

WHERE IS GOD IN SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE? A THEO-SEMIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
THE SONS OF ANARCHY

BY

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to uncover the religious nature of communication by re-visioning and situating French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of communication within a Christian theological context. By critically engaging Lacan's theoretical concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real within this context, the thesis is able to access the intersection of rhetorical semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Christian theology to have a more fruitful understanding of how meaning is exchanged between subjects.

Lacan's inter-disciplinary affirmation of rhetoric and psychoanalysis has been able to produce incredible explanatory potential for how meaning, as the bedrock of speech and communication, operates through the psyche of the human subject. What Lacan has not been able to do, likely because of his ambivalent religious history, is account for how the supernatural operates through and against communication. This thesis seeks a corrective to that dilemma by centering God as the center of the Lacanian Real.

As a result, the thesis will psychoanalyze the *Sons of Anarchy* as a popular secular fantasy to determine that all communication operates on a symbolic spectrum of avowal and disavowal in relation to the divine real. By analyzing the rhetorical semiotics of the series' characters, the axiological foundation of the *Sons* decision-making processes, and the show's representation and tropological response to trauma, this thesis will conclude that all rhetoric is inherently religious rhetoric, and all communication is, by nature, Christian communication.

Introduction

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's claim that Christianity and psychoanalysis exist in a dialectical antagonism was as profound as it was dangerous for the future of communication studies. The infamous claim from Lacan that "if religion triumphs, that will be the sign that psychoanalysis has failed" sparked an internal conflict within academia that frames the realm of possibilities regarding a theologically integrative form of psychoanalysis. (Press Conference, 2016, para. 3). This association of religious studies with a non-critical fundamentalism places psychoanalysis and Christian theology as opposites in the search for productive understandings of meaning-making processes. When Lacan (2002) claimed the rhetoric of "speech" as the "function" of psychoanalysis he implicitly situates religious critique as being antagonistic to the field of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology studies (p. 246). While Lacanian theories of language have allowed for inter-disciplinary engagements with a variety of intersectional dimensions of social justice, psychology, and philosophy, a robust analysis of Lacanian psychoanalysis from the standpoint of Christian theology is sorely lacking within communication studies.

Lacan's theory of rhetoric is foundational to many modern theories of communication, and the paradigmatic shift that occurs from psychological praxis to rhetoric proper in his later years sets the stage for how critical theory is formed, applied, and debated. Many communications scholars have appropriated Lacan's unique, and philosophically dense, vocabulary into their critical engagements with the world, signifying its profound impact in epistemologically organizing the world. This is specifically true in the context of how Lacan's tripartite of the Imaginary, the Symbolic order, and the Real frames the communicative exchange between the human subject and the world.

The register of the Imaginary presupposes a field of meaning, whereas the register of the Real assumes a terrain of excess, which acts as a mystical substance that cannot be captured by mere signification but is nonetheless an element in the totality of an object's being. The entire field of language is captivated by the symbolic order and, as such, a return to the study of semiotics is necessary to understand the human subject's constitutive role among other signs and signifiers. Calum Matheson (2019) confirms that these orders of communication work in tandem with one another when he writes, "...the Imaginary is the order of meaning invested in specific symbols, the Symbolic governs the differentiation and connection between them through metaphor, metonymy, and other mechanisms of transfer" (p. 31). All communication accordingly acts as a state of symbolic exchange of meaning, and thus, the central problematic must be posed to communication studies: Where is God in the symbolic exchange?

This thesis takes up this question with critical rigor to account for a fundamentally theological understanding of communication that incorporates the study of Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiology, and Christian theology. The integrative axis point that constitutes the field of meaning as articulated through communication studies must be understood through this heuristic thinking because the symbol acts as a reference point for an otherwise agreed upon prescription of value imbued within particular objects. Said differently, each field of inquiry that is listed above has particular diagnostic accounts for what is good, and these notions of value are commonly assumed to the degree where they take on a character of their own. Deconstruction of these signs and signifiers will help to understand what meaning or the ontological good is, how and if it can be known, and how to communicate this value between subjects. If the Lacanian prophecy that religion will seal the crypt of psychoanalytic critique is true, then the possibility of

an integrative critical theory would be obsolete; this thesis contends that claim as being inaccurate in light of several case studies.

The fundamental question of this application of Lacan's psychoanalytic work is to ascertain how the symbolic order reveals the ontological structure of meaning-making and the theological role or purpose of God within symbolic exchange. Lacan's theory that religion and psychoanalysis are mutually exclusive entities foreclose on the radical potentiality of theological becoming; this reveals that his form of psychoanalysis is neither neutral nor objective. Once revealed that Lacanian psychoanalysis operates from a fundamentally atheistic worldview, this thesis will administer a cross-comparative inquiry of varying forms of psychoanalysis. As such, the methodology of the clinic removes the subject position of God as the interlocutor of meaning within symbolic exchange and replaces the subject of the sublime with the nihilistic void of a highly theoretical and objective attempt at rational neutrality.

While Lacan himself has addressed religion in a limited sense, there is a notable lack of scholarship produced regarding the rhetorical-psychoanalytic encounter with spirituality in general, and with Christianity in particular. Some rhetoricians, such as Christian Lundberg (2009), the sociologist Rene Girard (1987), or even the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (1998) have managed to incorporate elements of the sublime into their rhetorical interaction with Lacan's work (or have incorporated foundational semiotic study that would go on to become the intellectual framework for Lacan's rhetorical move in psychoanalysis). Marcus Pound's (2007) book *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma* is an excellent reference of the type of religio-psychoanalysis engagement, by engaging Lacan through a "return to Kierkegaard" (p. 171). In spite of these authors' efforts, the lack of research regarding the unique intersection of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Christian theology in regards to communication indicates that there has been

a failure to give proper attention to the phenomenon of the religious ordering of language in any meaningful sense.

The significance of a particularly theistic study of the Lacanian theory of language would be the variety of ways in which it changes the analyst's view of the symbols produced by the analysand, in order to produce alternative clinical solutions for analysand. If the meaning-making processes produced by the subject of the clinical study operate from an ontologically different source than the presupposition of Lacan, then the conclusions of the study should result in equally different processes. In theory, psychologists and psychoanalysts in general, (along with Christian psychologists and psychoanalysts in particular), and audiences of both scholarly and non-scholarly influence alike can draw from this theory within their day-to-day practices to inform the subjective relationships between their meaning-making processes.

A qualitative and cross-comparative analysis of the symbols presented between the researcher and the object of study will be the methodology of this thesis. In this case, the object will be the FX television series *Sons of Anarchy*. Utilizing the *Sons of Anarchy* as a rhetorical artifact for a case study is essential, as its realistic depiction of outlaw-social life from the standpoint of motorcycle outlaw clubs manages to produce a fundamentally Christian symbolic order. The seemingly secular nature of the show, once deconstructed, is profoundly Christian at every level of analysis. This thesis will attempt to answer the question of the corporal integrity of a secular symbolic order in light of the deconstruction that happens when encountering the divine real. As such, several chapters will be dedicated to a conceptual understanding of the religious imaginary, Christian symbolic, and divine real to produce an account for God within the symbolic exchange.

Chapter one will include a general literature review of the historical context, philosophical and psychological definitions, and rhetorical possibilities provided at the intersection of rhetoric, religion, and psychoanalysis. This chapter will contain an overview of both Saussurian and Peircian semiotics, Lacan and his contemporaries' psychoanalytic engagement with rhetoric at the level of the symbolic order, and a historical tracing of rhetoric's development in regards to Christian thought. This literature review will include an explanation of modern rhetorical thought, as well as its relation to the Christian tradition. In the postmodern era that produces so much of current communication studies (especially so much of semiotic studies), literature regarding many postmodernists' theories of rhetoric will be incorporated to explain how the epistemic critique of reality operates. These authors will include Lacan, as well as Jean Baudrillard and will conclude with the Christian philosopher's response to the postmodern critique of language. This form of Christian postmodernism has been sub-divided into the camps of weak theology and radical orthodoxy. The literature review section of this thesis will also examine how the psychology of religion acts as a precursor to secular rhetorical study and how the historically Christian tradition of iconography has countered this.

The literature review concludes with an examination of the totality of academic literature produced surrounding the case study itself. Academic engagement with the *Sons of Anarchy* is surprisingly shallow – totaling under thirty possible encounters. The majority of this research focuses on the gendered relationship that the show has with the viewer, or the gendered relationships that occur within the show, although there are some notable deviances from this norm. Of these citations, there is only one serious applications of Christian thought to the religious imaginary that is the *Sons of Anarchy*.

Chapter two will begin the assessment, starting by focusing on the character of the Homeless Woman as an example of the divine real's intrusion into the symbolic order. By focusing on the appearances of the curious character of the Homeless Woman, this theistic understanding of communication will be able to prove how Lacan's psychoanalytic theory functions in a fundamentally religious tense within the context of the show. The mystical nature of this character guides the thoughts, actions, and purpose of the show while simultaneously being forced into the periphery of the setting. The inclusion of the Homeless Woman as a Christ-figure in an otherwise secular television series is curious, and it indicates that there is a description of reality that must always refer back to a fundamentally Christian subtext.

Chapter three analyzes character responses to the trauma of the lack, which is a Lacanian concept that is theorized to be representative of the inability to communicate pure thought between subjects (Evans, 2006). In an existentialist move, the nature of the lack resituates communication as a functionally traumatic encounter; how different characters respond to this trauma by mediating the failure of communication with a selection of symbols symbolic through language will be indicative of how psychological responses operate in a sociological sense. Analyzing the collective psychological responses to this trauma according to the *Sons* axiological predisposition to the world, as well as three collective moods that regularly appear throughout the show, will determine how particular symbolic orders manifest within narrative fantasies. The concept of the code will frame the moral axiom by which the *Sons of Anarchy* governs its unique brand of decision-making. The code's rhetorical interaction with Christian ethics will act as a form of symbolic return to Christian theories of virtue and vice. Secondly, this study will isolate the themes of celebration, drama, and despair as collective moods that regularly describe club social life. This thesis will juxtapose these themes to traumatic events, and the inability to offer a

satisfying or ethically intelligible grammar to navigate said trauma by the various characters or the viewer.

The purpose of this case study will be to discover and develop a grammar to articulate the nature of the religious phenomenon that expresses itself through the symbolic order for psychologists and rhetoricians to apply in their critical engagements with Christian (and secular) subjects, publics, narratives. These questions will be researched through the critical inquiry and design of the methodological case study. The case study will serve as a rhetorical artifact, or object, that exists at the center of analysis. In the context of Lacan, the analysand is the object, and the researcher is the analyst. The study will place a critical focus on the relationship between interpreter and interpretant, but the methodology itself will remain static. The reason for a singular and static methodological focus is so that it can be revisited by different analysts using the same (proposed) theory to derive similar/same results in future studies.

Literature Review

The field of communication has been a platform for literary discovery and meaning-making for decades. While it is true that rhetoric as a scholastic field has existed for several millennia, there is something unique to the past few decades in terms of particular academic movements, inter-scholastic integration, and philosophical inquiry that has allowed for scholars to discover, reflect, and find meaning in a host of inventive ways. One such area is the intersection between rhetorical and semiotic studies. The current shift of rhetoric into the rhetorical verbiage of the sign and the signifier is under siege by competing theories of the symbolic. This movement definitionally determines rhetoric, words, language, objects, and events as a symbolic exchange of meaning. For example, Freidrich Nietzsche & Carol Blair (1983) describe communication in the rhetorical language of art when they write:

it is not difficult to prove that what is called “rhetorical,” as a means of conscious art, has been active as a means of unconscious art in language and its development [*Werden*], indeed, that the *rhetorical is a further development*, guided by the clear light of the understanding, of *the artistic means which are already found in language*. (p. 106)

This reading of communication is uniquely important because it speaks to an understanding of the world that communication as a form is inherently symbolic; the act of revelatory or conscious art is the signification of the meaning that wades within the unconscious. In the sense that rhetoric encapsulates the full range of human social life, rhetoric is as much an art as it is a science. While the latter term implies that the study of rhetorical communication presumes it exists as a field of systematic study, the former questions whether there is an element of life that can transcend the artistic nature of subtle description. The rhetorical act of description is, by virtue, an act of art – it attempts to create linkages and images to construct a reality that can be known by those that internalize the act of description. This construction of the constellation of images to produce symbols for communicative exchange is, at a linguistic and cognitive level, the rhetorical creation of art.

Understanding rhetoric as an art inflects the work that one sees in the classicist George Kennedy’s (2007) popular definition of rhetoric as “the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions” (p. 21). As a baseline definition for rhetorical communication, Kennedy’s definition becomes a framework for understanding the intricacies of language, action, persuasion, affect, interpretation, and interpolation but, more importantly, it reveals the relevance of three major academic fields in attempting to understand communication: psychology, semiotics, and theology.

If rhetoric is indeed an “energy inherent in emotion and thought,” then there is a critical necessity of psychology to provide a grammar to the nature of this inherent socio-dynamic force (Kennedy, 2007, p. 21). The second relevant element of this definition alludes to the nature of grammatical transmission as a system of signs. As the study of signs and symbols, semiotics becomes relevant at a critical level: understanding communication is akin to understanding how the elements of affect and language converge as variable signs to produce symbols, which in turn form a connective network that can be understood as a language or social construct. Semiotics become the lowest common denominator of communication which, in light of the postmodernism’s epistemic deconstruction, allows for a more clear understanding of communication to be known.

A return to both the signifiers of “energy” and “influence” in Kennedy’s (2007) definition produces an important question in the context of meaning-making: what is the origin and *telos* of this energy (p. 21)? This question is a philosophical one inasmuch as it is theological, but it troubles the history of the study of communication. Pursuing the fundamental purpose of communication and unsettling commonly accepted definitions by unflinchingly holding each definition to the question of why one *does* communicate as opposed to why one simply communicates will help communication scholars to understand the thoroughly theological nature of communication. The recognition of this fundamental nature will be better able to achieve scholastic clarity, as well as reveal fundamentally new avenues for both how communication operates and how to engage it as a scholastic art.

This thesis is also inspired by the definitions of rhetoric put forth by countless communication scholars that are indebted to the deconstructive and reconstructive nature of rhetoric as captivated by the plane of the symbolic. In this sense, the work of Kenneth Burke is

important as it works within the direction of establishing a fundamentally rhetorical semiotic.

Burke (1969) proposes a theory that is structured dialectically between notions of identification and alienation; “rhetoric...is rooted in an essential function of language itself...the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 43). The hope of Burke is that a transcendent commonality through language compensates for the divisive nature of alienation that structures human rhetoric in the status quo. Bitzer (2010) contextualizes Burke’s thoughts on the redemptive elements of identification by writing that rhetoric is needed “to find common meaning, unifying symbols, and ways of acting together, and thus promoting cooperation” (p. 9-10).

In spite of this work, Burke’s definition is limited in scope; it focuses heavily on the utilization of language as a unidimensional conduit of his symbolic inducement, as opposed to the more open possibility that non-linguistic or verbal signifiers offer their own symbols to the world. Perhaps this requires a larger question about what language means, as well as its role within the larger communicative exchange but, insofar as language is interpreted to be a strictly verbal expression of communication, it will be woefully insufficient at encapsulating the full range of symbolic action. Additionally, the pessimistic premise that the world is metaphysically structured through communicative alienation is a profoundly theological concept; the fracturing of language being an essential element of the human condition is alluded to in Genesis 11 following the destruction of the Tower of Babel. The association of negativity with the fracturing of language presupposes that communication cohered before Babel, which is a theological error that misdiagnoses the role of the psychoanalytic lack as sin-nature that fractures the human psyche’s ability to communicate divine truth and meaning between subjects.

Aristotle's rhetorical triad of the *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* is also relevant in the formulation of a definition of rhetorical semiotics because it helps differentiate the flows of communicative affect that are at work within the rhetorical exchange. Whereas the *logos* of the text is best characterized as a logical study, the *pathos* of speech details a certain "psychology of emotion intended to help the audience's emotional state to fit the nature and seriousness of the particular issue being argued" (Herrick, 2013, p. 80). The *ethos* of communication speaks to a notion of believability that is associated with the communicating object. References to the Aristotelian triad as differing constitutive signs of the symbol will help forefront elements of communication that are not normatively considered to be a part of popular definitions of communication.

The Christian theological contribution to the rhetorical tradition is surprisingly underdeveloped throughout history. In this context, the description of underdeveloped is pertaining to original and uniquely Christian foundational theories of communication, with a majority of the academic engagement between Christian philosophical thought and the rhetorical tradition requiring an acceptance of pre-existing concepts within communication studies as developed through historically secular epistemic modalities. Augustine of Hippo is among the few notable Christian applications of rhetoric and, consequently, he expanded upon the Christian rhetorical tradition. The desire to seek the precise, the beautiful and the good in and through language is the basis for Augustine's desire to seek rhetorical clarity. In light of this interesting theological proposition, Augustine's theory of communication is decidedly Ciceronian. Augustine's utilization of rhetoric was dual-purposed: the academic pursuit of clarity is a teleological drive towards honoring the act of language as such, but the converse drive of the Christian rhetor is so that they can better evangelize the gospel to the world.

Christian rhetoricians that draw upon the wealth of older rhetorical traditions would do well to take heed of the critical approach offered by the postmodern movement which has overdetermined the language of current academic scholarship in such a short time. If postmodernism's intellectual desire is to critique the epistemic foundations of modernity that hold universal truths to be evident through a hyper-rationalist dialogism or a variety of pre-modern epistemic truth claims about knowledge acquisition through a revelatory authority, then a critical Christian response is required. This response should be able to explain the epistemological role of language in shaping the postmodern validity of current theories of communication while maintaining the pre-modern epistemological integrity of Christian claims of knowledge as revealed through the divine authority. Here the response by Christian rhetoricians is notably weak across the discipline of communication studies, but significant conversations are happening in the fields of Christian philosophy and theology that can be applied towards an understanding of speech and communication.

In terms of navigating through Christianity's responses to signifiers of postmodern thought, there are two major camps that are informally organized to provide different, yet relevant, answers. The first is that of weak theology which has been championed by the work of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, with the second camp being characterized by radical orthodoxy, which has been advocated by thinkers such as John Milbank and James K.A. Smith. In light of this postmodern turn to deconstructionism, Caputo (2007) applies a Derridian logos of deconstructionism towards dominant, western, and evangelical Christian norms when he writes:

Instead of being eloquent advocates of a truly evangelical nation, one marked by generosity and self-sacrificing dedication to the least among us, a see-how-they-love-one-another Christianity, evangelical Christianity has instead been corrupted by unfettered

capitalism, which rots our souls and our “family values” more surely than drinking wine, which Jesus *did do*...Family values are no less corrupted by the corrosive effects of individualism, consumerism, and the accumulation of wealth. Instead of shouting this from the mountain tops, the get-me-to-heaven-and-the-rest-be-damned Christianity the Christian Right preaches is itself a version of selfish spiritual capitalism aimed at netting major and eternal dividends and it fits hand in glove with American materialism and greed. (p. 131-132)

This form of deconstruction analyzes societal trends and traces them through the realm of the subconscious to find the source. The appropriation of Christian language, images, and representations has been, according to Caputo, distorted for the intentions and purposes of an American materialist *ethos*. His deconstructive analysis concludes in a solution to return to the symbols that once contoured the *ethos* of Christianity in light of their modernist appropriation.

It is here, in the discussion of varying models of symbolic exchange, where the scholarship has an overwhelming atheistic impulse. As Mangion (2011) writes “this is not what Derrida claims: there is no question of denying the intentions of the speaker or the author, but of whether these intentions can be completely accounted for in every context, since it is always possible for an intention to be interpreted otherwise” (p. 142). He continues by articulating that Derrida’s understanding of intentionality as a form within the folds of speech can be separated and criticized external to the speech itself and vice versa. The above-given example has Caputo analyzing and deconstructing the role of intention (evangelism) from the *logos* (the rhetoric of family values), which explains how Derrida can be contextualized through Christian deconstructive readings that point towards the larger symbolic truth as understood through rhetoric.

