

BIOGRAPHY AS A SEARCHLIGHT: FINDING THE FRANK STANFORD
STORY CYCLE IN ELLEN GILCHRIST'S FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

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Ellen Gilchrist's short stories and novels form several story cycles that connect her characters and tie her work together into interdependent story groups. Her work is also strikingly autobiographical, featuring protagonists who resemble her in obvious ways. Though critics have identified many of Gilchrist's story cycles, one important cycle has been all but ignored: a young poet appears in a number of her stories, and for several of Gilchrist's protagonists, he serves as a catalyst for needed change. The poet is a fictional representation of the poet Frank Stanford, who died in 1978 but played the same life-changing role for Gilchrist herself. This thesis examines the truth/fiction parallels in Gilchrist's fiction, particularly in the stories that feature the Frank Stanford character, and argues that knowledge of Gilchrist's

biography makes the Stanford story cycle visible – and places it in a larger cycle of writings about the poet. Thus, for an analysis of Gilchrist's work to be complete, Gilchrist's own life must be studied as a text alongside her stories, a narrative that supplements and complements her fiction.

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CHAPTER 1

ELLEN GILCHRIST'S STORY CYCLES

For thirty years, Ellen Gilchrist has published fiction that forms a web of connected stories and novels. Critics have defined her work as a series of story cycles, with plot lines that intersect and repeat to connect almost all of her characters and their life experiences. Furthermore, her stories – which create a seemingly endless loop of Southern women and their tangled family lives – are extraordinarily autobiographical, and many of Gilchrist's characters resemble the author in ways that cannot be ignored.

My thesis examines a story cycle within Gilchrist's work that has not previously been studied, a cycle that emerges only with knowledge of her biography: a young man appears in several of her stories, a poet who dies young but who serves as an agent of change in her protagonists' lives. The young poet, who appears in various forms with several names, represents Frank Stanford, a poet whose friendship impacted Gilchrist in the same ways this poet impacts her protagonists. I explore the ways and the reasons Gilchrist uses this character, showing that this new cycle is all but impossible to identify unless a reader can trace the truth-fiction connection in Gilchrist's work.

Gilchrist's work has emerged as a recognizable voice reflecting a specific place and time – the American South, for the most part, in the mid- to late

twentieth century. Gilchrist, who published her first work of fiction in 1981, writes novels and short stories with a distinctly Southern voice. She started writing in her forties and, in 1976, she left her three children and her third husband in New Orleans to spend a year in the graduate writing program at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Gilchrist published her first collection of poems in 1979 but soon turned to novels and short stories, winning the National Book Award for 1984's *Victory Over Japan*. Gilchrist's breaking free from New Orleans society and forming an independent identity as a writer is the key narrative of her life; it is also the key narrative of her fiction. The account of how she became a writer – and, in fact, much of Gilchrist's biography – can be found in her stories. Her protagonists re-enact scenes from Gilchrist's own life story, living out her biography in bits and pieces.

By sifting through these pieces, I examine Gilchrist's life as a text that should be studied along with her work. I argue that because Gilchrist's fiction is significantly autobiographical, the presence of the author cannot be ignored in any serious study of her work. This is especially evident in an examination of the Frank Stanford story cycle, which emerges in full only when a reader brings knowledge of the Gilchrist/Stanford relationship to Gilchrist's stories. By discussing the Stanford character's impact on four of her protagonists' lives – and weighing Gilchrist's own story as a fifth narrative – this thesis presents Gilchrist's biography as the light that reveals Stanford's presence and purpose in her fiction.

First I must establish a context for discussing the Frank Stanford story cycle. In Chapter One, I show the overlapping personalities and experiences of four of Gilchrist's primary protagonists, revealing how her fiction repeats story lines so often that her heroines, though they live in separate worlds, begin to blur in the reader's mind, forming what one critic calls a "composite personality" (Bauer 10). These women all have similar stories: born into wealthy families, they seek liberation from the privileged lives that nonetheless hold them hostage. Why are these stories and characters so alike? Why does Gilchrist tell a story more than once, reworking the same material again and again? To answer, I demonstrate how Gilchrist alters her stories with each telling, each time expanding the story's reach to express broader social truths. Ultimately, I will argue that this repetition is critical to the ways she broadens the Frank Stanford story.

In Chapter Two, I focus on Stanford, one of the most important figures in Gilchrist's life. Stanford, who committed suicide in 1978, just two years after Gilchrist met him, was nevertheless a major figure in her life. Gilchrist makes it clear – in her fiction and in personal essays and interviews – that she places her beginnings as a serious writer with Stanford's appearance in her life. When she left New Orleans to enroll in the Arkansas writing program, she met Stanford, a former student in the program, and they quickly became friends. Stanford represented the freedom of the writing world to her, and he is the one who helped her cross over into that world. Becoming a writer, finding a voice,

building a separate identity – this was a turning point for Gilchrist, and it is a turning point for each of the four protagonists as well. Each heroine has moved or is moving into a new, more independent phase of life – and each time the Stanford character plays a role in pushing her toward that independence and freedom.

Chapter Three is devoted to a closer reading of Gilchrist's work, delving into the fiction to demonstrate just how and where the Stanford character appears. Because of the nature of Gilchrist's story cycles, her representations of Stanford are scattered throughout her fiction, buried in stories and novels published over many years. I have assembled these stories and grouped them by protagonist. Examining the stories in these groupings is a revelation: unless the stories are pulled together in this way, it is difficult to see just how often Frank Stanford appears – and how ever-present he is for some of Gilchrist's characters. By systematically examining the relationship between each protagonist and her own Frank Stanford character, I show a cycle that repeats, with each repetition building Stanford into a frequent and dominating presence in Gilchrist's work. These many representations of Stanford have a clear composite impact, revealing both a presence that is persistent and a purpose that is constant.

Though his name is sometimes different and his precise role in the heroine's life changes, the young poet has the same function each time: he nudges Gilchrist's protagonists to find the freedom they seek. For one heroine,

he is the young husband whose sudden death spurs a writing career. For another, he is a writing mentor whose attention and friendship open the door to a more artistic world. For yet another protagonist, this character is the friend who brings poetry and community into a stiff society existence. I argue that for these somewhat different figures to be identified as the same person, they must all be recognized as Frank Stanford – and recognizing them as Frank Stanford requires knowledge of Stanford and his role as a change agent in Gilchrist's own life.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I place the Stanford story in a larger context. The poet has been portrayed in a remarkable number of poems, songs, novels, and stories by a large group of other writers who knew him. The poet's friend Steve Stern has written a novel that hinges on the death of a character identical to Stanford. Stanford's wife, the artist Ginny Stanford, and his mistress, the poet C.D. Wright, have both written personal accounts of the poet's suicide. A multitude of other writers – most of whom knew Stanford in Arkansas in the 1970s – have produced poems and prose that react to his death, and together they build Stanford into a legend. Gilchrist is therefore not alone; she is merely the most prolific and high-profile writer contributing to a body of work about Stanford that ultimately forms a literary megacycle, encompassing multiple authors who have offered unmistakable versions of the Stanford story. The dozens of works that feature Stanford have not been collected, catalogued, or even studied as a complete group, but together they form a body of material

that is invaluable for identifying the Stanford story cycle in Gilchrist's fiction. Connecting Gilchrist's stories to this larger cycle both illuminates her fiction and places her work in a new literary context.

1.1 Patterns of Gilchrist's Fiction

Before I can discuss the Stanford story cycle in Gilchrist's work, I must first explore the patterns of her writing techniques. Some of the most notable traits of Gilchrist's work provide the framework for discussing her fiction. Her protagonists overlap, possessing similar histories and experiences and blending together in the reader's mind. Her stories repeat, mixing in plots and details that come directly from her own life. And she blurs the boundary between author and character, purposely crossing the line that separates truth and fiction. In this context it is clear that the Stanford character offers a prime example of Gilchrist's style, appearing (and reappearing) in the repetitive, cyclical pattern that is a hallmark of her fiction. It also becomes clear that Gilchrist's biography can be used as a map to locate Stanford on the page.

First, one might argue that Gilchrist writes the same character over and over. A number of strikingly similar female protagonists form the core of Gilchrist's cast of characters, a small stable of outrageous personalities – the colorful, maddening, quick-tempered, and passionate women who populate her fiction again and again. Gilchrist has been living with these characters and others much like them since her first short story collection was published in 1981. Many of her characters are related to each other, members of two big,

boisterous, intermarried Southern families, and Gilchrist's stories visit them at different times in their lives – dropping in on them in middle age, then going back to their childhoods, following them through divorces and drinking problems, affairs and all manner of personal crises. These fiery female protagonists are the key players in what Gilchrist critic Margaret Donovan Bauer calls an “organic story cycle” (2), a cast of recurring characters that form a giant, multi-generational web.

Gilchrist's repeated use of the same characters has been compared to the *roman-fleuve* and even to the soap opera; like a serial television show, her stories foster a relationship between readers and characters that continues for years, compelling readers to “tune in” to each installment in order to learn what happens next – or what has happened before (Bauer 4). To understand some of Gilchrist's stories, one must understand that she employs the “iceberg theory,” as Bauer says (29). Desired explanations are not given; story lines trail off, unresolved; and often, more is happening in the story than a casual read might reveal. This iceberg beneath the surface is often the background information provided in other Gilchrist stories. The stories and novels provide context for one another, and knowledge of what has happened in an earlier story “enhances one's reading of a later one” (29). Her dozens of stories have “the feeling of a single narrative,” as one critic describes it, “albeit a purposefully fractured one” (Dieckmann 8).

Gilchrist is by no means the first to use the short-story cycle. Susan Garland Mann's study of the story cycle defines it as a genre of its own, encompassing a long list of fragmentary novels, episodic story collections, and books that are "neither novels nor short story miscellanies" (ix). The only "essential characteristic" of a story cycle, Mann says, is that the stories be simultaneously independent and interdependent – able to stand on their own but, when read together, capable of "creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (15). While some story cycles trace the maturation of a single protagonist, other cycles focus not on a single personality but on a large community, with stories told from various points of view; yet others are formed by a common theme – death, for instance, or isolation.

Gilchrist's stories use a combination of these factors to tie them together into cycles. She offers multiple stories with a single protagonist, but she has presented many of them in stories that are written and published out of order; readers meet frequent protagonist Rhoda Manning first as an adult, for instance, then later as a child. Gilchrist's story cycles include both short stories and novels, and she does not contain her cycles within a single volume. Characters will appear only briefly in a short story, then become the focus of a novel a decade later. Well-known protagonists are mentioned in passing in the pages of an unrelated story, instantly pulling into the cycle a story that seemed to be a stand-alone piece. Her short story collections are a blend of independent stories and cycle stories mixed together, and readers must pay

attention in order to spot familiar characters and assemble the puzzle pieces of connected lives. Learning to identify these cycles and gathering their scattered pieces is the way to recognize new cycles, loops, and repetitions in Gilchrist's work – including the Frank Stanford story cycle.

