciousness, the truth of this matter will become clear of itself with the passing of time."

The prince, though, is not receptive to the elder’s words:

郡王聞言心中不喜，退入後堂，再不出來。二位長老見郡王不出，也走出府來。52

The commandery prince heard this, and, in his heart, was not happy. He went back into the rear chambers of the palace, and did not come back out.

Abbott Gao then observes that the prince may himself sense that an injustice has been done:

’郡王嗔怪你說‘日久自名’。他不肯認錯，便不出來。’ 53

‘The prince blamed you for saying, ‘The truth of this matter will become clear of itself with the passing of time.’ He was unwilling to admit that he might be mistaken. Therefore, he did not come back out.’

51 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
52 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
53 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
Worldly justice, at least in this case, has shown its limitations. Afterward, Abbot Gao gets to the heart of the nature of worldly justice:

‘貧不與富敵，賤不與貴爭。’僧家怎敢與王府爭是非？’

‘The poor do not oppose the wealthy, and the lowly do take issue with the high-born.’ How is it that a monk has the audacity to argue about right and wrong with the royal court?’

Abbot Gao expresses a truth about the nature of worldly power. The commandery prince may be an enthusiastic patron of Lingyin Monastery, and he may respect Elder Yin and Abbot Gao, but he is still the one in power, and he does not take kindly to any questioning of his judgment.

Abbot Gao then suggests that Chen Kechang’s troubles are karmic in nature:

‘這也是宿世冤業……’

‘This is also the result of sins from a previous life…’

What Gao says here suggests that the reader may be mistaken in expecting this to be a story about Kechang’s unjust persecution and the search for justice. It may be that none of this really even matters. If this is a matter of karma, then this case fits into an entirely different framework of justice - a cosmic framework. Here, again, is an intrusion of the unseen order of reality, and of its subversion of worldly concepts.

From a worldly perspective, neither heroism nor justice are apparent in this story so far (except, perhaps, for Elder Yin’s bravely standing up for Chen Kechang). What Abbot Gao says here, though, has relevance to the nature of Chen Kechang’s religious heroism and to the theme of justice. Chen Kechang does not seem heroic, and his being punished for something he did not do naturally does not seem just. As manifestations of the dynamics of karma, though, both are

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54 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
55 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
arguably heroic and just. The unseen order of reality is still at work here, and just as Chen’s earlier setback resulted in his leaving the family, this encounter with persecution, and the suffering and loss that it entails, will help Kechang to take the next step on the path to spiritual awakening.

Despite their sentences being lightened, New Lotus’s and Chen Kechang’s punishments are still not light. When the prefect recommends holding off on New Lotus’s punishment, the reply that he gets is unsympathetic:

有大尹稟郡王：‘待新荷產子，可斷。’郡王分付，便要斷出。郡王分付，便要斷出。56

The prefect recommended to the commandery prince: ‘Wait until Lotus Sister gives birth, and then make a judgment.’ The commandery prince instructed, though, that the judgment be made immediately.

Her punishment, even after it has been lightened, is as follows:

將新荷杖八十，發錢塘縣轉發寧家，追原錢一千貫還郡王府。57

New Lotus was given eighty strokes of the rod, was sent to Qiantang County, and then sent back home. The money the prince originally paid for her, an amount of 1,000 strings of copper coins, was to be repaid to the prince.

Chen Kechang’s punishment is also harsh:

...府官只得將可常追了度牒，杖一百，發靈隱寺，轉發寧家當差...58

...the prefectural official had no choice but to revoke Kechang’s clerical certificate, and give him one hundred strokes with the rod, and have him sent to Lingyin Monastery before having him sent back home for corvée labor....59

56 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
57 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
58 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
59 I have consulted and followed the translation of Shuhui Yang and Yunqing Yang here.
The commandery prince, in acting as he does, seems to believe that he is doing justice by punishing New Lotus and Kechang for their alleged wrongdoing. However, it is clear to the reader that, in trying to do justice, he is actually creating a greater injustice. This illustrates just one of the ways in which worldly endeavors have the effect of becoming twisted into something undesirable, and how worldly justice often is not just at all. This is not, after all, a story about rectifying an injustice. On the contrary, it shows how the very pursuit of justice can itself create injustice. Indeed, if the prince had been less concerned with being righteous and upholding the laws, the result might have been more just than what he achieved by striving for justice. This leads into a topic related to worldly justice, and which we revisit in some of the other works in this study: worldly morality.

3.9 Worldly Morality and True Morality

Chapter Thirty-Eight of *Tao Te Ching* begins as follows:

> 上德不德，是以有德，下得不失德，是以無得。

A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue, and that is why he is without virtue.  

A strict adherence to the world’s standards of virtue can lead one to self-righteousness and inflexibility. The commandery prince arguably exhibits these characteristics, even as he believes he is promoting virtue. Another theme illustrated by this story, and by the other stories to be examined in this study, is that of worldly morality, as opposed to a more fundamental and true morality, a morality that transcends judgement, and that can thus be seen as reflecting the perspective of the unseen order of reality. If what appears to be cowardice is a form of heroism,

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61 D.C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 57.
then perhaps what appears to be immorality may, in fact, also sometimes be in accord with this truer, more fundamental morality. Therefore, when considering the unseen order of reality, which plays a role in all of these works, we need to lay aside our preoccupations with worldly appearances and standards. Two examples that may call into question our ideas about worldly morality are those of Chen Kechang, vis-à-vis his treatment by the other monks at the monastery, in response to his return to the monastery following his accusation and release from prison and New Lotus, vis-à-vis her treatment by the commandery prince.

Upon Kechang’s release from jail, Elder Yin took him back to the monastery, but his reception there was not a friendly one:

卻說印長老接得可常，滿寺僧眾教長老休要按著可常在寺中，玷辱宗風。62

Thereupon, the Elder Yin received Kechang, but the monks at the monastery asked him to forget about allowing Kechang to rest in the monastery, as it was a disgrace to the religious dignity of the monastery.

Therefore, Elder Yin has a straw hut built out back, and lets Kechang stay there until he recovers from his wounds.63

The commandery prince’s treatment of New Lotus exemplifies a worldly moral perspective. New Lotus has gotten pregnant, and has blamed an innocent man, Chen Kechang, for getting her pregnant. As New Lotus “belongs” to the commandery prince as a concubine (the prince paid 64 for her), her getting pregnant is treated as a criminal offense, and can even be seen as a violation of a financial transaction.

Worldly moral judgement, as we see it here, evaluates people based on their actions, rather than their inherent worth as human beings. If the unseen order of reality represents fundamental

62 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
63 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
64 The term for the money the prince paid for her is “原錢,” which literally translates into “origin money.”
truth, then it would transcend worldly moral judgment, valuing people for their inherent qualities. New Lotus has been purchased, and does not have the freedom to leave. Her worth is arguably seen as being in relation to her loyalty to the commandery prince, and not in respect to her innate qualities as a person. She later reveals the truth: that it was not actually Chen Kechang who got her pregnant, but a steward in the employ of the commandery Prince named Qian Yuan, and that he urged her to blame Kechang for the affair, as “the commandery prince likes Kechang, and will definitely show him mercy.” When she takes this courageous step, though, the commandery prince and her parents both treat her as if she is worthless. Her father, for example, says the following:

‘你這賤人！與個窮和尚通奸，他的度牒也被追了，卻那得錢來替你還府中。’

‘You tramp! Having an affair with an impoverished monk. His clerical certificate has been revoked, and now that money has to be returned to the prefecture in your stead.’

And the commandery prince is no less demeaning in the way he addresses her:

‘你這賤人，怎地依他說，害了這個和尚！’

‘You tramp! How could you do as he said, and get this monk into such trouble?’

New Lotus’s actions transform her, in the eyes of her father and of the commandery prince, into a “tramp.” This is worldly morality, in which people’s actions play a role in defining them. The morality of the unseen order of reality, though, would define people based on what they are inherently, and not on the sum of the actions that they have committed over the course of their

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65 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80-82.
66 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
67 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
lives. I will argue that worldly morality tends to focus on the external and the superficial, while the morality of the unseen order of reality is concerned solely with the internal and the fundamental. For the purposes of this study, I will define the internal as that which is perceived as mental: occurring in one’s thoughts; and I will define the external as that which is perceived as physical: happening in the world, and outside of one’s thoughts.

As to the concept of an innate nature, there are such concepts in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

In Confucianism, there is Mencius’s thesis of innate human goodness:68

人皆有不忍人之心。69

All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others.70

In Buddhism, there is Huineng’s idea of an innate and pure Buddha nature 自性. In The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, the monk Shen-hsiu 神秀 (Shenxiu) writes a verse on the Buddha nature, which goes as follows:

身是菩提樹
心如明鏡臺。
時時勤拂拭，
勿使惹塵埃。71

The body is the bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times, we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.72

71 Li Zhonghua 李中華, trans., Liu zu tan jing 六祖壇經 (The Sixth Patriarch’s Altar Sutra) (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2018), 12.
In response to Shen-hsiu’s poem, another monk, Huineng (who will soon become the Sixth Patriarch) responds with a verse of his own:

明鏡亦非臺。
The mirror also has no stand

本來無一物。
From the beginning, not a thing is,\(^{73}\)

何處惹塵埃？\(^{74}\)
Where is there room for dust?\(^{75}\)

Aside from asserting the immaterial nature of reality, there is also the idea that nothing can obscure the “mirror” which is the mind.\(^{76}\) We may not perceive it as pure, but it is. In Philip Yampolsky’s English translation of this sutra, the third line reads:

Buddha nature is always clean and pure.\(^{77}\)

Again, this implies a pure fundamental nature that must not always be apparent, especially to who are not attuned to it.

Another mention of Buddha nature can be found in Nirvana Sutra:

‘Kasyapa said to the Buddha: ‘O World-Honored One! Is there self in the 25 existences or not?’ The Buddha said: ‘O good man! ‘Self’ means ‘Tathagatagarbha’ [Buddha-Womb, Buddha-Embryo, Buddha-Nature]. Every being has Buddha-Nature. This is the Self. Such Self has, from the very beginning, been under the cover of innumerable defilements.’\(^{78}\)

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\(^{73}\) Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra*, 94-95. According to Philip Yampolsky, “…it is quite certain that this doctrine was never pronounced by Hui-neng.” Yampolsky writes that this line appeared “first in the Sung versions. [The Sung dynasty was after Hui-neng’s time.] He then writes, “…it would appear best to consider the Ch’an thought found in these sermons of Hui-neng as representing, together with Shen-hui’s writings, middle and late eighth-century concepts, which later Ch’an Masters organized, adjusted, clarified, and enlarged upon.”

\(^{74}\) Li Zhonghua, trans., *Liuzu tan jing*, 18-19.

\(^{75}\) Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra*, 132.

\(^{76}\) Huineng uses the analogy of clouds obscuring the sun to describe the Buddha nature: “The sun and moon are always very bright, yet if they are covered by clouds, although they are very bright, below they are darkened, and the sun, moon, stars, and planets cannot be seen clearly.” Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra*, 142.


We have also seen mention of this concept in the Vimalakirti Sutra, when Vimalakirti urges Upali not to focus on doubt and remorse in counseling two monks about how to make up for their wrongdoing.\(^7^9\)

In John Blofeld’s book *Taoism*, in the chapter titled “The Uncarved Block,” he also discusses the “real self”:

> Attainment of immortality means successful cultivation of the Way. Cultivation of the Way is a lifelong process of refinement of the adept’s consciousness. Bringing to bear his fully integrated powers of body and mind, he gradually discovers his real self - which in a sense is no-self. Or, to put it another way, he succeeds in freeing his real self of the gross encumbrances masking its perfection.\(^8^0\)

D.C. Lau, in the introduction to his translation of *Tao Te Ching*, also writes about one of the symbolic significances of the “uncarved block” 樸:

> Firstly, the uncarved block is in a state as yet untouched by the artificial interference of human ingenuity and so is the symbol for the original state of man before desire is produced in him by artificial means.\(^8^1\)

From these examples, we can see that in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, there are concepts of a pure (and, arguably, spiritual) self - the self which is unspoiled by the world. I will argue that worldly moral judgement reflects a failure to see this aspect of a person, as New Lotus’s father and the commandery prince fail to do.

To be clear, this is more than just saying that New Lotus is also a victim in this situation who deserves sympathy (she is a victim, and does deserve sympathy, to be sure); it is stating that whatever she has done, or whatever her status, she has value that cannot be taken away. Moreover, to take this principle to its logical conclusion is to assert that even the worst

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\(^8^1\) D.C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, xxx.
characters in this story have an innate nature that is pure and that is far removed from the hurtful and foolish things that they do. I will argue that the story, in its portrayal of people and events, falls somewhat short of realizing this, especially with regard to the “villain” of the story, Qian Yuan.

Chen Kechang’s reception by the monks at Lingyin Monastery is another instance in which worldly morality is emphasized over true morality. After Chen’s release from prison, the other monks at the monastery did not want him to return there:

卻說印長老接得可常，滿寺僧眾教長老休要按著可常在寺中，玷辱宗風。82

Thereupon, the Elder Yin received Kechang, but the monks at the monastery asked him to forget about allowing Kechang to rest in the monastery, as it was a disgrace to the atmosphere of religious dignity presented by the monastery.

Therefore, Elder Yin must make other arrangements for Kechang:

長老令人山後搭一草舍，教可常將息棒瘡好了，著他自回鄉去。83

The elder ordered some people to build a grass hut behind the mountain, and told Kechang to rest there until his wounds healed. After that, he would need to go back home.

There is an inescapable irony here in the idea that “religious dignity” rests on refusing to help one in need. As Kechang is close to enlightenment now, it also shows that a narrow focus on worldly morality sometimes makes people completely forget the very basis of the religion to which they belong by placing worldly appearances over the fundamental. The monks here, to be fair, have been taught to believe in certain moral principles, one of which they believe Kechang has violated. However, they seem to have forgotten compassion.84

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82 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
83 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 80.
84 This brings to mind the Biblical verse Matthew 25: 37-40:
Furthermore, it is the righteous who need to be taught this principle, just as the monks in this case (aside from Elder Yin) who because of their sense of righteousness, do not allow Kechang to recuperate in the monastery. This, again, underscores the way worldly morality often degenerates into righteousness, and thus falls short of true morality, which would seem to be best expressed through compassion. As the reader of this story, though, it is easy to make the same mistake the monks here do by, in turn, moralizing about the monks. Nonetheless, what they fail to do in this case is to consider their morality in its larger context, as something that is meant to bring happiness and peace, as opposed to being a mere measure by which to judge people’s purity - and thus a rationale for either accepting or rejecting them.

In this story (and the others in this study), the world is often presented in a way that is contrary to our instincts. Setbacks are progress, and suffering and loss can help one attain enlightenment. As seen in the discussion of heroism, misfortune is an opportunity for one to show forbearance, and thus to get rid of bad karma. As this is not an instinctive way of viewing misfortune, this story, thus challenges the reader to look upon misfortune from a new perspective. Chen Kechang makes his final step because of misfortune. His setback got him started, and his being falsely accused (and the ensuing physical suffering and loss of his good reputation) helped him to complete his journey. Misfortune is necessary in order to give him the push he needs to make progress. It needs to occur in order for him to realize his destiny and to become enlightened.

3.10 Change of Mind: Paying a Karmic Debt and Thanking One’s Persecutors

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink?
‘And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?’
‘And the King will answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’
In some of the stories in this study, the point at which the mental transformation takes place is clear. It is the point where the protagonist reaches his or her low point, what appears to be the point of desperation. In this story, while the transformation does take place, exactly when and where it does so is not as clear as it is in the other stories. It may have happened during Chen Kechang’s torture and interrogation, it may have happened during his time in jail, or it may have happened when he returned to the monastery. His earlier setback was one step toward his destiny, so this instance of misfortune would almost certainly seem to be the next step in his progress toward his destiny. The story does not show us his thought process during this time, though, so it is difficult to say for certain if that is the case. What we can be more certain of is that the accusation, beating, imprisonment, and loss of his reputation were catalysts for his transformation, whenever it actually occurred. If he had continued to enjoy the favor of the commandery prince, he would almost certainly have been content to continue living as he was, and would not have taken the next step.

A poem that he writes just prior to his death gives some insight into his thought process, and perhaps into the time of his final change of mind. It is here that Chen’s religious awakening becomes apparent:

卻說可常在草舍中將息好了，又是五月五日到。可常取紙墨筆來，寫下一首
辭世頌：

By the time Kechang had recuperated in the grass hut, it was once again the fifth day of the fifth month. Kechang took some paper, ink, and a brush pen, and wrote an verse on “Leaving the World”:

生時重午，
為僧重午,
得罪重午。

I was born on the Dragon Boat Festival,
I became a monk on the Dragon Boat Festival,
I was accused on the Dragon Boat Festival,

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85 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
為前生欠他債負。
若不當時承認。
又恐他人受苦。
今日事已分明。
不若抽身回去！
五月五日午時書。
赤口白舌盡消除；
五月五日天中節。
赤口白舌盡消滅。86

For a debt owed one from the previous life,
If I had not confessed at the time,
I fear another might have suffered.
Today, things are already clear,
I might as well withdraw and return!
Written at noon on the fifth day of the fifth month,
Do one’s best to get rid of malicious talk;
On the fifth day of the fifth month, the Dragon Boat Festival,
Do one’s best to eliminate malicious words.

Several things are significant here: the time and the date (the fifth day of the fifth month, at noon), which happens to be his birth date, the date of his tonsure, the date of his accusation, and the date of his recuperation and death. As he notes in the seventh line, it is also the date on which “...things are already clear,...” and “I might as well withdraw and return!” This refers to his enlightenment. As all of the major events in his life have happened on the fifth day of the fifth month, then it would make sense, in the context of the story, that this is the day when his change of mind occurs. In addition, this date has been one of worldly vicissitudes for Kechang. For example, this is both his birthday and his death day. His gaining the favor of the commandery prince and becoming a monk happened on the fifth day of the fifth month, and yet, his false accusation also happened on the fifth day of the fifth month. We have considered the line from the Tao Te Ching (Daode Jing) before, which states:

禍兮福之所以；福兮禍之所伏。87

It is on disaster that good fortune perches;

86 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
87 D. C. Lau, Tao Te Ching 道德經 (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), 84.
It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches.\textsuperscript{88}

Thus, it may be that Kechang sees that both his good and bad fortune are not fundamentally different, and that they are both facets of the same existence. Indeed, we have seen “bad” fortune lead directly to “good” fortune, and vice versa in this story, not unlike the situation in the story “The Old Man at the Frontier Lost His Horse.”\textsuperscript{89} Kechang would not have become a monk if not for failing the provincial-level civil service exams, and he would not have been accused if he had not been in the favor of the commandery prince (which gave the steward the idea of asking Lotus Sister to accuse him). Lastly, if he had not been accused, he would not be at the threshold of enlightenment now:

\begin{quote}
可常做了辭世頌，走出草舍邊，有一泉水；可常脫了衣裳，遍身摸淨，穿了衣服，入草舍結跏趺坐圓寂了。道人與長老知道。\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

Kechang finished writing his “Leaving the World” verse and walked out to the side of the hut, where there was a spring. Kechang took off his clothes and scrubbed his whole body clean. He then put his clothes back on, and went back into the hut, where he died and passed away while sitting in the lotus position. A servant notified the elder of what had transpired.

Meanwhile, New Lotus, whose family is unable to pay back the commandery prince, goes with her parents to see the prince and tell him the truth about what had happened:

\begin{quote}
新荷告到：‘妾實被幹辦錢原奸騙。有孕之時，錢原怕事露分付妾：‘如若事露，千萬不可說我！只說與可常和尚有奸。因郡王喜歡可常，必然饒你。’’\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{88} D. C. Lau, \textit{Tao Te Ching}, 85.


\textsuperscript{90} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.

\textsuperscript{91} Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
New Lotus reported what happened: ‘Honestly, I was taken advantage of by the steward, Qian Yuan. When I got pregnant, he was afraid he would be found out, and he told me: ‘If this comes out, under no circumstances say it was me! Just say it was the monk, Kechang. Because the commandery prince likes Kechang, he will go easy on you.’ ‘

Because of this, the steward, Qian Yuan, has been punished:

一百日限滿，脊杖八十，送沙門島牢城料高。92

After a period of no more than one hundred days, he would be given eighty strokes on his back with the rod, and sent to Shamen Island prison for [punishment] duty as a watchtower guard.

The prince, having realized his mistake, sends someone to summon Kechang, and when he finds out that Kechang has died, he rushes out to attend his cremation.93 During the cremation, with the elder, the monks, and the commandery prince gathered there, Kechang appears among the flames, and thanks the people there for helping him pay off his karmic debts from his previous life:

眾人只見火光中現出可常，問訊謝郡王，夫人，長老並眾僧：‘只因我前生欠宿債，今世轉來還，吾今歸仙境，再不往人間。吾是五百尊羅漢中名常喜尊者’。94

Those gathered only saw Kechang appear amidst the light of the flames. He put his palms together in front of his chest, and thanked the commandery prince, the prince’s wife, Elder [Yin], and the gathered monks: ‘Just because of a long-standing debt from my previous life, this life [I] have come back to repay [it]. Today, I return to the Land of Immortals, and will not return to the world of people again. I am one of the Five Hundred Arhats, and am named Constant Joy Luohan.95’

Among the people Chen thanks are the commandery prince, who punished him and wanted to have him killed without even taking the time to find out what had actually happened. He also

92 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
93 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82-83.
94 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 83.
95 The Chinese term for arhat: 羅漢.
thanks the monks, who did not want to let him stay at the monastery because they felt that his presence would disgrace it. Most people, in similar circumstances, would be angry, and would blame their persecutors. Kechang at this point realizes that the suffering he has gone through because of the false accusation has helped him to escape the suffering of the world, and to attain enlightenment. Therefore, he thanks the people who have persecuted him. We understand that his reason for thanking these people is, at least in part, because in putting his forbearance to the test, they have helped him to repay a karmic debt from a former life.