Conversely, radical orthodox theologians indicate that language acts as a presencing of the interiority of the soul into the exteriority of platonic space. This intersection between Plato and St. Augustine finds root in the philosophy of James K.A. Smith when he writes that the incommensurability in language finds new hope in the phenomenology of the incarnation. “Jesus of Nazareth...is an instance of the transcendent appearing within the immanent, without sacrificing transcendence. In the Incarnation, the Infinite shows up within the finite, nevertheless without loss” (Smith, 2002, p. 10). In an attempt to pursue an ethical philosophy of language that allows for the deconstruction of social normativity, as well as the descriptive affirmation of the other, Smith provides the incarnation as a moment of the spiritual being of the self being able to overcome the finitude of the immanent plane to proverbially speak to the other in God, while sacrificing neither the embodiment of existence nor the spiritual affirmation of interconnectivity.

The authors that are contributing to the field of symbolic exchange and deconstructionism are, by and large, also critical of the ways in which Christians have secured (and abused) positions of power to exploit non-Christians throughout time. Specific, contextual criticisms such as Caputo's are the minority; the majority of psychoanalytic and deconstructive scholarly work is done in a more macro sense between entire disciplines of theory. It would not be inaccurate to label the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan as a postmodernist, whereas Sigmund Freud was thoroughly a modernist. An example of Freud's foundational role within the philosophical uprising of modernism is his description of religious belief as “...illusions and insusceptible of proof” (Freud, 1927, p. 31). The modernist account to hold truths as understood through hyper-rationalist dialogue is curious but is largely filtered through his belief that religious scholars (and non-scholars) of his day were uninterested with the deconstruction of the norms offered by the church.

Both Freud and Lacan significantly changed the public perception of psychotherapy, although they disagreed on the methods by which productive solutions could come about. Freud's believed that religion was similar to the Marxist criticism in that it operated as an opiate for the masses – a form of wish-fulfillment designed to reconcile the state of humanity's helplessness. While Lacan, who was raised as a Roman-Catholic, is much more ambivalent about the field of religion, although he would confess that he was not a religious man. Lacan (1978) reacts to the modernist rhetoric of God is dead by stating that "...the true formula of atheism is God is unconscious" (p. 59).

This critical revision of Freud and the modernist movement writ large is important because it allows for Lacan to avoid the theological problem of the reality of God while continuing the conversation about the analysand's religious experience as an ordering principle. The seductive lure of the Christian imagination is present within the psyche because, if God were truly dead, then the subject would be free to their desires. In the age of postmodernism, the famous Nietzschean quote, according to Lacan, fails to take root – the symbolic order returns to the Christian imagination to reconcile the terror of this freedom. In an older seminar hosted by Lacan, he concedes that the triumph of religion is that it has overdetermined culture and society.

Lacan (2014) posits that "Science is new and it will introduce all kinds of distressing things into each person's life. ...Religion will find colorful [*truculent*] meaning for those" (pp. 64-65). This is, in a larger sense of the word, still a fairly nihilistic representation of the reality of God: Lacan, like Nietzsche, is unwilling to make a metaphysical claim about the nature of God, but is willing to say that the overflow of meaning by which God is represented makes it structurally impossible to know God in any meaningful sense because the oversaturation of meaning makes it impossible to distinguish what meaning is tethered to a physical reality.

As rhetoricians analyze the ways in which speech may reveal larger representations and forms of meaning across different fields, it is important to note how and where meaning is derived. To nearly all, this is a question of the subconscious, or how meaning is created through inter-subjective exchanges. The question many rhetorically based psychoanalysts have attempted to answer is how the subconscious constructs meaning. As a line of inquiry, the ideas that are offered at the intersection of rhetorical and semiotic studies offer a number of different frames of analysis that can help derive substantive meaning from the symbolic ordering of reality. While the definition of the words *rhetoric* and *symbolic* are generally considered fluid, there is a certain synchronicity to the two terms. As such, this literature review will be operating from a definition of rhetoric given by James A. Herrick (2013) as “the systematic study and intentional practice of effective symbolic expression. Effective here will mean achieving the purposes of the symbol-use, whether that purpose is persuasion, clarity, beauty, or mutual understanding” (p. 8).

The lack inherent in the phenomenology of human experiences produced in the study of rhetoric similarly requires a grammar to articulate the shared experiences of communicators in as accurate a way possible and, from here, is the entrance of the symbolic. The symbolic order is a dimensional plane of existence that intercedes between the subject and the object. Lacan (2002) refers to “the symbolic function” as the mathematical calcification of ideas and actions into objects – a return to a definition of the symbol found in the writings of Levi-Strauss (p. 72). The symbolic order is defined by Lacan as a sort of mask – an autonomous and mediating mechanism that orders the world, desire, experience, law, language, and pleasure. “The symbolic order is also the realm...of lack” (Evans, 2006, p. 204). Understanding this co-constitution as an operating principle for human subjects is critical to understand how semiotic-communication operates at a metaphysical level. An example would be if the reader were to look up and gaze

upon a tree. The base-level reality of the symbol of the tree would offer a large range of different shapes, colors, smells, and sensations that are further divided by signs such as wood, or leaves. The accumulation of signs constructs the variable symbol, which is a representation of the object that exists before the reader. This ventures into the field of semiotics or the study of signs.

Semiotics is divided into two major schools of thought: the Saussurian (European) and Peircian (North American) school of semiotics. Similar to the image of the tree, Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss semiotician who proposed that all of reality could be reduced to the Sign/Signifier. There is a literal difference between the sign (tree) and the signifier (the myriad of meanings, memories, and attributions that are superimposed onto the sign of tree). As it is written, “[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (Saussure, 1916, p. 66). If the syllogism is understood through its logical obversion, then the act of uttering the word tree should allow for a tree that is universally agreed upon to emanate from the mouth of the rhetor into the minds of the audience. What happens instead is the process of symbolic exchange, where variable sound-images are processed through the signification process into concepts. This is somewhat contrasted by the American pragmatist, Charles Sanders Peirce (1998), when he posited that the relationship of “a sign, its object, and its interpretant” acts as a more accurate way of organizing the engagement with reality (p. 3938). This trinitarian and “semiotic matrix” becomes a conceptual framework for interpolating reality (Robinson, 2010, p. 114). This triad is structurally similar in the sense that the semiotic elements organize our relationship to reality; the Peircian sign is elementally similar to the Saussurian signifier, and the interpretant acts as a referential field of meaning. The significant departure from Saussure is that “Peircean semiotics...contrasts with the implicitly anthropocentric tradition deriving from Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), for who the dyad of *signifier* and *signified* are necessarily

held together in the mind of the sign-user” (Robinson, 2010, p. 18). If, to continue the metaphor, the tree was on fire, then the interpretant of the fire might be smoke, as smoke does not exist absent a burning object. Smoke refers to the object and does not exist without it.

As semiologists, both were deeply concerned with rhetoric, or more specifically, how one comes to understand and organize speech. As Littlejohn (2017) clarifies “Many see rhetoric as synonymous with the term communication, and the decision of which term to use depends largely on the philosophical tradition with which you most identify” (p. 45). This means that the theoretically more microscopic interpretation of communication is, indeed, still a form of rhetoric writ large. This will be increasingly relevant as the historical tracing of the psychoanalytic drive towards rhetoric is explained because its adherents appropriate concepts that are derived from a semiotic approach to language into the methodological process of psychoanalysis.

The work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is essential in any contemporary reading of rhetorical semiotics, as the cross-disciplinary application of semiotics to the realm of psychoanalysis provided new ways of thinking about intra-psychosocial life, as well as the fact that it applied the relevant nature of psychology as being an intrinsic part of communication, and vice-versa. While the values of postmodernism are not universally adopted within the modern rhetorical and semiotic application of the symbolic, the language by which many of these authors articulate their rhetorical philosophies is decidedly postmodern.

As Christian Lundberg (2012) will illustrate early in his seminal work on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the rhetorical tradition, “in declaring that ‘the psychoanalyst is a rhetor,’ Lacan refuses to separate the practices and fortunes of the two traditions” (p. xi). Psychoanalysis will be a major field of study for the communication theorist in understanding the world in light

of this academic shift, precisely because of the scholarly contributions to the field of rhetoric by Lacan in the first place.

The Lacanian communicative theory also operates according to a triadic theory of elements constituted by the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, along with an additional sub-variable called the lack. Lacanian theory of the symbolic borrows a significant amount of context from the Saussurian dialectic. The argument would operate as follows: when confronted by an object such as a tree, the Real of that tree offers its true existence (or meaning) to the rhetor. The lack inherent in all people forces an invisible imaginary wall to come forth from the subconscious of the rhetor-subject, separating the rhetor-subject and tree-object. Out of this wall, symbols are constructed as a mediating mechanism by which the rhetor-subject is able to reconcile both their lack and the otherwise unknowability of the spiritual real of the object-tree.

While Lacan (2006) writes multiple essays and hosts multiple seminars on the nature of the symbolic order, it is during *ecrits* where he presents his particular view of the symbolic:

As we know, it is in the experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we can grasp by what oblique imaginary means the *symbolic* takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism. The teaching of this seminar is designed to maintain that imaginary effects, far from representing the core of analytic experience, gives us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them. (p. 11)

This view of the Lacanian symbolic explains the symbolic order as a means of understanding, interpolating, and interpreting the analysand's experiences. The act of symbolic exchange, where symbols are exchanged with different meanings, becomes the feature of the psychoanalytic experience. An example of this could be the dominant image of Jesus as being associated with

whiteness. Symbolic exchange could impose new meaning within the signification process, and the sign of racial difference in white-dominated ecclesiological societies could destabilize pre-set understandings of how those societies practice their Christianity. Osayande Obery Hendricks' (1996) prescription of "guerrilla exegesis" as "a Jazz thing" where oppressed and suppressed peoples can tease out the "meanings and significances heretofore obscured or hidden from view" is a practice of symbolic exchange (p. 76). Lacan (1997) believed that the subconscious operates like a language and, as such, the act of deconstruction of dominant norms and ideologies operates through the expression of that subconscious through the symbolic order.

If symbolic exchange attempts to connect communicating subjects both psychologically and rhetorically, then the role of religion animates the exchange itself. To say that there are few religious readings of the Lacanian symbolic would be generous, and there are even fewer readings that are specifically Christian in nature. Aron Dunlap (2014) gives an insightful theological reading of Lacan when he writes

The analyst, or, we should say specifically, Lacan...a certain kind of modern-day secular saint, modelled on the ascetics of old, but hopeless and filled with holy hatred. This Lacan...devoted to the price which the body must pay for having access to the symbolic, is a speech structured like that of the person praying. Psychoanalysis, because of its disavowed Christian heritage must take up the project of that religion, which concerns the making and keeping and caring of bodies... (p. 123)

Lacanian contemporaries that were more explicitly critical of Christian thinkers were, comically, rebuked by Lacan himself later in his life when he remarked that his contemporaries and students that were critical of Christian thought "mirrored its existence" (Reinhard & Lupton, 2003, p. 75). In a way, these psychoanalysts were captivated by the Christian rhetoric of right and wrong and

were fundamentally unable to separate themselves from the symbolic trope of value and meaning as proposed in Christian thought. As Dunlap confirms above, the line where Lacanian symbolic exchange and a Christian understanding of the symbolic is thin, because Lacan's understanding of psychoanalysis is a rhetorical trope that subtly appropriates the elements of healing found in prayer as a rhetorical expression.

Historically and philosophically, semiotics within contemporary communication scholarship press the question of communicative exchange through the symbolic order by way of the Saussurean school of semiology, as found in the work of Jean Baudrillard. As a cultural critic and semiologist, Baudrillard becomes something of a postmodern icon within the world of semiotics throughout the end (and turn) of the twentieth century. Baudrillard is increasingly more nihilistic in his approach to linguistics, even carrying the Saussurian dialectic to its logical extreme, which indicated that there is no unique relationship between the sign and the signifier. The problem with psychoanalytical interpretation (which is to say, any form of descriptive truth claim) suffers and operates through "the aleatory, meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous, circulation of signs on the surface...changing its truth effects into surface effects which act like a mirror absorbing and engulfing meaning" (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 153). In a sense, the unstable relationship between conscious language and unconscious meaning requires the act of generalization, reductionism, and the imputation of subjectivity from the listener onto the analyzed object. Baudrillard's example of a mirror becomes a way for communication to collapse back into the interpretative processes of the hearing subject. If interpretation requires a worldview to make sense of the system of signs, then the process of interpretation becomes a self-referential equation. Baudrillard avows this instability in language and utilizes his form of symbolic exchange to point out the lack of meaning that he sees in other rhetorical structures.

Baudrillard develops a particularly nihilistic semiology in the sense that his theory of signification that is removed from, or incapable of accessing, any external plane of meaning.

The Baudrillardian concept of hyperreality becomes the structural frame by which the world operates: a semiological code whereby the Real, as the true essence of things, is blurred due to the mass informational overload of an increasingly technological society that multiplies a series of signs and symbols through their shared referential meanings. Said differently, interpreting the world as a hyperreal simulacrum would be akin to saying that the Christian world no longer desires the ethics and calling of Jesus so much as they desire the comfort that comes from identifying as a Christian.

The symbol of peace associated with the Christian real that represents a loving God is stripped from the Real itself and is affirmed as its own *telos*. An example of this has been the technological move to affirm the effects of the Christian lifestyle as a way to secure meaning through social media's hashtag culture. Society no longer affirms its Christian past so much as the "previously religious sentiments...now translated into the Instagram-friendly language of 'self-love,' 'spirituality' and (financial) 'goals'" (Milar, 2019, para. 7). Mistaking the identity and affirmation of Jesus with the symbolic representation becomes a new process of hyperreality.

For Baudrillard, the simulation of these symbols to produce events of meaning makes a state of existence that isn't Real so much as it is hyperreal. This is relevant insofar as communication operates as a site of symbolic exchange, one must question to what reducible element does a shared communication exist? This question places the semiotic study of communication in something of an existential crisis by simultaneously returning to the point of whether or not any separated rhetorical signs have value in an objective tense. It also pushes the reader of the signs to peruse the question of why the axiomatic spring so persistently acts as the

fountain of meaning and value in the desert of the nihilist's symbolic order? In this sense, the post-structuralist criticism of the textual stability of language acts as both a radical necessity for a deconstruction of the network of signifiers that produce symbolic constructions of reality and also as a powerful apologetic for the mystical and metaphysical substance of God that grants any unity to the text.

There are two examples where Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange is beneficial to explain the nihilistic rhetorical turn. Baudrillard (1976) defines symbolic exchange "as an act of exchange and a social relation" (p. 133). William Merrin (2005) indicates that this definition of the symbolic is rooted within the Durkheimian tradition and furthers Emile Durkheim's work as the condition of possibility for all of the authors who have rooted communication within the realm of the symbolic, including but not limited to "Dumezil, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Lefebvre, Debord, and Vaneigem" (p. 11).

What is interesting here is that Baudrillard's agnostic rhetorical hostility can perhaps be explained by his connection to Durkheim:

[Baudrillard's] concept of 'symbolic exchange is directly derived from this tradition's identification and privileging of an immediately actualized, collective mode of relations and its transformative experience and communication. Durkheim's concept of 'the sacred' is the exemplar of this mode of relations. Durkheim identified a fundamental division in the tribal world between two opposed and irreconcilable categories: the 'sacred', the contagious state and experience of the divine, and the 'profane', the realm of the non-sacred and of the everyday, routine and productive labours of life. (Merrin, 2005, p. 12)

Merrin explains how the Durkheimian school is epistemologically constructed through a religious dialectic of the sacred and the profane. It appears that, for many postmodern rhetoricians, the move to attempt to encounter the sacred and to open themselves up to the divine other is a move that requires one's death. This oscillation between non-meaning and the violence of being terrorized by the specter of non-meaning itself seems to assume an apologetic (or counter-apologetic) in the face of world's experiences with God, but alas, perhaps Baudrillard is conceding that language is too reducibly small to grant those experiences coherence. Baudrillard (2008), in *Radical Alterity*, writes: "It is not primarily an exploration of the Other but of the Other's roles" (p. 36). This reluctance to turn and face the potential reality of God has been persuasive to non-religious audiences as the field of the symbolic acts as an imaginary impediment between the subject and the divine other.

The second major contribution that Baudrillard produces towards the field of the symbolic is in his division of the sign and the symbol. He gives the example of a wedding ring that acts as a symbol: it conveys a meaning of matrimony, love, and commitment. Baudrillard contrasts this with the sign of a cosmetic ring; a symbol devoid of meaning is determined to be a sign because the eternal properties that are conveyed through the singular object of the ring has been stripped of meaning. Perhaps the more poetic tense of Baudrillard's writings betray his true intentions, but one must wonder if he is writing in a prescriptively or descriptively. Nonetheless, this contribution is significant because it illustrates that there is indeed a lack or void between the world and its true telos. Similar to a litany of scriptural examples, the idea that language itself is fractured as a system gives credence to the idea that the symbol has near infinite possibilities.

James Walters (2012) highlights the sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet in the context of a theological reading of Baudrillard when he says "It is precisely because symbolic

exchange occurs in the order of non-value that it is of use ‘in thinking through the gratuitous and gracious relation effected between humankind and God in the sacraments’” (p. 71). If a symbol has the ability to offer a pessimistic reading on the certainty of God, then the hope of God can provide an alternative reading. Chauvet seems to suggest is that the extensive use of the sacraments as symbols allows for a linkage between God and humanity in spite of the latter’s many internal, rhetorical, and spiritual fractures.

The inability for the realm of the symbolic to coherently separate itself from the religious undertones becomes a point of departure in the literature; while no single religious theory of the symbolic exists, it is certainly plausible to theorize of the many ways in which the existing theories of the symbolic can be utilized to affirm and understand a uniquely *Christian* interpolation of the world. The areas of possibility seem to exist in two major disciplines: psychotherapy and iconography.

Historically it is more accurate to pinpoint Lacan as the self-perceived victim of a growing medical field that he had helped create in psychoanalysis. When he was banned from practicing psychoanalysis by both major organizations, he created his own school so that his followers could still learn from him. It is around this time in the mid-twentieth century where he makes his rhetorical turn, indicating that psychoanalysis has a qualitatively stronger realm of possibility in the literary plane than the medical one. However, it would be inaccurate to say that Lacan believed that his form of psychoanalysis would no longer offer benefits to different potential analysand’s lives.

The status quo ideological division between religion and psychology was a division encouraged by Freud, Lacan’s mentor. In fact, the Dianna Kenny (2015) contextualizes the Freudian antagonism toward religion as saying “Like all illusions, religious ideas are motivated

from the deepest recesses of the human psyche that have no regard for reality. These illusory ideas cannot be proven or refuted and can teach us nothing outside of the contents of our own emotional life” (p. 73). Archbishop Chrysostomos (2007) indicates that this is an idea that Lacan would publicly criticize when he writes that “the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan openly challenged Freud’s view of religion, taking on what he saw as Freud’s misapprehensions about religion and psychology in the same way that, in the words of one author, ‘the Fathers of the Church’ held against ‘heresies in religion’” (p. 15). While this is hardly a sign of Lacan’s belief in God, it does point to the ways in which a Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has been held to a framework guided in both truth and justice, with both being chief symbols of how Christianity motivates its subjects in closer communion with the heart of God.