Another hallmark of Gilchrist's work is the autobiographical element in her stories. Although the "composite protagonist" is not unprecedented (Mann 10), Gilchrist's story cycles feature an odd and interesting element: her cycles focus on characters so much like herself – living lives much like her own – that Gilchrist's own biography becomes both a text within the cycle and the agent that binds the stories together. If a Gilchrist story is an iceberg, as Bauer suggests (29), a considerable part of that bulk below the surface is the underlying story of Gilchrist's life and relationships. Her own experiences are reflected in nearly every story (Bradley), and within those stories "her experience and that of her characters merge" (McCay 4). Gilchrist herself does not claim an impervious dividing line between fiction and her own life. She has addressed the issue several times, acknowledging in interviews and essays that her characters do, in fact, resemble her to varying – and sometimes uncomfortable – degrees (Gilchrist, Introduction, *Rhoda* viii-ix; Gilchrist, "Watching"; Gowen E1). She calls her character Rhoda Manning, for example, "a mirror of myself" and asks: "So is Rhoda me? I don't know" (Introduction, *Rhoda* ix).

Most of Gilchrist's fiction portrays women who are struggling to "find their voices in a world that tries to keep them mute and complacent," states Gilchrist critic Mary A. McCay (44-45) – particularly women in the South in the mid-twentieth century. Wealth often is what holds back Gilchrist's Southern protagonists; those most like their creator seek to escape the confines of their structured, privileged lives. Almost all of them have spent their lives seeking the approval of overbearing fathers or husbands, an inequality they both resent and struggle to sustain. They display "a kindred outrage at limitation" (Bradley), and Gilchrist's most autobiographical protagonists do so the same way she did – through unhappy marriages, drunkenness, and decadence. If her heroines find happiness, it is because they find satisfying work that helps them break free from the bonds of family and society and locate their independent voices. In fact, two of Gilchrist's heroines make a physical escape from their affluent worlds exactly the way Gilchrist herself did, leaving lavish homes in New Orleans for academic bohemia in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

1.2 Gilchrist's Autobiographical Heroines

Clearly, these protagonists resemble each other as much as they resemble Gilchrist herself. Bauer describes the overlapping characters as a single "composite personality" (10) – again, a not-uncommon element of the story cycle. The four most prominent characters who fit this mold are some of Gilchrist's stars: Rhoda Manning, Anna Hand, Amanda McCamey, and Crystal Manning Weiss. These protagonists are different versions of the same person,

shaped by different aspects of Gilchrist's life experience. Bauer presents Gilchrist's protagonists as "evolving" from one to the next, each one more fully developed than the one that came before. The "initial prototype" of this composite character, Bauer says, is Rhoda Manning (10) – and Rhoda, heroine of more stories than any other Gilchrist creation, bears the most striking resemblance to the author herself. Readers follow Rhoda, in stories published out of order, from age five, where she appears as a headstrong, ruthless little girl in Mississippi, through her sixties, as she serves as the matriarch to a sprawling and somewhat maladjusted southern family. The author's and the character's biographies are almost identical. Like Gilchrist, Rhoda Manning spends her first few years on a Delta plantation called Hopedale, then moves with her family to small towns around the Midwest (McCay xv; Gilchrist, "Nineteen Forty-One" 20-21, "Tree Fort" 28, "Time Capsule" 38). Like Gilchrist, she marries impulsively at nineteen, has two sons, and divorces soon afterward. She later marries a wealthy lawyer in New Orleans (just as Gilchrist did), drinks heavily (as Gilchrist did), and eventually leaves her family to study writing at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville – as Gilchrist did in 1976. Rhoda's story, McCay observes, "registers some of the most important milestones in Gilchrist's own life. . . . [T]he autobiographical blurs with the fictional, and very little seems to separate the character and the author" (7).

Another Gilchrist character is Anna Hand, whose life story does not mirror Gilchrist's own to such an obvious degree; she is what Bauer calls a

“second, revised or evolved prototype” (15). Anna has three ex-husbands but no children, and she lives in New York and other big cities for much of her adult life before returning to her hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina. She spends outrageous amounts of money on clothing, interferes in the lives of her family members, and carries on a long affair with a married doctor. In her forties, Anna learns she has cancer and decides to end her life rather than be treated for the disease: she steps off a pier into the Atlantic Ocean wearing a fur-lined Valentino jacket and knee-high leather boots, committing suicide to die on her own terms and avoid all the “endless disgraceful boring cruel pain” she knows will come (*Anna Papers* 9). Her story is not immediately recognized as the typical Gilchrist narrative. Anna resembles Gilchrist, however, in uncanny ways; her identity, Bauer says, is “obviously autobiographical” (5). Anna is a bestselling fiction writer who already has found – as Gilchrist’s other heroines struggle to find – freedom in creating her own work and carving out her own identity. She returns to her family in North Carolina in her forties, but she is not swayed by their expectations for her. When Anna ends her life, it is not due to fear or emotional chaos, but because of a belief that “it’s all right to die if you’ve done your work” (*Drunk* 226). Anna has done her work, and she is the more confident, less self-destructive version of the Gilchrist prototype (Bauer 17); she is what Rhoda strives for years to become.

Amanda McCamey, Bauer says, is a “transitional figure” between Rhoda Manning and Anna Hand (16). She is bound to New Orleans by a wealthy

husband but is miserably seeking something more. Haunted by her past and a baby she gave up for adoption when she was fourteen, Amanda feels trapped by her life and believes she is smarter than the empty crowd of “lawyers and wifelets” who populate her world (Gilchrist, *Annunciation* 90). Amanda takes her first step toward freedom in her forties when she – like Rhoda and, of course, like Gilchrist – follows her interest in poetry and her academic desires out of New Orleans to Fayetteville, where she finds a wholly different life. Amanda eventually becomes, then, more like the free spirit Anna Hand, learning to “live her own life as she determines it should be lived” (Bauer 17). For Gilchrist, Amanda is a flattering mirror image: Gilchrist describes her as a “poorly disguised autobiographical heroine” and tells readers that “I disguised her by making her thinner, kinder and braver than I was at the time” (“Watching”).

Rhoda, Anna, and Amanda are “basically cut from the same cloth; they are fundamentally one and the same character,” Brad Hooper posits in his 2005 analysis of Gilchrist’s fiction (78). But Crystal Manning Weiss, too, is but a slight variation of the Gilchrist prototype. Crystal is a cousin to Rhoda and is distantly related to Anna Hand. She is unhappily married, as Gilchrist was, to a wealthy lawyer in New Orleans, and – like Amanda McCamey and Gilchrist herself – Crystal forms a deep bond with her maid, who narrates most of the stories about her. Crystal shares many of Rhoda’s characteristics: she is headstrong, spoiled, and an alcoholic, and she falls in love with poetry to escape the boredom of her comfortable life. Crystal does not leave New Orleans, and she

and her husband stay (somewhat uncomfortably) married – but she falls in with a group of poets and artists who give her life new meaning.

The protagonists' similarities are striking, and for good reason: these women represent different points in the evolution of what is essentially the same character: a woman searching for autonomy, important work, and an independent identity. That evolution, however, is neither perfect nor standard. Gilchrist sometimes uses one protagonist to continue a story she has started with another, placing two characters in nearly identical situations and altering the outcome in the retelling. Anna Hand, therefore, learns from Rhoda Manning's mistakes, and Rhoda from Amanda McCamey's. Furthermore, these four women are not the only overlapping characters in Gilchrist's fiction. Her full body of work adds layer upon layer to this composite character, with almost all of her heroines – even those who appear in just one short story – resembling Gilchrist and one another in ways that cannot be ignored.

Each of these heroines struggles against the strict confines of Southern society, then breaks free by finding a purpose that diminishes the power of that society. Each time, Gilchrist's protagonist finds meaningful work through an artistic project – writing, translating poetry, assembling a poetry magazine – that is separate from the world she previously knew.

Their search and struggle are presented in such similar terms that at times they melt into one narrative. When Amanda McCamey and Rhoda Manning each leave New Orleans for an academic life in Fayetteville, their

excitement is the same – identical, in fact. “I’m going to join the poets,” Amanda hums happily on the day she decides to move to Fayetteville (*Annunciation* 133). The phrase is echoed in the title and text of a short story, “Going to Join the Poets,” in which Rhoda Manning, too, leaves New Orleans behind for the freedom of Fayetteville: “She was going to join the poets. It was okay” (245).

It is not merely an escape from unhappy marriages these women seek; it is a purpose – the will and the ability to do creative and meaningful work. When Amanda tumbles into a love affair soon after arriving in Fayetteville, her friend – an artist – warns her not to get distracted, reminding her that “[w]ork is the thing that stays. Work is the thing that sees us through” (*Annunciation* 202). Anna Hand, meanwhile, knows she must find a way to write because “work . . . [is] where the satisfaction is” (*Anna Papers* 33). And many years after her move to Fayetteville and her emergence as a writer, Rhoda Manning looks back and says, “[I]t was the work that saved me” (“Love” 237).

The Frank Stanford character is invariably a part of this story line. When Gilchrist’s characters begin living out that key narrative – finding their freedom and the work that gives them purpose – the Stanford character is always nearby. He is not the same person in each story, and he plays a different role in each relationship. But Stanford, the poet who appeared in Gilchrist’s life and spurred her career as a writer, appears in the lives of her protagonists and prompts a forward movement in their lives as well, somehow helping them find a way into the work that will save them.

1.3 Crossing the Truth/Fiction Boundary

It is significant that Gilchrist's heroines tend to be fiction writers themselves. In Anna Hand and Rhoda Manning, for instance, Gilchrist creates characters who serve as "both writer/creator/narrator and as central character" of their own narratives, critic Jane Taylor McDonnell points out. Each controls her story even as she stars in it, and in doing so, she jumps across the line that separates reality and fiction (187).

Gilchrist frequently blends her own identity with that of her characters – playing those dual roles of creator and central character – by sharing credit with her writer protagonists for stories she herself has written. It is not difficult to find those fissures in the boundary between Gilchrist's own narrative and the one she describes in her fiction. She seems to want to leave the reader confused, wondering exactly who wrote the words on the page.

For instance, although Gilchrist's name is on the cover of her novel *Net of Jewels*, her protagonist, the fictional Rhoda Manning, is the book's purported author. The book's preface begins:

My name is Rhoda Manning and I am a writer. I meant this as a book of short stories and I started writing it that way. Then the stories started to bleed into each other and I decided to let them bleed. I should have known when I decided to call a book *Net of Jewels* I was going to be in trouble" (3).

From the first page of this 1992 novel, there is an intentional confusion about just who wrote this story – and whether Gilchrist and Rhoda are one and the same.