This goes against the worldly tendency to look merely at people’s deeds, and not at their true natures. The commandery prince and the monks at the monastery only saw what they perceived as Chen’s wrongdoing. Clearly they were mistaken, but not just on the obvious level. If each person has the potential, indeed, the certainty, of eventually attaining enlightenment, then should we not look past the person’s mistakes, and see the person’s true nature, albeit one not fully realized yet? In verse 399 of *The Dhammapada*, forbearance (*kshanti*) is extolled:

> 見罵見擊,嘿受不怒; 有忍辱力,是謂梵志。 
> The innocent person who endures
> Insult, physical harm, and imprisonment,
> Whose strength is forbearance
> - the strength of an army -
> That one I call superior.  

Here we can begin to see a perspective on unconventional religious heroism: It is not necessarily the one who fights, but the one who endures who embodies religious heroism.

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96 Liu Xuejun 劉學軍, trans., “Fanzhi pin 梵志品,” in *Faju jing 法句經* (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2019), 283. There are some minor differences between the Chinese verse and the English verse. For example, the Chinese verse does not explicitly describe the person as “innocent,” while the English does. “Imprisonment” is not mentioned specifically in the Chinese verse, but it is in the English. The line “- the strength of an army -” does not appear in the Chinese verse, either.

In The Lotus Sutra, we see an example of this when the Buddha speaks of the trials of a monk called “Never Disparaging”:

‘如此經歷多年，’ 常被罵詈，不生瞋恚，常作是言：‘汝當作佛，’ 說是語時，眾人或以杖木瓦石打擲之，避走遠住，猶高聲唱言：‘我不敢輕於汝等，汝等皆當作佛，’ 以其常作是語故，增上慢比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷，號之為常不輕。

Many years passed in this way, during which this monk was constantly subjected to curses and abuse. He did not give way to anger, however, but each time spoke the same words, ‘You are certain to attain Buddhahood.’ When he spoke in this manner, some among the group would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones and beat and pelt him. But even as he ran away and took up his stance at a distance, he continued to call in a loud voice, ‘I would never disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!’ And because he always spoke these words, the overbearingly arrogant monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen gave him the name Never Disparaging.

The Buddha then tells of a change in the way the four kinds of believers treated Never Disparaging:

於時，增上慢四眾比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷，輕見是人，為作不輕名者，見其得大神通力，樂説辯力，大善寂力，聞其所說，皆信伏隨從。

At that time, when the four kinds of believers who were overbearingly arrogant, the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who had looked with contempt and given him the name Never Disparaging - when they saw that he had gained great transcendental powers, the power to preach pleasingly and eloquently, the power of great goodness and tranquility, and when they heard his preaching, they all took faith in him and willingly became his followers.

After then relating the sufferings the four kinds of believers went through as a result of the karmic consequences of their great arrogance, the Buddha reveals that they eventually were able

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100 Zhang Songhui, trans., Miaofa Lianhua Jing, 461-462.
to progress spiritually. Never Disparaging had seen that quality about them, even when they
mistreated and abused him:

‘得大勢，於汝意云何？爾時四眾常輕是菩薩者，豈異人乎？今此會中，拔陀婆羅等五百菩薩，師子月等五百比丘，尼思佛等五百優婆塞，皆於阿耨多羅三藐三菩提不退轉者是。’

‘Gainer of Great Authority, what do you think? The four kinds of believers who at that time constantly disparaged this bodhisattva - could they be known to you? They are in this assembly now, Bhadrapala and his group, five hundred bodhisattvas; Lion Moon and her group, five hundred nuns; and Thinking Buddha and his group, five hundred laymen, all having reached the state where they will never regress in their search for anuttara-samyak-sambodhi!’

Chen Kechang arguably applies this same sort of perception to the commandery prince and the monks who did not want to let him stay in the monastery. He looked past their shortcomings and the wrongs they had done him, and he thanked them.

The worldly view is too often limited to the perception of people’s hurtful actions as defining them: a person who does malicious things is considered a malicious person. In the positive sense, it is not so problematic (for if human nature is inherently good, seeing a benevolent person as being good-natured would merely be an affirmation of that person’s innate goodness). In the negative sense, it mistakes the superficial for the fundamental. It assumes behavior is an expression of one’s innate character. If one’s innate character - one’s nature - is benevolent, then this view must be erroneous.

The transcendental view, though, which is utilized by Never Disparaging in The Lotus Sutra, and which Kechang arguably makes use of in this story, sees past the superficiality of phenomena such as behavior, appearances, and opinions, and perceives people’s true nature,

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102 Zhang Songhui, trans., *Miaofa Lianhua Jing*, 463.
their true potential, knowing they will all eventually attain enlightenment, as the fundamental nature of a person is that of an unrealized Buddha. Even their malicious behavior, when seen from this transcendental perspective, and when met with forbearance, can be seen as an aid to help one to progress spiritually. Thus we see Kechang express gratitude toward his oppressors. This is another way of reacting that counters our worldly tendencies. It seems natural to feel that we must respond to insults and aggression with counterattacks, and with judgement. However, when we see not counterattacks and judgement, but gratitude and appreciation in response to hateful behavior, it also gives us pause. It ever-so-slightly undermines our instinctive ways of reacting to the worldly persecution.

As to the concept of guilt and shame that result from wrongdoing, in the Vimalakirti Sutra, Vimalakirti also admonishes Upali for not helping two monks realize that guilt and shame, even the very concept of wrongdoing, are manifestations of worldly thinking, and that it is correcting one’s perception, not atoning for a perceived violation, that is the true way to deal with wrongdoing:

‘唯！優波離，無重增此二比丘罪。當直除滅，勿擾其心。’

‘Ah, Upali, do not make the offense these monks have committed even worse than it is! You should go about wiping out their doubts and remorse at once and not trouble their minds further!

‘所以者何？彼罪性不在內，不在外，不在中間。如佛所說：‘心垢故眾生垢，心淨故眾生淨。’心亦不在內，不在外，不在中間。如其心然，罪垢亦然，諸法亦然，不出於如。

‘Why do I say this? Because their offense by its nature does not exist either inside them, or outside, or in between. As the Buddha has taught us, when the mind is defiled, the living being will be defiled. When the mind is pure, the living being will be pure. As the mind is, so will be the offense or defilement. The same is true of all things, for none escape the realm of Suchness.

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‘Now, Upali, if one gains emancipation from delusion through an understanding of the nature of the mind, does any defilement remain?’
‘No,’ I replied.

Vimalakirti said, ‘In the same way, when all living beings gain an understanding of the nature of the mind, then no defilement exists. Ah, Upali, deluded thoughts are defilement. Where there are no deluded thoughts, that is purity. Topsy-turvy thinking is defilement. Where there is no topsy-turvy thinking, that is purity.’

In thanking his persecutors, Kechang seems to demonstrate this principle.

It should also be noted that despite the transcendent perspective portrayed in this story, it still, in some respects, reinforces worldly concepts and perceptions. Consider the case of Qian Yuan, the steward who seduced New Lotus, and then refused to support her after he had initially promised to do so, as New Lotus reports to the commandery prince:

New Lotus reported: ‘Qian Yuan said: ‘As long as you do not get into trouble and are allowed to go, I myself will raise your entire family, old and young. If you need to pay the prefecture back the money the prince paid for you, I will also take care of that.’ Today, I and my family, having been required by your gracious highness to return the money you originally paid for me, at the time had no way of dealing with the situation. Our only option was to go to him and beg for the money to return to the prefecture. In order to do this, my father went to speak with him, and - surprisingly - was beaten and insulted by him. It’s an injustice done to one who is innocent.’

104 Chen Yinchi 陳引馳 and Lin Xiaoguang 林曉光, trans., Weimojie Jing 維摩詰經 (The Vimalakirti Sutra) (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2019), 58.
106 Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang,” 82.
When Qian Yuan is punished later,\(^\text{107}\) it is hard not to feel a sense of satisfaction. That, however, is obviously contradictory to the idea that he should also be forgiven or thanked for his role in aiding Kechang by causing him suffering. It is hard to escape the feeling that the reader is meant to feel this way, as Qian Yuan is portrayed as one of the truly malicious characters in this story, hurting both New Lotus and Kechang for his own personal gain. However, if even the seemingly “worst” people should be forgiven, or even thanked, then it seems that he should be forgiven, or thanked, for his role in helping Kechang attain release from the world. In this respect, this story also somewhat reinforces the very worldly ingrained concepts and principles that it otherwise challenges.

Therefore, while Chen’s gratitude toward his persecutors is one of the most interesting aspects of this story, the poetic justice meted out to Qian Yuan seems out of place. However, while his punishment seems like an overlooked detail - an aberration in the context of this story’s Buddhist outlook - it may be that Qian Yuan’s punishment for his wrongdoing is at least as much in keeping with Feng Menglong’s own outlook as the forgiving, transcendental view taken by Kechang toward his oppressors. In *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, Patrick Hanan writes:

> Most of the plays he [Feng Menglong] wrote or adapted are concerned with moral action; indeed, many have been adapted so as to make their moral points more clearly. Of course, it is a common gambit to claim a moral force for one’s fiction, and some of what Feng says can be discounted, but there is no doubt that he viewed fiction and drama as centrally concerned with broad moral issues.\(^\text{108}\)

Hanan later elaborates that Feng believed in “a ‘Three Doctrines’ thinking that respected Taoism and Buddhism as well as Confucianism as systems of morality.”\(^\text{109}\)

\(^{107}\) Feng Menglong, “Chen Kechang.” 82.


It may be, then, that Feng saw stories as acceptable as long as they somehow reflected “broad moral issues” within the context of the Three Docrines, whether the morality that they reflected was Chen Kechang’s transcendent gratitude, or a more commonplace retribution in which people were punished for evil deeds and rewarded for good ones. In this story, we see examples of both forms of moral expression.

3.11 Conclusion

“Chen Kechang Becomes an Immortal on the Day of the Dragon Boat Festival” is a story of enlightenment. In a number of ways, it works on the reader’s deeper consciousness by depriving the reader of the vicarious satisfaction that can be derived from a character’s success, upward mobility, and physical and material gratification. While the possibility of miracles can be accepted without necessarily questioning the reality of the physical world, or without stopping to consider one’s attachments to it, challenging our basic concepts has the power to make us uncomfortable, and with that, perhaps to begin to consider the validity of our perspectives. Chen Kechang dies poor and relatively unknown, deprived of the good things the world has to offer. Furthermore, before his death, he suffers the legal consequences of a false accusation, to which he meekly acquiesces. He reacts to these hardships in a way that might not seem heroic - quickly admitting to the false accusation after denying it initially. His seeming lack of determination, and even cowardice, are really manifestations of a different sort of heroism, though, one that is not in accord with worldly ideas and concepts. Chen Kechang, having come to understand this principle, thanks some of his persecutors. This story deprives the reader of the vicarious satisfactions of the protagonist’s worldly success, and of worldly retribution for some of his
persecutors for the injustice he suffers. By materialistic, worldly standards, it would seem that he came to an unfortunate end. And yet, he achieved something far greater than most do. He achieved wisdom, immortality, and an escape from the suffering of the world.
CHAPTER 4

“MADAM WHITE IS KEPT FOREVER UNDER THUNDER PEAK PAGODA”

4.1 Introduction

“Madam White is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Pagoda” is an early period vernacular story,¹ and it belongs to the “demon story” genre.² In *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, Patrick Hanan writes about the characteristics of the demon story:

The structure of the demon story, the most clearly demarcated of the types, has been abstracted as three universal actors and four universal actions. The actors, in the order of their appearance, are a young man, unmarried; a demon, that is, an animal spirit or the ghost of a dead person in the guise of a young girl; and an exorcist, usually a Taoist master. The four actions may be labeled Meeting, Lovemaking, Intimation of a Danger, and Intercession by the Exorcist.³

Hanan also notes two other details of the demon story genre:

...in some stories, there are second and third demons, one of them posing as the girl’s mother. And the day of the meeting is usually the Qingming Festival, a time of services for the souls of the dead.⁴

We will see the first detail, but only in part. There is a second demon, but the second demon does not pose as Madam White’s mother in this story. The second detail - meeting during the Qingming Festival - does happen in this story.

Regarding the historical background of this story, in the introduction to *The White Snake and Her Son*, Wilt L. Idema writes:

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³ Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 44.
⁴ Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 44.
The legend of the white snake has only a relatively short history. Despite the often-seen assertion that the legend may originate in the Southern Song dynasty, (1127-1278), there exists no positive evidence of such a story before the Ming dynasty.\(^5\)

Regarding the background of this particular version of the story, Idema writes:

The earliest full-length version of the legend is a vernacular story included by Feng Menglong (1574-1646) in his *Stories to Caution the World (Jingshi tongyan)* of 1624.\(^6\)

Idema goes on to explain:

Feng Menglong was not the author of “Madam Bai is Imprisoned for ever under Thunder Peak Pagoda.” While the story shows signs of later editing, it most likely was written at some time during the first century of the Ming dynasty.\(^7\)

In “Madame White is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda”, the protagonist, a young man named Xu Xuan, meets, and later agrees to marry a beautiful woman, Madam White. Not long after that, though, Xu’s seemingly good fortune begins to turn bad, and he must rouse himself and take control of the situation in order to survive. While this story belongs to the demon story genre, it is also another story of enlightenment, in which the nature of the world is revealed to the protagonist to be one of suffering, and that the pleasures and material wealth of the world must be paid for by suffering and giving up one’s freedom. However, as has been the case in the other stories in this study, it is also through the suffering that Xu Xuan experiences that he is able to finally attain freedom and enlightenment.

**4.2 Synopsis**

In the first part of this story, Xu Xuan meets Madam White as he is riding in a boat back home from a visit to a temple during the Grave Sweeping Festival. He pays the fare for her and her

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6 Wilt L. Idema, ed. and trans., *The White Snake and Her Son*, xii.
7 Wilt L. Idema, ed. and trans., *The White Snake and Her Son*, xv.
maid. Later, he sees her in town, and she borrows an umbrella from him there, and also invites him back to her house. He visits her there twice, and on his second visit, she asks him to marry her. Xu Xuan ends up accepting when she offers him silver to pay for the wedding expenses. However, it turns out that the silver she lends him is stolen. Xu Xuan is arrested and taken to her house, which turns out to appear uninhabited. Most of the stolen silver is found in the house, but Xu Xuan is still punished and sent to Suzhou as part of his punishment. His ordeal has begun.

After Xu is sent away to Suzhou as part of his punishment, he encounters her again, and she gets him to marry her. For a while, they are happy together, but one night, when he goes out to see a temple festival, she gives him some clothes and jewelry to wear. Again, it turns out that these are stolen, and he is once more arrested and sent to another town. Madam White disappears that night, but turns back up in Zhenjiang Prefecture, where Xu Xuan has been sent. He goes back to living with her again, but continues to have doubts about her nature. When visiting a monastery one day, a Buddhist abbot notices Xu Xuan, and then drives away Madam White and Little Green when they come to get Xu Xuan by boat. Finally, after he returns to Hangzhou, the abbot helps him capture both Madam White and Little Green, and then imprisons them under Thunder peak Pagoda. At the end of the story, Xu Xuan leaves the family life and becomes enlightened by willing himself to die.8

4.3 The Intrusion of the Unseen Order of Reality

“Madame Bai is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda” is set in a place where the mysterious and the everyday seem to readily coexist. Before Xu Xuan is introduced, the setting is portrayed as a place where miraculous events have occurred, including a great flood:

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During the Xianhe reign era of the Jin Dynasty [326-334], the mountain waters flooded and surged into Ximen (West Gate). Suddenly, there was seen an ox in the flood waters, and its entire body was golden. After the flood waters receded, the ox was seen following the stream to North Mountain, but after that, the ox was nowhere to be found. Shocked, the people of Hangzhou City all believed it was the incarnation of a god. Therefore, they founded a temple, and named it Golden Ox Temple.

This legend, and some others like it, help create a mysterious atmosphere right from the beginning of the story. Throughout the story, in fact, it can be argued that there are several intrusions of the unseen order of reality into the life of the protagonist, Xu Xuan. These intrusions come in the form of 白娘子 Madam Bai and her helper, Little Green, in the form of Buddhist monks, a Buddhist abbot, and a Daoist priest, and in the form of phenomena and events. They have the effect of altering his life by bringing him suffering, endangering him, taking away his freedom, and yet also ultimately helping him find safety and freedom.

Xu Xuan’s long ordeal arguably begins before he even meets Madam White - with a visit from a Buddhist monk to the shop where he works. It is this visit that sets the events of the story in motion because it leads to Xu Xuan’s later meeting Madam White. (Most of the turning points of the plot will be somehow associated with Buddhism.) Because of this, it can be argued that this fateful visit is the initial intrusion of the unseen order of reality into Xu Xuan’s life in this story:

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10 Feng Menglong, “Madam White,” 474.
Suddenly one day, Xu Xuan was in the shop doing business when he saw a Buddhist monk come to the door to make inquiries, saying: This impoverished monk is from Baoshu Pagoda Monastery. The day before yesterday, I delivered steamed rolls and steamed buns to your residence. The Grave Sweeping Festival will be here soon, time to think of your ancestors and tidy up their graves. I hope to see Master Xiaoyi\textsuperscript{12} come to the monastery and burn incense. Don’t miss it. Xu Xuan replied: ‘I will definitely be there.’

It is because of this visit that the chain of events leading to Xu Xuan’s ordeal begins. The monk’s insistence on Xu Xuan’s going makes it seem as if this is no coincidence, as if there is an element of fate involved. In addition, this will be the first of several times when Xu Xuan’s life changes because of meetings with monks, or because of his attending Buddhist festivals or going to Buddhist temples. It can be argued that Buddhism acts as a catalyst in both the initiating of Xu Xuan’s ordeal, and in his being freed from it.

It should also be noted that Xu Xuan agrees to go without hesitation, and this can be seen as a sign of his conscientiousness. In immediately agreeing to the monk’s request, he appears to express his religious devotion and by observing Grave-Sweeping Day, he will appear to show his filial piety. There is no reason to believe that he is being insincere or perfunctory in these observations, and yet, as we are tracing his path of transformation, understanding his motives helps us to understand his process of religious awakening.

\textsuperscript{11} Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 398.

\textsuperscript{12} In the English translation of Stories to Caution the World, 警世通言, “小乙” is translated as “Oldest Son,” but in the 教育部重編國語辭典修訂本 Bureau of Education Revised Mandarin Dictionary, Revised Edition, website, “小乙” is defined as the youngest child: “兄弟中排行最小的。”
After Xu Xuan visits the temple, it begins to rain. The narrator states that the rain is due to the influence of the Lord of Heaven:

He crossed Western Peace [Xining] Bridge, Lone Mountain [Gushan] Road, Four Sages Daoist Temple, having come to see the tomb of Lin Hejing, and also to take a leisurely stroll at Six Ones Spring. Unexpectedly, clouds began to form in the northwest, fog enveloped the southeast, and it began to drizzle slightly, before starting to gradually rain harder. It was right at the time of the Grave Cleaning Festival, and it could not do without the Lord of Heaven bringing rain to speed the growth of the flowers. The rain shower came down constantly, without stopping.

In addition to the fateful visit by the monk, the weather here also plays a role in changing Xu Xuan’s plans - and thus altering his life. Furthermore, the rain does not just happen; Heaven is involved. The natural, the supernatural, and Xu Xuan’s life are all linked. Because he does not continue as he had planned, he experiences the next intrusion of the unseen order of reality when he meets Madam Bai while taking a ferry back:

When Xu Xuan looked, he saw a woman with her hair done in a bun to show her filiality, some white hairpins stuck in at the side of her black hair, wearing a white silk blouse, and a fine linen skirt. At her side was a maid who was dressed in green, her hair done up in two buns in the shapes of ox horns, and wearing two big, red tassels, with two ornaments stuck in her hair. She was holding a package, and wanted to get on the boat.

Xu Xuan’s attraction to the woman becomes evident after she boards the boat:

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14 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 399.
The lady and her maid boarded. When she saw Xu Xuan, her red lips opened in a smile, revealing two rows [of teeth, like] pieces of jade. She came forward and bowed slightly in a greeting. Xu Xuan quickly stood and greeted them in return. The lady and her maid seated themselves in the cabin. Her eyes like autumn ripples, the lady frequently glanced over, looking at Xu Xuan. Xu Xuan had always been an honest person. Seeing this woman, beautiful as a flower or jade, and her pretty and charming maid right next to him, he couldn’t avoid feeling attracted to her.

In the English translation by Shuhui Yang and Yunqing Yang, a parenthetical note by Feng Menglong is included:

(It so happens that prudish ones tend to be the easiest ones to catch.)

Xu Xuan begins to feel desire for Madam White as soon as he meets her. His desire is, from a Buddhist perspective, a source of suffering. The second of the “Four Holy Truths” asserts this:

The second Holy Truth is the truth of the source of suffering. This is the thirst or craving for sensual pleasure, for coming to be, and for ceasing to be.

A poem near the end of the story also asserts that Xu Xuan’s indulgence of desire is the cause of his troubles, and asserts that if Xu Xuan continued to indulge his desire, it would result in his continued suffering and eventual death.