The Christian impulse toward care is an animating impulse that drives the Christian subject towards larger rehabilitative forms of care of their brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lacanian symbolic acts as a way of interpreting the world to bring the analysand into a more intimate relationship with their perception of reality. As a result of this claim, the possibility of a Christian understanding of the symbolic acts as a radical potentiality that underwrites psychodynamics, because it changes the constitution, direction, and goal of the therapeutic session. For example, Paul Pruyser (1991) details a number of psychological situations that circle the intersection between rhetoric and religion when he writes “two technical terms allude to the special ontological and epistemological status of these peculiar entities of religion: transcendence and mystery” (p. 170). As said above, the medical possibilities of the symbolic exchange that occurs in language as a means of uncovering deeply repressed truths can help with guiding the respective walks of the analysand’s. Even Paul Tillich (1984), who has been referenced by each of the above rhetoricians and psychoanalysts, says

...the approach of the psychoanalyst...demands important technical training just as the work of the ordinary M.D. is not mechanical, but has many technical implications....Healing does not mean making perfect, but healing means a continually interrupted inner process of reunion with oneself....real healing of a person as person is not possible without relationship to the ultimate. (p. 124)

If one thing can be said, it is that the theological desire for the love of the other becomes an important condition of possibility for the construction of true and good health. Psychoanalysis is, as Lundberg has illustrated, a profoundly rhetorical function. Through this function, the Christian analyst can employ the wide variety of technical skills that Tillich articulates above in a way that uncovers the referent meanings within particular symbols, as well as re-directing the language of the symbolic toward *the ultimate*.

Another field that is ripe for academic growth and integration with the fields of the rhetorical, semiotics, and psychoanalysis is the academic field of iconography. While legitimate debates regarding the use and intent of the sacraments, icons, and focal themes of the Church that have captivated church history for centuries; the use of those elements as a part of the Christian act of worship and communion with God has existed for two millennia. Eastern Orthodox academic literature, in particular, casually moves through discussions of the symbolic as a means of interpreting and interpolating the Christian subject sacramentally, but no theology of the symbolic or symbolic analysis of Christianity has contextualized all of these truisms. One example is Schmemmann's (1963) analysis of the liturgy where he writes, "the liturgy is the *entrance*: the coming of the celebrant to the altar. It has been given all possible symbolic explanations, but it is not a symbol. It is the very movement of the Church as *passage* from the

old into the new, from this world into the world to come and, as such, it is the essential movement of the liturgical journey” (p. 31).

The sheer intimacy whereby Eastern Orthodox Christians perceive their usage of the sacraments as having a direct corollary to the beating heart of God in their lives illustrates the way in which they admit the realm of the symbolic, but transcend its limitations in a paradoxical form of submission. The submission to the symbolic object as a way of transcending it is a concept that Lacan, Baudrillard, and other deconstructive thinkers have attempted to answer, and the permeation of these scholarly authors yields fruitful research.

Similarly, Father Léonid Ouspensky’s masterful two-volume work on the *Theology of the Icon* explores a multiplicity of the dimensions of the symbolic. Ouspensky (1992) begins volume one by exploring the nuances of symbolism in the context of the historical church:

Everyday language frequently confuses the ideas of ‘sign’ and ‘symbol,’ as if they were identical. In fact, there is a necessary spiritual distinction between them. A sign only portrays reality; a symbol always qualifies it in a certain way, bringing forth a superior reality. To understand a symbol is to participate in the presence; to understand a sign is to translate an indication. (p. 17)

In light of the world of Saussurian, and Peircian, semiotics, the application of Ouspensky’s interpretation of the symbolic is short work in the wake of a continued discussion regarding the nature of signs, symbols, and icons.

The range by which Ouspensky (1992) analyzes the criticisms and affirmations of the symbolic coding of Christian art and worship is fundamentally theological in nature – take, for example, this text regarding the obscure nature of the icon: “the icon is made not for God but for the believer, and simple logic does not contradict this...the “realistic” image is the result of a

“free creation not bound by the dogmas of the Church, a creation the seventeenth century innovators demanded so doggedly” (p. 473). From a semiotic perspective, it would appear that Ouspensky is narrowing his critical eye to microscopic levels to analyze the way in which signs, as assumed as the realism of the icon independently, trigger the psyche of the believer. Being able to articulate this through the language of a psychoanalytic symbolic exchange could express an even wider range of redemptive possibilities when contextualized through the language of healing and reconciliation.

This is not to say that there are no Christian Lacanians/psychoanalysts operating through the field of rhetoric or, even more broadly, that there are no semioticians willing to wade through the pool of Christianity. Dr. Christian Lundberg (2012) is a prime example of a scholar that has applied a Lacanian psychoanalytic critique towards Christians, with a prime example being how evangelical publics engage in a form of divine violence through their participation in media spectacles like Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*. His argument is that the symbolic representation of Christ as the victim reaffirms a fantasy where evangelical publics perceive themselves to be the victim. The danger of the distancing that happens by means of symbolic exchange with the image of the media-represented Christ allows for gratuitous violence to be inflicted on the self in the imaginary which, in turn, allows for a distancing of evangelicals and the least of these that are persecuted by a multitude of differential modes of violence.

Another example is the recent additions to the field of semiotic religious studies, which has been positioned within the field of anthropology. Yelle’s (2013) *Semiotics of Religion* and Downing’s (2012) *Changing signs of truth* have begun to examine the ways in which Christianity uses, and is constituted by, a network of signifiers. Van Rhee van Oudtshoorn (2015) has applied a part of what Creswell (2018) would call a “transformative paradigm” (pp. 9-

10) to the realm of semiotics, indicating that a semiotic analysis of the church reveals the ways in which communication operates at a subliminal level to motivate the socio-spiritual energies of the clergy to change the world. Welz (2008) has even taken intra-communicative integrationist stance, by inferring that theology proper is a semiotic phenomenology of the invisible. Welz takes into account the ways in which the experience of God is also a sign that points back towards the existence of God in a teleological loop of symbolic direction. The important thing to note is that these additions are quite new – all within the last ten or so years, and could be improved by a Lacanian understanding of the symbolic to guide the research goals that these authors are attempting to reach.

In light of these current Christian efforts to engage the field of semiology, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the fact that these forms of scholarship are failing to argue the importance of a psychoanalytical foundation to language. Exchanging the symbol of Christian semiotic theory with the religiously neutral symbol of Lacan's theory of the symbolic should bring about different results for practitioners of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Lastly, the hit FX television show *Sons of Anarchy* has been critically under-analyzed by academics relative to its popular (and critical) success. With under 25 academic articles, journals, or books of critical engagement contributed to the legacy of an eight-year television program that has explored themes often theorized across the academy. This has included a wide variety of ethical, social, political, and theological questions related to the program's particular narratological exposition, and the *Sons* acts as a radical potentiality for genuine academic engagement. The dimensions of the story of the *Sons of Anarchy* offers much to analyze in the fields of media studies, religious studies, and a plethora of intersectional social issues such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenry.

The majority of the academic focus regarding the *Sons of Anarchy* notably comes from departments of gender studies, with feminist affirmations and critiques of the program occupying a majority of the academic engagement with the show. One essay by Cox & DeCarvalho (2016) on the topic suggests that hegemonic masculinity is performatively presented, mediated, and maintained by the subjects of the *Sons of Anarchy* narrative as "...internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained" – an allusion to the struggle of the symbolic pressures that are assumed within the gendered performance of the humanistic function and sovereignty of the motorcycle outlaw king (p. 230).

Similarly, it is theorized that the crisis of masculinity imposed by the presence of feminist thought has called for discursive constructions of neo-masculine figures in the *Sons of Anarchy*, in the sense that "destabilized portrayals of the New Lad...in *SOA*...work to convey the unstable, incompatible discourses of impassivity and emotionality through which both forms of hegemonic masculinity are socio-culturally constructed" (Nijjar, 2019, p. 38). What Nijjar is stating here is that masculinity currently exists in a state of mutation where prior constructions of the masculine figure are undergoing minor adaptations to adopt a liberal image of masculinity in flux, but the heart of these contradictions fundamentally sustains a coherence of hyper-masculinity as such. The deeply devoted nature of these critiques certainly rings true in isolated incidents, no matter how little nuance is given to its own curious conclusion that "...the series seemingly ends with a critique of its own hypermasculine culture. Jax's death in season seven serves as an attempt to break the cycle of bringing his own sons into the violent lifestyle" (Cox & DeCarvalho, 2016, p. 835).

A particularly thorough analysis of the show's multi-dimensional treatment of the maternal body and typological distinction of the mothers of the show works by highlighting how "Gemma, Tara, and Wendy push the typical boundaries of motherhood and femininity through their expressions of sexuality, their ability to occasionally have lives outside of their maternal duties, and the ways in which 'they use their power in the private sphere to influence the public sphere and effect great change, albeit with little public recognition for their efforts'" (Harrelson, 2015, p. 79). Conversely, there have been exhaustingly thorough analyses of masculinity and femininity in the context of the *Sons of Anarchy*. For example, it is theorized by Dr. Jennifer Scott from Regent University that masculinity is dispersed through the image of the biker as "a father, a son, and a brother, and through these relationships, passes on a legacy of masculinity. Viewers can see this communicated through the mediated visual signs and symbols and in the dialogue" (Scott, 2018, p. 175). Dr. Scott (2018) explains the ramifications of applying these analyses to media discourses on these tropes because by "considering the strong androcentric focus of *Sons of Anarchy*, studies such as this ask the questions that viewers need to ponder about their own gender ideology and how it is impacted by the media that they consume" (p. 172).

Analyzing the reverse polemic of the construction of gender, Laura Siltala of the University of Jyväskylä's that seemingly fluid nature of femininity becomes static through female character construction in the *Sons of Anarchy* by contrasting Gemma and Tara as developed from different traits of historic feminine construction. Siltala (2016) states that "the central female characters are constructed in *Sons of Anarchy* from different building blocks, such as motherhood and profession. Moreover, the characters are continuously developing in interaction with other characters" (p. 98). What makes Siltala's analysis of female character construction so unique

among her peers is the way in which she analyzes how female protagonists on the show affect and are affected by psychological traits/behaviors, physical appearance, speech patterns, interactions with other characters, and their varying environments. By conceding the misogynistic sub-cultural space of the setting of the show, these theorists are able to provide critical insight regarding the gendered and sexualized sub-text of the show's performative expression, and how that expression may be psychoanalytically interpolated by a viewing public. The near consensus of all of these theorists regarding the role of gender and sexuality in the *Sons of Anarchy* is that the show acts as a mirror to popular culture – a semiotic reflection of the contradictory and destructive ways in which patriarchy has submerged itself as an organizing infrastructural ontic across civil society.

The remainder of academic work about *Sons of Anarchy* is dispersed between a wide variety of intellectual queries in regards to philosophical musings on ethics, the show's depiction of colorblind racism, and the nature of the Christian axiological undertones that act as the constitutive lifeblood of the program itself. The limited quantity of academic sources that exist outside of the realm of gender studies speaks to both how gender politics is deeply submerged within the narrative of the *Sons of Anarchy*, but also how little critical attention has been given to the show itself.

Methodology

The methodology of this thesis will be a theistic revisioning of Lacan's theory of the symbolic and will analyze the works or fantasy themes that emerge from the narrative text of the case study. This thesis will also deconstruct, analyze, and reconstruct particular elements of the case study as a contained network of religious signifiers. The study will examine the following areas in their relation to the larger research of communication, rhetoric, and semiotics.

This will be a qualitative analysis of the case study, which will be the rhetorical artifact of the FX television program *Sons of Anarchy* to prove that all rhetoric exists intrinsically as religious rhetoric, or more specifically, that all communication is mediated by and through a uniquely *Christian* form of symbolic exchange.

This study will analyze historic Christian tropes that present themselves through modern fantasy themes in three unique areas: the symbolic figure of the Homeless Woman as a peripheral Christ figure, the secular axiological code of the *Sons of Anarchy*, and tropological responses to trauma in their relation to Christian theology.

Ultimately, this study will conclude that all rhetoric exists through an inherently relational and subliminally polemic spectrum of avowal and disavowal of the divine ‘other.’ As such, the correlative dialectic of joy and trauma will characterize the structural impact of this spectral mediation, considering the extent to which the symbol structures the communicating agent’s embodied actions. Secondly, the integration of the academic disciplines of psychoanalysis, semiology, and Christian theology will act as a new framework to analyze the fantasy themes and tropes that emerge from future rhetorical artifacts in their relation to the divine real.

Assessment: An Overview of the *Sons of Anarchy*

Prior to conducting the assessment, a short synopsis of the case study itself will be offered to provide clarity and context for critical application. The *Sons of Anarchy* was a major hit television program for the FX network that spanned 92 episodes over seven seasons from 2008 to 2014. The *Sons* was popular across both the network and popular television – emerging as the highest rated series on FX over its other hits *The Shield*, *Nip/Tuck*, and *Rescue Me* and boasted several of FX’s highest-rated telecasts in network history. At one point, the *Sons of*

Anarchy managed to average nearly five million weekly viewers (Andreeva, 2012). The massively influential crime-drama followed the trials and tribulations of the deeply paternal outlaw motorcycle club of the same name during the rise and eventual fall of series protagonist Jackson “Jax” Teller (portrayed by Charlie Hunnam) in the fictional town of Charming, California.

Show creator Kurt Sutter (who portrayed imprisoned club-member named “Big Otto” Delaney) has been forthright regarding the show’s dramatic Shakespearean influence, while maintaining the realistic integrity of the outlaw biker lifestyle by employing real-life members of the Hells Angels motorcycle club as technical advisers, actors, and by riding with the Hells Angels for months of field-work prior to the production of the show (Kremer & Cutler, 2018, pp. 91-92). Sutter stated in an interview that “One of the recurring themes of Shakespeare is the idea that power doesn’t just corrupt, but that the corruption continuously repeats itself... We take these sort of huge tragic turns at different points in the series that feel Shakespearean to me...” (Seitz, 2013, para. 4).

The series explores concepts such as brotherhood, loyalty, redemption, ethics, justice, vigilantism, government corruption, drug addiction, sex work, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and mystical supernaturalism in their relation to the mundane of the everyday human experience. The questions that these concepts pose press the previously-held conceptions of the sacred and the profane as prescribed by civil society by exposing the contradictions of modernist civic life in relation to the mistreatment of the outlaw subject.

The show begins by featuring the Teller-Morrow family in their relation to the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club (with members of the base-headquarters of the *Sons* boasting the additional patch of the *Redwood Originals* to complete the regional moniker of *SAMCRO*). The

ensemble cast originally features Jax Teller as the Vice President to *SAMCRO*'s President, Clay Morrow (Ron Perlman), who is featured as a power-hungry leader that is directly responsible for the clubs move into the gun-trade with the Irish Republican Army, the drug-trade with the Galindo Mexican cartel, and who personally assisted in the targeted killings of three previous club members.

The first murder occurs prior to the series with John 'J.T.' Teller, former club president, father of Jax and husband to Gemma; his writings and narration become a source of inspiration to Jax to reclaim the original purpose of the *Sons of Anarchy* before it descended into more violent forms of legal outlaw work. J.T. died from his injuries three days following a mysterious motorcycle/trucking incident. Gemma Teller-Morrow (Katey Sagal) is the mother to Jax and current wife to Clay Morrow. Her involvement with the club comes from a uniquely external standpoint, but her influence is as subliminal as it is intimate in her relationship to the clubs president (husband) and vice president (son). Gemma's eldest son is Jax, but she lost a second son, Thomas, to a genetic heart condition. Gemma has similar values to Clay, by desiring power, and valuing loyalty in a psychologically unhealthy capacity that causes her to violently lash out at people she believes could threaten the corporal integrity of her family. Gemma assisted in the murder of J.T., as well as directly murdered her daughter-in-law (and Jax's wife) in the season six finale. Gemma dies at the hands of Jax as penance for her crimes in the penultimate episode of the series.

The club members contribute to the plot in a series of different ways. Alex "Tig" Trager (Kim Coates) begins as the most violent member of the *Sons of Anarchy* and is described as being thoroughly loyal, despite often being associated with abnormal rhetorical and sexual behaviors. Filip "Chibs" Telford (Tommy Flanagan) is originally from Scotland and transferred

to *SAMCRO* by way of SAMBEL (the club's Belfast charter). Because of Chibs' virtue as the moral voice in Jax's ear in later seasons, Chibs assumes the position of the club president following the events of the *Sons of Anarchy*. Bobby Munson (Mark Boone Jr.) acts as a similar moral voice in earlier seasons and assumes different leadership positions within *SAMCRO*. Bobby consistently and calmly upholds the virtues of the club until his death at the hands of rival outlaw king August Marks. This death comes as a result of a divergence between the *Sons* business negotiations with the rival Niners gang and their undying pursuit of vengeance against the alleged killers of Jax's wife.

Juan Carlos "Juice" Ortiz (Theo Rossi) starts as one of the younger *Sons*, but distinguishes himself as being technologically proficient in ways that older club members lack. Juice carries the secret as being African-American, which goes against some of the more antiquated bylaws of the *SOA* constitution. This anxiety causes an intense internalized form of resentment of his biological family in light of his motorcycle family and leads to mistrust between him and other members. This *ressentiment* and mistrust of the *Sons* leads him to become manipulated by several characters in later seasons, which is important insofar as it tragically sets up his eventual betrayal of Jax. Juice becomes a witness and functional accomplice to the death of Jax's wife, and his eventual confession of this betrayal leads Jax to order his death.

Happy Lowman (David Labrava) is portrayed by a real-life Hells Angel, and he acts as the club's assassin. He is seen as quiet, dangerous, and obedient, and slowly rises through the ranks of the *Sons* to assume a leadership position by the end of the series. Piney Winston (William Lucking) was one of the First 9 original *Sons of Anarchy*, along with J.T. and Clay. Piney acts as a sort of paternal parental figure to Jax in his duration on the show before being

killed by Clay for threatening to reveal Clay's involvement with killing J.T. He is also the father of Opie Winston.

Opie (Ryan Hurst) is Jax's best friend and is released from prison for performing club-related activity just prior to the events of the show. The show's first season illustrates the conflict of desires between Opie's love of the club and his love of his family – a conflict that will be exploited by ATF agents in a move to pressure the club. This exploitation causes Clay to preemptively order the death of Opie, but a devastating turn of events causes the death to fall upon his wife, Donna. This dramatic miscommunication triggers a series of spiraling events for several members of the club, as those that had knowledge of the hit struggle with guilt, ethics, and the politics of justice in light of club loyalty. Opie struggles to find meaning in anything but the club (being initially unaware of the death order) and eventually sacrifices himself in a prison fight to save Jax, Chibs, and Tig (the last of which, ironically, was the assassin Clay ordered that accidentally killed Donna).

Wayne Unser (Dayton Callie) is the police chief of Charming and is shown early to be a friend to the club. Unser helps the more outlaw practices of the club to go unnoticed by the police in exchange for a variety of favors, such as the club's protection for his side-company. Unser exists in a state of inferiority to, and unrequited love of, Gemma; their friendship becomes the struggle by which he fights for the club. Eventually, Unser dies at the hands of Jax as a final line of defense between Jax and Gemma; dying in the house that Gemma grew up in.

Wendy Case (Drea de Matteo) is Jax's ex-wife and gives birth to their first son Abel. Wendy is introduced as a drug addict, and it is because of her addiction that Abel is born prematurely with serious medical conditions. Wendy returns in later seasons with a sobered and

more mentally healthy identity, which leads Jax to entrust her with both Abel and Thomas following his death.