Rhoda stands in again for Gilchrist in the 1995 story “A Wedding in Jackson.” As Rhoda speeds toward a family wedding in Mississippi, she drives along a curving mountain road outside Fayetteville, Arkansas. “I once killed a character in a novel on that road,” she muses. “Later, I brought him back to life in a short story” (37). The scene she describes is from Gilchrist’s own work: her first novel, *The Annunciation*, ends with a car flying off an icy Ozark mountain road; she brings the driver – presumed dead – back to life in her story “Life on the Earth,” published many years later (109).

Gilchrist also portrays the successful author Anna Hand – widely considered Gilchrist’s alter-ego (Jones 160) – as the author of her creator’s work. When Anna tells her editor she is writing something new, he asks what it will be called. ““Light can be both wave and particle,”” Anna replies (*Drunk* 221). She later tells her lover she will write a story about their affair – but she will fictionalize it, Anna promises, turning him into “a Chinese graduate student who meets a girl at dawn on a bridge” (*Anna Papers* 112). Gilchrist herself soon published a story about a medical student named Lin Tan Sing who meets a woman at sunrise on a Puget Sound bridge; she called it “Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle” (61).

In the same collection as that story, Gilchrist included a short piece called “The Man Who Kicked Cancer’s Ass.” The title is familiar to readers of *The Anna Papers*; it is a story Anna left half-finished when she died (251-52). Is the work Gilchrist’s? Or is it Anna Hand’s fiction? The ambiguity continues in Gilchrist’s 1990 novella “Winter”: it is introduced as “a manuscript that the deceased poet and novelist Anna Hand left in a suitcase” (*I Cannot* 3). In fact, Anna is seen writing the manuscript in *The Anna Papers* (138).

This intentional confusion of the author and her subject has made Gilchrist’s work “increasingly metafictional,” Bauer says, and it becomes obvious that she “has difficulty divorcing her own ego from her fiction” (47-48). But Gilchrist acknowledges the unruliness of this truth/fiction confluence, using her characters to demonstrate the confusion that can result. When Anna dies, she leaves behind piles of notes, drafts, and manuscripts, and family members puzzle obsessively over which of her first-person stories might be true. Did Anna really have a fling with a distant cousin, Phelan Manning? Did she really pick up a Norwegian sea captain in an airport lounge? “It might not be true,” Anna’s sister decides. “Maybe she just used their names because she was too lazy to make up fiction ones” (*Anna Papers* 211). Even Gilchrist’s fictional characters are concerned about the line between reality and fiction.

Additionally, in Gilchrist’s story “1957, a Romance,” a nineteen-year-old Rhoda Manning reads a copy of Ernest Hemingway’s *Across the River and Into the Trees* and imagines herself “in the marshes near Tagliamento, in northern

Italy, hunting ducks at dawn with Ernest Hemingway” (86). Repeatedly, she indulges a habit of imagining the story’s protagonist to be Hemingway himself. “(Rhoda was not fooled by personas,” Gilchrist adds parenthetically. “In her mind any modern novel was the true story of the writer’s life)” (86). By taking a small dig at Rhoda’s naïveté, her inability to separate a writer’s identity from that of his fictional characters, Gilchrist offers a wink to the knowing reader – an oblique acknowledgment that Gilchrist’s own life and those of her protagonists often tangle into hall-of-mirrors confusion. She may claim it is naïve for readers to assume she is telling her own story in fiction – but any reader who has studied Gilchrist’s life knows that she does exactly that, to a sometimes unnerving degree.

Some critics find this boundary-crossing objectionable and vain. A *Mother Jones* reviewer takes Gilchrist to task for her thinly-veiled autobiographical characters, arguing that the biggest weakness of her novel *The Anna Papers* is the similarity between the author and the protagonist, who is “a Southern writer of international reputation, whose opinions and preoccupations sound mighty like those of Ellen Gilchrist.” By modeling characters after herself, the reviewer complains, Gilchrist is “demanding over and over, ‘Admire Me’” (Brown 46).

In fact, critics often do not seem to be able to separate Gilchrist from her characters long enough to review her fiction without mentioning the author’s biography. The close connection – overlap, even – between Gilchrist and her

protagonists is too distracting for them. One reviewer expresses relief that Rhoda finds “her true calling” in Fayetteville: “Rhoda has always seemed a thinly disguised Gilchrist,” she observes, ticking off their similarities (Evans F05). Another complains that Gilchrist identifies too closely with her characters, unable to make them suffer the consequences of their bad choices (Johnson 95). And another reviewer cannot discuss the racism of Gilchrist’s characters without expressing suspicion about their creator, explaining that “Ms. Gilchrist seems implicated in her own characters’ attitudes” (Lesser 18).

1.4 Repetition of Plot and Characters

Critics have disapproved of another Gilchrist trademark as well: the repetition in her stories. The criticism is easy to understand because nearly-identical people and events – incidents both major and trivial – appear multiple times in her stories. Reviewers have called the practice “self-indulgent and self-referential” (Review of *Light* 84), complaining that the repetition “creates a sense of *déjà vu*” (Melmoth), and in 1991, one critic complained that a new Gilchrist novel was “not so much ‘another saga,’ as the publishers announce, as the old one revisited. . .” (Vaux 22).

Major events that shape a protagonist’s life – an early marriage, a move to Fayetteville – appear in more than one story, of course, happening to more than one character. But quirky, peculiar, even throwaway moments also reoccur: cheerleader tryouts, for instance, or the burying of money in the ground. A *Publishers Weekly* critic has described these repeated details as

“exasperating,” complaining that Gilchrist’s characters are all “obsessed with the color yellow” and have a tendency to quote Matthew Arnold (Review of *Light* 84).

Some of Gilchrist’s story lines are repeated often enough to form story cycles of their own. Unexpected pregnancies drive the plots of an inordinate number of stories, upending her protagonists’ lives and sending them off in new directions. Three of Gilchrist’s young protagonists have (or at least imagine they have) older boyfriends who are being treated for cancer. Three of her heroines suffer drunken falls down flights of stairs. Twins are prominent. Incest often takes center stage or hovers in the shadows, as does alcoholism. Several times, Gilchrist’s wealthy protagonists manage to straighten out their lives only with the help of their full-time maids, who become their only true friends. Gilchrist revisits and recycles themes, details, and story lines so often that the stories (and characters) fuse and overlap even in the attentive reader’s mind. Experiences, both small and monumental, make a character an individual; in Gilchrist’s fiction, however, shared experiences blend several characters into one.

In fact, Gilchrist herself acknowledges the tendency to tell the same stories and use the same cast of personalities. “. . . I am beginning to suspect,” she wrote in a 1987 collection of essays, “there may be a limited number of characters any one writer can create and perhaps a limited number of stories any writer can tell” (*Falling* 126). But these stories reflect what Bauer calls “the

intratextual nature” of Gilchrist’s canon – the way Gilchrist “responds to, revises, and transforms her own earlier works” (157), modifying her older stories by writing new ones. Gilchrist has “embroidered and re-embroidered” (Glass 6) the lives of her characters, often changing the perspective or broadening her scope in successive tellings.

For example, Gilchrist sometimes presents two versions of the same event in a single character’s life, making subtle but important changes to nearly identical stories. In the first story ever published about Rhoda, 1981’s “1957, A Romance,” Rhoda asks her father for help getting an abortion. She is nineteen, has had two children in two years, and says she “can’t stand to have another baby,” so she leaves her husband in North Carolina and turns to her father, “the one person who had never let her down” (81), for the \$500 she will need to pay a doctor. He does help her, of course, taking her from northern Alabama to Houston for the abortion and keeping their destination a secret from her mother. On the way home, when they stop to join a family reunion, Rhoda obsesses over how thin she is, admiring herself in the mirror. “I’m beautiful,” she tells herself. “I’m skinny and I’m beautiful and no one is ever going to cut me open” (95). She laughs with joy and relief, gazing at her pretty reflection.

In 1991’s *Net of Jewels*, a novel about Rhoda’s young adulthood, Gilchrist tells the story of the abortion again from a different perspective. This time, Rhoda’s story is presented in the first person, which encourages the reader to sympathize far more with her. Furthermore, the *Net of Jewels* Rhoda

is as concerned about her health and survival as she is about her appearance. While Gilchrist's first story had a relieved Rhoda thinking merely, "I don't have to have a baby, I don't have to have a baby" ("1957" 92), this new version shows Rhoda thinking, "I don't have to have a baby. I don't have to die" (*Net* 324). She asks more than once if she needs penicillin "[t]o make sure I don't get blood poisoning or something" (326), and she turns to her father for help because "I was safe in his presence. He would not let me die" (319).

At the end of the scene, there is no youthful laughter of freedom, no "wild excited face" in the mirror exulting over the fact that, as the first Rhoda said, "No one can make me do anything" ("1957" 95). In the retelling, Rhoda does admire herself in the mirror for a while. But then, she says, acknowledging her role as the mother of two, "I went outside to see if my mother had arrived with my babies" (*Net* 327).

It is a nearly identical account, with the same order of events and the same outcome; in fact, even most of the stories' words are the same. The second story, however, has some key differences that leave the reader with a distinctly different impression. In *Net of Jewels*, the reader certainly knows Rhoda far better than did the readers of Gilchrist's first Rhoda story; even if they have not encountered Rhoda in other short stories, readers have come to know her through the novel's previous three hundred pages. In the second account, Gilchrist has made Rhoda a multi-dimensional character, not merely a strange, selfish girl obsessed with being thin.

Additionally, Gilchrist broadens her perspective the second time around, creating a story that is as much a commentary on society as it is a personal tale. Bauer points out that the second narrative reveals the role of 1950s society in Rhoda's situation (Bauer 170): her desperation to have an abortion in a time when abortion was illegal and her need to prostitute herself (by sleeping with her doctor) to get the name of a professional who will perform one (*Net* 317). In *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist expands the story to tackle themes and issues that are bigger than the situation at hand. In a 1992 interview, Gilchrist said she wanted to create with this story "a little piece of history, a portrait of a time and place . . . where if you got pregnant you *had* to have the baby" (Smith 46). In *Net of Jewels*, Rhoda may still be young and self-centered, but her creator's broader focus sheds light on the laws, social pressures, and family expectations that both drive Rhoda and constrain her.

1.5 Conclusion

Critics and casual readers may be annoyed by the overlap in Gilchrist's autobiographical characters and the repetition in her stories, but her patterns are a gold mine for the scholar or serious reader. Studying Gilchrist's repeated stories reveals how her fiction approaches the same story from more than one angle; studying her similar characters shows how she tells a story through more than one person. And studying Gilchrist's own life casts her fiction in a new light as well. For a serious reader of Gilchrist's entire body of work, knowledge of her biography offers not distraction but enrichment: knowing the key narrative of

Gilchrist's life – her escape from a stifling existence and entry into a creative world – enables a reader to recognize how this single narrative takes multiple forms on the pages of her stories and in the lives of her characters.