The moral dimensions of the unseen order of reality also play a role in this story, as they do in the other works in this study. This “transcendent morality” would be in harmony with the

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15 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 399.
16 This sentence does not appear in the Chinese version of the story published by San min shu ju.
18 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 423; For the English version, see: Feng Menglong, Shuhui Yang and Yunqing Yang, trans., Madam White, 504.
morality of the unseen order of reality, and acting in accord with it may cause one to violate worldly morality and its rules. One example of this principle can be found in The Lotus Sutra, when a wealthy father deceives his children in order to get them to come out of the dilapidated, burning mansion which is their home.\(^{19}\) The Buddha explains to Shariputra that it was not wrong to deceive them:


Shariputra, that rich man first used three types of carriages to entice his sons, but later he gave them just the large carriage adorned with jewels, the safest, most comfortable kind of all. Despite this, that rich man was not guilty of falsehood. The Thus Come One [The Buddha] does the same, and he is without falsehood. First he preaches the three vehicles [Theravada Buddhism] to attract living beings, but later he employs just the Great Vehicle [Mahayana Buddhism] to save them. Why? The Thus Come One possesses measureless wisdom, power, freedom from fear, the storehouse of the Law.\(^{21}\)

In this case, the father lies, but does so in order to save his children from danger. If the father had insisted on not lying - on adhering to “morality” - he might not have been able to save his children.

Another example of the downplaying of worldly morality can be found in a passage from The Vimalakirti Sutra. In this passage, Upali is relates telling two monks who had “violated the rules of conduct”\(^{22}\) how “one goes about gaining pardon according to the Law.”\(^{23}\) Vimalakirti then
advises Upali not to “make the offense committed by these monks even worse than it is!”

Vimalakirti goes on to explain:

‘所以者何？彼罪性不在內·不在外·不在中間。如佛所說：‘心垢故眾生
垢心淨故眾生淨。’心亦不在內·不在外·不在中間。如其心然·罪垢亦
然·諸法亦然·不出於如。’

‘Why do I say this? Because their offense by its nature does not exist either inside
them, or outside, or in between. As the Buddha has taught us, when the mind is
defiled, the living being will be defiled. When the mind is pure, the living being
will be pure. As the mind is, so will be the offense or defilement. The same is true
of all things, for none escape the realm of suchness.’

If wrongdoing does not really exist, except as an illusory mental image, then to draw attention to
people’s wrongdoing is to perpetuate its existence. In that worldly morality emphasizes concepts
of right and wrong, and encourages remorse for wrongdoing, then from this perspective, worldly
morality can be seen as misguided or inadequate.

In addition, the parenthetical note above attests that Xu Xuan’s prudishness makes him an
easy target. If we equate such prudishness with worldly morality, we can then perhaps better
understand the perspective regarding worldly morality in these works. In this story, we will see
that, while Madam White may have evil intentions, Xu Xuan, in indulging his desire for her, also
plays a role in bringing about, and perpetuating, his own suffering.

4.4 The Reluctant Protagonist

While we will consider Xu Xuan in the context of the reluctant protagonist, he is among the most
willing of the protagonists of the works in this study. He enters into his ordeal unwittingly, to be
sure, but he also does so without hesitation. He does not appear to be reluctant at all, unlike the
protagonists of the other works in this study seem to be. As we have seen, he does not hesitate to do as the monk asks him. He visits the temple to observe the Clear and Bright Festival. He does not hesitate to enter into a relationship with Madam White, either. Part of his willingness comes from his decency; he seems happy to do as the monk asks, and also to show his filial piety. On the other hand, however, his willingness - his eagerness - to see more of Madam Bai betrays his lack of awareness. He does not realize what the consequences of his actions will be, both in terms of his soon-to-come ordeal, and of his ensuing enlightenment. If he did, he might be more reluctant about letting Madam White into his life. Part of his willingness, though, also comes from what may be seen as an aspect of his religious heroism, those qualities in him that help bring him to enlightenment. For example he is respectful toward the monk, and does not hesitate to pay his respects to his deceased ancestors during the Qingming (Grave Cleaning) Festival. He also lets Madam Bai and her maid ride with him on the boat out of kindness, though desire certainly plays a role here, too. Xu’s desire for Madam White will do its best to keep him “enchanted” throughout this story. The side of him which resists his desire will strive to awaken him, and will lead him to his eventual enlightenment. In that Xu Xuan spends much of the story indulging his desire and suppressing his urge to awaken, we may still see him as a reluctant protagonist, albeit one who, at some level, still desires freedom.

4.5 “It Is beneath Good fortune That Disaster Crouches”

As Chapter Fifty-eight of Tao Te Ching (Daode Jing) states, “It is on disaster that good fortune perches; It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches.”27 We have seen this principle at work in some form or another in almost all of the works in this study, and Xu Xuan’s apparent good

fortune, in the form of meeting Madam White, is no exception. It will quickly turn into a disaster for him.

When Xu Xuan sees Madam White at her house for the second time after their meeting on the boat, she asks him to marry her. As he does not have enough money to pay for the expenses associated with the wedding, she gives him silver to handle the expenses:

‘小乙官人，這東西將去使用，少次時再來取。’ 親手遞與許宣。許宣接得包兒，打開看時，卻是五十兩雪花銀子。藏於袖中，起身告道，青青把傘來還了許宣。許宣接得相別，一逕回家，把銀子藏了。28

‘Master Xiaoyi [Xu Xuan],’29 take this and make use of it. When there is not enough, come and get more.’ She handed it to Xu Xuan herself. Xu Xuan took the package. When he opened it, he saw a fifty-tael [ingot of] silver, white as a snowflake. He tucked it into his sleeve, arose, and bowed. Little Green returned the umbrella to Xu Xuan. Xu Xuan took it and bade them farewell, then headed straight back and hid the silver.

Life seems to have taken an abrupt turn for the better for Xu Xuan. Fifty taels of silver is probably more than he has ever had before in his life. He will also marry Madam Bai, and thus it appears he will not have to worry about money from now on. Xu Xuan reacts as many people might to the circumstances:

明日起來，離家到官巷口，把傘還了李將仕。許宣將些碎銀子買了一隻肥好燒鵝，鮮魚精肉，嫩雞果品之類提回家來。又買了一樽酒，分付養娘丫鬟安排整下。那日卻好姐夫李募事在家。飲饌俱已完備，來請姐夫和姐姐喫酒。30

The next morning he got up, left the house, and went to the head of Official’s Alley, and returned the umbrella to Officer Li. Xu Xuan took some silver coins and bought a plump roast goose, fresh fish and lean pork, tender chicken, fruit and the like, and took them back home. He had also bought a jug of wine, and he instructed the caretaker and the younger maids to set everything out. On that day,

28 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 402.
29 I have consulted and followed Shuhui Yang and Yuqin Yang’s translation here.
30 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 402.
his brother-in-law, Officer Li, happened to be at home. When the drinks and food had all been made ready, he invited his brother-in-law and sister to the feast.

Xu Xuan does have a motive for treating his sister and brother-in-law. He wants to ask them to find a matchmaker for him and Madam White. However, there does seem to be an element of gratitude and generosity in his doing so, as well. This is not unlike his paying for the fare of Madam White and her maid a few days earlier. He clearly was attracted to Madam White, but he may well have been acting as much out of kindness as he was out of a desire to make a good impression on her. Nonetheless, Xu Xuan is, as we will soon see, being naive; he does not stop to question why this good fortune has suddenly come into his life. His naivete is in noticeable contrast to his brother-in-law’s skepticism:

李募事卻見許宣請他，倒喫了一驚，道：‘今日做什麼子壞鈔？日常不曾見酒盞兒面，今朝作怪！’ 31

Officer Li, however, when he saw that Xu Xuan was treating him, was shocked. ‘For what reason did you spend so much today? Ordinarily, I have never seen so much as a wine cup set out! You must be up to something this morning!’

Officer Li is right, as we shall see. A few days later, Xu Xuan gives his sister the ingot of silver that Madam Bai gave him. When she shows it to Officer Li, he is shocked:

‘苦！不好了，全家是死！’ 那妻喫了一驚，問道：‘丈夫有甚麼利害之事？’ 李募事道：‘數日前邵太尉庫內封記鎖押俱不動，又無地穴得入，平空不見了五十錠大銀現今著落臨安府捉捉賊人，十分緊急，沒有頭路得獲，累害了多少人。’ 32

‘That’s awful! Our whole family is as good as dead!’ His wife was shocked, and asked, ‘Husband, what is such a big deal?’ Officer Li replied, ‘Several days ago, out of thin air, Marshal Shao had fifty large ingots of silver stolen from his treasury without the seal or lock being touched, and there is no underground tunnel from which to access the treasury. Now, the responsibility for capturing the

31 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 402.
thief rests with Lin’an Prefecture. It is absolutely pressing, but there are no leads. It has caused quite a number of people to be suspected.’

Disturbingly, it appears that the ingot given them by Xu Xuan was one of the stolen ingots:

’這銀子與榜上字號不差，正是邵太尉庫內銀子。即今捉捕十分緊急。正是：’火到身邊，顧不得親眷，自可去撥。’明日事露，實難分說。不管他偷的借的，寧可苦他，不要累我。只得將銀子出首，免了一家之害。’  

‘The serial number on this piece of silver and the one on the wanted poster are no different. This silver is definitely from Marshal Shao’s treasury. Today, catching the thief is the utmost priority. It is exactly the case that: ‘When the fire is at your side, you can no longer take care of relatives.’ If this matter is exposed tomorrow, it will frankly be difficult to explain. It does not matter whether he stole the silver or borrowed it. It is better that he face the consequences, and that I am not entangled in this. All I can do is turn in the silver in order that the entire family not be punished.’

When Xu Xuan is arrested the next day, and brought before the prefect, though, he is not even aware of what he has done wrong:

正值韓大尹陞廳，押過許宣當庭跪下，喝聲打！

許宣道：‘告相公不必用刑，不知許宣有何罪？’

Prefect Han happened to be hearing cases, and as Xu Xuan was escorted in and kneeled down in the courtroom, the prefect loudly commanded that he be beaten. Xu Xuan replied, ‘Your honor, there is no need to use physical punishment. I don’t even know what crime I, Xu Xuan, have committed.’

Xu Xuan is not aware of his ‘crime,’ and this reflects a more fundamental lack of awareness on his part. If attachment to the conditional world is analogous to being asleep or enchanted, then Xu Xuan is still enchanted. His “awakening” from enchantment will be gradual, and he will almost always experience times of greater awareness in association either with suffering, or with meeting a Daoist priest or a Buddhist monk. Sometimes it will happen when there is a Buddhist

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33 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 404.
34 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 404.
festival or an event at a Buddhist temple. In addition, it is because of his lack of awareness that his suffering occurs. It brings him suffering, and yet, it is also suffering that makes him eventually realize that he does not want to “be enchanted” anymore. The connection between enchantment and desire can be seen earlier, when he dreams about Madam White after returning home that day:

到家內喫了飯，當夜思量那婦人，翻來覆去睡不著。夢中共日間見的一般，情意相濃，不想金雞叫一聲，卻是南柯一夢。正是：

心猿意馬馳千里，浪蝶狂蜂鬧五更。35

He got back home, and ate dinner. That night he thought about the woman, tossing and turning, unable to sleep. In his dream, what he saw was the same as what he had seen during the day. The feeling of passion and desire was very strong. Before he knew it, the golden rooster had crowed once, and it was all but a “dream of the southern branch.” Thus it is:

*The heart is like an ape, and the will is like a horse galloping 1,000 li, Swarming butterflies and agitated bees pester one all five watches of the night.*

In this passage, the difference between dreams and wakeful “reality” is not clear. Did he sleep at all, or did “amorous desires keep him awake till dawn”? We could extend this metaphor to the entirety of Xu Xuan’s relationship with Madam White, as much of it is driven by his desire. However, unlike this night, in which desire keeps him tossing and turning, in his relationship with Madam White, it is arguably his desire that keeps him “enchanted,” and his relinquishing of desire that is associated with his “awakening.” As to the role of suffering, Xu Xuan begins to question the nature of the relationship when he suffers. Suffering helps alert him to the danger he is in. Without suffering, he might be content to remain as he is. The metaphor could even be

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35 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 400-401.
extended to life itself: a dreamlike, dangerous existence. Such a sentiment is expressed in the *Lotus Sutra*:

> ‘如是等種種諸苦，眾生沒在其中，歡喜遊戲，不覺不知，不驚不怖，亦不生厭，不求解脫。於此三界火宅，東西馳走，雖然大苦，不以為患。’ 36

‘Yet living beings, drowned in the midst of all this, delight and amuse themselves, unaware, unknowing, without alarm or fear. They feel no sense of loathing and make no attempt to escape. In this burning house which is the threefold world, they race about to east and west, and though they encounter great pain, they are not distressed by it.’ 37

Having been arrested for theft, Xu Xuan now does find himself distressed. His seeming good fortune has brought disaster upon him. In this disaster, though, lie the seeds of his future enlightenment.

### 4.6 Appearance and Reality

In *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha says to Subhuti:

> Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
> A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
> A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
> A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream. 38

In “Madam White Is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda,” not all of what Xu Xuan sees is as it seems, and the false appearances of things lead him dangerously astray. The first indication of this comes when Xu Xuan asks for directions to Madam White’s house, but nobody knows where it is, and it is only because Qing Qing happens to show up that he can get there.

When he visits Madam White, the house appears beautiful and well-furnished:

> 許宣看時，見一所樓房，門前兩扇大門，中間四方看街槅子眼，當中掛頂細密朱紅簾子... 39

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36 Zhang Songhui, trans., *Miaofa lianhua jing*, 100.
When Xu Xuan looked, he saw a house with two floors. In front of the door, there was a gate with double doors. In the middle, there were four square latticed windows with a view of the street. In the middle, there was hung a finely-knit scarlet curtain.

But when Xu Xuan is taken back to Madam White’s house after being arrested, the house appears uninhabited and run-down:

After He Li and his men had received the orders, in a burst of energy, the workers went directly along the road to the mouth of Double Tea House Alley to look at the black building across from the wall of Prince Xiu’s Mansion. In front of the door, there were four square steps, with two big doors in the middle. In front of the steps, though, there was garbage, and a piece of bamboo was stuck horizontally across the door.

Then a neighbor gives a disturbing account of the house’s past:

‘No Madam White has ever lived here. Not five or six years ago, there was an inspector Mao who lived here. His whole family died of a seasonal plague. In broad daylight, there are often ghosts coming and going to buy things, and nobody dares live in this place. Several days ago, there was a lunatic here at the gate bowing with his hands clasped in front of him.’

The “madman” was almost certainly the deluded Xu Xuan on one of his visits to Madam White. The beautiful house that he thought he saw was really an abandoned, “haunted” house. At this point, it becomes eerily clear why nobody knew where Madam White lived when he first tried to find her house, and why Qing Qing just happened to show up and take him there. Only

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40 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 404.
41 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 405.
when Xu Xuan has been given a shock - by being arrested and threatened with punishment - does he see the illusion for what it really is.

As it appears that Xu Xuan was the one who was deluded and under an enchantment while bowing at the door with his hands clasped, and that this is almost certainly because of Madam White’s influence on him, we must consider the possibility that he remains under an enchantment through much of the remainder of the story. The possibility of his being enchanted, and the certainty of his physical desire for Madam White, will appear to keep him in a state of befuddlement that will only be interrupted by suffering and by Buddhist festivals. Suffering will impress upon him the true nature of his situation (which may be seen as analogous to that of all beings in this worldly existence) and jolt him into a higher state of awareness. Buddhist festivals will also hold an attraction for him, perhaps because it is the nature of Buddhism to save people by guiding them away from the dangers of worldly existence, like the father in the Burning House Parable in the *Lotus Sutra*.42

In addition to the house’s deceptive appearance, both Madam White and her attendant Little Green are not as they appear. Madam White is a being with supernatural powers, and her true form is that of a white snake. At different points in the story, she is seen in her true form by Li Keyong, Xu Xuan’s employer in Zhenjiang, by Xu Xuan’s brother-in-law in Hangzhou, Li Ren, and by the snake charmer, Mr. Dai. Li Keyong is not a good man himself. He schemes to corner Madam White when she is alone, with the intention of forcing himself upon her. When she steps out to use the bathroom during a meal to celebrate his birthday, he follows her, and then sees her in her true form:

What the squire saw was not a beautiful woman. All he saw was a white snake as wide as a bucket coiled up in the center of the room, its two eyes like lanterns emitting rays of golden light.

Later, Officer Li (Li Ren), Xu Xuan’s brother-in-law, goes to check on Madam White after his wife (Xu Xuan’s sister) tells him that Madam White and Xu Xuan have had an argument. He also sees her as a snake:

...不張萬事皆休，一張時，見一條吊桶來大的蟒蛇，睡在床上，伸頭在天窗內乘涼，鱗甲內放出白光來，照得房內如同白日。44

If he had not looked, nothing would have been any different, but when he looked, he saw a python as wide as a bucket sleeping on the bed, its head extended up to the inside of the window in order to stay cool. From within its scales was emitted a white light, which lit up the interior of the room like broad daylight.

The next day, Mr. Dai, a snake charmer hired by Officer Li and Xu Xuan, also sees Madam White as a snake when he goes to Officer Li’s house to try to capture the snake there. Madam White comes to the gate when he arrives, and when she cannot get him to leave, she changes form and attacks him:

到天井內，那娘子轉個彎，走進去了。那先生手中提著瓶兒，立在空地上。不多時，只見刮起一陣冷風，風過處，只見一條吊桶來大的蟒蛇，速時將來...45

At the courtyard, the lady went around a corner and walked inside. The man holding the bottle in his hand, stood in the open space. Before long, a gust of cold wind arose. After the gust of wind had passed, all he saw was a python as wide as a bucket speeding toward him...

43 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 415.
44 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 420.
45 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 421.
It may seem that Xu Xuan’s unawakened state of mind is the reason why he does not see Madam White in her true form. However, as these other people have seen Madam White as a snake, it is hard to argue that it is because of Xu Xuan’s worldly attachments that he is blind to her true identity. It seems more likely that Madam White changed shape on purpose in order to scare off Squire Li and Mr. Dai, and that Li Ren caught her off guard. After all, Squire Li’s repugnant behavior shows that, in addition to being deeply caught up in desire, he is not a compassionate or sympathetic person. If anyone is “blind,” it would be him. In fact, as we will see, despite Xu Xuan’s difficulty in relinquishing worldly attachments, he is probably more “awake” than the other people who have seen Madam White as a snake. Furthermore, Xu Xuan does suspect her of being an evil spirit from the time that he is sent away for stealing the silver. When Madam White and Little Green find him again in Suzhou, he does not welcome them in:

‘你是鬼怪，不許入來。’攔住了門不放他。46

‘You are an evil spirit, and I will not let you enter.’ He stood blocking the door and would not let her in.

Xu Xuan is aware that something is amiss, despite his not seeing Madam White in her true form. Nonetheless, he still has a long way to go. He is in a situation where appearances are not as they seem, and, despite his growing suspicions, he still does not always see what is real.

4.7 Religious Heroism

What qualities does Xu Xuan have that facilitate his eventual enlightenment? We can assume that, in each of these stories, the protagonists have some preexisting qualities that have already

helped them progress to the point that they are at now. However, because most of these characters do not act in ways that seem heroic, it can be challenging to find what those qualities are. Before getting to Xu Xuan’s strengths, I will argue that Xu Xuan’s weaknesses are 1) a lack of vigilance and 2) attachment in the form of physical desire and greed. I will also argue that his strength is that he is able to learn from the suffering that he undergoes, and, because of this, to come to value freedom more than physical pleasure and material comfort. This strength plays a role in his achieving liberation from Madam White (and from the conditional world, eventually). However, it is - and must be - through suffering that this strength emerges. Without suffering, he would have had no impetus to discover this strength of his. If his association with Madam White had not resulted in his life being turned upside down, he might not have thought twice about spending his life together with her.

In addition, Xu Xuan cannot become enlightened on his own. He needs help in order to succeed, and he undergoes the longest and most complex struggle with attachments of the protagonists of any of these stories, including some relapses along the way.

As we have seen, after Xu Xuan’s bitter experience being accused of stealing silver, and then being sent away to Suzhou, when he sees Madam White again, he accuses her of being an evil spirit, and does not welcome her in. In this respect, his suffering has helped to clear his mind. However, his resistance to Madam White does not last long. Mr. Wang interrupts them as they argue about who is at fault for his misfortune:

王主人道：‘既然當初許嫁小乙哥，卻又回去；且留娘子在此，’ 打發了轎子，不在話下。47

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Mr Wang said, ‘Since you, at the time, gave your word that you would marry Brother Xiaoyi, yet now you are going back? Madam should remain here for the time being.’ He sent away the sedan chair bearers, but no more about that.

Madam White then enlists the Wangs to help her realize her plan to marry Xu Xuan:

過了數日, 白娘子先自奉承好了主人的媽媽, 那媽媽勸主人與許宣說合, 選定十一月一日成親共百年諧老。48

After several days had gone by, Madam White first ingratiated herself with Mr. Wang’s mother, who then urged him to reach an agreement about it with Xu Xuan. They chose November 11th as the day to begin their long and harmonious married life together.