Lastly is Jax's wife, Tara Knowles. Known as smart, innocent, and kind, Tara is a doctor at the local hospital and returns to Charming from Chicago just prior to the show's beginning. Tara is a high school sweetheart of Jax's, and their romance restarts as she takes care of Abel following his birth. Tara struggles with the moral question of being a part of the outlaw culture and the effect that it will have on her sons. Jax and Tara go on to have a son named Thomas, named after Jax's deceased brother. As a likely result of her close association to the *Sons of Anarchy* and Gemma's behavior (as generally the only other female protagonist), Tara starts to exhibit behavior that becomes increasingly riskier, manipulative, and dangerous. It is because of this, through a series of miscommunications, that she and Gemma get into a brutal fight, where Gemma kills Tara. Similar to the effect of Donna's death on Opie, Tara's death unwinds Jax; it refigures him entirely as an agent of vengeance who finds his identity within the sign of the reaper that signifies the *Sons of Anarchy*. While there are indeed other characters, the chief members of the club, the town of Charming, and the Teller-Morrow family are most vital subjects towards an analysis of the show.

Assessment: The Homeless Woman as Communicating Christ

The first, and arguably most obvious, utilization of the Christian symbolic is the representation of the character of the Homeless Woman (Olivia Burnette) as a Christ figure. This nameless character exists as an incarnational specter of Jesus Christ, often appearing as a peripheral portion of the setting's background to offer advice or to act as a reminder of the good in the midst of a narrative that slowly descends into literary tragedy. Significant character descriptions include the fact that she appears as a dirty, dark-haired, and fair-skinned homeless

woman (and/or beggar). She wanders the streets of the fictional town of Charming, although she does, somehow, appear in the Irish marketplace when the show's third season partially relocates to Belfast, Ireland.

She is only ever recognized by Gemma or Jax, and only in the midst of emotional, conflicted, and traumatic times where the latter characters are considering life-altering decisions. Her physical appearance further warrants the claim to her mystical position within the narrative-text; her humble appearance mirrors the biblical description of Jesus Christ, as well as a litany of scriptural characters whose material dispossession becomes a signifier of their spiritual wealth. Perhaps this is a reference to the Matthew 5:3 and 5 where it is written “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” The Homeless Woman’s posture as lowly, meek, and poor are all signs that allow her to go unnoticed within the capitalist-consumer culture that ignores her, but it is also symbolic of her relationship with Jesus Christ in an apocalyptic world. “Homelessness here likely equates to being unattached to the things of this world and thus truly free in the way the club and Jax claim to seek” (Gravett, 2017, p. 200). While Jesus Christ is not physically described in the gospels with great detail, the consistent thematic return to His performance as a 1st-century nomad is well-cataloged.

In Philippians 2:7, God is explained through Jesus as having “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness” – an example of physical humility in contradistinction to the possibility of existing as an emperor or king. Luke 4:30 indicates that Jesus was so physically indistinguishable within a human crowd that intentionally was looking to kill him – an example of super-folding where the narrative depiction of the Homeless Woman and Jesus Christ meet in their ability to blend into the periphery of their respective settings.

Unhinged by the material drives to power and an economy of excess, the poor are deconstructed from the humanistic function of the flesh that seeks to consume, which is characterized as a self or ego focus, as opposed to the drive to a so-called other focus. The idea that the aesthetic description of the Homeless Woman matches Jesus Christ in the sense that their overwhelming physical and spiritually aesthetic normality and humility blends them into the periphery of their respective textual settings creates a symbolic correlation where their value within the text is re-attributed, not at the superficial level of the aesthetic sign, but at a deeper and more rhetorically symbolic constitution.

The performance of Olivia Burnette's Homeless Woman suggests a certain supernaturalist occurrence considering the fact that her irruption into the storyline serves to remind or guide the protagonists (and/or the viewer) morally. There also seems to be a certain triggering process that there is something abnormal about her presence that transcends simple explanation within the textual frame of the scene. The Homeless Woman appears as an element of strangeness in the midst of otherwise normal scenes for the *Sons of Anarchy*, which further questions the inclusion of her scenes, and the significance of her role as a guiding agent in the context of the story. With the exception of season 2, the Homeless Woman almost exclusively appears in the final three episodes of the season, and never appears more than twice in a single season. Because of the limited contextual range of appearances, and the extent by which an analysis of her appearances draw a religiously symbolic correlation, this case study will examine each of her appearances in relation to a larger affirmation of joy or traumatic mediation in her relation to a protagonist character. Because of the limited quantity of her scenes, any study of the character will have to make inferences about the nature of her personage in context of her wider

situation within the narrative, but her limited acting performance contours the range of interpretative gestures that are possible for critical theory.

The Homeless Woman appears twice in season 1, with both appearances being useful analytical frames for how rhetoric operates as a mode of religious exchange. In the penultimate episode of season 1, *The Sleep of Babies*, the Homeless Woman appears as a beggar outside of a shop that the *Sons of Anarchy*'s elder matriarch, Gemma Teller-Morrow, walks by. The Homeless Woman explains that she is asking for money to help her two little boys, and that she is unable to collect disability due to "Uncle Sam cutting my aid – again," and that while she looks physically able she actually suffers from a mental illness that causes her to "fly into rages for no apparent reason" (Sutter, 2008, S1, E12). All of these signs would directly appeal to Gemma, considering that she is a mother of two boys (the death of her younger son Thomas, notwithstanding), receives financial aid by way of affiliation to the club instead of by traditional financial means, and struggles with her own fits of rage – she even goes as far as to respond with "since when is *that* a mental illness?" (Sutter, 2008, S1, E12).

Upon the receipt of Gemma's charity, the Homeless Woman graciously thanks her and distinguishably mutters, "Abel will help our little boys" (Sutter, 2008, S1, E12). This is a curious reference with interesting rhetorical and theological potentiality, as it harkens back to the psychoanalytic theory of the Freudian slip, or "parapraxis," where the repressed desire is temporarily verbalized (Freud, 1990, p. 32).

Gemma, unsure of what she heard, questions the woman who subtly corrects her statement to: "Able to help my little boys – bless you" (Sutter, 2008, S1, E12). The former statement assumes a unique character (Gemma's grandson, "Abel"), a sense of action (Abel "will"), and a relationality ("our").

In a sense, the slip reveals a prophetic imagination by the Homeless Woman, who in turn is prophesying Abel's ability to act as a redemptive force in the lives of an otherwise corrupted set of individuals. This is doubly true considering the role of Gemma in receiving this prophecy; Gemma is revealed early to have helped Clay kill J.T. so that the club deviate from the *Sons* original purpose as an anarchistic social commune to pursue the money and power that would come through the gun trade.

In a sense, appearing as a beggar allows for the Homeless Woman to psychoanalyze Gemma, and to conclude that while she has disciplined her desires through corruption, trauma, and violence, that the element of family symbolized through the birth of Abel can act as a spiritually redemptive force in her life. Assuming that the above theological analysis of the rhetorical Freudian slip operates at an ontological level through the irruption of the miraculous divine into the constitution of the natural world, it would assume that the Christ-figure located in the Homeless Woman *also* engages in Freudian slips. This reveals the true intention of the divine real in (and through) moments of seemingly random irruptions into the symbolic order to voice the desires of the divine real to the desires of Gemma.

Interestingly enough, the edit offered by the Homeless Woman doesn't change the substance of the aforementioned prophecy – assuming that there is a sense of loving guardianship that the Homeless Woman extends to the Teller bloodline. Assuming a spiritual kinship that a Christ-figure would share with Gemma's soul, then the symbolic exchange of the signifier of "our boys" with the signifier of "her boys" could indicate that the Christ-figure is acting as a spiritual guardian to the Tellers (Sutter, 2008, S1, E12). Lastly, a deep focus of the Homeless Woman's mouth reveals that the audio that delivers the Freudian slip was dubbed – as the words and sounds do not match the movement of the Homeless Woman's lips. This furthers

the thought that the mystical moment of a prophetic connection exists to relationally unify the women, as it grants the Homeless Woman an assumption of intimate knowledge regarding the traumatic familial history of the Teller family (and her divine intentions for that family) that a natural human being would not have.

In the first season finale, *The Revelator*, the Homeless Woman is introduced to the show's main protagonist in Jax Teller. Jax had passed out on the footsteps of a Patmos family mausoleum after a night of drinking following an intense and violent confrontation with fellow *Sons* member, Tig Trager. The rhetorical naming of the mausoleum as Patmos is significant as it is the island of Patmos is theorized to be the final living place of John, who was exiled following an unsuccessful death sentence. The later musical selection of *John the Revelator* reinforces this peripheral symbolism by layering the show's communication with a return to the author of the book of Revelation.

Gravett's (year) scriptural exposition plays as an excellent reference point for the ways in which Jax meets the angel of the Lord in the form of the Homeless Woman: "While on Patmos, the book of Revelation says that John receives guidance from an angelic mediator (Rv 1:1; 17:1ff), as well as from Christ himself (Rv 1:9ff)" (p. 199). The central conceit of Jax's anxiety in this instant is that he is slowly being revealed to the true nature of the club's questionable moral actions, but namely through the writings of his father. In this way, the revelation of John (Teller) to Jax in the form of club writings that could act as scriptural truth to set the club free from its vices acts as a moment of theological return to church history.

Interestingly enough, this is where the network of signs forms to create a religious symbolic plane that structures the many different interstices of Christian relationality within the text of the *Sons of Anarchy*: the beginning of the conversation between the Homeless Woman

and Jax begins with the song (and episodic namesake) *John the Revelator*, which fills the *pathos* of the scene with tales regarding John, the writer of the final book of the Bible. Given the context, John the Revelator is theorized to be a symbolic return to John Teller, whose manuscripts regarding the future of the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club's dissension into chaos and violence act as a narration of the revelation of what was inherently valuable about the *Sons* to his son Jax from beyond the grave. The character of the Homeless Woman acts as a reinforcement of this mechanism of symbolic communication by calling Jax to the moral good that stretches out to him from a variety of sources within this scene, and that exists deep within the *ethos* of *SAMCRO*.

When Jax wakes up in the cemetery, he is cloaked in a large gray blanket provided by the Homeless Woman, who is sitting nearby at the foot of a headstone wearing his oversized gray hoodie. Perhaps the blanket was merely to keep him warm in the night, but the religious symbolism of being clothed in "robes of righteousness" (a reference to Isaiah 61, Zechariah 3, and Revelation 3) come to mind through their rhetorical exchange. The rhetorical symbol of removing old clothes and being clothed by God is almost baptismal: it creates a symbol where God protects and redeems humanity by making them into a new image. Whereas the rhetorical exchanges between the Homeless Woman and Gemma are met with Gemma's more critically harsh demeanor that suspiciously asks questions before accepting the rhetorical offerings of the Homeless Woman, there is emotional ease in the communication between the Woman and Jax. Similarly, Jax's demeanor towards the Homeless Woman is other-centric; he returns the blanket with gracious thanks, offers a cigarette, and offers for her to keep his gray hoodie (an object that will be seen on her person throughout the rest of her appearances).

In turn, she tells him “there’s cool water down there” – directly mirroring the conversation that Jesus has with the Woman at the Well in the gospels regarding the water of life (Sutter, 2008, S1, E13). In John 4, Jesus speaks with a Samaritan Woman at a well, which was radical for two major reasons in the ancient world. The first major reason that this exchange was significant in the ancient world was that the woman was racialized through the dialectic of Jew/Gentile, as Samaria was a country historically hostile towards Jewish culture and faith. The second line of significance in this conversation was that men did not openly speak with women that they were not married to in the public of the ancient world. Christ’s subversion of both rhetorical tropes of interaction asserts a primacy in treating all people as worthy of redemption. Jax’s interaction with the Homeless Woman continues this logic, as she is routinely ignored by the public, but is consistently valued in the conversations that Jax has with her. Additionally, the purpose of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman focused on the value of physical and spiritual nourishment, articulated through the sign of water. The interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well in John 4:7-14 is written as follows:

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.[a]) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but

whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

In as subtle a reference as possible in a closing scene to the show's first season, the Homeless Woman's offering cool water to Jax acts as a symbolic return to the gospel. Water acts as a form of life-nourishment, conditioning agent of baptism, and is heavily featured as a plot device throughout the thoroughly nautical gospel. If the Homeless Woman acts as Jesus Christ within the *Sons of Anarchy*, then minor interactions like these become relevant to the degree that they layer cinematic symbolism with historically Christian fantasy at a subconscious level. This becomes an impulse towards the essence of Christian thought that repetitively and compulsively refers back to the ontological nature of God through allegedly secular forms of literature and cinema from the standpoint of the writers, the performance, and the viewer.

In the season 2 episode of *Fa Guan*, the Homeless Woman appears while Gemma stops to drop off Chief Unser at a revival church service. Upon recognition of the Homeless Woman, Gemma asks if she knows her, which is replied with a knowing statement of “everyone knows me” before entering the church (Conrad, Sagal, & Kay, 2009, S2, E9). This reinforces the theory that the symbol of God seen through the character of the Homeless Woman as a textual character expelled to the general periphery of the rhetorical setting of the narrative means that the heuristic thinking and symbolic imagery that constitutes the symbolic order of cinematic communication is compromised by the religious ordering of language. If the Homeless Woman is known by everyone or is at the very least known of by everyone, then she returns the viewer to the Lacanian notation that the world is captivated by Christianity: everyone knows of the teachings of Jesus Christ, even if by reference to a system of order and value that has been constructed through Christian thought. It also situationally confirms that the Homeless Woman is a Christ-

figure: if everyone at the particular locale of the church knows her, then this can be a cryptic way of revealing that she knows people through the church because of her positionality as God. Contrasting the rhetoric from the first season, where the Homeless Woman speaks in a more normatively direct prose, and this season, where her phrase seems intentionally obtuse, allows the viewer to accept a more parabolic interpretation of her identity based singularly on her rhetorical self-expression.

Additionally, it grants credence to the suggestion that Gemma is emotionally triggered and humbled to the point of compulsion by the presence of the Homeless Woman because the very presence of the Lord pressures the symbols that attempt to capture His essence. This is a psychological phenomenon that is alluded to in 2nd Corinthians 7:9-10 where Paul writes “As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” Grief over the violations that have occurred and conviction that leads to a resolved relationship in the presence of the Holy Spirit spurs one to action. In this sense, conviction of past sins, the overwhelmingly loving acceptance of the distraught subject in spite of them, and the desire for redemptive resolution represents a discursive response to the overwhelming call of God, which seems categorically similar to the *type* of engagement that constitutes the relationship between the Homeless Woman and Gemma in this scene. The context of this scene has Katey Sagal move from a performance of apathetic indifference of attending a church service with her friend, to being supernaturally compelled to reach out to a homeless woman that she had interacted with approximately once before.

A subplot of Gemma's is that she was raped earlier in this season, and she (along with Unser and Tara) fights to keep this secret in an effort to maintain the unity of the club. Major character deviations from Gemma's formerly secure and critical persona give way to an insecure and distraught identity – and all of these signs of trauma are misinterpreted by her loved ones through the symbol of maternal physiological aging, as opposed to a deeply psycho-maternal trauma. It is in this moment of vulnerability (and perhaps within the relational affirmation that Jesus Christ as the Homeless Woman offers to her) where Gemma follows the Woman into the church. Joyous worship music begins and flows through the remainder of the scene as the Homeless Woman, whose facial range of emotions had been held at a consistent and curious tonal register until now, is caught by the camera openly smiling at a Gemma who is brought to tears by the joy and lyrics of the worship song.

The song lyrics read “glory, glory; hallelujah – all my sickness will be over when I lay my burdens down” (Conrad, Sagal, & Kay, 2009, S2, E9). The burden of Gemma's rape as portrayed as being a private struggle that she has been forced to endure gives way to the following episode. In the following episode, she decides to lay her burdens down by confessing what happened to her to Clay and Jax. While this thesis' prescription of psychoanalysis does not attempt to prescribe a universal theistic solution to the trauma induced by rape, the contextual understanding of *this* relationship seems to pinpoint how the redemptive, resolutional, and relational nature of the Homeless Woman leading Gemma to worship acted as a means of finding healing. It is only *after* the encounter with the Homeless Woman that Gemma is able to internally determine a methodology of spiritual healing in regards to the sustained trauma that she has otherwise encountered, which furthers the function of the symbolic order as a referential avowal of the divine real to discover joy and healing.

The lack inherent in language presented through Gemma's rape became the symbolic negation of the divine real when she affirmed a praxis of self-doubt, as the feminine pressure within patriarchal spaces to internalize trauma in light of toxic masculine performances in certain spaces exchanges the divine real with the male ego. This acceptance of the violent sexual ego allowed for the trauma induced by the League of American Nationalists to accumulate and go unpunished. It also created a repetitive psychological triggering mechanism within Gemma that further caused her anguish. In releasing the burden of male ego worship, Gemma is able to experience the Real in an intimate way. In Jax and Clay's loving response to the trauma of a wounded spiritual real shared between them and Gemma by embracing her in spite of her insecurities they, too, are able to affirm the Real in a way that transcends potential patriarchal limitation. The limits of language that come in attempting to encapsulate the terror of rape can be similarly terrorizing in a world of the Lacanian real, but in the world of the divine real she is able to share both a spiritual hurt and healing that transcends the symbolic order of language.

The season 3 cameo of the Homeless Woman in the eleventh episode *Bainne* doesn't offer much by way of prophecy, redemption, or particular rhetorical narration. Instead, this appearance offers a moment to question the ontological constitution of the Homeless Woman, which ultimately encourages the idea of her divine sublimation. In a chase that follows the *Sons* to Belfast in order to recover a kidnapped Abel from an IRA conspirator, Jax discovers that a Catholic nunnery that was supposed to be housing Abel for the IRA had given him up for adoption. Jax tracks the young couple to a public market and stealthily follows them as he contemplates the thoughts that a priest had offered him days earlier about giving Abel a life free from the chaos of *SAMCRO*. Jax imagines this world as the couple walks Abel around a series of small shops, but the most curious moment is when they put money in the bag of the sleeping

Homeless Woman. While this would surely break the consciousness of the scene if Jax were to recognize her, clever utilization of character placement locates the Homeless Woman beyond the visual scope of Jax. The question of how the Homeless Woman was able to relocate (and, as the audience will see in the following season, how she is able to return to the States) to Belfast in tandem with the *Sons* points to her larger nature of always being within the peripheral unseen setting of the Jax as he attempts to pursue hope in seemingly hopeless situations.

The season 4 inclusion of the Homeless Woman is similarly brief, taking place early in the tenth episode, *Hands*. In this appearance, the Woman doesn't offer advice, or act to reinforce the religious symbolic periphery, but instead serves as a reminder of something supernatural in the midst of a traumatic event. In this setting Clay, has ordered the assassination of Jax's wife, Tara. The first act of the episode attempts to mediate the dramatic tension for the viewer as Jax's family spends the day away from the club at a park. The setting is lusciously green and reminds the audience that there is an almost nostalgic Americana not normally afforded to members of the outlaw biker gang. In a moment where the tension seems to disappear entirely, Jax is throwing out some trash while Tara buckles Abel into a car seat. Jax makes eye contact with the Homeless Woman just as Tara starts to scream as she is physically dragged into a van.

The cinematic technique of relaxing the viewer to re-introduce the tension through an action scene is executed with pinpoint precision considering the speed by which a routine family outing becomes the next event in a long chain of Teller-related chaos. What is curious is the means by which this relationship (the *pathos* of the scene and its connection to the characters that perform it) means, considering the unique introduction of the Homeless Woman. Any prescription of meaning or significant intent by the viewer would be over-reaching in this sense; her presence doesn't distract Jax from the trauma that is to unfold, nor does her making eye

contact with him alert him with enough time to account for the considerable physical distance that he would have needed to transverse if he was observant of the van earlier in the scene to have saved Tara from being attacked. While the Homeless Woman doesn't seem to appear to save Tara through any physical means, it is assumed that her presence in the midst of trauma serves to contrast a figure of the good with the event of evil that is constructed through other characters affirmations of deceit and violence.