The truth/fiction connection, then, is more than merely a curiosity; it is the map that guides a reader through her fiction. Gilchrist's fiction becomes a form of *roman à clef*; finding the truth/fiction parallels allows a reader to approach her fiction using her biography as an aid. And certainly, the key figures in her biography emerge on the page. There is a counterpart for almost every important figure in Gilchrist's life. For example, the maids in her stories – Lavertis, Baby Doll, Traceleen – represent Gilchrist's own maid and good friend, Rosalie Davis. Rhoda's husband Eric, Amanda's husband Malcolm, and Crystal's husband Manny are faithful representations of Gilchrist's own ex-husband Frederick Sidney Kullman, re-enacting their lives in New Orleans.

Knowing that she places the important figures of her life into her work, a curious reader will search Gilchrist's stories for another man who plays a starring role in her biography, the man deemed "the most influential person" in her life (McCay xi). Readers searching for signs of him in her stories will find him in James Alter, Francis Gautier, and Francis Alter, the shadowy figures in Gilchrist's fiction who represent the independent world Gilchrist found when she became a writer. In the world of these stories, they are the poet Frank Stanford.

In the following section, I will introduce Stanford, outlining his impact on Gilchrist's work and on her life as a writer. Just as Gilchrist's biography allows a

reader to find the truth/fiction parallels in her fiction, Stanford's biography shows his importance in the key freedom-finding narrative of Gilchrist's life and work.

CHAPTER 2

AN EVER-PRESENT POET

The most prominent themes of Gilchrist's story cycles have been well-covered by scholars and analysts: in fact, critics have focused almost exclusively on the repeated cycles of her willful women seeking escape from their restrictive southern lives. The Frank Stanford story cycle, however – a subset of the same story line – has been all but ignored.

The Stanford character, who has various names, is a young poet who enters the lives of Gilchrist's protagonists, generally at vulnerable and uncertain times. He invariably is charming and handsome, but her characters do not react to him in the way they respond to other handsome men; generally, instead of a romantic interest, he is a rare true friend, and he represents – and helps them find – the free life they seek. This poet wanders through the pages of Gilchrist's fiction, the focus of a story here, a name whispered in the background there. He is given an undisputed brilliance as a tragic, too-good-for-this-world figure, and he is alternately mourned, memorialized, worshipped, and judged. The poet dies – almost always by suicide – but he alters each heroine's life in some way; his appearance in her life and, soon after, his death become turning points. This

recurring character, his death, and the response to his death form the cycle that has been overlooked in previous studies of Gilchrist's fiction.

McCay calls Stanford the most influential poet to Gilchrist's work – and, she speculates, perhaps the most influential person in Gilchrist's life (xi). He is mentioned in almost twenty of her short stories and novels published over a fifteen-year period. Some of the stories hinge on Stanford's life or death; several more make his death a secondary narrative or mention him in passing. He often symbolizes a freer existence or pushes Gilchrist's protagonists toward that existence; Gilchrist approaches the Stanford story from several points of view to explore the meaning of the poet's friendship and the impact of his death on the protagonists who so strongly resemble her.

2.1 The Real-Life Role of Frank Stanford

The poet Frank Stanford, Gilchrist's model for this character, played a crucial role in Gilchrist's emergence as a writer. His appearances are scattered throughout her fiction, where he is often portrayed as larger than life, heroic – “blessed, gifted, cursed” (“Wedding” 39). “To be in his presence was to understand why men became the disciples of Christ,” Gilchrist's heroine Rhoda Manning says of the young poet Francis Alter (39). Gilchrist uses the same language to describe Stanford: in a 2000 interview with *The New Yorker*, Gilchrist spoke about the years she knew Stanford in Arkansas. “To know Frank then,” she said, “was to see how Jesus got his followers. Everybody worshipped him” (Buford 56).

Stanford's distinctive biography makes him instantly recognizable in Gilchrist's fiction. When he shot himself in 1978, he was twenty-nine years old. By the time he died, the young Arkansas poet had published seven books and written several more. More important, perhaps, he had collected a crowd of awed admirers – women who adored his curly hair and confidence, well-known poets who appreciated his wild images and distinctive voice, and a loose but always expanding group of up-and-coming writers who were drawn to him with a strange passion.

Stanford has been called as charismatic as Christ (Buford 56), irresistible to women, as “handsome as the sun” (Ehrenreich). His work has been compared to Whitman's (Hall; Stewart 5) and Faulkner's (Thomas), but his reckless tumbles through the South, both real and imagined, have inspired a comparison to “Huckleberry Finn on acid” (Trussell K1). He was “a tall tale come alive” (Launius 10), a man who made up his own past and created a persona that outlives him. He was also, critics and writers say now, “an exceptional voice in American letters” (Lorberer 36), “one of the great voices of death” (F. Wright), and, at the time he died, “the best poet in America under the age of thirty-five” (Stokesbury ix). Stanford is now, however, a bit of a cult figure: his work is admired passionately by devotees of Arkansas literature, but it is not anthologized in textbooks or widely read by the general public. In fact, most of his books were out of print until several were reissued by small presses

in the past decade. To recognize his appearance in Gilchrist's fiction, then, requires specialized knowledge: an awareness of Stanford's life and death.

It is necessary, then, to review Stanford's biography. Stanford was born in 1948 in Mississippi, but after his family moved to Arkansas when he was eleven, he never left the state for any significant amount of time (Launius 67, 73). After graduating from a Benedictine boys' school, he entered the University of Arkansas in the fall of 1966 as an engineering major (Shugars 12), but his writing impressed James Whitehead, the director of the graduate writing program, who soon invited Stanford to enroll in a graduate poetry workshop (Launius 120-21). Stanford enrolled in the writing program but never earned a degree, and by 1970, he had dropped out of the university and taken a job as a land surveyor (Henricksen 12). He continued writing poetry, however, and he still spent time on campus as his reputation grew.

During and after his undergraduate years in Fayetteville, Stanford attracted a circle of admirers (Shugars 16). He was widely considered a shining talent by the Arkansas writing community, and the university's writing program liked to claim him although he had not earned a degree – he was “our genius,” as program director Whitehead called Stanford in a poem years after Stanford dropped out (5).

2.2 Gilchrist and Stanford

Gilchrist met Stanford in 1976 when she enrolled in the university's writing program. Though Stanford had dropped out, he was still a regular

presence in university social circles, and both he and Gilchrist were close to Whitehead (Smith 47, Launius 270). Gilchrist and Stanford became friends soon after she arrived. She was dividing her time between Fayetteville and New Orleans, often flying back to see her family on the weekends (Launius 273), but she became fully immersed in university life – attending parties and intramural softball games and playing horseshoes at the homes of her professors (McCay 15; Gowen E1) – and she and Stanford were part of the same crowd.

Gilchrist connected with Stanford as an artist. When she arrived at the University of Arkansas, she considered herself a poet, and Stanford had a growing reputation as a fine poet. Alan Dugan and Allen Ginsberg both visited the Arkansas campus while Stanford was a student; Ginsberg read Stanford's work and singled him out as a greater talent than the other students, and Dugan told Stanford that he was a better poet than anyone in the program, including the faculty (Adamo et al.). The poet John Berryman read Stanford's work and wrote a letter telling him that "[m]ost poets would give their left eye to have written this, and their other eye to have done what you've done" (F. Stanford, Interview 302; Letter).

Gilchrist, too, was impressed with Stanford's work and believed it should have a wider audience. She resurrected a New Orleans literary journal, *Barataria*; the first issue, published in the spring of 1977, featured five of Stanford's poems along with work from other members of the writing program and some internationally-known poets (Launius 274-75). *Barataria* published

just two issues, but those issues were well-received, and Stanford's work received the most praise. At about the same time, Stanford started a small press, Lost Roads Publishers, primarily to publish the work of neglected writers in the Arkansas MFA program (288, 274). Gilchrist credits Stanford with teaching her how a book should be put together, and, she says, "how to believe in my instinctive sense of what a book should be" (McCay 110).

Ginny Stanford, the poet's wife, recognized her husband and Gilchrist's immediate connection. "When Ellen met Frank," she told an interviewer years later, "she just naturally recognized his expansive brilliance and responded to it by wanting to learn everything about poetry he could teach her" (McCay 15). In Fayetteville, Gilchrist sought liberation from the "cloyingly destructive landscape of New Orleans" (14) where she was trapped in the lifestyle of a corporate lawyer's wife; she found freedom among the artists and writers in town, and no writer was more important to her writing career than Stanford. He represented, McCay believes, "a kind of artistic freedom she herself was trying to achieve" (xi), and his guidance helped her get there. Even after Gilchrist left the program and moved back to New Orleans, her friendship with Stanford remained strong. When Stanford died, they were working together to assemble Gilchrist's first collection of poems, *The Land Surveyor's Daughter*; the book was published by Lost Roads the next year, in 1979 (16).

Stanford spent the last few weeks of his life at Gilchrist's home in New Orleans, working on that book of poems (Ehrenreich; McCay 16; Buford 56). It

was a much-needed escape from his increasingly intolerable life in Fayetteville, a tangle of lies that had become too difficult to maintain (Launius 293). By 1978, he was struggling to uphold a double life. His wife, Ginny Stanford, lived just outside of town (McCay 16), but Stanford was having an affair – and spending most of his time – with C.D. Wright, a student in the Arkansas writing program (Shugars 13; Ehrenreich; Launius 190). When the women learned about each other, they called him back to Fayetteville and confronted him together, listing their grievances over his infidelity. When they had finished, Stanford excused himself from the room, walked into a nearby bedroom, and shot himself three times in the heart (Launius 14; G. Stanford).

Gilchrist has been somewhat dispassionate about Stanford in public interviews and published essays. In a 1984 collection of essays, she is typically general and vague in describing her relationship with Stanford:

I knew a poet once and spent many days and nights with him and took walks with him and went into shops with him and watched the world with him and learned to adore the beauty of the world and despise its sadness. I must write of him someday and tell the world what it was like to know a great poet and be his friend (*Falling* 74).

Although Gilchrist has not been exceptionally forthcoming about her relationship with Stanford, the details of Stanford's life – and the aftermath of his suicide – appear many times in her fiction. Furthermore, she has made her

connection to Stanford evident even on the covers of her books, which often feature paintings by the poet's wife, her friend Ginny Stanford. She has placed him in many of her short stories and novels, turning Stanford into a fictional character, and in the fiction she has told his story – their story – over and over. These stories, collected, become the Frank Stanford story cycle.

Among Gilchrist's many recurring characters, the poet named Francis is a minor one; he has a speaking role in only one of her stories, and even then his words are not set off by quotation marks – they are a recollection, a voice from the past quoted in a rush of memory (“Going” 246-48). His relatively fleeting appearances in Gilchrist's stories, however, are many, and when considered together, they form a major presence in her work. Furthermore, the poet's impact on her characters is vast. He is a key person in the lives of Gilchrist's characters, both the autobiographical heroines and the communities that surround them.