If Xu Xuan still resents Madam White, the resentment seems to disappear on their wedding night:

白娘子放出迷人聲態, 顛鸞倒鳳, 百媚千嬌, 喜得許宣如遇神仙, 只恨相見之晚。正好歡娛, 不覺金雞三唱, 東方漸白。正是:

歡娛嫌夜短,
寂寞恨更長。49

Madam White spoke with an alluring tone of voice that exuded enchantment as they proceeded to consummate their marriage; her charms were tender and entralling, and Xu Xuan was as delighted as if he had met a celestial being. His only regret was their having met so late. Just as they were in the midst of their joyful bliss, the rooster crowed three times, and the eastern sky gradually became brighter. Definitely:

In delightful pleasure’s midst, one hates night’s brevity,
When all alone, one resents its interminability.

After one night together, Xu Xuan seems to have forgiven Madam White. At first, she was the one who had ruined his life, but apparently he no longer feels that way. This will be one of a few times when he swings back and forth between indulgence and awakening, and as we have seen,

49 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 408.
he lets himself relax when things are going smoothly between him and Madam White. Furthermore, these times are always associated with either physical pleasure or material gratification, or both.

And yet for each such lapse, an awakening is not far behind, which underscores what we may see as Xu Xuan’s religious heroism. Something in him appears not to be content with this existence, blissful though it may seem. Something in him wants more than mere pleasure and material wealth. After six months of marriage, Xu Xuan becomes aware of some noise and activity outside. Mr. Wang tells him it is a religious festival:

‘今日是二月半，男子婦人，都去看臥佛。你也好去承天寺裏閒走一遭。’ 50

‘Today is the fifteenth day of the second month, and all the men and women are going to see the Reclining Buddha.\(^{51}\) Why don’t you go to Chengtian Monastery as well for a leisurely stroll?’

Xu Xuan’s attention is not attracted by any ordinary activity. It is a Buddhist festival that catches his attention and draws him out. When Xu Xuan tells his wife he plans to go to the festival, she is not enthusiastic about the prospect:

白娘子道：‘有甚好看，只在家中卻不好？看他做什麼？
許宣道：‘我去閒耍一遭就回，不妨。’ 52

Madam White asked, “What is there to see? Is it such a bad thing to just stay at home? What is the point of seeing that? Xu Xuan replied, ‘I’ll just go to kill some time for a bit, and be right back. There is no harm in it.’

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51 I have consulted and followed the translation of Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang here.
Madam White is concerned about the festival for the same reason that Xu Xuan is drawn to it. She sees it as something that might expose her true identity, and threaten her ability to control him. On the one hand, Xu Xuan merely seems to be drawn to it. He could probably not explain why. On the other hand, it seems that in these religious festivals, the prospect of freedom beckons. Xu Xuan goes out to the festival, and while he is there, a Daoist priest notices him:

那先生在人叢中看見許宣頭上一道黑氣，必有妖怪纏他，叫道：‘你近來有一妖怪纏你，其害非輕！我與你二道靈符，救你性命。一道符，三更燒，一道符放在自頭髮內。’

The man saw, amidst the crowds, a pillar-like ebony cloud above Xu Xuan’s head, and realized that he had to be in the clutches of an evil spirit. He called out to Xu Xuan, ‘You have recently fallen into the clutches of an evil spirit, and the injury it is causing you is not small! I will give you two magical talismans, and save your life. One of them is to be burned at the third watch, and one is to be stuck in your hair.’

From what the priest says, it appears that Xu Xuan’s life is in danger. When Xu Xuan receives the charms, it confirms a suspicion that he has been harboring:

許宣接了符，納頭便拜，肚內道：‘我也八九分疑惑那婦人是妖怪，真個是實。’ 謝了先生，逕回店中。

Xu Xuan accepted the talismans. He then lowered his head, put his hands together, and bowed to the priest. He said to himself, ‘I also have my suspicions that that woman is an evil spirit, and apparently it is true.’ He thanked the priest, and went straight back to the inn.

Thus we can see that Xu Xuan, at some level, does question his situation. He desires his freedom, and is not content to merely have pleasure and comfort, though he will relapse from time to time.

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53 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 408.
54 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 408.
Still, Xu Xuan will not find freedom yet. This is partly because of Madam White. She does not appear ready to let him go, and does her best to maintain her control over him. The next day, she makes sure to discredit the Daoist priest in front of Xu Xuan. When the priest tries to expose her with a Daoist charm, she accepts his challenge:

那白娘子道：‘眾人在此，你且書符來，我喫看！’ 那先生書一道符，遞與白娘子。白娘子接過符來，便吞下去，眾人都看，沒些動靜。\(^{55}\)

Madam White said, ‘There is a crowd of people right here. Write up a talisman, for me to eat!’ He wrote up a talisman, and handed it to Madam White. Madam White took the talisman and swallowed it. All the gathered people were watching, but nothing happened.

She then goes on to humiliate the priest by using magic to suspend him in the air. After a moment she addresses the crowd:

娘子道：‘若不是眾位面上，把這先生吊他一年。’ 白娘子噴口氣，只見那先生依然放下，只恨爹娘少生兩翼，飛也似走了。\(^{56}\)

The lady said, ‘If it were not a matter of face for all gathered here, I would hold him up in the air for a year.’ Madam White blew a puff of breath, and the priest was put back down just as he had been before. He only regretted not having been given a pair of wings by his mother at father when he was born, and took off as if he were flying.

This display seems mainly intended for Xu Xuan’s benefit. While it may scare him into submission, as it scared off the Daoist Priest, it also seems counter-productive, as it shows that Madam White has magical powers, and thus would seem to strengthen Xu Xuan’s suspicions about her, rather than allaying them.

Nonetheless, whether Madam White’s display is effective in terms of controlling Xu Xuan or not, Xu Xuan quickly shows that he can be as much a danger to himself as Madam White is to

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\(^{55}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 409.

\(^{56}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 409.
him. After returning, he once again seems to forget his earlier suspicions as he continues to enjoy marital bliss and material ease:

夫妻依舊回來，不在話下。日逐盤纏，都是白娘子將出來用度。正是：
夫唱婦隨，朝歡暮樂。  

Husband and wife went home together, as always. No more need be said of it. As for daily living expenses, Madam White took care of the necessary expenditures. Undoubtedly:

*The wife sings along with the husband,*  
*The mornings are cheerful, and the nights are happy.*  

Of course, having a mutually satisfying and happy marital life, and being well-provided for, are not in themselves bad things. The point here would be that Xu Xuan has suffered because of Madam White, and seems to be in danger still, yet he allows himself to forget that danger as long as he is not currently suffering, and as long as his physical desires are gratified. This might be comparable to the situation in the novel *Watership Down* in which the rabbits in a warren get food from humans, and because of that accept being preyed on by them (the humans trap the rabbits for food). Rabbits in the warren disappear from time to time, but they do not complain, as they have a steady supply of food.  

Xu Xuan does not completely give in, though, and this is where the undercurrent of his resistance becomes apparent again. While he seems all too happy to forget his suffering, and live a life of bliss with Madam White, he is also drawn to the temple festivals. After a period of time, when the celebration of Sakyamuni’s birthday is being observed, he takes notice:

不覺光陰似箭，又是四月初八日，釋迦佛生辰。只見街市上人檯著柏亭浴佛
家家布施。許宣對王主人道：‘此間與杭州一般。’  

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57 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 409.  
The time flew by like an arrow, and it once again was the eighth day of the fourth month, the birthday of the Buddha, Sakyamuni. In the streets and in the markets, all one could see were people bearing cypress Buddha pavilions, washing statues of the baby Buddha, and all the families were giving alms to monks. Xu Xuan said to Mr. Wang, ‘This is the same as it is in Hangzhou.’

Again, Xu Xuan wants to attend, and Madam White, again, resists his going:

許宣轉身到裏面，對白娘子說了。白娘子道：‘甚麼好看，休去！’許宣道：‘去走一遭，散悶則個。’

Xu Xuan turned, went in, and told Madam White. She replied, ‘What is there to see? Don’t go!’
Xu Xuan said, ‘I’ll just go take a walk around for fun.’

As we have seen, each time Xu Xuan wants to attend a temple festival, he defends it by saying it will not take long, and that it will be “for fun.” This, of course, could not be further from the truth. There is almost nothing that happens in this story that does not change the course of Xu Xuan’s life. His accepting one ingot of silver led to his losing his freedom and being sent away to Suzhou. By the same token, his attending the temple festival also threatens to disturb his life with Madam White, and, in doing so, to bring him one step closer to attaining his freedom.

Xu Xuan’s wakeful stirrings are brought about by religious festivals, and also by suffering. In this case, Madam White reluctantly assents to his going out, but has Little Green bring some nice clothes for him to wear before he does so:

叫青青取新鮮時樣衣服來。許宣著得不長不短，一似像體裁的：戴一頂黑漆頭巾，腦後一雙白玉環；穿一領青羅道袍，腳著一雙皂靴，手中拏一把細巧百摺描金美人珊瑚墜上樣春羅扇。打扮的上下齊整。

She had Little Green get some fashionable clothes. The clothes were not too long or too short for Xu Xuan, as if they were custom-made for him: he wore a pitch-black head-scarf, with a pair of white jade rings hanging in the back; a blue-green

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60 I have consulted Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang’s translation here.
silk Daoist robe, had on a pair of black boots, and in his hand he held a dainty, finely-crafted folding silk-gauze fan, with images of beauties traced in gold on it, and hanging coral pendants. He was neatly dressed from top to bottom.

Xu Xuan’s wakeful stirring, expressed in his interest in the Buddhist festival is, ironically, juxtaposed with his naivete at once again accepting fine, expensive things from Madam White. Perhaps her paying for their expenses over the past several months has made him complacent. If so, his complacency will once again bring him hardship and suffering. Even as he, in his own seemingly-innocuous way, defies Madam White by attending the festival, he also sets his foot in yet another trap by accepting her gifts:

許宣叫了鐵頭相伴，逕到承天寺來看佛會。人人喝采，好個官人。只聽得有人說道：‘昨夜周將仕典當庫內，不見了四五千貫金珠細軟物件。現今開單告官，挨查沒捉人處。’
許宣聽得，不解其意，自同鐵頭在寺。63

Xu Xuan asked Iron Head to accompany him, and they went directly to Chengtian Monastery to see the Buddhist festival. Everybody cheered as he went by, saying ‘What a man!’ However, they only heard someone say, ‘Last night, Squire Zhou had four to five thousand strings of cash worth of gold, jewels and expensive clothing go missing from his storehouse of his pawn shop.64 Today, he drew up a detailed list of the stolen items, and made an official report to the authorities. They are searching from house to house, but the thief has not been apprehended yet.’ Xu Xuan heard them, but did not realize the import of what they were saying, and remained at the monastery with Iron Head.

Xu Xuan, once again, is oblivious to the trouble and danger that he is in. As he did earlier with the silver ingot, he has accepted what Madam White has given him without even wondering how she came by these things. This is yet another example of Xu Xuan’s lack of vigilance, combined with greed. He has already suffered because of this lack of vigilance, and this greed, and he will continue to suffer for it.

63 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 410.
64 I have consulted the translation of Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang here.
Indeed, not long afterward, as he is leaving, he is spotted and arrested:

許宣道：‘娘子教我早回，去罷。’轉身人叢中，不見了鐵頭，獨自個走出寺門來。只見五六個人似公人打扮，腰裏掛著牌兒，數中一個看了許宣，對眾人道：‘此人身上穿的，手中拿的，好似那話兒？’數中一個認得許宣的道：‘小乙官，扇子借我看一看。’許宣不知是計，將扇遞與公人。那公人道：‘你們看這扇子扇墜，與單上開的一般！’眾人喝聲：‘拿了’就把許宣一索子綁了...

Xu Xuan said, ‘My wife told me to get back soon, so let’s go.’ He turned around in the midst of the crowd, but did not see Iron Head, and therefore left the monastery on his own. Then he simply saw five or six men who dressed like arresting officers. They had yamen tablets hanging from their waists. One of them saw Xu Xuan and said to the others, ‘What this man is wearing and holding in his hand seem to match the description.’ Then one of them, who knew Xu Xuan, said, ‘Master Xiaoyi, let me take a look at your fan.’ Xu Xuan did not know it was a trick, and handed the fan to the officer. The officer said, ‘Look, this fan and pendant match the description on the list!’ All of them yelled ‘Grab him!’ and tied Xu Xuan up with a rope...

While he is only charged with a minor offense, the punishment is quite harsh by today’s standards:

一日，大尹把許宣一一供招明白，都做在白娘子身上，只做‘不合不出首妖怪等事’，杖一百，配三百六十里，押發鎮江府牢城營做工。  

One day, the prefect acquitted Xu Xuan of the accusations against him, and, instead, had Madam White charged with the offenses. Xu Xuan was only charged with ‘Not turning in an evil spirit, and other offenses,’ for which he received 100 beatings, and was sent under escort 360 li to a penal labor camp in Zhenjiang Prefecture.

Despite this, the next time he sees Madam White, after he has been sent away to Zhenjiang, he almost immediately forgets his anger toward her:

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Having been thus deceived by Madam White, Xu Xuan stopped being angry, and began to smile. He muttered to himself for a long time, his courage clouded and confused by lust. He lingered, reluctant to leave. Instead of going back to his place of lodging, he stayed at Madam White’s apartment upstairs.

This is followed by another period during which Xu Xuan and Madam White live together as husband and wife. Following the incident with Squire Li, Madam White persuades Xu Xuan to leave the squire’s shop and find work elsewhere. Their neighbor, Jiang He, helps them move and make other arrangements. Jiang He is thus described:

且說，‘今是古，古是今’，各處有這等出熟的。閭壁有一個人，性蔣名和，一生出熟好事。68

It is said, ‘As it is in the present, so it was in the past, and as it was in the past, so it is in the present.’ Everywhere, there are the sort of people who are enthusiastic about helping others. Next door there was a man whose surname was Jiang, and whose given name was He, who had for all his life had cheerfully helped others.

Jiang He appears to embody innate decency and kindness. He is one of the few characters in this story who seems motivated almost purely by compassion. Later, he will play a role in shaping events, and will thus aid Xu Xuan in taking a major step toward gaining his freedom. Despite his decency, though, he later encourages Xu Xuan to lie to Madam White.

Not long afterward, a monk stops by Xu Xuan’s new shop and asks for a donation. The monk also asks Xu Xuan to come to the temple on the day of an upcoming festival:

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67 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 414.
68 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 416.
From the time Xu Xuan opened the shop, he was surprised to find that business was better and better each day, and that he generally made large profits. Once, while in the middle of selling dried medicinal herbs out front, he saw a Buddhist monk carrying a donation book. The monk said, ‘I am a monk from Jinshan Monastery. The seventh day of the seventh month is coming soon, and that is the birthday of Yinglie, King of the Dragons. I hope the young master will come to the monastery to burn incense, and to give money.’

Before leaving, the monk makes a statement very similar to the one the monk at the beginning of the story made when asking Xu Xuan to come during the Clean and Bright Festival:

‘是日望官人來燒香！’

‘On that day, I hope the young master will come to burn incense!’

This temple visit will turn out to be an important step toward Xu Xuan’s regaining his freedom. In light of Jiang He’s goodness, it seems to be no accident that it is he who encourages Xu Xuan to go to the temple festival not long afterward, the third such festival he will have attended since he met Madam White:

不覺又是七月初七日，許宣自開店來，只見街上熱鬧，人來人往，幫閒的蔣和道：‘小乙官前日布施了香，今日何不去寺內閒走一遭？’

Before they knew it, the seventh day of the seventh month had arrived. Xu Xuan had just opened his shop when he saw that there was a festive atmosphere in the streets, with people coming and going. Jiang He, helping with things, said, ‘Master Xiaoyi, you made a donation of incense the other day, so why not go to the monastery for a leisurely stroll today?’

69 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 416.
71 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 417.
Again, we also see the motif of doing something that appears to be insignificant. Just as something as seemingly innocuous as accepting an ingot of silver or some clothes can result in suffering and the loss of freedom, these “innocuous” temple visits play a role in Xu Xuan’s regaining his freedom. Madam White states this principle herself:

白娘子道：‘‘無事不登三寶殿’，去做甚麼？’

Madam White said, “Nobody just makes a visit to a Buddhist temple for no reason,’ so what are you going to do there?’

Seeing that Xu Xuan is determined to go, she makes him promise her three things:

白娘子道：‘一件，不要去方丈內去；二件，不要與和尚說話；三件，去了就回。來得遲，我便來尋你也。’

Madam White said, ‘First, don’t enter the abbot’s room; second, don’t talk to the monks; third, come back soon after you get there. If you are late getting back, I will come looking for you.’

Madam White sees the temple visit as an existential threat, despite Xu Xuan’s reassurances. His saying the visit is “just for fun” is perhaps helpful in assuaging Madam White’s misgivings, but it may be that it is Xu Xuan himself who needs to be convinced that the temple visit will not result in any changes to the status quo. While Madam White is clearly opposed to his temple visits, it may be that, at some level, Xu Xuan himself is also reluctant to regain his freedom. After all, regaining his freedom does mean giving up his relationship with Madam White, and all that the relationship entails. The alacrity with which he has forgotten his anger almost every time they have reunited shows how strong the pull of desire is for him, even when it clearly has turned his life upside down.

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72 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 417.
73 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 417.
Nonetheless, Xu Xuan visits the temple, and this can be seen as an understated expression of his defiance. This visit to the temple will be a decisive step toward regaining his freedom. Also decisive will be his going into the abbot’s room, even after promising not to do so. Jiang He, who has accompanied him, is the one who suggests doing so, and while Xu Xuan hesitates, Jiang He insists:

先到龍王堂燒了香，還寺閒走了一遍，同眾人信步來到方丈門前。許宣猛省道：‘妻子分付我休要進方丈內去。’立住了腳，不進去。蔣和道：‘不妨事，他自在家中，回去只說不曾去便了。’說罷，走入去，看了一回，便出來。’

They first went to Longwang Hall and, having burned incense, then took a casual stroll around the monastery, following the throng of people to the doorway to the abbot’s room. Xu Xuan then suddenly remembered and said, ‘My wife instructed me not to go into the abbot’s room.’ He stopped right there, and would not enter. Jiang He said, ‘There’s no harm in it. She herself is at home. When you get back, just say you didn’t go in.’ (What a liar!) Having said that, they went in, took a look around, and then came back out.

Here we see an instance in which worldly morality is ignored, and in which doing so seems to be the right thing. In this case, Jiang He helps him by getting him to do something that he is not willing to do himself, that is, to disobey Madam White. Xu Xuan has never given the reader cause to think him dishonest. He has never stolen anything, despite being wrongfully arrested twice for theft, and he has often been passive, except for his insistence on visiting the temples during Buddhist festivals. He has been angry with Madam White for causing him so much

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74 The male pronoun is used here, even in reference to Madam White.
75 The parenthetical comment found in the English translation is not included in the *San Min* Chinese version.
76 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 417.
trouble, but has not shown any desire to willfully deceive her. Even when Jiang He tells him to go into the abbot’s quarters, he balks, only going in after Jiang He insists on his doing so.

Xu Xuan’s insistence on conventional morality in his not disobeying Madam White, is, on the one hand, a sign of his innate decency (despite some of his other weaknesses). However, that decency can be harmful to him when it keeps him from doing what he needs to do to attain freedom. Jiang He, on the other hand, does something “immoral” - he encourages Xu Xuan to break his word. It is because of this “immorality” that Xu Xuan will finally be able to become free, perhaps even save his own life. In most of these works, we see protagonists who fall short when it comes to conventional morality, but who achieve religious triumphs that other, more “moral” people seem unable to achieve. This seems to indicate that the morality of the unseen order of reality is perhaps beyond our understanding, and often not in accord with the “morality” that we would impose on it.

4.8 Portrayal of Evil

At the end of “Madam White is Kept Forever Under Thunder Peak Pagoda,” Madam White and Little Green are, as the title of the story states, held under Thunder Peak Pagoda as prisoners, put there by a Buddhist Abbot in order to protect people from them. Madam White is repeatedly referred to as an “evil spirit,” and many aspects of her portrayal would appear to confirm that she has a malevolent and monstrous nature. For example, the effect of her generosity on Xu Xuan is clearly harmful, the correlation between Xu Xuan’s physical desire for her and the loss of peace that it entails is also harmful (though physical desire, from a Buddhist perspective, is arguably harmful in any form, not just when directed toward a so-called “evil spirit”), the portrayals of her manifestations as an evil spirit are eerie, her attempts to keep Xu Xuan from going to religious festivals - and to keep him from encountering monks - are suspicious, and the portrayals of her as
a snake (especially when she chases Mr. Dai), and the threats she makes to Xu Xuan near the end of the story, make her seem truly menacing and predatory.

As we have seen, Xu Xuan is twice arrested, accused of theft, and punished, after accepting gifts from Madam White. He accepts silver in one case, and fine clothes in the other case (though we have seen that the crime and sentence end up being more lenient in both cases, considering his extenuating circumstances). The correlation between cause and effect in these cases is clear. Madam White’s gifts bring trouble. (There is also the implication that people pay a karmic price for the good things in life.)

Almost from the time Madam White meets Xu Xuan, she manipulates him and the people around him, getting Xu Xuan arrested, getting him to marry her, and then doing her best to keep him from “awakening” to the reality of his situation. And while this is an indication that her character may be questionable, it is her eerie supernatural manifestations that present the strongest evidence that she is inherently evil. Some of the first of these instances occur when Arrest Officer He Li and his men take Xu Xuan back to Madam White’s house with the intention of arresting her. When they get to the house, it is clearly abandoned, as we have seen. Then, one of the neighbors, Mr. Sun, who lives on the same street, experiences harmful effects immediately when he comes near the house:

那孫公擺忙的喫他一驚，小腸氣發，跌倒在地。78

Mr. Sun, in the midst of being very busy, was extremely startled. His hernia of the small intestine suddenly began to act up, and he dropped to the ground.