Upon further reflection, an interesting cinematic moment occurs to validate the mysticism of the Homeless Woman, whether by legitimate or accidental means; as soon as Jax breaks attention with the Homeless Woman, she physically disappears as the camera shifts to a different angle. Upon closer inspection, the viewer can verify that the correct two trees and two garbage cans exist in the same proximity to Jax, who is reaching for a hidden gun, are correctly within the same frame of the setting that had previously included the Homeless Woman in the previous shot. Similar to the material accessibility function that questions the ability for the Homeless Woman to have appeared in the Belfast marketplace in the previous season, the speed by which the Homeless Woman moves out of the ocular range of Jax in the park verges on something distinctly *supernatural*. In this instance, the disappearance of the Homeless Woman into the quotidian is a ghostly act. This act is a slippage from the immanent into the transcendent like how Jesus Christ slips from the symbolic into the real. Lastly, the director of this episodes says in a feature commentary over this scene that "Jax sees the omnipresent, the omniscient "Homeless Woman," who represents what to him? Death. Freedom. The end of the road; the beginning of something else?" (Weller, 2011, S4, E10). This insight acts as a unique process of signification of prescriptive divination onto the body of the Homeless Woman, and will act as a

complement to Kurt Sutter's (2012) later revelations that "the Homeless Girl is Jesus Christ" (WTF Sutter S5 E16).

The season 5 inclusion of the Homeless Woman occurs through the season finale, *J'ai Obtenu Cette*, a title that roughly translates from the French as "I got this." Ironically, this phrase will also act as the final words of both Opie and Jax before their respective deaths. In this episode, she is noticed by Jax (despite multiple club-members having run past her) while combing through a dumpster outside of a dog-fighting ring speaking to a stuffed horse. The Homeless Woman appears as if in a dialogue with the horse when she says, "Of course. They can live with the case. To be safe, my love. Yes. Always" (Collins & Sutter, 2012, S5, E13). The intermittent pauses indicate that she is, in some way, having a conversation with the horse that contributes to the plot.

The language itself is difficult to interpret, but it's highly possible that this is another act of prophecy, in the sense that the Homeless Woman may be foretelling a future action to procure the safety of the sons (both biological to Jax, and metaphorical by way of the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club members). This is an allusion to the need to protect the future generations of variable sons in light of Jax's dissension into a gratuitously violent leadership style that mirrored that of his predecessor, Clay Morrow. This, by extension, completes the theoretical prophecy of John Teller that foresaw the move into illicit business by the *Sons* as a seductive trap that would be their downfall. One way in which this is a plausible prediction is through the line "They can live with the case," assuming that the signifier of "case" can be applied as meaning Wendy Case, Jax's ex-wife and biological mother to Abel Teller (Collins & Sutter, 2012, S5, E13). When considering the show's ending, where Jax leaves his children to live with Wendy, this line by the

Homeless Woman acts as a narrative construction point to determine a safe futurity of many different types of *Sons*.

This leads to the two appearances of the Homeless Woman in episodes eight (*John 8:32*) and 13 (the finale, *A Mother's Work*) of season six. In *John 8:32*, the Homeless Woman's first appearance external to a scene shared with either Gemma or Jax Teller occurs alongside a new character of Brooke Putner. Brooke is the teenage daughter of Gary and Emily Putner, the latter of which passed away as a result of a car accident that involved the death of John Teller. Brooke is a daughter struggling with the nature of her mother's death, a death that robbed her of a mother as a newborn. It is later revealed that Emily Putner died as a part of the car crash that was caused by the truck that hit J.T.'s motorcycle several years before. Brooke lashes out against the image of the *Sons* (by attacking their new ice-cream business and Tig's motorcycle as symbolic expressions of the club) as an attempt to resolve an inconsolable lack produced through her mother's death.

In a sense, the intrinsic relationship that connects the Putner family's loss to the Teller's family loss is not inaccurate; the death of John Teller was created by Gemma, and the spirit of him lives on through his desires for the club as articulated through his writings to his son, Jax. The relationship that connects these three to the Homeless Woman is the nature of the subliminal act of revealing and concealing that occurs through her character. The fact that she shares active screen time (no matter how obscure) is not insignificant from the stance of the creator that writes the scenes that place her as a sign of value for the viewing public.

In this episode, it is alluded to that the distinct form of the Homeless Woman resembles the image of Emily Putner, as only a picture of her is left for Jax to view. He remarks about how she looks familiar, and the lack of clarity in his ability to recollect the source of this familiarity is

similar to, and similarly alluded to, the Homeless Woman. The fact that there is indeed some relationship between the Homeless Woman and Emily Putner is confirmed in a commentary of the season finale in *A Mother's Work* by Kurt Sutter, specifically responding to a question of the purpose of the Homeless Woman in this scene that "She represents what she does, and she is who she is...we know who she is now, because we sort of introduced it with the whole Brooke storyline" (Sutter & Collins, 2013, S6, E13).

Later in *John 8:32*, the audience sees Brooke walking home after a reconciliatory conversation with Jax where, as children to the motor vehicle accident that killed their parents, a mentally acknowledged *pathos* is forged between them. As Brooke exits the scene, she passes the Homeless Woman searching through a dumpster. While Brooke fails to recognize the Homeless Woman, the Homeless Woman is portrayed as looking after Brooke. This reinforces the idea that, in some way, the figure of the Homeless Woman may have some relationship to the image of Emily Putner, and also grants credence as to which this particular specter has only been visible in relation to the Teller and Putner families, or families affected by the trauma of the incident.

Theologically, this returns the viewer to the variety of ways in which God presents Himself in the world prior, during, and after the presence of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of the Lord, King Melchizedek as the High Priest, Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God, and a host of differing symbolic representations become matters by which the real of divine meaning takes limited symbolic form as a *readable* body to limited publics. This form of revelation texturizes the nature of the Homeless Woman's divinity, because it speaks to the ways in which the gendered body of the female in a hyper-masculinized world, the impoverished body in a world seduced by consumer-capitalism, and a semiotic world that has accelerated beyond the point of

recognizable authenticity mirrors the ancient textual representation of Jesus Christ as sharing many, if not all, of these very same attributes.

God's presence in the world as presented through Jesus Christ and these other figures is symbolic because the material world is mediated through the immanent symbolic plane of heuristic thinking. In light of that fact, the signifiers that produced this unique representation of God are important because they can be cross-compared to a historicity of representations of God appearing in the quotidian world. The Homeless Woman may take the form of Emily Putner because of the Tellers and Putners shared rhetorical and axiomatic relationship towards the good being connected through the trauma of the accident. For example, Gemma's defensive and cautious reactions to the Homeless Woman signify a caution to the inherent good that the Homeless Woman signifies; Gemma has disciplined the faculties of her thoughts and desires to accumulate social status, material wealth, and physical pleasure at the expense of what might otherwise be physically, emotionally, or spiritually healthy for her.

Additionally, Gemma was revealed to play an integral part in the accident that led to J.T.'s death by allegedly helping Clay sabotage J.T.'s motorcycle, meaning that her interactions with the spiritual essence of the good that has taken shape as Emily Putner could be a psychological reaction to harming a loved one and an innocent mother. This compulsion is neither all-encompassing, nor is it over-determinate. It acts as conviction through a reminder and desire to pursue the good in light of her past sins, similar to how God offers the choice of avowal and disavowal in light of the inability of the human subject to overcome their unique histories of sin. In this sense, Gemma's caution against the signifying powers of the Homeless Woman is really caution against communication itself – a past where she killed her husband, tangentially killed a mother, and the pursuit of violence that has constituted her life since and through those

times has led her to communicate through symbolic negativity. Being met with inherently good tropes such as humility (Homeless Woman), friendship (Chief Unser), and love (Jax's starting a family with Tara) gestures Gemma towards a new form of communicating her self-expression, and a question that she struggles to answer as she navigates through different traumas and the lack's seductive will to power.

Jax has a generally situational relationship to the Homeless Woman; assuming that the form of Emily Putner is necessary for the terms of the plot and explanatory potential for how the Homeless Woman acts as a symbolic Jesus, the only sins that Jax has to separate himself from in regards to the Putner family are inherited sins. In this particular *mythos* of the narrative, the *Sons of Anarchy* restructures Clay and Gemma as a proverbial Adam and Eve, with Jax (and potentially his deceased brother, Thomas) as a proverbial Cain and Abel. It's not an exact fit, as symbolic representations seldom are, but it does grant rhetorical power to the ways in which inherited sin acts as an ontological undercurrent across space and time – a struggle to atone for histories of violence and failure so as to not repeat the past.

As a result, the relationship between Jax and the Homeless Woman is generally quite positive at an interpersonal level, but as Jax descends into the seductive measures of the flesh that captivated his predecessors (Clay, Gemma, rival gang lords, etc.), the Homeless Woman seems to assume a future-forward stance. Acting on a correlative scale of avowal and disavowal, Jax's actions begin to accelerate in terms of disavowing the Christian virtues that the Homeless Woman comes to symbolize, and his heart hardens to beyond the point of redemptive possibility. This will lead to the final decision between Jax and the Homeless Woman, which becomes the final Girardian (1977) point of redemptive possibility.

It is relevant to note that the scripture of John 8:32 writes “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” which acts as a scriptural return to the nature of truth is a form of revelation that frees individuals to exercise new opportunities of freedom. If the majority of the *Sons* struggles are mobilized through action based in miscommunication, then deconstructing that miscommunication through truthful revelation could become a useful therapeutic aid in understanding the self’s relation to the other. As explained above, Gemma’s honesty in regards to the rape led to resolution and love; the nearly infinite number of examples within the text of the *Sons of Anarchy* suggests the converse relationship of using lies strategically was actually the basis for increasing amounts of conflict itself. J.T.’s diary speaks to the epistemological concept of truth and lying as a dialectic that, once reversed, is almost impossible to distinguish when he narrates:

Inside the club, there had to be truth. Our word was our honor. But outside, it was all about deception. Lies were our defense, our default. To survive, you had to master the art of perjury. The lie and the truth had to feel the same. But once you learned that skill, nobody knows the truth in or outside the club; especially you. (Erickson & Horder-Payton, 2008, S1, E7)

The season six finale in *A Mother’s Work* finds the Homeless Woman near the scene of the death of Tara. After Juice is seen dispersing of different items (including the murder weapon) across multiple dumpsters, the camera pans over to the Homeless Woman pushing a stroller and muttering something unintelligible to the stuffed horse. The cameo is brief, and the lack of rhetoric makes it difficult to determine any value-laden thought that may be imbued into the narrative by the Homeless Woman, but it does illustrate an earlier point well, which is that the Homeless Woman is always near the Tellers.

In this sense, the Homeless Woman was near the Tellers home where Gemma and Tara fought to a gruesome end. She also is consistently present in traumatic situations. In this case, the trauma that unfolds regarding the violent death of Tara at Gemma's hands. In some ways, this is critically important from a theological standpoint, as Jesus Christ is theorized to act as the theoretical bridge between death and new life. In this sense, Jesus Christ exercises some roles that have commonly been associated with reapers, which have little to do with the actual killing of bodies and more to do with the ferrying of the undead into new life. If the Homeless Woman is to assume all of Christ's varying abilities, it would only be natural for her to be present at the passing of Tara, as one of the show's lead protagonists. Similarly, it can be interpreted that the stroller (which is slightly different from the cart she is normally seen with) is symbolic in a variety of ways to confirm this theory. A stroller acts as a cart for children, and the mythological lore of personified death as a grim reaper that carts souls through the afterlife is found across history and time in a variety of different mythologies. An example of this would be in Hellenic cultures where Charon ferried souls across the river Styx to Hades, the realm of the dead. In this scene, it can be interpreted that Jesus Christ has returned in the form of the Homeless Woman to carry the soul of her child in Tara Knowles-Teller from the scene of her gratuitous and traumatic death into a peaceful eternity.

Lastly, she remains unnoticed by other characters, such as Juice, and maintains her position as part of the unthought periphery of the setting by those characters. While the feature of the Homeless Woman is both brief and fails to add new features to her character, it does reinforce several key elements about her role that the writers wish the audience to see. While her presence is as similarly indescribable as it is determinate, the Homeless Woman is acting in supernatural congruence with the plot of the *Sons of Anarchy*.

The Homeless Woman is not seen again until the penultimate episode (*Red Rose*) and the series finale (*Papa's Goods*). In *Red Rose*, the audience sees the Homeless Woman as pushing the stroller near a rest stop in Eureka, California. Similar to the Homeless Woman's previous performances, the majority of her presence in this episode confirms previous interpretations of the Homeless Woman's divinity in relation to her triadic roles in the series. The conditions for her appearance are that she only appears immediately before/after a traumatic episode, is always near and is only noticed by people related to the death of John Teller, and potentially acts as a ferry between imminent death and supernatural life. This moment occurs early in the episode, and considering the tone of the season, it acts to foreshadow the end of Gemma Teller-Morrow's storyline.

Not long after the sighting of the Homeless Woman, Gemma curiously conveys the following message to a nearby trucker named Milo in the interest of getting a ride to Oregon to pay her final visit to her father. "I'm a good Christian girl; just need to get home, see my daddy" (Sutter, Murray, & Barclay, 2014, S7, E12). One can surmise that this has deeper relevance – while Gemma hardly performs the virtues of a normatively Christian lifestyle, there is a somber acknowledgment by her that she will have to atone for her sin of murdering her daughter-in-law with her own life. It is at this point in the plot where the truth is revealed to Jax that Gemma was the true culprit who murdered Tara. While Gemma is attempting to travel north to reach her own parents, Jax attempts to locate her to extract justice. There is a certain *pathos* that guides the scene – a feeling that is a mixture of dread and reflection to act as a sobering moment in the midst of many converging signifiers.

The network of signifiers that constitute the narrative of *Sons of Anarchy* mirrors a realistic understanding of the world in the sense that each life attempts to grapple with a series of

internal and external struggles that converge with other lives, and those lives' relevant struggles. It is difficult to slow down the many symbols to understand the full range of meaning that takes so many different forms, but the beauty of the moments presented in *Red Rose* is that it completes the storyline of a character that has accelerated life by engaging in a state of spiritual disavowal. If life is the ontological extension of the creation of God, then the disavowal of the inherent relationship between God and creation becomes an avowal of death. Similarly, Gemma's final moments seem to slow in real life as she sees the Homeless Woman, and it allows the audience a brief moment to see what life could have been like if she engaged in a state of divine affirmation, as opposed to negation: Gemma returns to her childhood home, to her parents, and it is psychologically revealed (or confirmed, given the course of her contribution to the narrative) that her attempt to remedy the lack inherent in her perception of her childhood became the foundation for her actions later in life.

As an extension of the sighting of the Homeless Woman, this becomes a critical moment to understand the rhetorical spectrum of interpolation that constitutes the relationship between characters as symbols in a world mediated by fundamentally Christian metaphysics and values. Similar to Ireland in the sense that there is no description of how the Homeless Woman is able to travel great distances and back. This time she appears in a Eureka truck stop, which is approximately a six-hour car ride from San Joaquin County, where the town of Charming is said to exist. She also appears the next day having returned to Charming, with no indication of having any other means of transportation than the stroller she pushes around town. The mystical presence of the Homeless Woman in the final hours of Gemma acts as a reminder of her supernatural break with the structure of the plot.

Lastly, the Homeless Woman appears one last time within the waning moments of the series. In *Papa's Goods*, the Homeless Woman appears to Jax as he is settling all of his outstanding debts to the various social circles of which he is affiliated. While *en route* to complete his final murders, Jax happens upon the Homeless Woman perched on a ledge in a garden, draped in the blanket she covered him with in their first encounter. The setting of the garden is in and of itself significant because it serves as a character symbolization of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus walks into a clearing to speak with the Father in Matthew 26 before His eventual sacrifice. In Matthew 26:37b, Jesus is described as beginning “to be sorrowful and troubled.” This is emotively similar to Jax following the Homeless Woman’s final words to him, as his face draws back to reveal that his understanding of his impending fate weighs heavily on him – even if he knows it is the right thing to do. The resolution in his head to do the right thing does not negate the human experience of apprehension and anxiety, but the presence of spiritual confirmation gives both Jax and Jesus the spiritual resolution to continue along their respective paths out of the garden and back into the world.

In this instance, interpreting the Homeless Woman as the Holy Spirit allows her to confirm the spiritual disposition of Jax as a new symbolic Jesus. She is eating a loaf of bread, and a half-filled bottle of red wine is seen near her (with a portion of the bread appearing to be stained from the wine). He stops to notice her, perhaps with the realization of how this will unfold as his final day and, after a long pause, engages her with a tone of curiosity and a genuine desire to understand: “Who are you?” The Homeless Woman responds with “It’s time,” as she hands him the blanket and turns to walk back down the alley he walked from (Sutter, 2014, S7, E13). Jax nods with quiet and solemn understanding as the camera pans over to zoom in on the

bread and wine, stressing the essential elements of the sacrament of communion as the scene transitions.

The fact that the Homeless Woman treads back down the path that Jax came from can be interpreted as her returning to the earth that he is leaving, or perhaps that she has more work to do in her protection and guidance of different souls. There is a certain mutual exclusivity between these characters in terms of their respective life paths, as illustrated by the scene. While Jax has all but confirmed the consequences of his life decisions as a conclusion found in death, the Homeless Woman turns back to the life on the street – to walk through the world and bless those that still occupy it. The fact that she is in a garden perhaps brings the audience to a state of serenity that is uncommon in the world of this narrative, and alludes to the peace of being in communion with God in the heavenly space. Cinematically and semiologically speaking, this area is naturally well lit, and there is grass; both of these signifiers are important when considering the generally urban environment that structures the show.

While the *Sons* are sometimes seen riding throughout the mountains and occasionally walking through parks, it is the exception to the rule that states they are a part of a concrete world. The city is a testament to the acceleration of signs, as the acceleration of technology is what makes everything from automotive repair to the abolition of natural earth for concrete possible. Heidegger (2013) has much to say in regards to the acceleration of technocratic signs being, itself, a symbol of illusory progress when he writes that “the rule of Enframing...demands that nature be orderable as standing-reserve” (p. 23). Heidegger’s claim that technology acts as a consumer-drive is based on the will to mastery; an *ethos* that propels the desire of science and technology to discipline nature into an energy-producing, efficient, and tempered object for human consumption. With this framework in place, the setting itself becomes an act of symbolic

exchange, which situates Jax as moving between places. The seemingly more natural elements of the garden act as the will of divine creation, and the return to the garden before the climax of the series acts as a symbolic return to the divine real as an animating discourse of the show.

Conversely, the will to mastery that has been symbolized by the technocratic society of Charming, Teller-Morrow Automotive, and the surrounding areas, all act as symbolic negations of the real by constructing nature into a standing reserve.

Of course, the bread and wine present within the scene are obvious symbols of the flesh and blood of Christ that are ritually participated in through the symbolic performance of communion. The last supper becomes the moment of foreshadowing in the gospel where the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as a radical act of atonement for the sins (both actively committed and passively inherited) of creation throughout space and time. Similarly, Jax realizes that his biological sons, Abel and Thomas, are at risk to adopt his lifestyle if they were to grow up around him and the outlaw culture that produced him. The only way to stop the repetition is to create a fissure within the patterns of thought that have been disciplined into the many disciples that don the leather vests of the *Sons of Anarchy*.

Similarly, Jax's devotion to his non-biological brothers by way of *SAMCRO* requires a sacrificial scapegoat to cover for the struggles he has accumulated as President of the club. He murders multiple people, sends his biological sons to live with Wendy and Nero, and takes ownership for killing Jury (the president of the Indian Hills charter of the *Sons of Anarchy*) by practicing confession with his professional colleagues in the *Sons of Anarchy* presidents of different charters. Lastly, he removes the guilt and pain of forcing his contemporaries in *SAMCRO* to deliver the Mayhem vote by leaving to handle his sacrifice on his own terms. If accountability and acceptance of the consequences of his sins were not taken, then it would mean

an accelerated gang-rivalry between the *Sons* and other outlaw groups and potential FBI/police inquiries and arrests of his club. Perhaps most importantly, it also would mean that his club's rule that an intra-club death requires a Mayhem vote would psychologically torture his friends.