Knowing about Frank Stanford, then, allows us to recognize a large web of connections among stories that seem unrelated. Placing the literal Stanford alongside the fictional version makes the fictional Stanford visible. It provides a set of tools for exploring the fiction, and it transforms an otherwise minor character into an important presence across a wide swath of Gilchrist's fiction. In the next chapter, I will examine how four Gilchrist protagonists – Amanda, Rhoda, Crystal, and Anna – interact with the Stanford character, who plays a role in each of their lives.

CHAPTER 3

FRANK STANFORD IN THE FICTION

The Frank Stanford story cycle is not as obvious as Gilchrist's other cycles, which consist of stories that share a single protagonist or identical plots. In fact, the characters who represent Stanford are not connected in any transparent way, and their appearances are scattered over many stories. I have assembled these characters and their stories, pulling them together to show how the Stanford figure interacts with – and impacts – the protagonists who encounter him.

In all of these stories the Stanford character remains static, fixed in a specific time or place; he is often talked about and remembered, though he never appears, alive and well, in the present tense. Still, he effects change in the characters that surround him, his friendship or his death often pushing them in a new direction. He plays a different role for each protagonist – friend, mentor, husband – that might be missed by most readers. For a reader who recognizes the Gilchrist/Stanford relationship, however, his identity as a fictional Stanford is always unmistakable.

In this chapter, I turn to the fiction to show how Gilchrist uses the Stanford character; in various guises, he appears in her protagonists' lives at different times and in different roles – but always with the same result.

3.1 James Alter: Amanda McCamey's Warning Sign

The poet who represents Frank Stanford appears throughout Gilchrist's work, from her first collection of short stories to some of her recent fiction. The first time a Frank Stanford character appeared in Gilchrist's fiction, he was merely a shadow that passed through her first novel, 1983's *The Annunciation*. In fact, she hadn't fully settled on his name: here, he was James Alter, a poet who had killed himself in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Amanda McCamey, who has left her stifling life in New Orleans to write and translate poems in Fayetteville, falls in love with a younger man named Will, who "got blown off the road by James Alter's death" (297). "I loved him," Will tells Amanda. "Jesus, I loved that man" (187). His devastation is a factor in Amanda's decision to rethink her work and her life.

Amanda has been translating the poems of an eighteenth-century Italian poet, Helene Renoir, who took her own life at twenty-one. As Amanda discovers how much her own life resembles Helene Renoir's, death begins to cast a shadow; the story of James Alter's death hovers in the background, adding another layer of darkness, and it all becomes too much. Amanda becomes uncomfortable with the "whole goddamn life-hating death-wish trip" (*Annunciation* 281) and decides "all this romantic suicide poet stuff" is unforgivable (297). Amanda's decision comes on the heels of a boating accident; just days earlier, her canoe overturned on the Buffalo River and she almost surrendered, nearly giving in to death, thinking, "This is what it is to die"

(246). Now she has survived the river and has learned she is pregnant. Amanda has found the purpose in her life and suddenly sees suicide, which had seemed like a viable option so recently, as wrong. “It isn’t the side I’m on,” she decides, and goes forth to live her life, determined to “keep on putting one foot in front of the other and everything will turn out right” (298). With the sad aftermath of James Alter’s suicide in the back of her mind, Amanda moves toward “freedom through self-knowledge” (Thompson and Garner 107), turning away from despair to lead “a self-directed, meaningful life” (105).

3.2 Francis Alter: Crystal Manning Weiss’s Escape

The Stanford character was fully realized by 1984, when Gilchrist published a short story that features Crystal Manning Weiss, a society matron who lives in New Orleans. Crystal has discovered poetry in midlife and has fallen in with a group of artists and poets, much to the dismay of her husband Manny, who wishes she had more respectable friends. One of her poet friends is Francis Alter, who is working with Crystal to publish a poetry magazine. Crystal is the first of Gilchrist’s protagonists to have a real relationship with the Frank Stanford character, though she will not be the last.

In “Traceleen’s Telling a Story Called ‘A Bad Year,’” Gilchrist recounts the death of Francis Alter in the conversational tone of Traceleen, the maid who has seen everything but is a step removed from the group. Traceleen looks back at 1976, the year there was “too much going on” (233), the year Francis Alter died. That spring, she recalls, the poet arrived unannounced at Crystal’s

house one afternoon and spent the rest of the season in New Orleans, encouraged even by Crystal's husband Manny to "[s]tay another week . . . Stay with us" (224). As soon as he arrived, he and Crystal "got out all their boxes of stuff about their magazine and started laying it out all over the dining room table" (226). Soon after, they called some poet friends and a crowd began to fill the living room, listening to jazz, "sitting on the floor, happy and drinking wine and talking about poems" (227). It is a scene Traceleen will recall later as a golden era in her life with Crystal, but in this story the joyful gatherings came to an abrupt end. Francis Alter, after spending weeks with Crystal and her family, went home and shot himself.

The story mirrors Gilchrist's own story. In the spring of 1978, Stanford spent about three weeks with Gilchrist and her family at their home in New Orleans. They worked together on Gilchrist's poetry collection, and other poets came over to join them (Ehrenreich; McCay 16). The scene must have looked much like the crowd in Crystal's living room. Then, after a "fairly relaxed, even fun" few weeks (Ehrenreich), Stanford was called home to Fayetteville and, soon after, shot himself.

In "Traceleen's Telling a Story," Traceleen puzzles over Francis Alter's suicide: "It just don't make a bit of sense." She asks Crystal, "How come him to do it to us," and Crystal offers up several reasons Francis might have killed himself – fame, a lack of money, "those monks that raised him at that boy's school" (225) – before she finally admits she doesn't know why Francis wanted

to die (225-26). “He seem like such a happy man,” Traceleen says, and he had “[e]veryone in town calling him up whenever he was here, men and women. . . . How could he go and shoot himself with all those people loving him to death and wanting to talk to him all day?” (224).

At its midpoint, the story takes a turn to focus on Crystal’s son King. King – who was fourteen, “just the age for adoring someone” (“Traceleen’s” 225) – considered Francis a friend, a hero, and a role model, and he barely left the poet’s side while he was in town. “King loved him the hardest of anyone,” Traceleen says (225); he eagerly read any book Francis recommended and followed the poet everywhere. Unhappy since his mother divorced his father and married Manny, King had rebelled and used drugs to escape, but he found healthy escape in his friendship with Francis (McCay 8). And when Francis Alter shot himself, King ran away from home. His grandfather found him at a hippie commune in Texas and brought him home, but King immediately ran away again and was missing for weeks. The household was in chaos, with policemen and family members and support groups coming in and out at all hours until King returned on his own in mid-July, a day before his fifteenth birthday. Throughout the story of that year, Traceleen remains baffled by Francis Alter, angry with him for what she considers a shirking of responsibility. “How could you shoot yourself with a young man adoring you and copying every move you make?” she wonders. “That’s doing wrong, that’s doing very bad even if he was a famous poet” (“Traceleen’s” 225).

The spring of 1976, when Francis came to stay in New Orleans, was a rare moment for Crystal and Manny, King and Traceleen – a time of harmony and beauty, poetry and inspiration. In fact, for years after this story, Gilchrist dropped Francis Alter’s name into stories about Crystal as if her readers might all remember the impact of his death on her characters. In one story, the reader finds a fleeting reference to “one terrible week in New Orleans after Francis Alter died” (*I Cannot* 237), in another a wistful observation that “[i]f Mr. Alter hadn’t killed himself he might be here to turn this experience into literature” (“Too Much” 67). Traceleen will mention, to provide a timeframe, “This was when Mr. Alter was alive and would come and visit us and inspire poetry in everyone in town” (“Big Cleanup” 249). These brief allusions to the past are inserted with no context and no explanation. A reader unfamiliar with Francis Alter and his role in Crystal’s life might be frustrated by what seem to be extraneous references, needless distractions, or editing errors.

For a reader aware of the context, however, Gilchrist’s name-dropping is not an annoyance but a shorthand reminiscence, a murmur of a memory slipped quietly into a conversation between people who share that memory. Clearly, Crystal looks back at her friendship with Francis Alter as one of the best times of her life; these were the months and years when she found freedom. When Crystal fell in with the poets, her house was often full of happy, excited voices speaking passionately about art and literature. Traceleen, many years after Francis Alter’s death, remembers the scene:

. . . the jazz poet dragging himself out of bed to come join them or the skinny poet, Mr. Lancaster . . . and there is no telling what other poets or artists coming over and beginning to talk about things that interest them. . . . Their voices rising with excitement. Oh, the good old days (*I Cannot* 76-77).

This was Crystal's crowd, far removed from the unimaginative, stuffy people from her husband's world. With the poets and the artists, Crystal found freedom, and Francis Alter was her most important connection to that world.

McCay points out another clear link in "Traceleen's Telling a Story" between Gilchrist's life and her fiction. King, she says, "might well be a composite of Gilchrist's two older boys, Marshall and Garth" (8); Marshall, especially, had a close relationship with the poet Frank Stanford, and he was devastated when Stanford died. The story, to McCay, is Gilchrist's thinly-disguised account of the suicide's grave impact on her own son; she reveals her own son's anguish through fourteen-year-old King's rash, grief-stricken behavior.

All of "Traceleen's Telling a Story," in fact, focuses on Francis Alter's importance to Crystal's family. Another story, however, published a decade later, shows the impact of the poet's death on a larger community. In 1995's "The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria," just as she did with the story of Rhoda Manning's abortion, Gilchrist again retells a story to recast it, shifting her focus from individuals to a segment of society. The story – which hinges on the

death of Francis Alter – makes the poet’s death larger than a personal loss for Crystal. Gilchrist has broadened her focus, showing Francis Alter’s impact on the artistic community, and his death represents no less than the end of an era.

“Raintree Street” takes place in a New Orleans bar where the local poets spend their days. It is a big year for poets in New Orleans, a year when “[e]very society woman in town who wasn’t into tennis was into poetry” (86). Wealthy women – who are, of course, Crystal’s peers – have started spending time at the Raintree Street Bar that year, chasing after the poets and invading their creative, bohemian world.

On a humid summer afternoon, a young man named Sandy George Wade walks into the bar and asks if anyone has heard of Francis Alter. Francis had told him he would find friends if he went to the bar, that there “are people there who know me. They know my work” (“Raintree” 88). As soon as he walks in and mentions Francis Alter’s name, the poets begin to express their awe. “You know Francis?” says a man known as the Jazz Poet. “He’s the best. The absolute nonpareil. The very best” (88). The Jazz Poet leads Sandy to the bar, puts an arm around his shoulder, and says, “Tell me about Francis. . . . I’d give anything to know him. He’s the best there is, the absolute best. . . . He’s a god” (90). A few minutes later, a woman arrives at the bar, a society matron named Jane who – not surprisingly – publishes a poetry magazine. The Jazz Poet introduces Sandy, and Jane is intrigued: “You know Francis Alter?” she asks him. “That’s amazing. I’ve been trying to meet him for years” (92). The Jazz

Poet continues the praise: “I worship Francis Alter. I worship at his shrine” (97). As the evening wears on and people gather around him at the bar, Sandy gets caught up in the excitement over Francis as well. “He’s the most beautiful man I ever knew,” Sandy tells his audience. “He makes everything seem important” (97).