Another disturbing sign greets them when they open the door of the house:

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78 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 405.
He Li ordered the men to remove the bamboo pole that was placed across the door. Inside, it was cold and desolate, and a gust of wind arose, carrying out with it an unpleasant odor. The men were shocked, and took several steps back. Xu Xuan watched, unable to utter a sound, as if dumbfounded.

One of the eeriest things that happens is when they encounter Madam White upstairs, though:

There were three inches of dust on the upper floor. They came up to the front of the door to a bedroom, pushed the door open, and looked. Over the bed was hung a bed curtain, and there were storage cases for travelling, and pieces of baggage in the room, as well. They also saw a beautiful woman, as lovely as a flower or jade, dressed in white, sitting on the bed. They all looked, but did not dare to take a step forward. The men asked, ‘Is the lady a goddess or a ghost? We have come to present you with a summons to Lin’an Prefecture, the prefect has summoned you and Xu Xuan to come testify.’ The lady sat there without moving.

Then one of the braver men, ‘Wang Er’ steps forward, and enhances his courage with a bottle of wine:

Wang Er opened the bottle and drank the whole bottleful down. He then said, ‘She can’t do anything to me!’ and took the bottle and threw it at the area within the bed curtain. If he had not thrown the bottle, nothing would have been the same, but as he had just thrown the bottle, all they heard was a deafening sound, a
bolt out of the blue, and all of them fell over with astonishment. When they got back up, the lady was not on the bed anymore, and all they saw was a pile of gleaming silver there.

In addition to these eerie occurrences, the aura of Madam White’s enchantment, and her seemingly formidable magical powers suggest an inherently evil nature. Xu Xuan and most ordinary people are oblivious to Madam White’s aura, but, the Daoist priest who tried to save Xu Xuan earlier in the story, and Buddhist abbott Fahai, who will come to his aid later, can easily see that Xu Xuan is under an enchantment. The eerie pillar of black smoke above Xu Xuan’s head, and Madam White’s resounding defeat of the Daoist priest the next day all make her appear sinister and formidable.

Madam White is clearly not to be trifled with. Her demonstration of magical powers shows that the Daoist priest is no match for her, and that she can cause great harm if she so desires.

Near the end of the story, she threatens Xu Xuan:

‘小乙官我也只是為好，誰想倒成怨本！我與你平生夫婦，共枕同衾，許多恩愛，如今卻信別人閒言語，教我夫妻不睦。我如今實對你說，若聽我言語喜喜歡歡，萬事皆修；若生外心，教你滿城皆為血水，人人手攀洪浪，腳踏渾波，皆死於非命。’ 82

‘Master Xiaoyi, I just want what is best. Who would have thought I would end up being the object of your resentment? I and you are husband and wife for life. We share pillow and quilt, and much affection, and yet now it is the case that you believe the rumors of others, and that makes it so that things are not harmonious between us. I now tell you truthfully, if you listen to what I say, and are happy, everything will be fine. However, if you have other ideas, it will cause the whole town to be awash in blood and water. Every hand will only have the torrent’s waves to cling to, and every foot will only have the watery billows on which to tread. All will die unnatural deaths.’

82 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 419.
Madam White shows here a frightening potential for destruction (reminiscent of the flood dragons in “An Iron Tree at Jingyang Palace Subdues Demons”\(^83\)). Since she has demonstrated magical powers before, and easily bested the Daoist priest, it seems that she can back up this threat, and even if she were bluffing, who would dare to take the risk of calling her bluff? It is perhaps just as important that she is willing to make such threats in order to keep Xu Xuan in line. Even minus magical powers, this is a disturbing behavior. Xu Xuan’s contemplating suicide near the end of the story\(^84\) shows that the effects of living in such a situation are harmful to his mental well-being, and that merely fulfilling his physical needs does not ultimately satisfy him.

Lastly, this relationship, according to Abbot Fahai, is a predatory one. After Madam White and Little Green have been imprisoned, Abbot Fahai recites a poem:

奉勸世人休愛色！愛色之人被色迷。
心正自然邪不擾，身端怎有惡來欺？
但看許宣因愛色，帶累官司惹是非。
不是老僧來救護，白蛇吞了不留些。\(^85\)

People, put to rest your love of lust! A love of pleasure makes one go astray.
Evil does not stir an upright mind, and how can rectitude let evil sway?
Just look at Xu Xuan - ‘cause he loved her charms, in lawsuits he was caught, disputes aroused.
Had not this old monk come to his rescue, by white snake would he have been swallowed whole.

Fahai asserts here that Xu Xuan would have ultimately been eaten by Madam White. This is one of the most compelling of many arguments for Madam White’s being an evil being. After all, if her design was all along to kill Xu Xuan, then how can she not be seen as sinister?


\(^{84}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 422; Feng Menglong, “Madame White,” 502-503.

\(^{85}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 423.
Thus, there is a very strong argument to be made that Madam White is malevolent, and that she actively seeks to do harm. She does, in many ways, cause harm to Xu Xuan. She deprives him of his freedom, causes him mental anguish, and tries to manipulate him into obeying her. She resorts to displays of powerful magic, and then threats of even more powerful and dangerous magic as he feels the need to get away from her more and more strongly. If what Abbot Fahai says about her is true (and he would not seem to be the sort to lie deliberately), then this relationship can only end in death for Xu Xuan.

However, while it may be true that Madam White has evil intentions towards Xu Xuan, some of her statements, actions, and omissions also show another possible side to her character - they show that Madam White may not be as evil as she appears to be.

To start with, consider what Madam White does not do. She is with Xu Xuan for over a year. If her intention were to devour him, as Abbot Fahai asserts, why would she wait so long to do so? An evil spirit, a monster, she would seem to have little reason to let her prey live for such a long time. Furthermore, why would a purely evil creature, intending to devour Xu Xuan, put up with even one trip by him to the temple, especially when she knows that it presents such a clear danger to her? Xu Xuan made at least three temple visits while he was with her, the last of which resulted in her eventual imprisonment. Why would a cunning, malevolent monster take the slightest chance of exposing herself to such danger?

Madam White also shows mercy when she could opt to be ruthless. For example, as we have seen, she lets the Daoist priest go after suspending him in the air for only a moment. In addition, she does not kill Li Keyong or Mr. Dai. Her threat to kill all the people in Hangzhou is a very serious one, but she does not carry it out, either. When she is afraid that Li Keyong will tell Xu Xuan the truth about her identity, she merely gets him to quit working for Li Keyong, and open
his own shop. Why, though, would a truly powerful and evil monster not just use her magical powers to kill Li Keyong and thus silence him forever? If she can kill everyone in a city, and has magical abilities (which have allowed her to teleport herself into sealed rooms to steal silver and other valuables), why would she not use those abilities to get rid of the people who are threats to her?

Lastly, despite the things she has done throughout the story, Madam White still comes off as sympathetic in some respects, and even shows a certain nobility when she is being questioned by Abbot Fahai at the end of the story. When Fahai asks her what kind of monster she is, she replies:

‘禪師，我是一條大蟒蛇。因為風雨大作，來到西湖上安身，同青青一處。不想遇著許宣，春心蕩漾，按納不住，一時冒犯天條，卻不曾殺生害命。望禪師慈悲則個!’ 86

‘Your Holiness, I am a large python. Because of the strong wind and heavy rain, I came to West Lake to find shelter, and took shelter in the same place as Little Green. It never occurred to me that I would meet Xu Xuan, and that doing so would awaken my feelings of love for him. I was unable to restrain myself, and broke the laws of Heaven. Nonetheless, I have not taken a single life. Your Holiness, I hope that you will be merciful!’

Indeed, throughout the story, for all of her manipulation and threats, Madam White has not actually killed anyone. It is also hard not to feel some sympathy for her in light of her feelings for Xu Xuan. Most importantly, as we see here, she does not seem malevolent or demonic. In addition, it seems that her not having killed anyone is a sign of restraint on her part, which may indicate that she is not a completely ruthless monster.

When Fahai asks her about Little Green, she responds in a way that is surprisingly noble:

青青是西湖內第三橋下潭內千年成氣的青魚。一時遇著，拉他為伴，他不曾得一日歡娛，並望禪師憐憫！

Little Green is a black carp from a pool under the 3rd bridge on West Lake. She has been cultivating her qi for 1,000 years. When I met her, I invited her to accompany me. She has never had even a moment’s pleasure, so I hope your Holiness will show her compassion!

Madam Bai tries to help Little Green by speaking in her favor. She does what we would expect of any true friend here in standing up for Little Green. Therefore, we can see that Madam White, despite her being, by strict definition, an “evil spirit,” has some redeeming qualities. Even Abbot Fahai shows some leniency toward Madam White and Little Green because of these qualities:

念你千年修煉，免你一死...

Taking into account your 1,000 years of cultivation, you are exempted from being put to death...

Thus, at the end of the story, when she and Little Green are imprisoned by Abbot Fahai, while this is a great relief for Xu Xuan, it is still hard not to feel some sympathy for them.

It should also be mentioned that, however evil is defined, it need not be in the form of a spirit or a creature with magical powers. Li Keyong, as we have seen, plots to entrap Madam White because he wants to force himself on her. He does not have magical powers, and is not an evil spirit, but what he attempts to do is sinister.

While Abbot Fahai is almost puritanical in his view of Madam White as an evil spirit whose only purpose is to bring harm to people, Madam White’s “evil” may ultimately be similar to Xu

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87 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 423.
88 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 423.
Xuan’s indulgence in worldly attachments. For all of the trouble that she causes, and even with the eerie manifestations of her magic, she does not seem to be inherently wicked in nature. The harm that she does seems mostly to result from her meddling in people’s affairs. When she gives Xu Xuan silver, for example, it does not seem that she deliberately intends to cause him harm. She may even feel that she is trying to help him. She may also not be aware that there is anything wrong with her stealing the silver, or that any consequences will come of her doing so. Her lack of awareness, though, still causes harm, just as Xu Xuan’s wandering into this relationship with her causes him harm. Both seem almost naively unaware of the karmic significance of their actions.

4.9 The Transformation of the Mind

Xu Xuan’s change of mind takes place over a longer period of time than that of any other protagonist in this study, and is marked by a process of gradually coming to the realization, through repeated and painful experience, that desire and material gain bring suffering to him. In addition, his progress is not direct: he makes progress and then regresses on at least two occasions, as he goes back and forth between indulging his desire on the one hand and trying to escape from Madam White on the other. In this respect, his process of enlightenment seems to resemble the process of trying to change one’s habits, but occasionally relapsing, before finally making the difficult decision to make the change once and for all. His progress toward enlightenment also can be seen as a process of awakening, and that awakening comes because suffering makes him realize that he must give up his attachments in order to survive. His stirrings of awareness are always brought on by religious festivals. Even his initial meeting with Madam White is the result of his being asked to visit a monastery for the Qingming Festival. This is the beginning of his suffering, but if he did not suffer, he would not have the opportunity to become
enlightened. Thus, his embrace of desire both causes him suffering and helps bring about his ultimate enlightenment. As we see in all of these works, misfortune must be endured - often repeatedly - before one can firmly set one’s mind on enlightenment, as Xu Xuan does after Madam White is imprisoned.

In addition, there are a few more mental steps that he takes before he can truly be free. He takes the step from doubt to certainty regarding his misgivings about Madam White’s identity, and then he gets to the point of utter despair. As to becoming certain about Madam White, he does so after Abbot Fahai notices him at Jinshan Monastery (which is reminiscent of the Daoist priest’s noticing him earlier), and follows him out. Abbot Fahai then confronts Madam White:

禪師道: ‘業畜, 敢再來無禮, 殘害生靈! 老僧為你特來。’
白娘子見了和尚, 搖開船, 和青青把船一翻, 兩個都翻下水底去了。許宣回身看著和尚便拜: ‘告尊師, 救弟子一條草命!’
禪師道: ‘你如何遇著這婦人?’
許宣把前項事情從頭說了一遍。禪師聽罷, 道: ‘這婦人正是妖怪, 汝可速回杭州去。如再來纏汝, 可到湖南 淨慈寺裏來尋我。’ 89

The abbot said, ‘Monster, how dare you come here and violate the law, causing harm to living beings! This old monk will deal with you.’ As soon as Madam White saw the monk, she began to rock the boat, and she and Little Green flipped it over. The two of them fell into the water and went down to the bottom. Xu Xuan then turned around. He looked at the monk, and bowed to him, ‘Your Holiness has saved my worthless life.’ The abbot then asked, ‘How did you meet this woman?’ Xu Xuan related everything that had happened from the beginning. When the abbot was done listening, he said, ‘This woman is definitely an evil spirit. You should be ready to head back to Hangzhou quickly. If she comes back to torment you, go to Hunan Jingci Monastery and find me there.’

Xu Xuan then returns to his home, and realizes the abbot was right:

白娘子同青青都不見了。方纔信是妖怪。 90

89 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 418.
90 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 418.
Madam White and Little Green were both gone. Thus, he finally believed that Madam White was an evil spirit.

Xu Xuan has wavered and doubted throughout the story. Now he realizes that what seemed to be the case is true. This is a step in his awakening. It is no coincidence that following this realization, there is an imperial amnesty, and Xu Xuan becomes a free man. As it is his desire that keeps him tied to Madam White, so his realization that his relationship with her is harmful brings him a degree of freedom. The ensuing amnesty is one of his happiest moments in the story:

As it turned out, Emperor Gaozong was elevating Xiaozi to the throne, and handed down a universal pardon. Aside from those who had committed serious offenses involving the taking of life, remaining minor offenses were pardoned, and all of those pardoned were released to return home. Xu Xuan upon being pardoned, was so overjoyed he could barely contain himself. He chanted a poem, which went as follows:

My gratitude to the emperor for handing down this amnesty,
This ‘net on three sides opened’ promises renewal;
At the time of my death, I will not haunt a foreign land,
On the day of birth, I return as a native of my home soil.
Unfortunately, I encountered a spirit, my melancholy even deeper,
When can I meet with an amnesty, and the roots of my sin be pulled up?
Upon my return, a fistful of incense in hand, I will light it,
Paying my gratitude to the cosmos for once again showing me mercy.

91 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 418-419.
However, Xu Xuan’s elation is short-lived. After the imperial emancipation, he goes back to Hangzhou, only to discover that Madam White has found him again, to his dismay, as his brother-in-law relates:

‘現今兩日前，有一個婦人帶著一個丫鬟，道是你的妻子。說你七月初七日去金山寺燒香，不見回來。那裡不尋到。只到如今，打聽得你回杭州，同丫鬟先到這裡等你兩日了。’ 92

‘Two days ago, there was a married woman who brought her maid with her, and said she was your wife. She said you went to Jinshan Monastery to burn incense on the seventh day of the seventh month, and that you didn’t return. She looked everywhere for you, but to no avail. Only recently, after asking around, did she manage to find out that you had come back to Hangzhou, so she came here with her maid, and has been waiting here for two days.’

Xu Xuan realizes that he is still not free. Even an imperial amnesty cannot save him. It is after this that, as we have seen, his brother-in-law sees Madam White as a snake, and they hire Mr. Dai to try to capture her to no avail. Xu Xuan’s brother-in-law then suggests that he go live at the house of an acquaintance:

‘眼見實是妖怪了，如今赤山埠前張成家欠我一千貫錢。你去那裏靜處，設一間房兒住下，那怪物不見了你，自然去了。’ 93

It appears that she is an evil spirit. These days, the family of Zhang Cheng, living in front of the Red Mountain Wharf, owes me 1,000 strings of cash. You can go there, get set up with a room, and lie low. If that monster doesn’t see you, naturally, she will leave.’

Officer Li gives for Xu Xuan a note and a banknote to take to Zhang Cheng, but Xu Xuan somehow loses it:

來到赤山埠前，尋著了張成。隨即袖中取票時，不見了。94
He arrived at the front of the Red Mountain Wharf, and began looking for Zhang Cheng. When he reached into his sleeve to get the banknote, though, it was gone.

In retracing his path searching for the banknote, he finds himself in front of Jingci Monastery:

只叫得苦，慌忙轉步，一路尋回來時，那裡見。正悶之間，來到靜慈寺前，
忽地理想起那金山寺長老法海禪師曾分付來：‘倘若那妖怪來杭州纏你，可
來淨慈寺內來尋我。如今不尋，更待何期。’ 95

All he could do was bewail his bitter lot. Frantically, he turned around and went back the way he had come to see where the banknote might be. Just as he was in the midst of feeling depressed, he came to the front of Jingci Monastery. Suddenly, he remembered what the Zen master Abbot Fahai had instructed him to do: ‘If that evil spirit comes Hangzhou to torment you again, you can come in to Jingci Monastery’ to find me. If you do not search for me these days, I will await the time of your visit all the more.’

This is reminiscent of the fisherman’s stumbling upon the Peach Blossom Source in “Record of the Peach Blossom Source”:

晉太元中·武陵人·捕魚為業·忘路之遠近；忽逢桃花林...96

During the Taiyuan Era of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, a man from Wuling who made his living as a fisherman went up a stream, and forgot how far the way was. Suddenly he came upon a grove of peach trees…

Like the fisherman in this story by Tao Yuanming who finds the Peach Blossom Source without actively searching, Xu Xuan does not consciously search for the monastery, but finds himself there, nonetheless. For one, this suggests an element of fate, which can be seen in all of these works. It also hints at the possibility that when the unconscious is allowed to operate, one’s true nature becomes the guide. This theme has resonance with the Daoist concept of non-ado,97

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95 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 421-422.
96 Tao Yuanming, 桃花源記; Record of the Peach Blossom Source, in Tao Yuanming quanji (Taipei: Shang zhou chu ban, 2019), 216-217.
97 See Chapter 37 of Tao Te Ching: D.C Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 54-55.
in which one accomplishes something by not exerting one’s own will. Xu Xuan appears to be in a sort of reverie here, and it may be that his searching for the bank-note brings him to a state in which he focuses single-mindedly, and which then leads to the deeper state of mind that guides him to where he should be. What is clear here is that Xu Xuan finds himself exactly where he needs to be, and it is not because he intends to be there.

Xu Xuan then enters the monastery to look for the abbot. It is here that he encounters his last, and deepest frustration, leading to his loss of hope:

急入寺中，問監寺道：‘動聞和尚，法海禪師曾來上剎也未？’
那和尚道：‘不曾到來。’
許宣聽得說不在，越悶。折身便回來長橋堍下，自言自語道：‘時衰鬼弄人’，我要性命何用？’看著一湖清水，卻待要跳！正是：

閻王判你三更到，定不容人到四更。\(^98\)

He rushed into the monastery, and asked the caretaker: ‘May I ask if Master Fahai has come by the monastery yet?’
The monk replied, ‘He has not been here yet.’
Upon hearing that the Abbot was not there, Xu Xuan became even more depressed. He turned around and left, returning to the area under one end of Long Bridge. He said to himself under his breath, ‘When one’s time is almost up, ghosts come to torment one.’ Of what use is my even wanting to live?’ Looking at the blue-green waters of the lake, he readied himself to jump! Definitely:

*When King Yama rules that your time will come during the third watch, He most definitely won’t let you reach the fourth.*

Xu Xuan has lost almost all hope now, and he is at the point of committing suicide. It is at this point when Abbot Fahai walks by, and he relents:

許宣正欲跳水，只聽得背後有人叫道：‘男子漢何故輕生？死了一萬口，只當五千雙，有事何不問我！’ \(^99\)

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\(^{98}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 422.
\(^{99}\) Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 422.
Xu Xuan was just about to jump into the water when he heard a voice behind him call out, ‘For what reason would a real man take life so lightly? When 10,000 die, it can be counted as only 5,000 pairs. If something was wrong, why didn’t you ask me?’

It is desperation that brings Xu Xuan to the point of suicide, and this may be a necessary part of his journey. Following his joy at the imperial amnesty, he began to see hope in the world again. With the return of Madam White, and his futile attempts to capture her and hide from her, though, he has come to the point where he can see nothing left in this world for him. If he still saw some hope in the world, perhaps he might wish to linger, and not take his final step towards enlightenment. This motif is one that appears in some form or other in all of the works in this study. In some cases, it is explicitly portrayed, in others, it is portrayed with more subtlety. The world is such that the nature of it must be laid bare to some before they are willing to relinquish their attachments to it.

4.10 Imprisonment and Release

With Abbot Fahai’s help, Xu Xuan captures Madam White and Little Green. While the title of the story indicates that they will be imprisoned “forever” (‘永’ means ‘forever’), there is a distant time set for their release:

西湖水乾，江湖不起，雷峰塔倒，白蛇出世。100

When West Lake dries up, and the rivers and lakes do not rise, when Thunder Peak Pagoda topples, the white snake will come [back] into the world.

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100 Feng Menglong, “Bai niangzi,” 423.
This is a harsh punishment, but the future release of Madam White and Little Green seems to hint at the possibility that, given Little Green’s thousand years of cultivation, the two of them may eventually become enlightened as well.

Xu Xuan then decides to leave the worldly life, a decision that he probably would not have made if not for his fateful encounter with Madam White:

惟有許宣情願出家，禮拜禪師為師，就霧峰塔披剃為僧。修行數年，一夕坐化去了。101

Only Xu Xuan was willing to leave the family. He acknowledged the Abbot as his master, and took the tonsure at Thunder Peak Pagoda. After years of cultivation, he attained enlightenment one evening during sitting meditation, and thus left the world.