The intricacies of this storyline mirror Christ's move to sacrifice Himself for the world. Christ's friends in the apostles were people He cared deeply about at an interpersonal level, so the acknowledgment and affirmation of the sacrifice as a scapegoat to atone for the consequences of their (and by extension, the worlds) actions is symbolically offered by the sacrament of communion. The participatory act of communion signifies that those of faith join in the crucifixion of Christ to remember the value of sacrifice, as such. In 1st Corinthians 10:16, communion is described as an incarnational form of participation when Paul writes, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" The presence of the symbols of communion before and after Jax's final ride is a mystical moment that foreshadows Jax's sacrifice as being a relational participation with the model of sacrifice that is performed by Christ for the world. The move to sacrifice mirrors the sociological notion of sacrifice as an act of atonement but more specifically, the act of self-sacrifice for the betterment of others is a uniquely Christ-like virtue, and is the spiritual foundation for all Christian doctrine.

The dialogue of the Homeless Woman is also a symbolic affirmation of the divine real. Instead of offering a satisfying answer, the Homeless Woman refuses to be identified by the signifying call for a name and, instead, grants courage to Jax as he goes about his mode of becoming the scapegoat. Her stating "It's time" is a confirmation of the path that Jax has chosen (Sutter, 2014, S7, 13). It moves through the ontological register of his decisions to avow a life of hope for his family (both biological and club) and comforts him as illustrated in the performance

delivered by Charlie Hunnam. Jax nods at her statement, understanding that she is answering a more subliminal question than he is, at that moment, emotionally (or perhaps even cognitively) capable of rhetorically forming into language. It is a grippingly emotional moment – not necessarily because of the singular performance, but because of the Homeless Woman as confirming a path that the audience is led to dread.

In terms of the opening following scene, Jax is sitting on the steps to the town courthouse, entirely covered by the blanket. Similar to the Homeless Woman in all of her performances, he goes unnoticed by the public, which allows him to reveal his position against August Pope strategically. In a final act of justice, Jax shoots his Pope's bodyguard and Pope as penance for the unjust death of his friend Bobby and the countless acts of violence that occurred between the rival outlaw kings. The cloaked figure of Jax takes the figure of the reaper, and at this moment the sign of his image mirrors the signifier of *Sons of Anarchy* logo, which is itself also a reaper. Jax blurs the line between symbol and reality, and this post-structural form of symbolic exchange (in this sense, Jax and the reaper becoming one) means that Jax has fully realized the form of the reaper. His life decisions have acted as a state of becoming through the disavowal of divine life, but his moral code that harkens back to the presence of the divine real (and confirmed through the Homeless Woman) have allowed for a rhetorical muddling between sign and signifier. At this moment Jax is literally the reaper – he is the son of an anarchic ontology of death, and he takes it upon himself to deliver death as a site of penance as well as to become death through his sacrifice. If the reaper acts as a signifier of death (even if only by the association to a history of mythology), then Jax becomes the reaper by the end of his narrative.

The value of this symbolic muddling maintains the messianic arc of the narrative; Jesus takes on all sin as a form of ontological death as the scapegoat for created humanity. This

inversion of the scapegoat mechanism becomes the zero point of radical possibility for Girard, because it dispels with the need to externalize violence (1987). In this way, both Jax and Jesus are mapped by death, even if Jax's actions to affirm the immanent image of the reaper is categorically distinct from Jesus' transcendent overcoming of the reaper. Jax's decision to murder August Marks and Charles Barosky hardly seems like an act of Christian love, but the limitations of Christianity's authentic representation through secular storytelling prove that language being contingent does not mean that it has to be fully faithful, necessarily. The contingency of secular narrative to biblical text allows it to operate as a textual allusion from the former to the latter. The parasitic nature of communication on Christian theological subtext means that particular deviances from the divine real of storytelling are inevitable. The appropriation of the divine real into a secular symbolic script speaks to the sacred value that is always already associated with the preexisting value inherent to Christian being, ethics, and thought.

The appropriation of the divine real into a secular symbolic as a form of mediation by way of the Homeless Woman and Jax Teller as Christ-figures in the *Sons of Anarchy* is, if anything, a truly faithful interpretation of the scriptural text. As a secular subject, Jax is perhaps too *human* to perform a faithful interpretation of Christ; too riddled with sins of lying, sexual conquest, and murderous vengeance to operatively be the Son of God. It is precisely for this reason that Jax's redemptive messianism is symbolic of how all humans can come to know, internalize, and perform the sacrificial state of being that is gestures towards the narrative of Jesus Christ. It is *because* of the flesh that represents the humanity of Jax that makes him such a compelling spiritual symbol of Christ. Jesus Christ deconstructs the disparate analytical paradigms of immanence and transcendence by becoming an embodied God. In Hebrews 2, the

incarnational affirmation of Jesus' humanity is described as being fully man and fully God allows Him to be the God that can truly identify, empathize, and love on His creation by sharing the experience of human life.

Jax becomes the extension of this logic where the idea that the lifestyle of Jesus Christ is non-identifiable because of the perfection by which His life was lived allows for a more identifiable Christ figure to present themselves so that the nature of God can be known. Jax is not only human in terms of his fallibility, but he represents a highly particularized niche sub-culture of motorcycle outlaws – a group not commonly known for their high percentage of converted believers. Jax becomes the symbol of the divine real seen in Jesus Christ through his redemptive actions that appropriates the divine real in a way that is necessary to make Christ accessible to such a unique and secular sub-culture of the world. This redistribution of the signifiers of the Holy Spirit onto the Homeless Woman, and Jesus Christ onto Jax is itself a form of symbolic exchange with the narrative of Christ that ultimately shapes how the concept of secular narratives are ultimately a fiction. Just as Fr. Stephen Freeman (2013) writes that “[t]here is no such thing as the secular, but the holy world created by God can be so distorted that it becomes opaque to itself,” so too is it revealed that all narratives are Christian narratives (para. 12).

Assessment: Historic Christian tropes as Axiological Foundation

If the character of the Homeless Woman acts as a symbolization of the divine real into the quotidian, then analyzing the rhetoric of the *Sons* moral code unveils the register of impulsive psychological gestures as unique symbols that operate on a uniquely Christian symbolic spectrum. Lacan's claim that the world is captivated by Christianity is given new life in light of the claim that the world is similarly captivated by the symbolic. In a sense, the fundamental rhetorical register that structures the series of semiological interactions that exist within the

experience of existence reveals itself as mirrored within the narratives that society uses to recreate its value-system from. The *Sons of Anarchy* can be explained thus as a narrative that demonstrates the imaginary of value through the re-interpolation of historic Christian tropes into particular symbolic offerings to a viewing public. Because historic Christian tropes reveal themselves through modern fantasy themes, the analysis of the tropes themselves as unique signifiers of the divine real can collectively be thought of as the constitution of the fantasy – an imaginary sustained by the affirmation of the symbolic phenomenological network, as such. Critically engaging the *Sons of Anarchy* at this level of rhetorical-media studies is essential to understand the extent by which particular values are reflected through the particular cinematic mirror of the screen.

The moral code of the club becomes a register of the Lacanian imaginary that sustains and structures the decision-making practices of all characters within the *Sons of Anarchy* narrative. As with any modality of decision-making, all forms of communication act as a rhetorical reaction that stems from the psychosocial impulses of each character's interpolation of the good. This is best illustrated in the rhetoric of J.T. that narratively structures the subjectivity of Jax. In a sense, the writings of J.T. (a selection of reflections written within the show as *The Life and Death of Sam Crow. How the Sons of Anarchy Lost their Way, by John Thomas Teller*) operate as a symbolic return to the gospel. As a collection of proverbs and prophecies, the writings of JT provide a moral direction for Jax as he attempts to navigate the intricacies of club life. J.T.'s diary gives a language to the moral code of the *Sons*; a grammar of desire that coheres that moral axiom of Jax's rebellious leadership model in contrast to Clay's aggressive leadership model. Said simply, the more that Jax learns about views that his father had about the club, the more he hopes for a form of the *SOA* that transcends the physically, emotionally, and legally

dangerous consequences that are assumed as practical elements of club life under Clay's leadership. As Jax states in the first episode, the original vision of the club was "real hippie shit – it wasn't outlaw" (Sutter, 2008, S1, E1). Within the same episode, Jax contests the lifestyle that constantly exposes him and his loved ones to bodily injury. A lifestyle that requires him to murder rival outlaws, continually risks physical injury considering the nature of their work in contrast to his new responsibilities as a father, and the possibility of legal capture that had removed his friend Opie from being able to intimately care for his family for five years.

Other members of the club rightly point out the psychoanalytical process of symbolic exchange that occurs within Jax; by exchanging the symbol of his investment in the *Sons* future with his new investment as a father, Jax calls for an *SOA* futurity that operates through new and legally legitimate ways to earn money so that he can avoid the chaotic lifestyle that consumed his father. The rhetorical vision of the *Sons of Anarchy* laid out by J.T. has more to do with pursuing immaterial concepts of the symbolic good through a socially anarchistic commune; concepts like freedom, justice, and truth. This is contrasted by the decisions that eventually led to J.T.'s death, and the power-moves by Clay that turn the anarchistic social tendencies of the motorcycle club into fully-exploited legal anarchism that included gun-running, loan-sharking, and drug-smuggling as a re-territorialized quest for sovereignty by way of money, influence, and intimidation. Jax, like his father before him, struggles between his love of *SAMCRO* which demands certain expectations from him in practical ways that are mutually exclusive with his loving and desperate desire to secure the safety of his family. Everyday living practices that operate according to the code becomes the trope that harkens back to the ancient Christian church because the early church operated according to the divine law in instances where it differed from the laws of man.

The para-political nature of the early church, in relation to the Roman Empire, is radically similar to the *Sons of Anarchy* because it represents a social reality that exists on the fringe of a politicized society. As Gravett (2017) aptly describes, "...to the larger Roman world, the followers of Jesus sometimes appear as out of place as a motorcycle gang living out an anarchist vision in the idealized Americana of Charming, California" (p. 193). The fictional town of Charming California is symbolic of the socio-political desires of a modernist civil society. Those desires manifest themselves as a middle-class, predominately white, and business-friendly town that follows the rule of law in a way that allows it to fall within the larger assemblage of the American social fabric. Cops, ATF agents, and the neoliberal forces of capitalist advancement are the guardians and enforcers of a particular way of life that appears to be peaceful, desirable, and good.

The *Sons of Anarchy* reveal the backdrop of this symbolic network as a fantasy that struggles to cohere as a morally legitimate narrative-construction when forced to account for the contradictions between socio-legal practice and socio-legal. The ways in which Chief Unser provides legal cover for the club's illegitimate activities, how Agent Stahl leaks inaccurate information to the club (which tangentially caused the death of an innocent in Opie's wife Donna) in an effort to cause division, and the revelation of Romeo as the head of the Galindo drug cartel as a double-agent with the CIA all warrant the claim that the imaginary of the legal system being a symbol for peace and justice is fundamentally incoherent in the eyes of the disenfranchised outlaw subject.

Subjects that are framed as existing outside of the law are unfairly criminalized as living outside of the territoriality of the laws of the empire because of the legal/criminal dialectic that contours the borders of civic life within political society. Social life, however, exists both in and

beyond the borders of political society. Gravett (2017) continues by extending the connection between the *Sons* and ancient Christian sociality's with how "[n]umerous texts portray the Gospel as appealing to persons disenfranchised from the larger religio-cultural mainstream" (p. 193). The writings of J.T. across a number of episodes explain how the nature of this outlaw social life adheres to its own symbolic code of morality:

We came to realize that when you move your life off the social grid, you give up on the safety that society provides. On the fringe, blood and bullets are the rule of law and if you're a man with convictions, violence is inevitable (Sutter, 2008, S1, E2). When we take action to avenge the ones we love, personal justice collides with social and divine justice. We become judge, jury and god. With that choice comes daunting responsibility. Some men cave under that weight; others abuse the momentum. The true outlaw finds the balance between the passion in his heart and the reason in his mind. The solution is always an equal mix of might and right (Sutter, 2008, S1, E3). I never made a conscious decision to have the club become one thing or another. It just happened... before my eyes. Each savage event was a catalyst for the next, and by the time the violence reached epic proportion, I couldn't see it. Blood was every color. (Conrad, 2008, S1, S9)

The rhetoric of J.T. frames the central conflict of determining the moral center of the outlaw social life in a way that Lacan might describe as neurosis. A life lived outside of the socio-political coordination of the laws of the empire is similar to the deconstructed terrain of the subconscious – there is an infinite axiological possibility. As George Dunn (2013) extrapolates on this possibility, "[t]he logic of violence that...pertains to life in the state of anarchy, where everyone, being free and equal, is a mortal threat to everyone else" (p. 63). The conviction that J.T. alludes to becoming the new rule of law fits neatly within an intra-existential crisis that an

analysis and may experience while undertaking a theological revisioning of the Lacanian theory of symbolic exchange.

For example, J.T.'s creation of the *Sons of Anarchy* and Jax's desire to recognize its original form can be subject to a theological form of psychoanalysis that moves from the symbolic order to the order of the Real. In their minds, contemporary existence within the town's socio-civic life would be a meaningless existence that is overly fascinated with the symbolic order as a *telos*. The comfort that comes from a meaningless job and conforming to social norms is, in the eyes of the Tellers, an inauthentic way to live. Their respective lines of flight from the meaningless order of signs that constitute the political economy of the empire is a move towards the divine real because it moves from the empty sign of a secularized society into a (temporarily) de-symbolized imaginary.

Symbols of safety and justice that are associated with the social grid of the empire (for example, the image of safety that comes from the professional settings of town sheriffs, attorneys, and hospital administration members) are similarly meaningless to a number of organizations on the fringe of social life, such as *SAMCRO*, the Mayans motorcycle clubs, the Niners gang in Oakland, the Russian gun suppliers, the Mexican cartel, the real IRA, and the Wahewa reservation members. The meaningfulness of this symbolic order is because of inability to present an authentic or ethical defense of the institutionalization of social life by the empire of Charming in relation to these groups that have otherwise been forced to self-sustain through the creation of their own cultural orders. The empire of modern social life, as presented through the town of Charming, is deconstructed as an inauthentic and contradictory form of ethical praxis in the eyes of fringe social groups.

This is evidenced by the assumptions of J.T.'s writings – if the Lacanian imaginary is a state of meaning that is co-constituted and maintained by the structure of the symbolic order, then concepts like love, social and divine justice are emptied of the symbolic value within the de-territorialized space of outlaw social culture, and re-distributed value accordingly. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) described deterritorialization as a process of “coming undone” in relation to the social organization of values as they have normatively come to be understood (p. 322). In this example, outlaw social life that exists on the fringe of civil society is offered a new symbolic exchange through the creation of new axiomatic symbols to govern the subject's ethical determination of right and wrong.

This is where the theistic vision of psychoanalysis differs and transcends typical Lacanian thought. The excess of language's ability to articulate a moral code in a world off of the politicized social grid that J.T. describes would normally be allocated to the terror and awe that is associated with the Lacanian Real. A theological revisioning of psychoanalysis that places God at the center of the spatial terrain of the Real gives intellectual coherence to the idea of a deconstructed symbol of love, social, or divine justice because it re-situates the conceptual ontic of each of those symbols as a referent to a deeper truth, or singularity. It is in this state of axiomatic being where new symbols are offered that exist in spectral proximity to the Real. The existential unveiling of the symbolic order allows for a more intimate avowal (or more destructive disavowal) of the divine real inherent in language because each unique symbol can be understood in a clearer relationship to the source of meaning that grants it coherence in the first place.

This fundamentally existentialist psychoanalysis of the human subject understands, (by virtue of the sin-nature which presents itself as a lack that acts as an irresolvable chasm between

the subject and the divine real), that Lacan's hope for better symbolic exchange as a form of mediation with neurosis is actually the grounds for nihilistic inauthenticity and true intra-psychological violence. A better form of symbolic exchange is realized by attempting to affirm a rhetorical course that consistently breaks through the symbolic order. The *Sons of Anarchy* represent this, insofar as their club of social outlaws manage to affirm a collective nomadic lifestyle that allows for the re-articulation of value and meaning outside of the prescribed code of the empire. The desire for these bikers to live a life of true anarchic freedom is a performative display of the attempt to transverse the symbolic order. While the rigid codes of social normativity that are structured within the order of the symbolic are temporarily suspended (pending future mediations through a return to the symbolic), the *Sons* are caught within the wall of the imaginary.

It is within this deterritorialized space where they are able to experience a temporary interaction with the divine real; awe-inspiringly hopeful and dangerously terrifying within the same semi-indescribable experience. To use an example, J.T.'s reflection that "...true freedom requires sacrifice and pain. Most human beings only think they want freedom. In truth, they yearn for the bondage of social order, rigid laws, materialism, the only freedom man really wants is the freedom to become comfortable" speaks to how an experience with the freedom that comes from outlaw life is unsustainable given the seduction of the symbolic (Parriott, 2008, S1, E4). While the ethics of transcending or breaking the symbolic real to gaze upon the nature of the divine real is a form of inspiration for symbolic orders that are more proximately intimate with the real itself, it similarly signifies that the lack makes the possibility of a sustained anarchic ontic life a functionally impossible one. Conversely, the directionality of the divine real intruding

into the symbolic order as a process of guiding the purpose and significance of faithful symbolic exchange is consistent with a savior-God that consistently appears across the historical quotidian.

Lacan calls this obsessional pursuit of the real a process known as the death drive, but this drive is also terminally deconstructed through the performance of Jesus Christ. What is death that the existentialist has to fear in their desire to be absolved into the ontic essence that is God? Perhaps this strikes to the heart of the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* as a repetitive movement and non-satisfiable movement around the object of the religious study in God. Both possibilities are represented in the *Sons* affirmation of the code. The *Sons* are similarly united by an unspoken moral center that animates their politics but also consistently struggles with affirming an ethic that is good in the wake of their human shortcomings.

This recentering of the divine real as calling out to Jax through the writings of J.T. is also essential towards any reading of the *Sons of Anarchy* because it explains the deconstructive processes at work that comes from encountering this divine singularity. Jax reads the writings of his father not unlike the gospel is read for the Christian subject. It forces a critical self-evaluation in relationship to his family, *SAMCRO*, and civil society. Outlaw social life coheres under the symbolic social life of its current leader because the leader acts as a scribe and interpreter of the club's moral law; Clay's leadership leads to destructive decisions, whereas Jax's leadership style is compelled by the egoic drives of vengeance and pride.

The repetition compulsion that structures the death drive of *SAMCRO*'s leadership is because of an underlying impulse to affirm the symbolic order in light of pursuing the noble, mysterious, and difficult aspects of the divine real. A theistic visioning of Lacanian psychoanalysis would recognize that the club's drive towards meaning within the finite and/or distorted symbol of value in material objects, as opposed to the telos of those values, is a

nihilistic process. Affirming the sustenance of the objects of their desire, based in an orientation to the Real, is antithetical to Lacan's theory of the psychoanalytic process. Lacan's simple affirmation of different modalities of symbolic exchange leads to a pacification of spiritual movement. An affirmation of the divine real in its triadic relationship with the religious imaginary and Christian symbolic structures a calling to transcend what is comfortable to pursue a relentless and unconditional affirmation of a seemingly impossible understanding of what is good.