Meanwhile, across town, Crystal receives a phone call: Francis Alter is dead. He has shot himself. Crystal is in shock – after all, Francis had just left her home in New Orleans. He had been visiting Crystal, her husband, and their friends, “charming them to death with his beauty and poetry, charming their children . . . charming the birds down from the trees” (“Raintree” 94). The act of suicide is described twice, perhaps for emphasis: “Then he had gone home to his meager poet’s cottage and lain down upon a bed and shot himself through the heart. He had gone into a bedroom and lain down upon a bed and blown his heart to smithereens” (94).

In “Raintree Street,” we again get a glimpse of King’s devastation at the death of Francis Alter: “Is Francis really dead?” King asks. “Francis is dead? He said he was going to take me fishing. He said we were going camping on the White River. He said he was coming back” (95). But this time, the story expands beyond the grief of Crystal and her family when Crystal decides the poets of New Orleans need to hear the news.

“The poets should know,” Crystal tells her husband, then drives down to the Raintree (“Raintree” 94). As she makes her way to the bar, a series of

revealing thoughts runs through her head: "I hate to tell them, Crystal thought. I don't know if I want to be the one to spread this. Of course she was dying to be the one to tell, dying to be known as the first one who knew, dying to be remembered as the great poet's friend" (97). It is important to Crystal's self-concept that she be identified as this poet's close and worthy friend. She is a true part of the artistic community, not merely a wealthy woman dabbling in the arts, and breaking the news about Francis Alter's death allows her to confirm that privilege.

As Crystal walks into the bar, she arranges her face into "a mask of sadness and mystery and despair" ("Raintree" 98) and tells one of the poets what she knows. And here, at the story's end, Gilchrist seems to make her clearest statement about the impact of the poet's death in his circle of fellow writers. His death represents the end of an era, and in "The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria," everyone recognizes it immediately. It has been, the story says, "the pinnacle year of poets in New Orleans" (93), a year when the poets got all the admiration and all the women, a year when life was simple and days could be spent drinking in the Raintree Street Bar. And as the news of Francis's death begins to spread through the bar, people stop dancing and simply look at each other, realizing that "a death had come among them. A poet had died by his own hand, had given the lie to all the gaiety and pussy and beer and poetry and jazz" (98). Just as Traceleen longs for "the good old days" (*I Cannot* 276-77) of poetry and excitement in Crystal and Manny's household, this story

expands that longing beyond one family and into the artistic community at large: “Those were the days, the people from the Raintree would say later. Those were the years” (“Raintree” 93).

McCay describes the frequent fictional presence of Stanford in Gilchrist’s work as “almost a chant about the death of the artist in the late twentieth century” (xi), and she believes the poet’s death is intended to show the need for artists. Certainly, *The Age of Miracles*, Gilchrist’s 1995 collection of stories, is haunted through and through by Francis Alter’s ghost, and his role as artist is key. “The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria” is included in this collection, but the majority of the book’s numerous Francis Alter stories revolve around Rhoda Manning.

3.3 Francis Alter: Rhoda Manning’s Mentor

Gilchrist has written about Rhoda since her first book of short stories in 1981, but Francis Alter does not appear in Rhoda’s life until *The Age of Miracles*. When he appears, however, his presence – and, subsequently, his absence – explain much that was previously missing in Rhoda’s character and personal history.

Rhoda’s life story so closely mirrors Gilchrist’s that it is difficult to separate the two. Like Gilchrist, a forty-something Rhoda leaves her wealthy but uncomfortable life in New Orleans – as well as her husband and fifteen-year-old son, Teddy – to go to Fayetteville and study writing. She is eager for the freedom of the academic life that awaits her; this is her turning point, the

moment she becomes a writer. In “Going to Join the Poets,” Rhoda climbs into her new green Mercedes and drives to Arkansas to escape into a new life, a new identity.

Reading Anne Sexton’s *45 Mercy Street* has inspired Rhoda to upend her life and go to Fayetteville. She had gone into a bookstore on a whim, bought Sexton’s book, and sat on a bench on the Tulane campus, reading and weeping. She began to write that day, and poems began to spill out of her – one hundred of them in one hundred summer days (“Going” 242-3). Rhoda’s sudden conversion to writing mirrors a story Gilchrist has recounted from her own experience: in an interview, she recalls “weeping uncontrollably” while reading Sexton’s posthumous collection in public – “[s]o I began to write” (Smith 47).

Soon after Rhoda moves to Fayetteville, she meets Francis Alter; it is a story that parallels Gilchrist’s own almost exactly. The poet is on campus when Rhoda arrives at the University of Arkansas. “Meet Francis Alter,” the head of the writing program tells her, gesturing to “a completely beautiful man of uncertain age” and declaring him “[t]he best poet in the state” (“Going” 246). Like Stanford, Francis Alter is no longer a student at the university, but he spends so much time with the students and faculty in the writing program that he is considered a part of the community. Immediately, the poet’s death is foretold, even in that moment of meeting: “Their eyes met. From that moment on they would be friends. Until the day he told her good-bye and left her and

went home and shot himself, not a single moment would be cruel or jealous or untrue" (246).

Before the end, we learn, Francis Alter will take over Rhoda's education. Rhoda will, like Gilchrist, leave the writing program before she earns her degree. She will listen only to Francis, and he will direct her fledgling career. He will help Rhoda get her work published, helping her find the magazines that will appreciate her work – and when Rhoda gets published and wins an award and her fellow students begin to envy her, Francis is the only writer friend who will not resent her success ("Going" 246, 248-49).

In "Going to Join the Poets," Rhoda recalls how she and Francis "had sat around and talked, the crazy talk that writers talk, talk that transcends the food stamps and old cars and cold apartments, talk that lifts the spirit out of the realm of houses or clothes or cars" (247). The student poverty she describes, of course, is not Rhoda's reality. She drives a Mercedes; she has a wardrobe she bought just for Fayetteville, clothes that were "not anything she would wear in New Orleans" (249). When the heat goes out in her modest apartment near campus, she can afford to leave that day and rent one that costs twice as much (246). Because of this wild writers' inspiration, however – this connection with another writer – Rhoda ignores the other, less inspiring realities of her life: the marriage that is disintegrating and the teen-age son who is experimenting with drugs. It is, she says "[t]he best year of her life" (260). She is pleased with the

new identity she has formed in Arkansas; the poet who “took over her education” (246) has turned her into his equal, and she relishes the role.

Gilchrist emphasizes another role here as well. In this story, Rhoda asserts that although others felt betrayed by the poet’s lies, by his scams, by his suicide, she did not. The story stresses how Rhoda’s friendship with Francis was never “untrue” (“Going” 246), that the poet was always honest with her and never misled her about his intentions – even his intention to die. “Many years later she knew that even the days before he did it were not untrue,” the story continues (246). He had told her goodbye, had told her to remember him. “She had been so lucky,” Rhoda thinks later, a bit smug. “All the women who made love to him, who held him in the sleepless dark nights of his soul, had never had what she had from him.” What Rhoda had (which, of course, is what Gilchrist had): “She had his friendship and his help with her work. It was a gift she had longed for all her life” (247).

In the end, Rhoda – like Gilchrist – does not stay permanently in Fayetteville – at least, not at first. When she begins to tire of the scene and her jealous classmates, she flies home to New Orleans on the weekends (“Going” 249). She realizes she is playing at this meager existence, dipping in just to sample the student life, and she soon decides she is “tired of acting like she was poor, tired of never getting dressed up in nice clothes” (249). Her identity as a writer, however, is now established. She has been published. And, perhaps more important, Rhoda has earned the respect and the friendship of

Francis Alter, a writer she admires who is also a friend she loves. Like Crystal in “The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria,” Rhoda is proud to have a connection, a real friendship, with Francis. He has ushered Rhoda into the writing life and has helped her find the freedom she came to Fayetteville to seek.

Francis Alter appears yet again in the Rhoda stories. In the short story “A Wedding in Jackson” – also part of *The Age of Miracles* – a fifty-eight-year-old Rhoda Manning drives to a wedding in Mississippi from her home in Fayetteville, Arkansas. On the way, wishing she had time to visit the grave of the poet Francis Alter, she takes time to remember him:

He was my first true writer friend. The first blessed, gifted, cursed poet that I knew. Also, the most beautiful human being I have ever seen. To be in his presence was to understand why men became the disciples of Christ. Existence changed when he was around, became finer, clearer, more alive. He dedicated his life to beauty, to art, poetry, freedom. Then he killed himself (39).

In this story, Francis Alter, like Frank Stanford, is buried on a hill at Subiaco, the Benedictine academy in western Arkansas where Stanford attended high school. Francis also plays the same role for Rhoda that Stanford played for Gilchrist. “He showed me how to make my first book,” Rhoda says, “chose the poems, put them into order.” But in this brief passage, Rhoda is short on time and unable to reminisce any longer: “Francis’s bones are laid to

rest,” she says. “He has been in the grave for fourteen years, has turned to dust” (“Wedding” 39). She remembers him briefly, then drives on.

Francis Alter’s presence in this story is not necessary to the plot; it is merely a moment of recollection offered in a single paragraph. In fact, the first-time reader picking up *The Age of Miracles* – the collection that includes both stories – will read “A Wedding in Jackson” well before the book’s final story, “Going to Join the Poets,” can provide the background that will make this paragraph understandable, meaningful, or even interesting. Why does Gilchrist mention Francis Alter here, when he plays no role in the current story? Its inclusion here is an inexplicable distraction, even with the full fictional context – except for the reader who knows Gilchrist’s own story and can recognize this passage as one of the markers she leaves in her fiction like crosses on the side of the highway, momentary pauses to memorialize a poet long dead.

3.4 Francis Gautier: Anna Hand’s Lost Love

In 1988’s *The Anna Papers*, Gilchrist introduces a new heroine, the writer Anna Hand, and in Anna’s universe she places a new variation of the Frank Stanford character. Anna is, Bauer says, “the apex of Gilchrist’s development of her prototype” (14), a character whose life does not follow a pattern identical to Gilchrist’s earlier protagonists. The poet whose death impacts Anna’s life, then, by necessity does not appear in identical form. In Anna’s world, the poet is Francis Gautier – similar, but not identical to Francis

Alter. And indeed, just as Anna is a variation on Rhoda and Crystal, Francis Gautier is a variation on Francis Alter.