Xu Xuan attains something that very few attain - enlightenment. It is almost certainly because of his long, bitter experience that he has made the decision to do so, and is able to succeed in his goal. If he had not encountered misfortune, he would have most likely lived a quiet, uneventful life. Therefore, it can be argued that only suffering pushed him to the point of serious contemplation and cultivation. While Madam White brought him much suffering, in a sense, he should be grateful to her (as Chen Kechang thanked his persecutors). Without her, he most likely would not have found freedom.

4.11 Conclusion

“Madam White is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Pagoda” presents what is possibly the longest and most subtle depiction of the path to enlightenment of any of the stories in this study. Xu Xuan, like the other protagonists, is not a conventional hero. He struggles with worldly attachments, but often ends up just falling back into indulging these attachments. He is often passive in his reaction to events. He is not a mover and a shaker; rather, it is other people, beings,

and events that seem to almost always determine his path. His attempts to escape from Madam White seem timid and halting, often ending in his temporarily giving up and resigning himself to his situation. It is only at the very end of the story that he becomes more active in determining the course of his life (though his life is, arguably, already determined by fate and karma). In this respect, Xu Xuan’s struggle comes across as realistic. His periods of progress and regression make it appear almost as if he were a person struggling to overcome an addiction.

Another theme that is brought up is that of the importance, or lack thereof, of morality. This story emphasizes morality very strongly in its equating Xu Xuan’s desire for sensual pleasure and greed as being harmful. This moralistic element cannot be ignored. However, Xu Xuan breaks a promise to Madam White on at least one occasion, and doing so appears to be the right thing to do, even though it is, strictly speaking, immoral. In addition, it is exactly Xu Xuan’s “immorality” in the sense of indulging his worldly attachments that brings him to new awareness. If he had insisted on being a “moral” person from the beginning, he would arguably not have progressed as far as he did. Thus, his immorality actually helped him to make spiritual progress.  

In this story, we also see a more judgmental perspective on “evil” than in some of the other stories. Abbot Fahai seems ready to kill both Madam White and Little Green, but does not do so because of Little Green’s 1,000 years of cultivation. His and others’ referring to them as evil spirits and monsters, and his determination to punish them, seems to go beyond a mere desire to protect humanity; it seems to enter into the territory of puritanical judgment. (This attitude is not completely baseless, as he feels that Madam White would eventually have killed Xu Xuan.)

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102 In the novel *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse, the protagonist, Siddhartha, must also immerse himself in the vulgar world and its desires for years before he can make progress toward enlightenment. If he had insisted on remaining “pure” he would not have been able to get past a certain point, and would have lived out his life without attaining enlightenment.
Nonetheless, despite Abbot Fahai’s judgmental perspective, and the imagery associated with Madam White that suggests that she is inherently evil, there are hints here that evil is a matter of degree, and that all of us are somewhere on a spectrum, a range of spiritual progress. Madam White does show some restraint, and her defense of Little Green at the end of the story shows that even she has some sense of principles. The possibility is left open that she may also be able to attain enlightenment, though she has a longer way to go than Xu Xuan does. While Chen Kechang thanks his persecutors after he has become enlightened, Xu Xuan does not, but perhaps he should do so. All of this appears to be the operation of karma and fate, and in that respect, Madam White - in being the bringer of his suffering - was as much a helper to him in attaining enlightenment as anyone in this story.
CHAPTER 5
A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

The focus of this way is an inner realization of the deep relatedness of all things beyond past and future, living and dying. This requires a basic shift in a person’s understanding of what is most valuable in life, and is expressed in metaphors of union with ultimate reality, illumination, and freedom. It leads a person to experience serenity and inner strength and spontaneously express compassion.

Frederick Streng - *Understanding the Religious Life*

5.1 Introduction

Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” is the one English story, and the one Christian story, in this study. Like the Buddhist and Daoist stories in this study, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” also portrays the intrusion of the unseen order of reality into the life of a reluctant protagonist in the form of her fateful encounter with the Misfit, an encounter which helps her realize her religious heroism. As it is a Christian story, “salvation” would probably be the proper term for what happens in it, as opposed to “enlightenment.” However, with that said, it seems very much like a story of what Buddhists might term “sudden enlightenment.” In addition, it features a protagonist who endures loss and suffering before she experiences her awakening. Indeed, it is only through loss and suffering that she is able to open her mind and become receptive to what O’Connor terms “grace.” This story is especially interesting in terms of its portrayal of unconventional religious heroism, of its portrayal of suffering and loss as a means to religious awakening, and of its subtly downplaying the importance of conventional morality as a prerequisite for religious heroism. As to the role of suffering in religious

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{頓悟 dunwu is the Chinese term for sudden enlightenment.}\]
awakening, O’Connor made it very clear that violence (which entails suffering, both physical and mental) is the element that helps bring her characters to religious awareness:

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.²

In the other stories in this study, violence, or the threat of violence, has played a role in changing the minds of the protagonists. O’Connor leaves little room for doubt here about her views on the role of violence in her writing (which fits into our framework of suffering because of the fear, mental anguish, and physical pain that it creates). Therefore, though I will still address this dynamic, and O’Connor’s views on it, my main focus will be on aspects of the story that seem less apparent, but which are relevant to this study: unconventional religious heroism, the Grandmother’s³ religious heroism, the process of the Grandmother’s change of mind, and the process of the Misfit’s change of mind.

5.2 Synopsis

“A Good Man is Hard to Find” is a story about a family trip in which the traveling family has a car accident on a back road, and then encounters a dangerous escaped criminal nicknamed “the Misfit.” He and his entourage of two other escaped criminals end up killing the entire family, but not before the Grandmother experiences a kind of religious awakening, and sees the Misfit - and her relationship to him - from the perspective of what we have been terming the unseen order of reality.

5.3 The Reluctant Protagonist

³ In this story, O’Connor does not use any capital letters for the protagonist (“the grandmother”), but she uses all capital letters for the antagonist (“The Misfit”). I will refer to them as “the Grandmother” and “the Misfit” except when quoting the story or quoting Flannery O’Connor directly.
In her essay, “On Her Own Work,” O’Connor sums up the theme of the reluctant religious protagonist (the Grandmother, in this case) succinctly:

The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances, she is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely.\(^4\)

Implicit in this statement is the idea that religious commitment is larger than life itself, and that death is an opportunity for religious heroism. In the Buddhist stories we have seen, the protagonists will themselves to die in the process of becoming enlightened. In the Daoist story, the protagonist, who is guided to enlightenment, stays alive throughout. The Grandmother has no such freedom in this story, though. She faces death no matter what, and her only choice is whether to embrace religious awakening or not. In a similar respect to the protagonists that we have seen so far, the Grandmother does not appear to want to contemplate larger issues than those that usually arise in her daily life. Like these other protagonists, and people in general, she also does not want to leave behind what she sees as familiar and safe. The Grandmother’s fateful encounter with the Misfit has the characteristics of an intrusion of what we have been referring to as the unseen order of reality, which Flannery O’Connor refers to as “mystery.” It is frightening, even terrifying. It comes in the form of an encounter with a violent criminal who will upend her life and take away from her all that she knows.

Regarding the theme of the reluctant protagonist, and contemporary views on this topic, O’Connor writes:

Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be apparent. The assumptions that underlie this use of it, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries. These are assumptions to which a large part of the modern audience takes exception.\(^5\)

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In the modern world, there are plenty of things to give us comfort, and plenty of things for us to put our faith in. These things help people to forget temporarily about death, or give people the idea that death can be pushed back and kept away. O’Connor felt that putting one’s faith in these trappings of modernity, though, only created other dangers. For example, in her essay, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” she remarks:

> Since the eighteenth century, the popular spirit of each age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man, a belief that is still going strong even though this is the first generation to face total extinction because of these advances.\(^6\)

The belief in technology and science that she questions here is like a faith itself, and O’Connor clearly sees it as a destructive one. It is, nonetheless, a tempting one, and it is easy for people to believe that these things will provide them safety and security. The idea that people drift further and further from faith as science and technology progress is also implicit here. Before such advancements in technology, perhaps it was easier for people to embrace faith (or religion), as the threat of death seemed much closer and more visible. With the advent of modern technologies and institutions, the immediacy of the threat of death may appear to have been pushed back temporarily, creating the illusion that merely relying on technological advances will keep people safe. This may explain O’Connor’s remarks regarding the tendency of modern people to “take exception” to her ideas about the central Christian mysteries. In this story, we see a situation in which this faith in modernity is shattered by the abrupt intrusion of The Misfit,\(^7\) and of the violence he brings with him.

### 5.4 Religious Heroism

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\(^7\) O’Connor capitalizes both words in this appellation in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”
Religious heroism in these four stories has been, arguably, a passive phenomenon. As these protagonists appear to want to cling to the world and its pleasures for as long as possible, it is not their conscious volition that brings about the realization of their religious awakenings, but rather qualities that lie below the surface, and which do not initially appear to find expression in their conscious thoughts. Their religious heroism emerges as they are forced to deal with hardship and suffering. Along these same lines, we will consider another related idea brought up by O’Connor: that the worldly expression of religious heroism can sometimes be manifested as a form of inability.

O’Connor states that the Grandmother in this story is “is in the most significant position life offers the Christian,”8 thus asserting the Grandmother’s opportunity to display religious heroism. Like the other protagonists, the Grandmother does not appear to be a heroic person. She does not seek out this opportunity intentionally, and (like most people) would avoid it if she could. Her opportunity is thrust upon her, and has fateful characteristics that make it seem like an intrusion of the unseen order of reality. For example, prior to her encounter with the Misfit, the Grandmother mentions him on at least three occasions.9 When she does see him for the first time, she feels as if she knows him:

The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was.10

While the Grandmother has seen the Misfit’s picture in the paper,11 it seems that what she feels now is more than mere facial recognition. In particular, the fact that she feels like she has known

8 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 110.
him all her life makes it seem like her life has been leading to this moment. This encounter seems to be a matter of fate.

Despite the fateful nature of this encounter, the Grandmother seems to lack the wherewithal to rise to the occasion. She can be manipulative and sneaky and she is often backward and ignorant in terms of her views on society and the world. Moreover, she is impulsive, and she does much in this story that seems cowardly. When the threat of death arrives in the form of the Misfit and his entourage, the Grandmother and her family do what the Misfit asks them to do, even when it means going to their deaths. Of course, this is what most people would do under similar circumstances, in the hope of buying time, or in the hope that they might be able to survive by cooperating. It is understandable, and to criticize the Grandmother for her passive role in this situation would be tantamount to blaming the victim. When we think of heroism, though, there is an expectation that the heroic protagonist (the Grandmother in this case) will somehow stand out, and do what the average person would not, that he or she will defy or trick the antagonists (the Misfit and his entourage), and thus survive the ordeal. In this regard, while the Grandmother’s passive reaction is realistic, she does not seem to possess heroic qualities.

Not only does the Grandmother come across as unheroic, she also has some noticeable foibles. Among them, a tendency to manipulate people is one of the Grandmother’s less likeable qualities. At the beginning of the story, she tries to scare and shame her son Bailey into changing their travel plans by showing him a newspaper article about The Misfit:

‘Now look here, Bailey,’ she said, ‘see here, read this,’ and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. ‘Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did.’

12 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 967.
The Grandmother does not seem to genuinely believe that there is any real danger that they will encounter The Misfit (though this is an ominous foreshadowing of events that will happen later in the story). This is, rather, something she can use to persuade Bailey to go to Tennessee instead of Florida.

Later, she manipulates the children into pestering their parents so that they take a side trip on a dirt road to see an old plantation house that the Grandmother wants to see. She excites their curiosity by making up a story about the plantation:

‘There was a secret panel in this house,’ she said craftily, not telling the truth, but wishing that she were, ‘and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but was never found…’

Her story has the desired effect on the children:

The children began to yell and scream that they wanted to see the house with the secret panel. John Wesley kicked the back of the front seat and June Star hung over her mother’s shoulder and whined desperately into her ear that they never had any fun, even on their vacation, that they could never do what THEY wanted to do. The baby began to scream and John Wesley kicked the back of the chair so hard that his father could feel the blows in his kidney.

The Grandmother could not get Bailey to go to Tennessee, but she has now used the slight dysfunction of her family to her advantage in order to get her way with regard to taking this side trip. She has manipulated the children into pestering the parents to get what she wants, and she seems well aware that her son and daughter-in-law will take the easy way out by letting the kids have their way.

The Grandmother can also be sneaky. For example, she secretly brings her cat along with her on the trip, but she does not tell Bailey about it:

She had her big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus in one corner, and underneath it she was hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it. She didn’t intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he

would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and asphyxiate himself. Her son, Bailey, didn’t like to arrive at a motel with a cat.\textsuperscript{15}

While the Grandmother does not do this for malicious reasons, her bringing the cat (among other things she does) also plays a role in causing their car accident later in the story, which puts them at the mercy of The Misfit.

Despite her ability to understand and manipulate her family, though, she does not come across as one given to deep thought, or careful consideration of the issues. At the beginning of the story, when trying to convince Bailey to change his travel plans and go to Tennessee instead of Florida, she argues that it will be a learning opportunity for the children:

‘The children have been to Florida before,’ the old lady said. ‘You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to East Tennessee.’\textsuperscript{16}

Along the way, though, she shows that she also might have some learning to do about the wider world. For example, the grandmother has a simplistic view of the past, which can be seen in her correcting John Wesley and June Star:

‘Let’s go through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much,’ John Wesley said.

‘If I were a little boy,’ said the grandmother, ‘I wouldn’t talk about my native state that way. Tennessee has the mountains and Georgia has the hills.’

‘Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground,’ John Wesley said, ‘and Georgia is a lousy state, too.’

‘You said it,’ June Star said.

‘In my time,’ said the grandmother, folding her thin-veined fingers, ‘children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then.’\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 968.
\textsuperscript{16} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 968.
\textsuperscript{17} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 969.
The Grandmother’s romanticized view of the past here is clearly a simplistic one, which she does not appear to question. Later, when she talks to Red Sammy at lunch, her comments on politics again betray a limited understanding of current events:

He [Red Sammy] and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right.\textsuperscript{18}

The Grandmother also uses racist terms when she describes an African-American boy whom they see along the way. When June Star remarks that the boy did not “have any britches on,” the Grandmother explains that African-American children “in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture....”\textsuperscript{19} Her use of racist terms most likely reflects the way the Grandmother has spoken all her life. The Grandmother does not appear to question this sort of language, and her assessment of the socio-economic conditions of African-Americans is obviously a simplistic and ignorant one.\textsuperscript{20}

Because of all of these things, there is a temptation to judge the Grandmother harshly. In her essay, “On Her Own Work,” Flannery O’Connor writes about how she has met some teachers who saw the Grandmother as evil:

I’ve talked to a number of teachers who use this story in class and who tell their students that the Grandmother is evil, that in fact, she’s a witch, even down to the cat.\textsuperscript{21}

She then relates her response to a teacher who, in teaching about this story, did not understand his Southern students’ “resistance” to his belief that the grandmother was a bad person:

\textsuperscript{18} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 971
\textsuperscript{19} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 969
\textsuperscript{21} Flannery O’Connor, \textit{Mystery and Manners}, 110
I had to tell him that they resisted it because they all had grandmothers or great-aunts just like her at home, and they knew, from personal experience, that the old lady lacked comprehension, but that she had a good heart.  

The Grandmother’s having a “good heart” brings us to the theme of her religious heroism in this story. She is concerned with many things that seem trivial, like appearance, and being seen as a lady. She is manipulative and sneaky. She “lacks comprehension” - to use O’Connor’s words - when it comes to her simplistic and unquestioning outlook on the world. Cynicism and mean-spiritedness, however, do not appear to have a place in the Grandmother’s character.

In addition, as we are operating on the premise that the unseen order of reality is an active presence in these religious stories, we must assume that there is a reason why the Grandmother is in the position she is in - that it is not because of random chance that she finds herself in this situation. It would seem that she is not in this position by chance, but because of some qualities that she possesses that give her, as O’Connor writes, “capacity for grace.” The foreshadowing that appears in first half of the story seems to indicate that the grandmother’s encounter with the Misfit has an element of fate to it, and that her encounter with The Misfit is not an accident. Therefore, some quality of hers must play a role in directing her to where she is on this fateful day. Like the other protagonists in this study, the grandmother has spiritual qualities that are not readily apparent, but which become more apparent when one slows down and looks past her more prominent foibles. O’Connor has stated that the Grandmother has a good heart. One example of this is her sense of joy in life. Another is her insistence on people’s goodness. Both of these qualities betray a certain innocence, and this innocence is arguably what gains the Grandmother capacity for grace. In addition, we will consider the Grandmother’s belief in

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22 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 110
23 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 111
24 The Misfit is mentioned on pages 967, 968, and 971.
25 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 110
people’s goodness as a form of inability - the inability to see badness in people. We will consider the idea of this sort of worldly inability as an aspect of religious heroism.

The Grandmother is almost childlike in her expectation of the family trip, despite not getting her way with regard to going to Tennessee. For all that she has complained, she does not seem less enthusiastic about it:

The next morning, the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go.26

The grandmother’s sense of adventure seems to come from a sense of joy in life, and that comes partly from being with people. For example, while she manipulates the children, as we have seen, she is also the one who spends the most time engaging with them. She is the one who curls June Star’s hair,27 she sits with the kids in the back seat,28 and she seems to genuinely enjoy playing with the baby:

The grandmother offered to hold the baby and the children’s mother passed him over the front seat to her. She set him on her knee and bounced him and told him about the things they were passing. She rolled her eyes and screwed up her mouth and stuck her leathery thin face into his smooth bland one. Occasionally he gave her a faraway smile.29

This shows the reader another side of the Grandmother’s character, a side that takes joy in interacting with people. We also see this quality in her when the family stops at Red Sammy’s diner for lunch and she asks Bailey to dance:

The children’s mother put a dime in the machine and played ‘The Tennessee Waltz,’ and the grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn’t have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother’s brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair.30

26 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 968
27 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 968
28 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 968
29 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 969
30 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 970
“Sunny” is an apt description of the grandmother’s character here, and Bailey serves as a foil for her “sunniness” in that he is unwilling to relax and enjoy himself. When the grandmother continues to act like she is dancing. She did not get her way as far as going to Tennessee is concerned, but she is still clearly happy, and that happiness seems to come from being out with her family on a trip. The grandmother stands out for doing some very foolish things in this story, but she also stands out in that she is the only one who is clearly enjoying herself. Lastly, the imagery of her brown, bright eyes gives physical expression to her enthusiasm and love of life.

Furthermore, despite her manipulation of the family, and her leveraging its dysfunction in order to get her way, she is the only one who tries to teach the children to follow the rules, and to be respectful. For example, before they arrive at Red Sammy’s, the grandmother insists that they do not litter:

The Grandmother ate a peanut butter sandwich and an olive, and would not let the children throw the box and paper napkins out the window.  

After they get to Red Sammy’s, and after the grandmother asks Bailey to dance, June Star tap dances on the dance floor. She receives a compliment for it from Red Sammys’s wife, but she responds rudely. The grandmother then scolds her:

‘Ain’t she cute?’ Red Sam’s wife said, leaning over the counter. ‘Would you like to come be my little girl?’
‘No, I certainly wouldn’t,’ June Star said. ‘I wouldn’t live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!’ and she ran back to the table.
‘Ain’t she cute?’ the woman repeated, stretching her mouth politely.
‘Aren’t you ashamed?’ hissed the grandmother.

No one but the grandmother says anything to June Star here.

31 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 969
32 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 970
33 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 970-971
The grandmother also has another characteristic that can be seen as an embodiment of religious heroism, and that is her trying to see the good in people. When Red Sam talks about getting cheated because he trusted two men to pay him for gas they bought on credit, for example, she emphasizes his goodness in allowing them to charge the gas:

‘Two fellers came in here last week,’ Red Sammy said, ‘driving a Chrysler. It was a old beat up car, but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?’
‘Because you’re a good man!’ the grandmother said at once.
‘Yes’m, I suppose so,’ Red Sam said as if he were struck with the answer.34

The grandmother’s assertion that Red Sam is a “good man” foreshadows events later on, when she asserts the same thing, as we shall see, about The Misfit.35 The relevance of her doing so to the theme of religious heroism is in her tendency to see the good in people. Red Sam’s surprise at being told he is a good man, and not a fool, for trusting people shows that this sort of uncynical view is perhaps not a common one. The grandmother focuses on his goodness instead of others’ badness.

It may be, however, that the grandmother is being more polite than she is sincere. This may just be her almost instinctive, polite way of reacting to people’s self-deprecation. As we have seen in the other works in this study, there is a tendency for these protagonists to act in a perfunctory or insincere way with regard to religious matters, but later to attain religious awakening, as if their initial insincerity veiled something more sincere. I will argue that while the Grandmother is capable of being insincere, at some level, she still believes that there is goodness in people, and in the context of this story, I will argue that that belief in goodness is equivalent to an expression of faith on her part. What is more to the point might be to consider the

34 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 971
35 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975-979
Grandmother’s assertions about people’s goodness to be signs of a sort of inability. O’Connor discusses her view of inability in her comments on her novel *Wise Blood* in *Mystery and Manners*:

*Wise Blood* was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a major stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think of it as a matter of no great consequence. For them, Hazel Motes’ integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author, his integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one’s integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that it usually does...