While this can be seen clearly through the literal intrusion of the divine real into the symbolic order by the Homeless Woman (specifically in her attempt to gesture towards a lifestyle through signs that avowal of a relational commitment to the good through her advice, warnings, and eventual acceptance of Jax as a soteriological sacrifice), it is also articulated through J.T.'s diary. The writings of J.T. inflect a textual character of virtue and a calling to avow a praxis of life-affirmation for his son. While J.T. is dead as a literal character, the spiritual essence of his values speak to and through Jax as a formative shaping of his desires toward the good. As Smith (2009) writes that the love of our desires is "what ultimately govern our vision of the good life" (p. 51). More than simply reading about his father's values, Jax's desires about the club are being formed by his primordial love of his father. In this sense, the viewer is treated to a second example of how this theological reading of the Lacanian Real calls from beyond the symbolic order; the show illustrates J.T.'s vocal narration as a proverbial speaking from beyond the grave.

The spiritual essence of these writings become a symbol of hope towards a productive spiritual future by reclaiming the roots of a nostalgic past. This reclaiming acts as a description of time where the values of the club signified a way of life that was not captivated by the will to

power that comes from assimilating into a politically civic way of life, nor the dissension into chaos that comes from the temptations of power in outlaw social life. In this sense, the civic life of the political empire signified through ATF agents that engage in corrupt practices to achieve utilitarian goals, local law enforcement officials that are bribed to ignore criminal activity, and the ways in which theoretically legitimate business practices are empowered to exploit the people of Charming mirror many of the ethical vices of outlaw social life. Agent Stahl is seen murdering both her business and sexual partner to construct a narrative of victimization that allows her to pursue various outlaw figures on her terms. Romeo of the Galindo cartel is a CIA agent that convincingly runs a vast drug cartel empire. Even Chief Unser (for all his niceties) puts political pressure on his officers to direct them away from the illegal activity of the *Sons*. In light of this revelation of the contradictory set of unethical practices that are carried out by alleged guardians of the law, the show levels certain presumptions that the viewer may have regarding the overlap of the laws of man and the laws of God. Various external signs of the *Sons of Anarchy* become representative of the code as an antagonistic force that pressures the moral axioms of the empire through deconstructive critique.

In this sense, the fantasy of the plot of the *Sons of Anarchy* returns to a fundamentally ancient interpretation of the early church. The early church in Rome was persecuted for hundreds of years – many of the symbols offered by the show are representative of this reality. The *Sons* are regularly targeted as the source of gang activity, with their leather vests (cuts) being targeted at the opening of season four as a symbol of public disturbance. Because the leather cut is symbolic of admission into the *Sons* due to its cultural association with motorcycle gangs and the unique image of the reaper, the cut itself becomes symbolic of the *Sons of Anarchy* as a representation of deviance within the public's normative prescription of value. Christian symbols

of outward aesthetic appearance, such as requirements for hair care, tattoo and piercing motivations, and circumcision as a dividing cut between followers of the Old Testament law are deconstructed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. While the focus on aesthetic symbols are less heavily featured within ancient Christian social life, the presence and proliferation of images through iconography and early Christian symbols served to categorize ancient Christians in contradistinction to the majority of the world. Images of the *Chi-Ro*, the dove, and the cross all act as images that served to signify Christians *as* Christian. Considering the early Roman persecution of Christian people, these symbols would operate within the same series of exchange *Vis a Vis* conventional scapegoating mechanisms to categorize and criminalize Christians as social deviants with respect to the empire.

When club members meet to vote on decisions that will structure the direction of the club, they meet in a specially designated room of their clubhouse and call it church or chapel. This description of their private meetings gives value to the idea that there is something sacred or reverent about a church service where regular and focused attendance is required to affirm community formation. Perhaps under a different interpretation, the term chapel is used to signify a place where these social outlaws can call home. In this interpretation, the chapel fills the historical and theological role of the church being a rhizomatic congregation of people more than a material place. It has been explained that “the church is not some fortress of rigid orthodoxy...but...a multiplicity of Eucharistic sites dispersed like a network or rhizome across the social body,” which is certainly consistent with the cinematic description of the *Sons of Anarchy* in their relation to other charters throughout the world and in their unique affirmation of the town of Charming (Bell, 2010, p. 72). Another interpretation still is that the *Sons* as an outlaw group have to engage in a language of opacity regarding some of their illicit business

practices (as observed through their exclusive table-meetings, and the extents by which they go to sound-proof their room from outside surveillance), but this still begs the question of why to move towards a uniquely Christo-centric grammar. The return to the mystic grammar of Christianity, even if only as a means of managing opaque optics in regards to their actions, signifies that there is something inherently good, redeemable, and desirable about Christian rhetoric that calls to outlaw social groups from the transcendent beyond.

The move to opacity by appropriating rhetoric from popular society's lexicon of signifiers is also a call back to ancient Christian practices that performed their semiotic Christianity similarly. As the early church grew in numbers, it quantitatively accumulated a correlatively similar degree of persecution. While there were established religious centers, temples, and agreed upon meeting places, the deconstruction of physical space (which had long been associated with the Jewish tradition) allowed for Christians to move through spaces that were otherwise unfriendly to their evangelistic message. Popular Roman symbols (such as the cross) were an easy way to move through the rhetoric of the ruling class to self-identify as religious subjects without drawing unnecessary attention. In the context of evangelism, ancient Christians would over-identify with cultural customs to help different people understand various aspects of the faith.

A clear example of cultural engagement as a means of evangelism would be Paul's time in Athens in Acts 17 where he engages the people by acknowledging the validity of their gods but appeals to the unknown god that was reserved for the known unknown that Greeks would maintain in light of their epistemic shortcomings. Paul concedes that the men of Athens are very religious (v.22) and speaks to the symbolic representations of the many gods in the Areopagus. Paul specifically references the altar reserved for "the unknown god" (v. 23b). Paul uses this as a

rhetorical-teaching moment to speak to the ontic reality of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and utilizes the religio-cultural register of the Greeks to speak about a God that transcends idolization. In spite of this transcendence, Paul indicates that the God that he knows simultaneously has intimate relational care with the world. Paul says in Acts 17:29 “Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” Paul's appeal was a way of working through the rhetorical dressings of the culture by engaging in symbolic exchange so that the symbol of Christ could be better revealed.

This operates in a limited manner with the *Sons of Anarchy*; the *Sons* operate an auto-mechanic shop, an ice-cream shop, and a pornographic film studio, and they also take part in community cookouts, communal protection, and are well-versed in their legal rights. All of these act as rhetorical codes to offer the public the ability to consider the ways in which the *Sons* relate (albeit, somewhat differently) to members of society.

It can be argued that the affirmation of the cross mirrors the *Sons* appropriative affirmation of the reaper insofar as it plays with the signs of death. The significance of early Christians selecting the cross is two-fold, as it serves as a reminder of the abject terror that was taken on by Christ because of His love and hope that the world may be saved, and also as an act of deconstruction that empties the sign of death of any meaning. In this sense, Christ's transcending death turns the symbol of the cross as a vehicle of death into a symbol of non-meaning in light of the pure, gratuitous, affirmation of life that Christ performs on and through the event of the crucifixion. In Lacanian thought, the death at a cross would be an event located within the Real of human sub-consciousness because the awe and terror associated with this moment of gratuitous violence transcended the linguistic ability to signify. This is where the

term crucifixion arises as a symbol meant to encapsulate this meaning, and here within this attempt to associate sheer abjection with the negativity of death, Christ subverts the symbolic exchange with a radical reclamation of life.

This is similar to the *Sons* affirmation of the reaper, which has a long, storied tradition as being the agent of death. The reaper becomes the sign that symbolizes the *Sons*, as they are also sometimes called reapers. The image is adorned over their clothing, their bikes, their building, their church table, and as tattoos that each member can only carry if they are a member in good standing with the club. The reaper is mostly metaphorical, for while the *Sons* do sometimes engage in murderous acts, the narrations of the Tellers indicates that the club more often feels as if they are haunted *by* the metaphysical reaper than when they actively pursue others *as* the reaper.

If the rhetorical connection is held to its logical end, then it can be said that the reaper is reclaimed as a symbol of hope to transcend a form of death that structures the civic life that the *Sons* are establishing a line of flight from in the first place. For the members of the *Sons of Anarchy*, (and all of their communal relationships), association with the motorcycle club is hope for social anarchy, whereas life on the political grid of conventional life is true death. This flipped dialectic reverses the meaning of life and death as they are commonly determined because the embodying of symbols of death to represent new life allows for radically new possibilities of community formation. At a psychoanalytic level, this new mode of symbolic exchange has the possibility to birth new societal collectives structured by systems of value that are fundamentally untethered to a securitization against death. Daniel M Bell Jr. (2007) argues that a counter-politics to the dominant liberal order operates across Christ's atonement of the empty-sign of death into a politics of life when he writes that "Christ, and the life of fidelity to

the truth-event that is Christ, is indifferent to crucifixion, suffering, and death. Thus displaced, death gives way to life, to the pure affirmation that is resurrected life. Christ gives the gift of life, a gift that founds a politics of resurrection” (pp. 56-57). The ancient church, being a semi-nomadic group of social outlaws that associate themselves with popular symbols of death, shares a significant set of common ground with the *Sons of Anarchy*.

The *Sons of Anarchy* observe that simply because something is legal does not mean that it is morally correct, and they are in turn viewed as a form of vigilante protectors of what is good when moral injustice cannot be remedied by legal means, such as the early season one example where the Charming town mayor’s daughter is raped by a carnival employee. In an effort to protect his daughter’s innocence, businessman Elliott Oswald turns to the club to extract justice for a gratuitously violent crime, likely because of a belief that increased media attention and the possibility of legal failure would bring undesirable and furtherly destructive attention to his daughter. This navigation around and through fissures in the law confirms the theory that affirming the symbol (the political laws of man) as its own teleological good in light of the divine real (a notion of justice that determines right and wrong according to the laws of a transcendent notion of the good found in real presence of God) is an auto-destructive measure that only leads to failure. In a sense, the *Sons of Anarchy* deconstructs the notion that it is possible to be good solely according to the strict adherence to the principles of human laws when the nature of human flesh that carries out these legal practices is indicted as ontologically corrupted towards selfish desires, exploitative methods, and de-critical thinking processes.

This refers back to the passage where Christ is asked about taxation, and answers to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, but render unto God what is Gods.” In this tongue-in-cheek reply, Jesus recognizes the legitimacy of the laws of man, but only insofar as they direct

the citizen towards a larger moral praxis of knowing God intimately. Where the laws of man and God diverge, so does the actions of the Christian subject because their allegiance is not to a humanistic identity or sovereign nationalism but to the kingdom of God. In a manner of speaking, it is assumed that if one follows the laws of God that they will produce a character that respectfully and honorably follows the laws of man.

The *telos* of Christ's message in this passage is not a focus on Caesar, but a focus on God, because there is no tax, land, or power that the political empire of Caesar can exercise that exists outside of the dominion of God. The sequencing of His answer is critical because it frames an understanding that the kingdoms of man and God have the ability to overlap, and the viewer can sense that the anarchy practiced by the *Sons of Anarchy* is not a state of ontic recklessness, but rather a focused and critical refutation. This rejection is a refusal of particular traits, behaviors, and desires that the kingdom of man requires the outlaw to conform to in its project of assimilation – a rejection that directly mirrors the actions of persecuted Christians throughout the ages that are forced to renounce Jesus Christ under threat of violence.

Christian social life, when lived according to the authentic adherence as performed by Christ and the apostles, is anarchic in the sense that it owes no allegiance to the notions of good inherent within the fantasies of human sovereignty. The social constitution of the Christian subject is singularly called to the set of symbolic practices that gesture towards the divine real. To do otherwise would be an auto-destructive affirmation of the spectrum of the symbolic order in a way that disavows the intention of the law as directing the political citizen towards truth, justice, and ethics found within the divine real – an affirmation of the symbolic order as its own *telos* is a dangerous will to objectivity because it rests upon an axiological foundation of non-meaning.

Situating this new ethical dialectic within the context of the show, the viewer notes that the seduction/will to power unveils the law as an illegitimate and incomplete moral paradigm. Despite its attempt to appear otherwise, legalism as the expression of modernity's rationalism is neither objective nor neutral in its ability to curtail deviant psychological behavior. Modernity's attempt to demystify or suspend religious thought as a cornerstone for community formation re-structures what is good as not an objective and foundational truth, but as a site for inter-subjective dialogical negotiation between similarly incomplete and fractured human subjects. The appeal to the truth or knowable moral good that rests as an objective moral principle is not subjective or contextual because of its symbolic nature, but objective because it gestures and reveals itself from the divine real into the symbolic order. Social anarchism then represents a responsive possibility that moves away from the political order of assimilation and erasure that seeks to discipline the desires of each subject in order to move in a direction that pursues what is good, honorable, and noble in ways that are beyond the paradigm of legally legible morality.

This, of course, must be noted through the distinctions and levels of the proposed anarchic performance; the purpose of the club was to affirm an *ethos* of social anarchism – not to become a legal outlaw organization. If one turns to Deleuze, then they might find that while the deterritorialization of the subjectivity of *SAMCRO* is reterritorialized when their practices begin to mirror the actions of the political society that they were drawing a line of flight from. A humanistic kingdom is a kingdom, regardless of whether it is constructed through the city of the empire or at the fringe of society's border. J.T. notes that the club's desire for power and money at the expense of their virtues was never a space in which he intended to move *SAMCRO*. Jax recognizes the difficulty of breaking from the stranglehold of humanistic sovereignty and adopts

a measure of literal sacrifice to create the scapegoat necessary to atone for his family and club's sins so that they can continue to live.

In the series finale the viewer recognizes that anarchy for anarchy's sake is an untenable lifestyle – as J.T. says: “On the fringe, blood and bullets are the rule of law and if you're a man with convictions, violence is inevitable” (Sutter, 2009, S1, E2). Jax and/or the *Sons of Anarchy* cannot maintain a lifestyle that desires peace for their families while simultaneously managing a relationship with the Mexican drug cartel, the real IRA's gun-running business, and the constant pressure from local law enforcement's threat to imprisonment. More than the simple material struggles of this particular type of anarchic lifestyle, Jax cannot prevent the subconscious drive to ego and death that consumes him and his loved ones as they attempt to affirm an increasingly humanistic reterritorialization of the symbolic order.

If one substitutes the postmodern notion of deconstruction as a type of cognitive or intellectual anarchy, then more of the same auto-destructive processes that were seen in Jax's inability to navigate through his convictions are similar to the plight of the postmodern philosopher. Radical deconstructive criticism's assumption that the world is socially constructed without purpose makes for an ultimately purposeless nihilism. This derision into passive nihilism consumes the thinking subject, but it is hardly logically coherent – the claim that the world is socially constructed does not mean that the truth-events that undergird those social constructions are relative. The converse is more likely, which is why Christian existentialism is a more accurate philosophical response to the seemingly meaningless constitution of the world. The language of postmodernism's deconstructive critique suffers from a significant contradiction; it either is unable to prevent itself from an on-going deconstruction of the signs in relation to establishing an axiom of meaning to justify the necessity of critique itself, or it requires an

axiological limit that transcends the need or ability for deconstruction. Locating God within the space of the real provides the possibility of that limit, and structures the symbolic order accordingly.

The social anarchy of the *Sons* is important insofar as it reveals the contradictions within modernist ethical paradigms, and proposes the possibility of a community founded upon more authentic pursuits of the divine real. The slippage of the deconstruction proposed by this modality of anarchism into a reconstruction of the values of sovereignty proposed by the empire reveals the requirement and recognition of the limit imposed by an axiological foundation imposed by God within the quotidian world. In this sense, the postmodern epistemology understood as deconstructionism is a form of philosophical anarchism, and must be reassigned as a tool of critical reflection under the more accurate pre-modern notion of epistemology as a form of revelation from the authority of God as located within the psychoanalytic space of the real. If Gods intrusion from the real into the symbolic order is an act of revelation, then that revelation structures the relationship towards ontological value, as such. The unicity of meaning that structures the texts of different social conventions are then known as a revelation of human nature's created design, which once again points back to the *telos* found within the divine real. The metanarratives that postmodernists criticize persist in spite of radical deconstructive criticism as a result of this axiomatic and mystical unicity. Ultimately, the purpose of illustrating these varying metanarratives regarding the relationship between the *Sons of Anarchy* and the practices of the ancient Christian church is to reveal how even in secular fantasies there are subliminal appeals to particular Christian tropes.

The nature of the fantasy reveals the spectrum of the symbolic order. Whether the characters, plot-devices, or particular performances associate notions of the good life with a

particular set of practices, there is a consistent relationship between joy and trauma that structures the consequence towards their chosen action. The academic must ask themselves why dialectical fantasy themes of virtues and vices are found within the *ethos* of a television series that offers society the ability to peer into the life of secular outlaws that regularly engage in what can be described as anti-Christian behaviors? Why do the symbols of establishing a moral code, theoretically opaque linguistic decisions, and the nature of social rebellion from a political empire cohere under a religious grammar, and find root within ancient Christian history?

Conversely, being able to see Christian tropes in fundamentally secular fantasies says something about the metaphysical constitution of the world. The nature of the world, at least as it is represented through secular fantasy, exists in a state of eternal symbolic return to the ontological reality of God as the source and unicity of meaning. As a result, the Christian religious tradition can be thought of as having cash value/social capital in terms of being able to locate ethically possible (and singularly meaningful) decisions in relation to the historical performance of Jesus Christ.

Assessment: Tropological Traumatic Response & Christian Fantasy Theme Construction

Whereas the interpersonal socio-political relationship of the *Sons of Anarchy* to the empire of the modern world offers many symbols of Christian social life at a parapolitical and historical level, the dialectically Christian themes of virtue and vice arise at a more intimate and intrapersonal level throughout the series. Where the previous analysis focused on the ontological relationship between the ethics of outlaw/political life as a communicated form of Christian social life, turning the psychoanalytic gaze inward allows for the intricacies of intrasocial life to speak to a similar avowal and disavowal of the Christian symbolic order.

There are similar appeals to tropes inherent within Christian communicative life found within this psychosocial order, but instead of the focus being on the historic nature of Christian tropes that permeate through societal constructions of the good, an analysis of four symbolic reactions to trauma will be analyzed. Traumatic tropological responses to Christian themes of virtue and vice act as an inherent response to reconcile the lack inherent within communication; the inability to fully express oneself requires a leap of faith that various types of responses are sufficient to communicate the interiority of being. To help clarify the dyad, especially in regards to this analysis of symbolic exchange that determines communication to be on a spectrum of avowal and disavowal in relation to God, this thesis will subdivide traumatic responses along a polemic that describes the nature of the traumatic situation. The three themes that will be examined are drama, celebration, and despair; each will be given examples to explain how communication is, at its core, a fundamentally theological act.

Dramatic tension is a response to traumatic situations found throughout the *Sons of Anarchy* because a majority of characters struggle with working through the life off the grid of conventional normativity. The traumatic break occurs when the characters are forced to decide between living a socially and politically protected life or to produce a life founded upon the nature of their convictions and the strength of their integrity. The tension produced in the dialectic of outlaw and non-outlaw life is scripted fairly early on in the series through the relationship of Donna and Opie. Donna resents *SAMCRO* for “getting rich” while her husband went to jail for five years on a club-mission (Sutter, 2008, S1, E1). Opie’s desire to be a good father and husband (and thus fulfill the role of the American-male archetype) contrasts his desire to be a good brother to his *Sons of Anarchy* brethren.