Like Rhoda (and Gilchrist herself), Anna married in her late teens after her first year of college; the first young man she found became her husband (*Anna Papers* 28). Instead of following the Rhoda/Gilchrist story line, however – babies, followed by divorce, followed by another unhappy marriage – Anna suffered a series of miscarriages and did not have children at all. Instead, when she divorced her first husband, she met a poet named Francis Gautier. She married him. He was, *The Anna Papers* says, the one she truly loved – and when he died soon after they married, Anna “pulled an old Royal portable typewriter out of a closet and set it up on a wooden card table in a sewing room and began to write” (30).

This is exactly how Gilchrist describes the beginning of her own writing career – a moment in 1975 when, she writes, “I pulled my old portable typewriter out of a closet” (*Falling* 41). Leaving for a vacation with her husband, Gilchrist suddenly went back inside the house, “opened up a closet in the hall, got out a Royal portable typewriter I hadn’t touched in about seven years, and took it with me to the islands” (Smith 47). It was the moment she began to reclaim her life and build a future as a writer. By the next fall, she was enrolled in the University of Arkansas writing program. After years of raising children and writing little, Gilchrist had found freedom.

Unlike Gilchrist and her other protagonists, Anna claims her freedom early. She becomes a writer in her twenties, not waiting for a journey to Fayetteville in her forties. Still, it is the poet, Francis Gautier, who triggers her discovery.

There is no chapter or short story devoted to Anna's loss of Francis, but the poet's name is mentioned frequently. Anna idealizes how her life with Francis might have been, recalling a summer day in her twenties when "she was celebrating because she was going to marry a poet A new world where she would be happy all the time. And I would have been, Anna thought. If he hadn't died I would have been happy" (*Anna Papers* 144). Nearly two decades later, she stops by his grave and tells him: "I'm sorry the water has left your protein molecules, Francis, but I'm not mad at you for dying anymore" (137). Later, Anna has a dream about Francis: "I dreamed he came to me and wept for the loneliness of my life. I dreamed he begged me to forgive him for dying" (141). When Anna begins to suspect she herself is dying – the symptoms of her cancer becoming evident before she ever sees a doctor – she consoles herself about death, thinking, "Wherever I'm going Frank will be too" (144).

The similarities to Francis Alter become evident as praise echoes for Francis Gautier. A Boston poet named Mike Carmichael and Anna's sister Helen are Anna's literary executors, and together they sort through Anna's papers after she dies. In a closet, Mike finds letters and some other mementos from Anna's life with Francis. He speaks of Francis in worshipful tones: "Francis

Gautier was my favorite poet writing in the sixties,” he says. “I don’t know if I can read these letters. I don’t know if I can do this” (*Anna Papers* 253). When Helen remarks that Anna “really loved that man,” Mike jumps in with words that sound much like the admiring poets in “The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria”: “She should have loved him,” he says. “I would have given anything in the world to know him” (254).

Francis Gautier is not the exact replica of Frank Stanford that Francis Alter is. He was a poet, and he died young – but in a car accident, not from suicide (*Anna Papers* 30). He never lived in Arkansas, and he was not simply a friend but a husband to Gilchrist’s autobiographical heroine. Why? This is another example of Gilchrist’s “respond[ing] to, revis[ing], and transform[ing] her own earlier works” (Bauer 157). Through Francis Gautier, Gilchrist likely is experimenting with other possibilities, imagining the paths her characters – and, of course, she herself – did not take. What if Stanford had not committed suicide? What if she had met Stanford in her twenties instead of her forties? Would their relationship have been different? Would she have become a writer much earlier? Gilchrist can explore all of these questions through her characters, and she does so here. Throughout her work Gilchrist presents essentially the same character, a poet named Francis, but each time she places him in a different set of circumstances, much as she does with her female protagonists. If Anna Hand is an evolved version of Rhoda Manning, as Bauer

suggests (15), then surely Francis Gautier fits somewhere along Francis Alter's evolutionary spectrum.

3.5 An Outsider's Perspective

Oddly, one of Gilchrist's fullest, most focused fictional accounts of Stanford's death is a story that does not involve any of the four protagonists. In fact, in "Among the Mourners," published in 1995, Gilchrist brings another protagonist into her Stanford story cycle: Aurora Harris, the teenage daughter of the head of the English department at the University of Arkansas. Aurora is younger than any of Gilchrist's other protagonists, even Anna, when she encounters her Stanford figure. In fact, Aurora does not know Francis Alter well at all – he is merely a friend and former student of her father's – and she reports the details of the poet's suicide and its immediate aftermath with less gravity.

In "Among the Mourners," Gilchrist places Francis Alter – at his death – squarely in the middle of an adoring crowd. The story, about a wake for the young poet that lasts for days, is a revealing glimpse of the way Francis Alter was revered by his friends and admirers. Of course, as in many of Gilchrist's stories, the parallels to reality are striking. When Stanford died, friends gathered at the home of Jim Whitehead, who had several young children. The wake lasted for several days (Adamo et al.; Launius 301; McCay 16).

As Aurora watches her family's house fill with mourning friends, she observes the way the adults react to the poet's death. Aurora finds the experience an inconvenience – after all, she is thirteen and in love with a boy

named Giorgio – but the behavior of the group offers the reader a glimpse of how devastated (and dramatic) the poet's friends are.

“The spring that I was thirteen years old a poet we knew died and we had to have the funeral,” Aurora says. “It was the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me in my life” (“Among” 99). By presenting the story of the wake through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old who does not understand “the implications of adult grief and uncertainty,” McCay says, Gilchrist adds “an ironically chilling dimension to the tale” (17). This is true, but a young – and, to some degree, uninvolved – narrator also gives Gilchrist the opportunity to lay some expository groundwork. She is able to show us the poet's death through a wide-angle lens, again offering a broad view of its impact on a whole community – and, this time, peppering the account with critical questions and judgments from an observant bystander who is among, but not one of, the mourners.

The poet shot himself, Aurora explains, “because his girlfriend had talked his wife into divorcing him and the next thing I knew there were about a hundred cars parked all over the yard” (“Among” 100). Aurora, meanwhile, feels free to criticize. When her father tells her to be more respectful, she replies: ““If someone kills themselves they don't get my respect”” (101). Aurora, tiring of a household in chaos, seeks refuge at the home of her new boyfriend, where Giorgio's mother joins her in criticizing the dead man, remarking to Aurora that everyone “should stop making a big deal out of someone young and in good health who would kill themselves” (101-02).

At Aurora's house, the mourning crowd is ridiculous in the thirteen-year-old's eyes. Graduate students have cleaned out the poet's closet and are walking around handing out his shirts as souvenirs. One of the guests, a man named Mr. Seats, claims Francis Alter has appeared to him as a ghost. "I bet Mr. Seats told that story about fifty times in one day," Aurora says. "Every time I would walk through the room . . . there he would be, telling about the ghost behind the rocking chair." And Aurora marvels that her parents, usually such rational people who disapprove of meaningless rituals and believe ghosts are "a lower-middle-class superstition," have abandoned all reason in order to join the mourning crowd ("Among" 103). By examining the emotion of the crowd through a character who does not share the emotion, Gilchrist offers new perspective and distance, allowing her protagonist – and, perhaps for the first time, her reader – to see (and judge) the poet and his death from a distance.

The young, uninvolved voice Gilchrist uses here to offer a less personal, more critical account is a thinly-veiled version of that "composite personality" Bauer identifies (10). Aurora -- feisty, self-centered, her talent constrained by the limitations of her small town -- comes from the same mold as Gilchrist's other protagonists. She encounters her Frank Stanford figure, however, at a time when she is too young to be impacted by his death.

Gilchrist brought Aurora Harris back in the 1998 story "The Triumph of Reason," and here the dispassionate bystander, a young woman now, has drawn near and embraced the tragedy. Aurora is sixteen now and, on a family

trip to France, she meets a young man. On their first walk, she tells him about the significant events of her life. She begins: "I told him about the poet in Fayetteville who had committed suicide because he was adopted and because his girlfriend talked his wife into divorcing him." Next: "I told him about the six-day wake we had at our house and how it was the day I got kissed for the first time and about how Dad hid all the poet's books for several years and finally last year I demanded to be able to read his poetry" ("Triumph" 206).

A bit older now, and having read the poet's work, Aurora has gained perspective on his death – and, having done so, she claims the loss as her own. She, like so many of Gilchrist's heroines, is touched by the death of a handsome poet who died young, and she reminds readers again just how much Francis Alter's death mattered, and how the fact of his death is woven into the lives of so many Gilchrist characters. In "The Triumph of Reason," the poet's death does not become an integral part of the story's plot. Its appearance, however, is another reminder, another passage Gilchrist has inserted that keeps the Francis Alter/Frank Stanford story cycle alive.

CHAPTER 4

A CRUCIAL FIGURE IN A KEY CYCLE

The Frank Stanford cycle is more than a single story about a poet or even several stories about a poet. Instead, Gilchrist has made the poet and his death a constant presence in her work, and she has given readers several versions of Frank Stanford interacting with several versions of herself. Just as her autobiographical heroines have different lives and different circumstances and yet convincingly create a composite character, Gilchrist's different versions of Frank Stanford are different characters but have the same purpose in all of her stories about him.

Gilchrist gives her Stanford character different names: James Alter, Francis Alter, Francis Gautier. She places them in different circumstances and in different relationships with her protagonists: For Anna, he is a husband who died young, while for Rhoda he is a classmate who helped her become his equal, and for Crystal he is a friend who came down from the mountains of Arkansas occasionally to spend time with her. Certain details, however, always remain the same, and those details correspond perfectly to Frank Stanford. Gilchrist's Stanford character is always a young, handsome poet who dies young, has a mystical, charming quality, and makes a lifelong impact on the characters who interact with him.

Just as Ellen Gilchrist's biography ties her heroines to one another, showcasing their similarities, Stanford's biography makes this new story cycle visible. Knowledge of Gilchrist and Stanford makes it possible to fully understand the stories of Anna Hand and Francis Gautier, Rhoda Manning and Francis Alter, and Crystal Manning Weiss and her own Francis Alter – makes it evident that in Gilchrist's fiction, a husband who died in a car accident represents the same person as a classmate who died by his own hand.

A complete analysis of Gilchrist's fiction requires an understanding of her technique. Critics who take issue with Gilchrist's tendencies toward autobiography and self-reference overlook the fact that Gilchrist is not telling simply her own story. She tells a version of the story, then loops back to tell it another way. She changes the time, the circumstances, the protagonists, and the reactions of other characters. By recognizing the truth in Gilchrist's story, a careful reader can identify how and where she crafts it into fiction. In fact, only by knowing Gilchrist's full biography – and the story of her relationship with Stanford – can a reader fully recognize the way she uses fact to form fiction.