Normally we think of inability as a weakness, as a drawback. O’Connor’s ideas here challenge the idea that inability need always be seen as a bad thing, especially in the context of religious heroism and transcendent morality. If we consider the example of someone who is unable to hurt another person, the idea of inability as a kind of integrity begins to make sense. We have considered the example of Huck Finn’s “immoral” decision not to betray Jim in Chapter One of this study when discussing transcendent morality. His case is illustrative in this context as well, because of his own inability to harden his heart against Jim and betray him.37

Huck’s inability to harden his heart against Jim is more a testament to his strength than to his weakness. Thus, whether or not the Grandmother is always sincere or not may not be the point. What may be more to the point is that she is unable to see the badness in people, and that this quality is a form of integrity, even an expression of religious heroism.

Part of the Grandmother’s enjoying life is expressed in her just in taking time to notice small things that others do not appear to take the time to notice. For example, earlier in the story, before arriving at Red Sammy’s Famous Barbecue, the grandmother is watching the scenery out of the car window, when she sees the following:

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36 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 114
37 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 213
The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled.\textsuperscript{38}

Much of the imagery in this story is bleak, but this scene is beautiful and brilliant. The grandmother notices it, as she is watching, but it is not clear if the others see it. If the grandmother had not been paying attention, she might have missed it, as well. The significance of this may merely lie in the Grandmother’s tendency to notice such things, while others are preoccupied with more “important” things. To read more into it, this may also be the case in her appraisal of Red Sam’s goodness. It may be for the same reason that she looks for goodness in people, which would be an aspect of faith and, therefore, religious heroism.

As to the sunlight making “the meanest of them” sparkle,” it is hard not to feel the urge to apply some sort of symbolic significance here. Do the trees represent people? If so, do even the lowliest have qualities that give them value and worth? Or does the Grandmother just happen to see beauty even in the simplest of things, while others are too preoccupied to notice?

An excerpt from Matthew Henry’s Commentary on Psalm 113 shares the O’Connor’s phrasing, “the meanest of them”:

Psalm CXIII

5 Who is like unto the Lord] Those who are highly exalted are generally unapproachable; they are proud and overbearing, or so surrounded with magnificence and flatterers, that to them the poor have no access; but God, though infinitely exalted, humbleth himself to behold even heaven (sic) itself, and much more does he humble himself when he condescends to behold earth and her inhabitants, (ver. 6) But so does he love his creatures that he rejoices over even the meanest of them to do them good.\textsuperscript{39}

This appears to have relevance to the theme of unconventional religious heroism as we have been discussing it, especially with regard to the tendency for these protagonists not to be people who come across as especially moral or outstanding:

\textsuperscript{38} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 969

\textsuperscript{39} The Holy Bible, with a Commentary and Critical Notes, by A. Clarke (United Kingdom: n.p., 1836), 2310.
God sometimes makes glorious his own wisdom and power, when, having some great work to do, he employs those least likely, and least thought of for it by themselves or others. The apostles were sent from fishing to be fishers of men. And this is God's constant method in his kingdom of grace. He takes men, by nature beggars, and even traitors, to be his favourites, his children, kings and priests unto him; and numbers them with the princes of his chosen people.⁴⁰

James Parker, in his article “The Passion of Flannery O’Connor,” also touches on this theme, in writing about O’Connor’s story, “Revelation”:

In O’Connor’s story ‘Revelation,’ for instance, the pious Mrs. Turpin is attacked by an insane girl in a doctor’s waiting room. ‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,’ the girl tells her. Later, while hosing down her pigs—divinely concussed, so to speak—Mrs. Turpin has a vision: a cavalcade moving toward the crack of heaven, a ‘vast horde of souls’ led by ‘white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives,’ and ‘battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.’⁴¹

In this case, those leading the way to Heaven are not the socially desirable, much less the stable, sane people. If “freaks” and “lunatics” are more spiritually aware than so-called “normal” or “sane” people, then this can help explain why unconventional religious heroism sometimes appears the way it does in these stories. Indeed, these “freaks” and “lunatics” bring to mind the Buddhist monk and the Daoist priest in Chapter One of The Dream of the Red Chamber, dismissed by Zhen Shiyin as insane.⁴²

The quote continues as follows, with commentary on morality:

These are the poor in spirit, coming into their inheritance. Bringing up the rear, meanwhile, are the righteous, the organized, the scrupulous and stainless, the people like Mrs. Turpin and her husband. “They were marching behind the others with great dignity … Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”⁴³

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⁴⁰ Matthew Henry, Commentary on Psalms 113, King James Bible Online, last modified September 1st, 2019, https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Psalms-Chapter-113/
⁴² Cao Xueqin, Honglou meng (The Dream of the Red Chamber) (Taipei: Sanmin, 2014), 1-13
⁴³ James Parker, “The Passion of Flannery O’Connor”
If the “poor in spirit” lead the way to Heaven, then how much more “poor in spirit” are those “bringing up the rear”? Here, it is not the “righteous, the organized, the scrupulous and stainless” who lead the way. Furthermore, those at the rear are not given any advantage by their “great dignity.” As if in a final refutation of worldly morality, we see that “even their virtues were being burned away.” O’Connor does not portray these people as being denied salvation, but she does portray salvation as being something very different from that which “moral” and “upright” people may imagine it to be. The imagery of virtues being “burned away” also suggests that things of value to people in this world, even abstract and seemingly good things, are annihilated in the process of transformation, leaving behind nothing but what is essential. This also brings to mind the “Fasting of the Mind/Heart” passage from Zhuangzi, in which emptying the mind of worldly things allows the mind to be illuminated by the light that can now shine in. O’Connor thus uses her fiction to challenge people’s worldly concepts.

In “The Passion of Flannery O’Connor,” James Parker uses imagery that, in some respects, evokes Daoist and Buddhist ideas in describing O’Connor’s idea of salvation through a “burning away” of the ego:

For O’Connor, the space left by the destroyed ego—we can imagine it as a kind of humming vacancy, drifting with pieces of burned paper—was holy because it belonged to God.

The term “vacancy” here seems more at home in Daoism and Buddhism than it does in Christianity, and this idea - of removing the worldly in order to make space for that which belongs to God - evokes passages such as Zhuangzi’s “Fasting of the Mind” and the Buddhist

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45 James Parker, “The Passion of Flannery O’Connor”
“Heart Sutra”\textsuperscript{47} which make use of the concepts of void 虛 and emptiness 空, respectively, as metaphors for a state of heightened spiritual awareness brought about by the removal of worldly things and concepts. The Buddhist concept of the Twelve-linked Chain of Causation also sees the extinguishing of worldly phenomena as a means to ending worldly suffering:

\[
\begin{align*}
'\text{是為癡滅故行滅，行滅故識滅，識滅故名色滅，名色滅故六入滅，六入}
\text{滅故觸滅，觸滅故受滅，受滅故愛滅，愛滅故取滅，取滅故有滅，有滅故}
\text{生滅，生滅故老、死、憂、悲、苦惱滅。}' \textsuperscript{48}
\end{align*}
\]

‘As to these causations, when ignorance is extinguished, volitional action is extinguished; when volitional action is extinguished, consciousness is extinguished; when consciousness is extinguished, name and form are extinguished; when name and form are extinguished, the ‘six entrances’ are extinguished; when the six entrances are extinguished, contact is extinguished; when contact is extinguished, sense is extinguished; when sense is extinguished, craving is extinguished; when craving is extinguished, grasping is extinguished; when grasping is extinguished, becoming is extinguished; when becoming is extinguished, existence is extinguished; when existence is extinguished, old age, death, worry, sadness, suffering, and vexation are extinguished.

With this realization, the bodhisattva attained enlightenment:

\[
\begin{align*}
'\text{爾時，菩薩逆順觀十二因緣，如實知，如實見已，即於座上成阿耨多羅}
\text{三藐三菩提。}' \textsuperscript{49}
\end{align*}
\]

‘At that time, the bodhisattva observed forward and backward the Twelve-linked Chain of Causation. And only then did he truly know and truly perceive. And so, on his seat, he completed anuttara samyak sambodhi - supreme enlightenment.’

The Grandmother’s mind, though, would appear to be full of the concerns of the world (as most people’s minds likely are). I will argue that it is the grandmother’s taking pleasure in being with people, and her inability to see the badness in people that brings her to the point that she


\textsuperscript{48} Taisho Tripitaka: Dirgha\textsuperscript{49}gama Sutra, Sutta Central, https://suttacentral.net/da1/lzh/taisho.

\textsuperscript{49} Taisho Tripitaka: Dirgha\textsuperscript{49}gama Sutra, Sutta Central, https://suttacentral.net/da1/lzh/taisho.
finds herself in in this story, but it will be her ordeal that helps to clear her mind, and prepare her for her “moment of clarity.”\textsuperscript{50} As to her change of mind, her upcoming encounter with The Misfit will help her to achieve that.

5.5 The Role of Suffering and the Grandmother’s Process of Transformation

Much of the suffering experienced by the protagonist is in the form of mental anguish brought on by terror and by the death of her family members at the hands of the Misfit and his gang in the second half of the second half of the story. The ordeal starts with the car going off the road and turning over after the Grandmother’s cat jumps out of the valise onto Bailey’s neck,\textsuperscript{51} and culminates with the death of the Grandmother, after the others in her family have been killed.\textsuperscript{52}

The Misfit and his gang arrive not long after the car turns over. After the Grandmother recognizes him, the Misfit says, ominously, that it would have been better if she had not recognized him:

‘Yes’m,’ the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, “but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me.”\textsuperscript{53}

The implication is clear: in order to avoid being reported to the authorities, the Misfit will need to kill them. What started as a family outing has now become a nightmare. Before long, Bailey and John Wesley are taken off into the woods to be shot.\textsuperscript{54} Shortly after that, Bailey’s wife, June Star, and the baby are taken off to the woods to be shot.\textsuperscript{55} Finally, after trying to persuade the Misfit not to kill her, the Grandmother is killed near the end of the story by the Misfit.\textsuperscript{56} This

\textsuperscript{50} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979.
\textsuperscript{51} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 973.
\textsuperscript{52} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 977-979.
\textsuperscript{53} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.
\textsuperscript{54} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.
\textsuperscript{55} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978.
\textsuperscript{56} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979.
story could almost pass for a horror story in its portrayal of a family facing their imminent, violent deaths. It is hard to imagine the degree of mental anguish they experience.

It is during this ordeal, though, that the Grandmother begins her process of transformation, and because of this ordeal that she attains religious awakening. Like the protagonists of the other stories, she is brought to the point of desperation, and with this desperation comes sincerity/honesty. At the point of unvarnished honesty, there seems to be the opportunity for awakening.

The process begins with the Grandmother’s alternately asserting that the Misfit is a good man, and her begging for her life. Her desire to survive is, of course, completely understandable, and most people would probably do as she does in similar circumstances. As to her insistence on the Misfit’s being a good man, she may be sincere at some level, but it also seems that she is largely driven by the hope that she can appease the Misfit into not shooting her by doing so. For example, after asking if the Misfit would “shoot a lady,” the Grandmother then asserts the Misfit’s goodness:

‘Listen,’ the grandmother almost screamed, ‘I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!’

In this case, her screaming makes it seem that her main motivation is desperation. Shortly after that, she reiterates:

‘Listen,’ she said, ‘you shouldn’t call yourself The Misfit because I know you’re a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell.’

The Grandmother also asks the Misfit if he prays:

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The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him. ‘Do you ever pray?’ She asked.\textsuperscript{60}

Later, she urges him to pray:

‘Pray, pray,’ the grandmother began, ‘pray, pray…’\textsuperscript{61}

It is not clear just how religious the Grandmother actually is. She will continue to tell the Misfit he is a good man, and urge him to pray until almost the end of the story. Up to this point in the story, though, she has not professed any religious sentiments. The family does not seem to be particularly religious, either. None of them (aside from the Grandmother) say or do anything to indicate that they are religious at any point in the story. This does not mean that the Grandmother is not religious, or that she is being phony when she talks about praying. What it does seem to mean is that, while she may consider herself religious, religion does not seem to be central to her life. Again, this is not to judge the Grandmother, but rather to consider how sincere she is when talking to the Misfit. She may feel that she is being sincere, but whatever religious sentiments she may have do not appear to be central to her outlook on life. Her saying these things may be done more out of habit for her than as the expression of a sincerely-felt commitment. O’Connor describes what the Grandmother says about religious matters up to the time of her religious awakening “prattling.”\textsuperscript{62}

The Grandmother, though, is not a simple, stock character, despite her sometimes simplistic outlook on life. Much of what she says is blurted out - most likely without a great deal of thought or introspection - but that does not have to mean that she is entirely insincere. In her essay, “On

\textsuperscript{60} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976-977.
\textsuperscript{61} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 977.
her Own Work,” O’Connor concedes that the Grandmother is “a hypocritical old soul,”\textsuperscript{63} but she also defends the Grandmother, writing that she has a “good heart.”\textsuperscript{64} Her statements about the Misfit’s goodness and about how he should pray may be platitudes uttered in desperation, but there is still arguably some truth behind these otherwise superficial sentiments. As we have seen with the other protagonists, they are not especially devout themselves. Lan Caihe makes fun of Zhongli of the Han for having to lead an ascetic life devoid of worldly pleasures. Chen Kechang becomes a Buddhist monk, advised by a fortune teller to consider doing so after his failing to pass the provincial-level civil-service exams three times, but only with a sense of resignation. Xu Xuan is more than willing to visit temples and make observances, but it is only after a long experience of suffering that he decides to seek enlightenment as a Buddhist monk.

As death approaches, and as the other members of her family are taken off to be killed, the Grandmother becomes increasingly desperate, and with this desperation, she arrives at the point of honesty. Just after her daughter-in-law, June Star, and the baby have been taken away, the Grandmother finds herself almost at a loss for words:

She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, ‘Jesus, Jesus,’ meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing.\textsuperscript{65}

She finds her voice again right after that, though, as she makes a last, desperate plea:

‘Jesus!’ The old lady cried, ‘You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!’\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 111

\textsuperscript{64} Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 110

\textsuperscript{65} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978

\textsuperscript{66} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978
The Grandmother’s desperation here is clearly the driving force behind what she says. The last sentence, especially, would seem to negate everything else she has said about the Misfit’s goodness and good upbringing by implying that he is only out for money. This statement is among the strongest evidence for the Grandmother’s insincerity with regard to her assertions about the Misfit’s being a good man. She is, however, approaching the point where only honesty will be left. Her desperation and mental anguish are extreme now:

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, ‘Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!’ as if her heart would break.67

And it is this that brings her to the point where she appears to give up completely. In responding to the Misfit’s statement about whether or not Jesus performed miracles,68 she replies:

‘Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,’ the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted around her.69

This is arguably the point of sincerity for the Grandmother. She no longer has a facile response, and she no longer tries to assert what she does not necessarily know or believe. She has arrived here because of terrible suffering and loss. She has lost family, and will soon die herself. Any superficial insincerity has been “burned away” by her encounter with the Misfit. In “Experiencing Flannery O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find,’” Douglas Novich Leonard writes:

After a lifetime of easy faith that does not deserve to be called faith, she has a terrible moment of doubt. Though leaning toward disbelief, the grandmother still has not chosen. In her case doubt is refreshing honesty, and honesty clears the way for grace, and for real faith.70

67 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978
68 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978
69 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979
She has reached the point of honesty, which means admitting that she does not know. The next step for her will be religious awakening.

She is not alone though. As this story can be seen as a story about relationships, The Misfit, during all of this, has been undergoing a process of transformation, as well.

**5.6 The Misfit’s Process of Transformation**

The Misfit undergoes a similar process, in which his polite veneer gradually gets peeled away, revealing the rage that simmers beneath the surface, until he, too, reaches the point of unguarded honesty.

The Misfit’s transformation, which takes place during his conversation with the Grandmother, also involves a gradual shift from an outward display of gentlemanly politeness to his revealing his underlying and murderous rage and resentment, and then to an uncharacteristic admission of uncertainty. In this respect, the Misfit also comes to the point of sincerity. This is a process that has been facilitated by the Grandmother, just as the Misfit has facilitated the Grandmother’s process of transformation. That this is a mutual, interactive process underscores the importance of relationships in this process. Regarding the role of relationships in religious transformation, Frederick Streng notes:

> In the traditional theistic religious context, the source of this human concern [with relationships] comes from the personal discovery that one is a child or servant of God and must do his will, which requires compassion for all other members of creation. Human relations in this context are vehicles for reaching a higher understanding beyond the strictly human. 71

Streng comes very close to the nature of the relationship between the Grandmother and the Misfit in this story. The Grandmother’s calling him a good man seems out of place in light of the terrible things he has done. She will express compassion for him that he does not at all seem to

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deserve in light of his lack of compassion. However, she, and possibly he as well, will appear to reach “a higher understanding beyond the strictly human.”

At first, the Misfit comes across as polite, even gentlemanly. In light of his fearsome reputation, this is surprising. He is very polite when speaking with the family. For example, after the Grandmother identifies him, and thus dooms herself and her family, Bailey swears at her:

    Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened.\textsuperscript{72}

The Misfit’s response to this does not seem to fit the character of a cold-blooded killer:

    ‘Lady,’ he said, ‘don’t you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don’t mean. I don’t reckon he meant to talk to you thataway.’\textsuperscript{73}

The Misfit here seems polite and sympathetic, like someone who understands and cares about people. His reddening in embarrassment even seems to betray a hint of sincere feeling. Clearly, this behavior is not in harmony with his reputation.

    The Misfit’s politeness, though, while disarming, does not seem to mean much when it is clear that he does not intend to let the family live. He may be pleasant enough to talk to, but what lies underneath that polite exterior? When the Grandmother insists that he “must come from nice people,”\textsuperscript{74} The Misfit replies:

    ‘Yes, mam,’ he said, ‘finest people in the world.’ When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. ‘God never made a finer woman than my mother, and my daddy’s heart was pure gold,’ he said.\textsuperscript{75}

This appraisal of his own family will change as The Misfit becomes more honest. Later, the Misfit says:

\textsuperscript{72} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.
\textsuperscript{73} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.
\textsuperscript{74} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.
\textsuperscript{75} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.
Daddy was a card himself...You couldn’t put anything over on him. He never got in trouble with the authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them.\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.}

This suggests that his father may not have been quite the saint that the Misfit suggested he was earlier. Even later, the Misfit says he was accused of killing his father, but he denies doing it.\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 977.} It is hard to know whether the Misfit is lying or not. Either way, it seems to hint at a dysfunctional family background.

Despite the dysfunction that he hints at, the Misfit shows such politeness that it is somewhat difficult to dislike him:

> He looked at the six of them huddled together in front of him and he seemed to be embarrassed as if he couldn’t think of anything to say. ‘Ain’t a cloud in the sky,’ he remarked, looking up at it. ‘Don’t see no sun but don’t see no cloud neither.’\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 975.}

Later, he even apologizes for his appearance:

> He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again. ‘I’m sorry I don’t have a shirt on before you ladies,’ he said, hunching his shoulders slightly.\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.}

Again, it is surprising to see a cold-blooded murderer acting embarrassed and trying to make small talk. One would expect him to be rude or abusive.

Before long, though, the Misfit begins to show more honesty, and a different side of his character, one more in keeping with his reputation, emerges. Just after Bailey and John Wesley have been taken to the forest,\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.} and the Grandmother has again stated that the Misfit is “not a bit common,”\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.} he replies:

> ‘Nome,’ I ain’t a good man,’ The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, ‘but I ain’t the worst in the world neither.’\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976.}
This is reminiscent of Red Sam’s surprise at being told he was a good man by the grandmother earlier.

The Misfit then goes on to give some insight into how he has become the man he is today:

‘My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. ‘You know,’ Daddy said, ‘it’s some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it’s others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He’s going to be into everything!’”

What is important here is that the Misfit “has to know why it is.” There is a philosophical aspect to the Misfit’s character, and it will become clear that this characteristic has played an important role in the development of the Misfit’s outlook on life. If the grandmother appears to just accept things as they are, and does not feel the need to question them, The Misfit, from what he says here, seems to be the opposite sort of person: he cannot but question the way things are. As he continues to talk about his life, this will help to show how he became the violent person that he is now.

He continues to talk, after they hear pistol shots from the woods, and what he says begins to reveal how he may have begun to become the person he is now:

‘I was a gospel singer for a while,’ The Misfit said. ‘I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive once,’ and he looked up at the children’s mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; ‘I even seen a woman flogged,’ he said.

The Misfit is far from innocent. Unlike the grandmother, he has seen some terrible things happen, and his life has not been easy. He is gradually letting the grandmother, and the reader, know why he is the kind of man he is. The grandmother seems to have led a sheltered life, which

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may account for her relative innocence. Since she has, most likely, not seen the worst side of people, and of life, she appears to persist in believing that there must be goodness, even in a man like The Misfit.

The Misfit’s life story then veers into even darker territory, and he begins to hint at the source of his rage. In telling his story, it seems as if he himself wants the Grandmother to understand where he went wrong:

‘I never was a bad boy that I remember of,’ The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, ‘but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive,’ and he looked up and held her attention to him with a steady stare.86

He wants to trace his life back to the crime he committed, but he apparently cannot, and from this, a sense of anger and lack of control emerge. He was “buried alive” for something that he cannot even remember.

As he speaks, it is hard to deny that The Misfit and the grandmother have some sort of connection. We have seen her attention drawn back to him, even when her son and grandson were being taken off into the woods to be shot:

‘Bailey Boy!’ the Grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at the Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her.87

Now, it seems that he wants her to listen to him, as well. The Misfit pays more attention to her than the members of her own family have throughout the story.

The Misfit cannot remember his crime, but he is certain that he committed it:

‘Turn to the right, it was a wall,’ The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. ‘Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain’t recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come.’

‘Maybe they put you in by mistake,’ the old lady said vaguely.

‘Nome,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t no mistake. They had the papers on me.’

This will be one of the apparent reasons for the Misfit’s taking the dark road he has taken in life.

He feels he has been punished, but does not recall what he was punished for. It is from this almost cosmic sense of injustice that his rage appears to have arisen. Indeed, the Misfit then reveals that his behavior may be motivated by something other than mere greed when the grandmother suggests a reason for his crimes:

‘You must have stolen something, she said.’

The Misfit sneered slightly. ‘Nobody had nothing I wanted,’ he said.  

If nobody had anything that The Misfit wanted, then his reasons for leading a life of crime may come from some darker source, rooted in something other than a physical need.

Before the Misfit asks the Grandmother’s daughter-in-law to step off into the woods, he rationalizes his violence to the Grandmother:

‘No, lady,’ The Misfit said while he was buttoning it [the shirt] up. ‘I found out that crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done, and just be punished for it.’  

Almost all of the polite veneer has come off by now, and the Misfit’s view of the world is becoming more apparent. To him, there does not appear to be any justice in the world, and he seems to respond to the devoid-of-justice world in kind, by doing whatever he wants. If he is guilty anyway, and will be punished no matter what, especially for things he does not even remember doing, then why bother trying to be a good person?

He then explains the name he has given himself:

‘I call myself The Misfit,’ he said, ‘because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.’  

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He ties his identity to the unfairness he has experienced.

After they hear a pistol shot from the woods, he asks:

‘Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap, and another ain’t punished at all?’

Here, again, there seems to be a need for him to justify himself to the Grandmother.

The Misfit’s progression from politeness to honesty will eventually reveal the very darkest aspects of his character. After hearing more shots, the grandmother cries out in grief and desperation, but The Misfit just keeps on talking, and we then see him at his most menacing and savage:

‘Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,’ The Misfit continued, ‘and He shouldn’t have done it. He th’[r]own everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can - by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,’ he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

The Misfit has laid bare his own character here, and the near “snarl” of his voice when he finishes talking is an indication of the resentment and rage that lie beneath his polite exterior. We have seen earlier that The Misfit, from an early age, was not content without knowing why things were the way they were. It seems to follow that this need to understand the nature of things, combined with his feeling that the world is unjust, have brought him to live a life that is in harmony with what he considers to be the nature of the world. He is not the kind of person who lives half-way, nor does he seem to be one bent on material gain and physical comfort. He would almost pass for an ascetic, if it were not for his violent and destructive behavior. And if his view

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91 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978
92 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978
93 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 978-979
94 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 976
of the world is that it makes no sense and that it is not fundamentally just, then his reaction is to live in accordance with the nature of that senseless world. If this mortal life is all there is, his view is that you should do whatever you want to do, because you are only going to die before long, and will be punished no matter what. His violence and criminal behavior, and even his lashing out at the world, therefore, are not random, but rather the product of his philosophy about the nature of the world and our existence in it. He lives the sort of life that fits the nature of the world as he sees it.

In his concluding his view of the vicious nature of existence in the world, though, he leaves open the possibility that he is open to another way of viewing the world - that if Jesus had really done the things he did, then that would mean there was another way to live, which he would willingly follow. He has clearly chosen not to, though.

The Misfit and the grandmother now, for differing reasons, have come to the point of almost complete honesty, of not having anything to hide from the other. They have also come to admit their uncertainty to each other, after almost the entire encounter with each other. The Misfit now questions his “faith,” and the grandmother questions hers. They no longer attempt to act as if they know. For the grandmother, it is this encounter with suffering and loss that has brought her to the point of utter weakness and uncertainty. For The Misfit, it is harder to say what has brought him to this point, but perhaps it is something about the grandmother. Perhaps her professed belief in his goodness, which seems to be her default assessment of people, has made him open up to her. It seems also that, ironically, her admission that she does not know is the concession that he needs to make a concession of his own:

‘I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t,’ The Misfit said. ‘I wisht I had of been there,’ he said, hitting the ground with his fist. ‘It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,’ he said in a high
The Misfit here is as honest as he has been throughout the story. He has gone past appearing polite, to revealing the uglier side of his character, to honestly stating his destructive philosophy on living in an unjust world, to finally revealing that he is not nearly as fearsome a man as people might think he is. He is also weak and uncertain, and does not really know how he should live.

And just as the grandmother’s concession seemed to make it possible for The Misfit to open up like this, his admission has an effect on her:

His voice seemed about to crack, and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why, you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder.

It is here that the Grandmother’s “awakening” occurs. It has been brought about through the sort of suffering and loss that, in this case, have helped make it possible for the Grandmother’s head to clear as it does at this moment. In “On Her Own Work” O’Connor writes the following about this part of the story:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other part of the story, one which indicates where the heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I’m talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.

There is a point in this story where such a gesture occurs. The Grandmother is at last alone, facing the Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined

to him by ties of kinship deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture.\textsuperscript{97}

According to O’Connor, this is a moment when the action of the unseen order of reality - mystery - becomes manifest. It makes contact with the Grandmother, and finds expression through her. If we consider this story to be a progression toward a fundamental religious truth, it may be that even the most vicious and evil side of the Misfit’s character, which - as it is in accord with his violent, criminal behavior - would seem to represent the true Misfit, is not really true. Just as there seems to be more to the Grandmother than her foolishness, there seems to be more to the Misfit than his cruelty. The real truth of people, then, would seem to lie beyond their actions, and in that part of their character that is in accord with what O’Connor refers to as “mystery” and which we have been terming the unseen order of reality.

The Misfit also undergoes a process of transformation, as a result of what happens. His statement, just prior to the Grandmother’s awakening, appears to be an admission that the way he is now is not a good way to be. When she makes the gesture, he reacts violently, though:

\begin{quote}
The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

While this is an utterly ruthless way to respond, it still appears that he has somehow been moved. Afterward, when he takes off his glasses,\textsuperscript{99} he does not appear to be in control anymore:

\begin{quote}
Without his glasses, The Misfit’s eyes red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{97} Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 111-112.
\textsuperscript{98} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979.
\textsuperscript{100} Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979.
His next statement to Bobby Lee - a statement that suggests the idea of suffering as a means to religious awakening - can also be seen as evidence that he has not gotten through this situation without some sort of change of mind:

‘She would of been a good woman,’ The Misfit said, ‘if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’

O’Connor herself makes it clear that the Misfit is no ordinary person. She refers to him as a “prophet gone wrong.” As to the effect of the Grandmother’s gesture on the Misfit, O’Connor states:

I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become.

This may seem unlikely, indeed, but in light of the Misfit’s desire to know the reasons why things are the way they are, and considering his insistence on living his philosophy, it seems that he ultimately will not be satisfied with anything less than the truth.

5.7 Conclusion

“A Good Man is Hard to Find” is the one English-language story by a Christian writer in this study. It contains elements similar to the ones in the Daoist and Buddhist stories: a reluctant protagonist, unconventional religious heroism, and religious attainment resulting from suffering and loss.

The suffering experienced by the protagonist in this story surpasses any of the suffering we have seen so far in these works. Religious awakening is achieved while the world is devastated.

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101 Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man,” 979
102 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 110
103 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 112-113
From the worldly perspective, this is a horror story, but from the perspective of the unseen order of reality, it is a story of religious “triumph” (to use O’Connor’s phrasing). From these two vastly different perspectives come two contradictory assessments. Thus O’Connor’s view of religious heroism challenges our perspectives.

\footnote{Flannery O’Connor, \textit{Mystery and Manners}, 111}
CONCLUSION

Religious awakening is a theme common to the four stories in this study, Chinese and Western, Daoist, Buddhist, and Christian. In these stories, we also see literary portrayals of the manifestation of what William James termed the “unseen order of reality.” Its manifestations, as they operate in these stories, may well seem out of accord with worldly ideas and concepts. Four elements common to these stories stand out:

1. **Religious heroism does not appear heroic in these stories.** The protagonists’ positive qualities are often buried beneath more prominent weaknesses. Along the same lines, these characters may not appear to be moral people. Lan Caihe openly mocks and threatens Zhongli of the Han. Prior to his change of mind, he seems more like a bully than one destined for Daoist immortality. Chen Kechang is a talented poet, but he is otherwise meek and unable to influence worldly events. Instead of defying his accusers and insisting on his innocence, he gives in and confesses after being beaten. Therefore, he appears cowardly, though his motives are compassionate, and this compassion is an expression of his religious heroism. While Xu Xuan takes some steps to regain his freedom, he is passive for much of the story, and is quick to reconcile with Madam White on at least two occasions when the two of them are reunited. Despite her role in his suffering, he seems more than happy to forget what has happened and immerse (or re-immers) himself in marital bliss until he is again reminded of the true nature of his predicament. Lastly, from a conventional perspective, the Grandmother can be seen as the bringer of disaster in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” It is her foolishness and selfishness that results in her death and the deaths of the people in her family. She does
not have the physical prowess or the cleverness to protect her family and herself from the Misfit and his gang.

2. In addition, there is a reluctance on the part of these protagonists to pursue religious awakening. None of them are initially enthusiastic about what amounts to laying aside their worldly concerns. Lan Caihe would be more than happy to live out the life he is living, if it were not for the efforts of Zhongli of the Han to enlighten him. Chen Kechang initially only wants to pass the civil service exams and thus gain prestige and employment. Even after joining the monastery, he still enjoys the favor of the commander prince when his poetic talents are discovered. Only suffering and loss of his good reputation and freedom bring about his transformation. Xu Xuan only changes his mind very slowly, and after repeated episodes of suffering and hardship, culminating in the realization that he might be in imminent danger of death. If he did not suffer, he would be content to live out his life without seriously contemplating religious awakening. The Grandmother, understandably, would avoid her encounter with the Misfit if at all possible. Any person likely would. Only this encounter brings her to religious awakening, but prior to it, religious awakening would appear to be the last thing on her mind.

3. Worldly concerns and goals, do not seem to be the priorities in these stories. These stories do not end with worldly gain. Rather, the endings seem to be characterized by worldly loss and even death. Thus, religious awakening may appear in the context of worldly loss and tragedy. Lan Caihe leaves his family and his career. From their perspective, this story ends tragically. Lan Caihe also gains nothing materially speaking, from his decision. He gives up the world. Chen Kechang, from a worldly perspective, is wrongfully accused, and dies alone - rejected by even his fellow monks - before he is
finally vindicated. To all appearances, this is a tragedy. Xu Xuan also dies a Buddhist monk, after years of hardship. The Grandmother is killed, after the other people in her family have been killed. From a worldly perspective there does not - understandably - appear to be anything good about this ending.

4. **As to the nature of suffering, in this study, it serves as a reminder.** Suffering, setbacks, and misfortune can serve to emphasize the true nature of worldly existence, and to compel these protagonists to reconsider their worldly values, priorities, and senses of identity. This process brings about transformation and religious awakening for them. The threat of a beating from the magistrate is what it takes to get Lan Caihe to agree to leave the worldly life. Chen Kechang must endure setbacks, a false accusation, and a beating before he finally becomes aware of his true identity as an arhat. It is the years of hardship and that Xu Xuan goes through which cause him to make the decision to leave the worldly life. The Grandmother’s encounter with the Misfit is the reason for her religious awakening. Without suffering, these characters would have continued to live their lives as always, and would not have had the opportunity for enlightenment.

While it is natural to categorize things based on that which they contain, it may be more in the spirit of of this study to frame some aspects of its conclusion based on what these stories lack. They lack an emphasis on physical and mental strength and ability. The protagonists of these stories are not men or women of action. None of them are fighters in the physical sense; rather they tend to be somewhat passive in the face of hardship. In one case, even a character’s inability can be seen as an aspect of transcendental strength. They lack an emphasis on worldly goals. The protagonists strive for things like fame, marital bliss, and honor, but these goals are either not achieved, or they must be abandoned. They lack an emphasis on conventional morality and
courage as prerequisites for religious heroism. None of the protagonists overtly express religious or moral sentiments prior to their ordeals. Some of them even do things that are “immoral” or harmful. Nonetheless, they all achieve religious awakening. They lack an emphasis on material rewards or physical gratification. None of the protagonists appear to be wealthy. Most of them appear to have few or no valuable material possessions when they leave the world. In the most extreme case, there is a clear cause-and-effect link between material gratification and suffering.

In each of these stories, larger forces, such as fate, seem to direct the passive protagonists toward their religious awakenings. This appears to be, in some cases, because of qualities the protagonists possess, which may make them more sensitive to the workings of the unseen order of reality. Lan Caihe, after his decision to follow Zhongli of the Han, appears to have changed, and become a person who appreciates peace and happiness, and wishes it for others, as well. Chen Kechang’s unrealized identity as an arhat, and his need to balance out his karmic debts, appear to be the forces behind his encounters with setbacks and misfortune. As to Xu Xuan, it is less apparent what his inner qualities are, though he does express the desire to be free at certain points in the story, and this need, buried beneath other temptations and weaknesses, may be what helps guide him to his destiny. As to the Grandmother, her tendency to see the good in people (or rather her inability to see the bad) appears to be a manifestation of her “capacity for grace,” to use O’Connor’s phrasing.

Lastly, though this dynamic does not appear in these stories quite to the extent that it does in, for example, the works of Zhuangzi, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and some of the other stories by Flannery O’Connor, to name a few, the idea that true wisdom and sanity may appear insane in a worldly context expresses itself to some extent in these stories. Zhongli of the Han, for example, seems like an eccentric, annoying pest to people who do not know his true identity.
Chen Kechang’s giving up on the possibility of honor and reputation to become a monk, and his forgiving his persecutors, are both difficult to understand from a strictly worldly perspective. Willing himself to die at the end of the story would certainly seem to indicate a troubled state of mind, but in the context of this story, he is the sanest one around. Xu Xuan, who also wills himself to die in order to become enlightened could also be seen as insane for doing so. The Grandmother’s blurring out her recognition of the Misfit is the epitome of foolishness. Even if this does not make her seem crazy, it does seem like she cannot control what she says. Her final words to the Misfit also seem odd and difficult to understand, but that is because her words transcend the world as we know it. O’Connor asserts that her words represent her transcendent relationship to the Misfit, and thus seem inscrutable. From all of this, it would seem that, while logic and rational thinking may help one to navigate the world as we perceive it, they are not necessarily adequate to guide one to an understanding of the mysterious realm that exists just beyond the reach of the senses, and which is at work in the worlds of these stories.

All of these elements indicate a mystical, non-worldly perspective - one that may seem unsatisfying in its subtle denial of worldly gratification, and its portrayal of protagonists who do not seem heroic or capable of asserting themselves. For these very same reasons, though, these stories challenge worldly perspectives and embody certain religious concepts. Therefore, they present opportunities to reevaluate traditional ideas about morality and judgement, and “good” and “bad” fortune.

The focus of this study has been to explore the role of suffering in these portrayals of religious awakening, examine some of their inspirations, and to note that there are some apparent similarities between these Chinese works and a well-known Western short story by the Catholic author, Flannery O’Connor. There are, of course, many and significant differences among the
religious traditions behind these stories, which should not be brushed aside or ignored. That similarities still appear between such different religions from such different time periods and cultural backgrounds, though, has been one impetus for this study. In light of the complexity of religious beliefs and ideas, I have tried not to draw broad conclusions here. There are not enough works, nor enough religious traditions represented by this study to draw any sort of general conclusion about the commonalities of mystical religious experience among Chinese and Western religious traditions. The focus of this study is merely to note some of the similarities that appear among this tiny sampling of the world’s religious stories.

As to the theoretical concepts found in the classic works and scriptures, and expounded upon by the commentators, many of them are clearly portrayed in the plots and characteristics of the protagonists. The unseen order of reality, pedagogical suffering, the idea that worldly life is characterized by suffering, and the idea that religion is a means to transformation, for example, are depicted in some or all of these works.

William James’s unseen order of reality is expressed through elements like fate, which guide the protagonists toward their respective destinies. Lan Caihe’s spiritual qualities are recognized early in the story, unbeknownst to him, and then Zhongli of the Han arrives to make sure that Lan fulfills his destiny. We see this expressed in Chen Kechang’s transformative setbacks and suffering. We see it in the hardships experienced by Xu Xuan, as well as by the tendency of Buddhist festivals to draw him out, and nudge him toward his destiny. We also see it expressed in the Grandmother’s feeling that she somehow knows the Misfit, despite never having met him before.

The Daoist idea that the assertive use of the will can be harmful is expressed both indirectly in the passive nature of some of the protagonists, especially when it comes to their allowing larger
forces to “push” them along. Chen Kechang, for example, after giving up on the examinations, seems to do almost nothing to try to change the course of events, even to the point of giving in and confessing to something he did not do. Xu Xuan, at several points in his journey, goes along with someone else’s suggestions, like Jiang He’s suggestion that he break his promise to his wife not to see the abbot at the Buddhist temple. His acquiescence in these instances helps bring him to his destiny (which suggests that if he actively tried to influence events himself, he might not realize his destiny). “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is not a Daoist story, nor is there any chance of a syncretic inclusion of Daoist ideas in its outlook, as can be expected in the Buddhist stories. However, even here, the Grandmother’s attempts to assert her will and influence events, namely manipulating the family into taking their fateful side trip, lead to disaster. When she finally gives up on trying to persuade the Misfit near the end of the story, she has her transcendent moment of grace.

Rodney Taylor’s concept of “pedagogical suffering,” which we have modified here to mean suffering that brings about a change of mind that ultimately leads to religious awakening, is evident in all of these stories. Lan Caihe only becomes willing to follow Zhongli of the Han after he is threatened with a beating from the magistrate - a punishment that is orchestrated by the very one who would save Lan from suffering. Chen Kechang’s persecution helps him to realize his true identity, and to understand the transcendent context in which his suffering has occurred. Xu Xuan’s suffering helps him realize the true nature of worldly life, and brings him to the point where he is willing to leave the world and become enlightened. The Grandmother’s suffering helps bring her to the point where she can see clearly, and recognize her transcendent relationship to the Misfit.
In Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity, we have considered the views of commentators whose interpretations of the nature of worldly existence is similar to the perspectives on the world portrayed in these works. In “Lao Tzu’s Conception of Evil,” Sung-peng Hsu ascribes worldly misfortune to “assertive use of the human will.” Robinson and Johnson, in retelling the story of the Buddha’s “Great Renunciation” note the Buddha’s view on the worldly life: “Sensual joys are fleeting; death casts its long shadow back over life and blights all transient happiness.” (Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction, 3rd. ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982), 8). In Augustine’s Early Thought on the Redemptive Function of Divine Judgement, Bart van Egmond discusses Augustine’s Christian view that worldly suffering is due to the “deeply fallen” nature of humankind. “Most people need the violent admonition of divine providence to be driven in the right direction.” (p. 28) This is reminiscent of O’Connor’s belief that “violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.” (MM, p. 112) In “Zhongli of the Han Leads Lan Caihe to Enlightenment,” though, while the story is Daoist (Zhongli of the Han is a Daoist immortal), much of the terminology and concepts it uses are Buddhist. Nonetheless, Lan Caihe does make use of what is arguably an assertive use of the will in scheming to rid himself of Zhongli. He also extols the joys of worldly pleasures to Zhongli of the Han, but eventually finds a greater peace and joy after renouncing worldly pleasures, and letting himself be guided, thus relinquishing the assertive use of the will. Both Chen Kechang and Xu Xuan fail to find satisfaction in worldly endeavors. Instead, they encounter setbacks and suffering for crimes they have not committed. For each of them, in at least one instance, what appears to be good fortune directly results in their suffering (Kechang’s special treatment by the commander prince, and Xu Xuan’s receiving valuable gifts from Madam
White). The Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” encounters violence, but this violence helps to change her mind, and to bring about her religious awakening.

Frederick Streng’s idea of religion as a means to transformation is evident in all four works. Lan Caihe becomes an immortal, Chen Kechang becomes an arhat, Xu Xuan wills himself to die, and the assumption is that in doing so, he becomes enlightened. The Grandmother’s final words are evidence of her coming into contact with grace. All four characters achieve some sort of religious awakening which transforms them from the people they were before. In this respect, especially with regard to the first two stories, an aspect of Frye’s themes of ascent is evoked: “the discovery of one’s real identity.” In “Madam White is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda,” another of Frye’s themes of ascent is embodied: “growing freedom.” Xu Xuan frees himself from the punishments imposed upon him for crimes he did not commit, and also frees himself from Madam White. This process also coincides with his coming to the point where he can renounce his own desires, and become a monk. The theme of “the breaking of enchantment” is also arguably embodied in this story, if we consider Xu Xuan to have been under an enchantment by Madam White. (Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 129).

Thus, in these ways, to name a few, these characters bring to life religious concepts as well as literary themes and archetypes associated with the religious life. They embody the theme of realization of religious awakening through suffering and loss.

Further research on this subject could take several different directions. A broader study of Chinese religious stories with these themes would be one approach. The sampling here is obviously very small. A more specific study of the religious backgrounds of Chinese religious stories would be another. Exploring the influences of different schools of Buddhism or Daoism
on literature would provide insights into religious didacticism in the Chinese literary tradition. Another approach would be to explore how religious themes have evolved in Chinese literature over time, and what brought about this evolution. A multi-cultural comparative study involving stories from more of the world’s religious traditions would also give insights, as similarities almost certainly exist among religious stories from the world’s different religious traditions. In Chinese literature, at least, there is undoubtedly room for a wider and broader survey of the religious stories, and of their characteristics.
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