4.1 Fitting Pieces into the Cycle

The truth, of course, is not always *literal* fact. The Stanford stories are filled with inconsistencies and passages that seem unnecessary or inexplicable without awareness of the Frank Stanford story cycle. Only a reader familiar with that cycle can recognize just how often Gilchrist alludes to the poet in her

fiction, slipping the name or a telling detail into stories that are not about him at all.

Furthermore, Gilchrist's portrayals of the poet often contradict her own timeline, making his story impossible even within her fictional world. In "Traceleen's Telling a Story Called 'A Bad Year'" – in which Crystal's son King runs away from home – Francis Alter dies in 1976 (223). In "The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria," which recounts almost the same scene, it is 1979 (86). In thirteen-year-old Aurora's account of the wake in Fayetteville, it is 1993 when Francis Alter dies ("Triumph" 212).

In other Gilchrist stories, Francis Alter appears in places and at times that, according to her other stories, would have been impossible. A story in *The Age of Miracles* called "The Stucco House" opens in the bedroom of Rhoda's son Teddy, a second-grader, where a mobile of small silver airplanes hangs in the window. "A poet had given it to Teddy when he came to visit," the reader learns. "Then the poet had gone home and killed himself. Teddy was not supposed to know about that, but of course he did" (111). The poet clearly represents Francis Alter – but Francis Alter did not appear in Rhoda's life until 1976, when Teddy was fifteen years old and Rhoda went to join the poets in Fayetteville. Francis could not have visited Rhoda so early and left gifts for a young Teddy – and yet, his appearance here is unmistakable.

And in the 1990 book *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*, two of Gilchrist's Stanford characters appear in a single novella: Crystal's friend Lydia makes

fleeting reference to the awful days “after Francis Alter died” (237), and within the same pages, Anna Hand can be found longing for her own departed Francis, the poet Francis Gautier (71, 362). The fact that two versions of Stanford appear in the same book shows just large he looms in Gilchrist’s inner world. It also shows that the Stanford character is not merely a single figure in her work; he is represented by several characters whose lives overlap, contradict, and intersect with one another, each performing the same function but in a different protagonist’s world. The inconsistencies do not matter within the cycle because the Stanford character, like Gilchrist’s protagonists, has become a “composite personality” (Bauer 10).

To understand all of this requires a critic to consider Gilchrist’s biography as a text to be weighed alongside the fiction. To ignore the autobiographical element of Gilchrist’s fiction is to miss the story cycle completely – and, at times, to appear foolish and short-sighted. Brad Hooper, for instance, in his analysis of Gilchrist’s fiction, determines he will “draw no parallels and connections between the author’s life and her work.” He makes a case for taking Gilchrist’s work “at face value,” positing that only the fiction matters (5). But the shortcomings of this approach are made obvious by Hooper’s analysis of “The Raintree Street Bar and Washerteria.” Though the story shows the sudden, era-ending dissolution of a group of artists at the news of Francis Alter’s death, Hooper calls “Raintree Street” “rather a throwaway piece about New Orleans society women getting involved in the city’s active poetry

community . . . ” (103). Hooper goes on to discuss Crystal’s involvement with the poets, her appearance at the bar, and her “dabbling in the arts” – and he pronounces that “[t]he only interesting feature of the story” is the arrival of Sandy George Wade, the young man who appears from out of town. Hooper ignores Francis Alter’s death in this story entirely, overlooking its importance in the story – and completely missing the poet’s importance to Crystal and to the poets at the bar. Here, the connection between Frank Stanford and Francis Alter – that is, the connection between Gilchrist’s life and the characters in her fiction – is crucial. Without knowledge of Frank Stanford, the significance of Francis Alter is overlooked – and thus, this powerful Gilchrist story becomes nothing but a “throwaway piece.” Hooper, failing to consider the biography/fiction connection, appears naïve and uninformed.

Hooper’s book does devote some attention to the Francis Alter character, but Hooper is either ignorant of the character’s real-life counterpart or chooses to ignore the connection. He discusses the significance of the name Alter, calling it “a not-too-subtle allusion to his capacity to be an agent of change” (57). This may be true, but it is also the name Frank Stanford was given at birth, when his mother, Dorothy Alter, adopted him (Shugars 12). (She married Alfred Franklin Stanford, who gave the boy his last name, four years later.) Hooper’s attributing symbolic meaning to the name Alter may well be appropriate, but it overlooks another “not-too-subtle allusion” – one more important and more concrete: Gilchrist has given her character the *actual* name

of her friend. Once again, knowledge of Gilchrist's biography – and in this case, Stanford's – confirms the character's identity and places the stories in the Stanford cycle.

4.2 A Larger Cycle

Stanford has been dead for more than thirty years – longer now than he lived – but his reputation and his legend have continued to grow since his death, bolstered by the writings of those who knew him. Since his death at twenty-nine, Stanford has taken on a new life – and a new importance – as a character in the work of these writers, and their work forms a literary megacycle that spans genres and decades. The Frank Stanford cycle in Gilchrist's fiction, then, is part of this larger cycle.

Steve Stern, one of Stanford's Arkansas contemporaries, wrote a novel in 1986 that features an obvious version of Stanford. *The Moon and Ruben Shein* portrays a young man much like Stern himself as he mourns the suicide of his friend, a poet identical to Stanford. What begins with hero worship for this departed poet, however, shifts to confusion and resentment as the men's identities begin to intermingle.

The poet C.D. Wright has written a multitude of poems about Stanford, her lover and the man who shared her home for two years. In passages that are sometimes vague, sometimes excruciatingly direct, Wright returns to Stanford again and again; she tells the story of his death, expresses her anger, and chronicles private moments in their relationship.

Songwriter Lucinda Williams has written at least two songs about Stanford. Williams spent part of her early twenties in Fayetteville; her father, the poet Miller Williams, helped James Whitehead found the University of Arkansas writing program, and Stanford was a regular guest at the Williams home (Buford 55; Shugars 15; “Jim Whitehead” 1). While Lucinda Williams did not have a long-term relationship with the poet, she was part of the circle of admirers who surrounded him – and, in the spring of 1978, she was one of several women he was seeing in a “frenzy of philandering” (Buford 56). Her song “Pineola” tells the story of the days after Stanford’s death chronologically, from the moment she heard the news (“When Daddy told me what happened . . .”) through the wake at Whitehead’s home, the funeral, and Stanford’s burial. The song is structured as a story, which gives it more power. There is no chorus or bridge to slow the details that pour out in a relentless series of four-line stanzas.

Whitehead himself wrote a poem about Stanford that was published in 1993. “Below Is What He Said That Troubles Me” sets up a confession heard by the narrator, an admission of jealousy made to him after “our genius died” by someone who envied all the friends who were “blessed / To be the ones who found him lying there” The confessor was not “asked / To go along to find the suicide.” He never saw the body with “eyes open, a thoughtless, drying stare” Whitehead’s final lines are a succinct, revealing description of the way Stanford’s circle reacted to his death:

They saw him in his blood
And took the seeing for a source of pride,
The perfect homemade horror all have wished, –
For people want this story. All draw near (5).

More than three decades after his death, this larger cycle of work about Stanford continues; in 2008, Forrest Gander published a novel based on Stanford's suicide. (Though Gander never met the poet, he met C.D. Wright in 1979, just after Stanford's death, and they married four years later [Colburn]). In four short sections, *As a Friend* offers a portrait of a poet's life and sudden death – and the destructive envy of a man who admires him.

Others have emerged to write poetry, songs, and prose about Stanford. Almost without exception, their life stories can be traced back to Fayetteville, Arkansas, in the 1970s, where they loved or admired a brilliant poet who died young. The sheer number of works, all focused on a relatively minor figure, is extraordinary. At least sixteen writers – all with some personal connection to Stanford – have offered thirty poems, five novels, two songs, one essay, an unfinished non-fiction novel, and several short stories. And while many of these writers knew each other at one time – many were contemporaries in Fayetteville in the mid-1970s – they are by no means a group of friends or colleagues who have remained in Arkansas, edited or published each other's work, or even stayed in touch with one another.

This fact makes even more remarkable the degree to which each writer has stayed faithful to a single story, reporting the same details about Stanford's life and death. The accounts are strikingly similar, many offering far more detail than Gilchrist does: a late-night confrontation over the poet's unfaithfulness, three shots to the heart, a wake that lasts for days and leads to his burial near a Benedictine monastery. Even the small details that might disguise Stanford's identity are not changed. These writers make Stanford a recognizable figure, offering no ambiguity or misleading detail that might cast a doubt in the knowledgeable reader's mind. And as with Gilchrist's work, these poems and prose are enhanced immensely by knowledge of the Stanford story. In many works – the poems, especially – recognition of Stanford is necessary for the reader to understand at all.

Gilchrist's contribution to this Stanford megacycle is unparalleled; no one has written more about Stanford over a longer period of time. Furthermore, none of these writers has used Stanford's presence in such a persistent fashion, placing a character in the lives of more than one protagonist.

4.3 The Stanford Character's Purpose

In Gilchrist's fiction, her autobiographical heroines seek freedom from their overbearing Southern families and stifling lifestyles – and they find that freedom when they find their own creative voices. “I finally made it to the free people,” Amanda McCamey tells herself when she arrives in Fayetteville (*Annunciation* 151). The Frank Stanford character represents that world they

seek – the world where they join the “free people” – and, in most cases, he is the one who welcomes them in and teaches them how to belong. His life and death are the catalyst for change. Amanda, seeing the impact of James Alter’s suicide on others, decides suicide is unjustifiable and uses her righteous anger to take charge of her own life. Crystal Manning Weiss’s friendship with Francis Alter is her ticket into a world of artists and poets, a community the wife of a corporate lawyer would not ordinarily meet, and after he dies Crystal longs to be “remembered as the great poet’s friend” (“Raintree” 97). Anna Hand, when Francis Gautier dies in an accident, chooses to write through her grief; she pulls her typewriter out of a closet and becomes a celebrated novelist. And Rhoda Manning’s new life begins when she arrives in Fayetteville and meets Francis Alter. He influences her writing and helps her get published, launching the career that sets her free from the “bonds” (*Net* 3) of family that have contained her all her life.

“In the end I got free,” Rhoda says in *Net of Jewels*, “so it sort of has a happy ending. That’s what this country is about, isn’t it? Getting free. Freeing people from their pasts. Creating our own crazy dazzling lives” (3-4). It is the overarching theme of Gilchrist’s entire body of work – the most frequent, dominant, and memorable theme of her fiction – and the Frank Stanford character plays a major role in pushing her heroines toward freedom. Thus, the Stanford story cycle is worthy of study. And in order to recognize that cycle, a reader must understand that Stanford has played a nearly identical role in

Gilchrist's life and in that of her characters. Gilchrist's biography, then, including her real-life relationship with Frank Stanford, is a text to be studied along with her fiction; it is a text that belongs in this cycle. To ignore it is to ignore a significant amount of material that matters – and to overlook a key part of the dominant narrative in Ellen Gilchrist's fiction.

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