This causes multiple conflicts where Donna publicly, but separately, rebukes Opie, Gemma, and Jax in order to protect her family from continued harm. This dramatic tension is contingent on each character's prescriptive notion of the good life. Donna's prescription of the good sees the protection of her husband from imprisonment as dually fitted to help her husband fulfill his duties as a provider for the household and keep them from bodily harm. Donna is eventually persuaded to be more open to the club life, but events unbeknownst to her unfold to posture Opie as a snitch to the club. Clay secretly orders the assassination of Opie, which even by the outlaw's moral code is akin to treason when conducted in unilateral privacy.

A tragic turn of events occurs when Opie and Donna switch cars so that Donna could, ironically, return to a club party to help Gemma clean up and is mistaken for Opie. Tig Trager's mistaking the driver of Opie's car results in shooting through the back window of the car, killing Donna instantly. This death acts as a catalyst for growing tension between Jax and Clay, the former of which correctly suspects that the death shot was intended for his best friend. It also emotionally buries Opie, who for the remainder of the series devotes his life to club life, and removes himself as a nurturing father because of the relationship that he associates between his children and his deceased love.

The second example of this dramatic tension is the nature of femininity as articulated by Tara and Gemma throughout the series. Tara consistently is wary of club life, and Maggie Siff performs the character as attempting to understand, take part in, and eventually remove herself from elements of the Old Lady lifestyle. Her attempt to do this is motivated by her love of Jax and desire to both protect herself and her family from danger. Tara pleads with Jax to leave the club, attempts to accept his lifestyle choices, and then slowly begins to adopt more manipulative and emotionally hardened tactics as the level of trauma increases around her. In season one, she

is pursued by a stalker that she attempts to leave behind in Chicago by moving back to Charming and she struggles to rely on Gemma and Jax as they embolden her to defend herself (even to the point where Jax literally murders him for attacking Tara).

As Tara assumes a maternal role over Jax's son Abel, and then eventually births their son Thomas, her original questioning of a lifestyle that is surrounded by the trauma of death, violence, and the consistent threat of imprisonment returns through a dramatic tension based response. The lack inherent in language is mirrored in the inability to produce a solution that is able to speak to the many loves that occur across the dialectic of the citizen/outlaw lifestyle.

Tara's expressions are similar to how the biblical notion of softening/hardening one's heart is understood as a willingness to articulate a range of emotional sensitivity in response to trauma. The more emotionally sensitive Tara is contrasted with the emotionally hardened Gemma. This disposition, as well as matriarchal power position, changes in the season four finale when Tara is similarly seduced by the will to power within the outlaw kingdom of the *Sons of Anarchy*. The performative folding of images from J.T. and Gemma to Jax and Tara occurs when Jax is voted in as president of the club, making Tara the proverbial new Old Lady. Tara's adaptation of more emotionally hardened responses to the traumatic elements of the outlaw lifestyle becomes a survival reaction to the increasingly traumatic life events found in symbolic negations of the divine good.

While Tara's storyline can be described as growing increasingly traumatic correlative to her intimacy with the life of the club, it should be pointed out that a number of her troubles have less to do with proximity to outlaw social life and more to do with the type of symbolic affirmations that she, and those around her, choose. An example of this is would be how her court-ordered restraining order, as well as Jax's warning of the town police, failed to prevent her

stalker from engaging in increasingly dangerous forms of harassment, and if it hadn't been for her proximity to outlaw subjects that affirmed types of behaviors designed to protect her emotional and physical well-being, she would have likely died at the hands of this toxic masculinity. In this case, the affirmation of a symbolic order (the affirmation of life, protection of the weak, and the enforcement of consequences for the care-denying form of psychological harassment that the stalker performed in relation to himself and Tara) creates a *pathos* that seems consistent with the revelation of the good found in Christian ethics.

Tara produces a set of actions that attempt to have her flee with Abel and Thomas from the way of life of deviancy that seems to have ensnared her husband, which is quite different from Donna who believed that passively accepting the lifestyle would resolve the inner turmoil that this drama produces. Tara fakes a lost pregnancy, lies to Jax and prepares an escape route that would allow her to relocate with the boy's several states away. In this sense, Tara begins to adopt the more Machiavellian measures that Gemma consistently engages in in order to achieve her goals. Donna's passive acceptance and Tara's refusal by way of adopting a negative symbolic code result in the same conclusion when Tara is brutally murdered by Gemma, who mistakenly believes that Tara is going to turn on the club.

Because of the many variables at work in producing the destructive conclusions of these many plotlines (as opposed to the victim-blaming notion that any singular character brings about their fate strictly because of their action, inaction, or their justifications for their actions), it is important to remember that the trauma of biological death is part of an accruing process of symbolic negations of ontological life found within the real. Each affirmation of the symbolic order as a *telos* of theoretically ethical decision-making, as well as active decisions against the callings from the divine real are steps that solidify each character's path towards or against life.

Conversely, Tara's dissension into the polemic of the negative symbolic order (or an acceptance of symbolic behaviors, traits, and performances that negate the virtues found within the Christian revelation) is a form of mimicry that she embodies in relation to Gemma. Gemma also struggles with non-violent affirmations of her family and the club and is often seen disciplining, fighting, or manipulating those that she interacts with into following her particular worldview. Gemma is not without emotional experience, and she routinely works through emotional breakdowns as a consequence of balancing both the unhealthy behaviors that she embodies and the hyper-traumatic events that she is forced to endure.

Gemma Teller-Morrow routinely engages in violent behavior due to a two-fold insecurity; an insecurity that her position as the queen of the club will be challenged when or if her husband Clay, or son Jax, were to leave the club, and a separate insecurity related to her inability to cope with the steady loss of her family to mental disease. As a result, Gemma's response to the traumatic events that unfold as a result of her involvement with the *Sons* is interesting because of the way she devotes herself to the cause.

Gemma is brash, methodical, and conveys an *ethos* of confidence even when she is unsure of the outcome of certain events. An example of this is the arrest of the *Sons* following the conclusion of season 3. In an effort to protect her from becoming an accessory to the legal crimes that the *Sons* were about to commit, a club decision decided to withhold relevant information from. Gemma performs the subject position of the old lady valiantly considering how she believes that the majority of her family are to be imprisoned indefinitely (unaware of a deal that guaranteed the *Sons* a short time in prison for a series of unavoidable crimes they were set to endure inevitably, by offering information about the Real IRA).

Gemma assumes the leadership role of the matriarchal queen even though she is not an official member of the club. In the context of this particular frame of outlaw royalty, Gemma has relinquished her citizenship to the political empire – all of her actions indicate that, in her mind, if she doesn't have power within the social circle of her family or in the outlaw society, then she functionally has nothing. This logic carries through to her eventual death, where she passively accepts that her actions have caused an irreparable rift between her and Jax by killing Tara, which means that she wouldn't be able to establish any legitimate claims to her grandsons or the motorcycle club.

Clay, being the only other leader that she respects with a claim to any form of outlaw power, is killed by Jax for a multitude of crimes, which fundamentally leaves Gemma alone. Gemma is different from both Donna and Tara because instead of passively participating in the outlaw lifestyle, or slowly adapting violent tactics for purposeful gain, she consistently affirms the miscommunication of violence in light of possible reconciliation.

The Bible holds a hope that all may be redeemed, but its understanding of justice follows the idea that all people are truly free to create their own path in life – and be held accountable for the decisions of that path. The drama that Gemma responds to is indeed plentiful, but ultimately each dramatic situation requires her to make a decision to pursue a state of desires that lead to the good or pursue a desire of the self. In her ultimate betrayal of Clay which leads to his death, (both in spite to and because of his violent relationship with her), Gemma's consistent inability to see Chief Unser as a suitable form of masculinity in spite of his enduring friendship and sacrificial love for her, and the fact that she actively took part in the murders of both of her ex-husbands and her daughter-in-law because of an inability to reconcile relational differences that she had with them are all evidence to the claim that in all instances Gemma accelerates the

tension towards conflict. This makes conflict itself the paradigmatic positioning of her character. It is, unquestionably, heartbreaking when Jax finds his mother in her childhood home among her favorite flowers. Jax wavers in this, but Gemma encourages him as a mother would encourage a child, and has him follow the moral path of her decisions to its violent end as penance for her sins.

The last move to drama as a response to the symbolic order is the inner dialogue that Jax carries throughout the series as he ascends to the throne of the president of the Redwood Originals charter of *SAMCRO*. The constant tension between Jax's more utilitarian desires for the club and the more deontological cautions as narrated by J.T. in the earlier part of the series becomes the most clearly communicated dramatic tension that the show produces. The question of how to pursue the right course of action in light of seemingly impossible circumstances is a profoundly theological notion. The inner dramatic tension of how to best pursue the good is at the core of every action because the rhetorical nature of each proposition is a question of which movement will allow for a more intimate affirmation of God.

The beauty of the human condition is the ability to work through these symbols and learn from the past triumphs/failures of others, whereas the struggle of the human condition is the inability to know with any degree of certainty the variable consequence for each action. Kierkegaard, as a Christian existentialist, struggles with this inner dialogue to pursue the good in a more obviously theological manner, but the rhetoric of the show re-articulates this monologue/dialogue at the level of embodiment. J.T.'s writings eventually are replaced with Jax's own journaling and the struggle of the debate of whether to affirm the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club as a social outlaw vs. a legal outlaw continues.

It is not controversial to say that this dramatic tension exists as a root cause of conflict; Lacan himself would say that the concept of the lack becomes a condition of possibility for subtle ego formation during the mirror stage of human development, which in turn allows language to form along drives of negation such as the death drive. Christian theology has a long historical contribution to this topic when it writes about the concept of sin nature. If one exchanges the symbol of the lack utilized in Lacan's psychoanalytic study with the symbol of sin-nature, or at least if a line of equivalency is drawn between the two terms, then Christianity can help explain how the drama of the rhetorical situation is the central difficulty of human existence because sin itself is the paradigm of human intra-psychological conflict. Sin is the original relational cut that separates the fundamental ontology of human subjectivity from the divine essence of God.

The fact that there are unique character traits that distinguish the personalities of each person is not descriptive of the larger ontological separation of people from one another and from God so much as the way in which different axiomatic drives that structure each subject's natural flow of desire. This is an important clarification because non-critical engagement with this text might produce reductive conclusions that determine that the differences in dialect, language, and rhetorical performance between individuals is the relational cut that separates people from participating as a more univocal collective – this is not the argument. All individuals are separated not by language but by communication because communication is what allows for different individuals to collectivize as a corporate body. The concept of shared interests, passions, and loves are all the reaction to a larger question of what desires does each individual entertain. The historical Christian tradition reframes the original teleological notion of desire in

an outward facing fashion. Instead, God's creation and affirmation of the 'other' is performed at a quotidian level through the historical event of Christ's resurrection.

Conversely, if the resurrection is the historical moment in time where desire is reconciled toward an other-centric *ethos* of being-for-life, then the historical event of being-for-death that distorts, perverts, and corrupts the natural flow of desire would be the self-centric negation of the calling of the divine real. An argument can be made that the possibility of hereditary sin is ontologized through the genealogical tracing of sin in the accounts of man back to Adam, but understanding sin as the collapse of desire back into the immanent nature of the flesh means that the temptation to sin is a question of the will to power. If the flow of desire stems from the heart, then the formative structures that discipline what interests, what passions, and what loves are inherently desirable.

Life is then restructured upon this symbolic spectrum of becoming, with the pole of life-affirmation being a pursuit, embodiment, and disciplining of desire towards the calling of the divine real. The pole of life-negation is then characterized through the release of desire to act according to the pleasures of human flesh – a distortion of the teleological callings of different objects in their relation to the human subject. Symbolic negation also becomes the psychoanalytic practice that affirms symbolic exchange in an effort to remove the nature of the real as the *telos* that anchors the meaning that structures the significance of affirming particular symbolic practices in the first place.

This is where the *Sons of Anarchy* brilliantly exhibits this theory of desire as being the axiological subtext of communication. Donna, Tara, Gemma, and Jax are each confronted with the symbolic order of the *Sons of Anarchy* in the context of how the club interacts with different aspects of the law, different degrees of violence, and the hopeful vision of social life in relation

to the good. Each character is tasked with the struggle of responding to the dramatic tension of affirming the symbol of the reaper, and what that would mean for their families, friends, and selves. The enormous difficulty that comes from this existentialism is the fact that each character's desire to impute language onto the mystifying and terrifying nature of the real becomes a practice of self-affirmation that concludes with a destructive end.

Jax is the most interesting in this regard because the moments in which he is reflecting on the struggles that he continually endures harshly contrast his battle-ready leaps into action; it is almost as if he is mirroring the Pauline struggle of forming the wisdom and knowledge of his mind into a consistently embodied praxis. This is reflected in Romans 7:19-20 when Paul writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." Paul speaks to the fact that mere knowledge of right and wrong that comes through reflections such as Jax's are insufficient to reconcile the state of the flesh, which consistently reacts according to the desires of evil. Jax is taught to act according to his impulsive desires his entire life; while his reflections on the trauma of everyday life are important, it ultimately fails to restructure the totality of his lifestyle which has constituted his existence.

The difficulty of even critiquing the action of four characters that all ultimately become victims of their own circumstance is the fact that one wonders if more and different words (different symbolic orders, so to speak) would be sufficient to save them from their untimely fates. The only possible answer is perhaps it could change things, but the fact that these interrelated characters, events, and desires are forming towards a path of symbolic negation in a way that correlates with their eventual fates is evidence of the fact that the dramatic existential tension acts as a mood that eventually overdetermines the network of signs.

The second major theme that presents itself as a historically Christian trope within the secular narrative of the *Sons of Anarchy* is the theme of celebration. The historicity of celebration as a remembrance and honoring of the saints that have passed into eternity has a long and notable observance in the Christian tradition. Christian festivals and feasts have been a way of engaging with popular culture, often to the point of affirming the observances of different cultures and redeeming them through the particular frame of Christian truth. This form of appropriation is distinct from standard criticisms of appropriation insofar as it provides an alternative to the public's observances as opposed to sheer erasure that comes through the violent enforcement of replacement - keeping with the affirmation of free human agency that exists in the symbolic exchange between creator and creation. An example of how this has worked throughout the pagan world would be the interaction between Celtic pagans and Christian evangelists in ancient Ireland. St. Patrick's Day, which now is symbolic of the Irish cultural legacy, is predated by Druidic pagan festivals that existed there prior to the evangelizing of the area. In a sense, the Christian theme of celebration occurs as a hopeful response to the trauma inherited through the Lacanian lack. The celebration is a reminder of the redemptive effect that Christ has in conquering death through His gratuitous affirmation of life.

Lacan's cut in language operates as a poststructuralist description of sin nature - understanding this concept as the primordial traumatic event, the reminder of Christ in public through celebration is a joyful and hopeful material moment that transcends the traumatic division of sin as death. The act of Christian celebration itself is a cross-temporal disruption of linear time; a radical return to the past to inform the present of the possibilities of the future. The act of Christian celebration partakes in the joy of this redemption and is similarly disciplined by the labor that is performed on the cross and in remembrance of the saints that mirror Christ. This

makes the act of celebration categorically distinct in a particular sense, insofar as the pleasure derived from partaking in the joy of this moment is not the telos but the effect of food, drink, and cultural customs (such as dance, singing, or ritual). As a result, the Christian theme of celebration manifests through social events such as feasts and the honorable observance of life events - a trope that is featured heavily throughout the Sons of Anarchy as a symbolic affirmation that positively (or hopefully) moves in the direction of the divine real.

The first example of this form of celebration as a Christian fantasy trope in the Sons of Anarchy comes early in the first season, following a chapel meeting in the first episode of the first season. The chapel meeting discusses routine elements of club life – how to resolve conflicts with rival organizations such as the Mayans M.C. or the Nordics white supremacist drug-dealing street gang, business strategies on how to earn money for the club, and treasury questions regarding motorcycle runs and bill payments. Club members may come to the table with social concerns for the town of Charming in the context of protecting the town from potential drug infiltration. In several episodes, the chapel meetings cohere to allow for information gathering regarding potential legal concerns that are posed to the club (in one particular case, the medical information regarding a violent fight between Jax and a meth-dealer that dealt drugs to his pregnant ex-wife), as well as good-natured interpersonal communication. The first chapel meeting including a warm-hearted message from Piney Winston to Jax offering the clubs services as he endures the day to day struggle of his son Abel's premature birth and health concerns.

This chapel meeting is immediately followed with a late night barbecue, adorned with rock music, non-club men and women, drinking and smoking, and entertainment in the form of bare-knuckle boxing between Happy Lowman and Tig Trager. The communally festival nature

of this event seems to celebrate the life that the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club is able to produce in light of difficult circumstances – or even in light of the mundane nature of life. In some ways, this event's following of the routinely ordinary nature of the chapel meeting seeks to overcome the trauma of the mundane itself; the event itself becomes something to look forward to as a means of communing with members in the community in a safe and secure environment structured by the values of the club.

In other ways, the event is a space to escape the trauma of psychological struggle that haunts Jax, as it is clear through both his violent attack on the meth-dealer and his inability to visit his son who is physically struggling through multiple surgeries that Jax is unable to deal with the emotionally difficult nature of becoming a father in such a turbulent way. The celebratory nature of the festival returns in many moments of the show – with one particularly notable moment being when the *Sons* travel to Ireland to unite with their Belfast charter. In this party, there is a similar featuring of alcohol, smoking, food, conversation, dancing, sex, a bonfire, card games, and bare-knuckle boxing between the sister-charter's members. While the nature of neither of these two parties could hardly be described as Christian in their tonal execution (as sure as the Christian desire to utilize sex, drinking, feasting, and physical exercise as an affirmation of the divine gift of the body within the limitations that scripture dictates to be appropriate as a form of life-affirmation, the *Sons* seem to lack any sense of divine caution), the return to festival-like activities as a celebration of club life is an interesting public notion that drives right to the heart of the Christian tradition. The celebration itself is the formation of a public (the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club members) within a public (the wider community of family members, Old Ladies, community members, automotive enthusiasts, friendly outlaw groups, rival outlaw groups that have formed temporary allegiances, crow-eaters, pornographic

cast and crew members from their Cara Cara studio, dog rescues, a former transgender prostitute named Venus Van Dam, and occasionally Chief Unser).

This celebration of life that operates through the collection of outlaws and misfits is not dissimilar to how a contingent of Christians in the ancient world would have engaged one another in spite of their constant persecution. The affirmation of the social outcast found in the performance of Jesus Christ is the formation of a community that starts with the forming of relationships with thieves and prostitutes. The relationships created by Jesus to begin his ministry are with those that are seen by political and religious elites within the intersection of disenfranchisement. This intersection is widened to include the racialized, gendered, disabled, lower classed, those whose affirmation of morality by way of legal, vocational, and sexual departure differed from the ruling class, and those that were young. In effect, a celebration of this collective of individuals separated by political and religious differences under the reformatory *ethos* of Christian living is paradigmatic of the body of Christ – each person being a complementarian part of the larger community. These contributions are a labor of love – a desire to affirm the ‘other’ for how they contribute to the cultivation of life that comes from the celebration. In this sense, the celebrations offered at the end of chapel services by the *Sons of Anarchy* are similar to the feasts and affirmation of individuals that would otherwise be separated by ideological differences that are done following Christian chapel services. The regular observance of these parties follow the regular pattern of Christian feasts as an event that cultivates community, joy, and hope as a sign of hope in the wake of the mundane and the traumatic.

The second observance of celebration as a metanarratological return to Christian themes within the secular narrative of the *Sons of Anarchy* comes within the second episode of the fourth

season, *Booster*. In the final act of the episode, a coordinated attack by local policeman and fireman force the club to endure watching the law enforcement officials fabricate a story about a fire as a justification to invade the club. This causes massive infrastructural damage to the *Sons* by destroying furniture and causing emotional trauma by taking an ax to both their club table that features the reaper logo and the wall of mugshots that featured the historical members of the Redwood Originals charter. Both of these symbols have deep personal attachments for the club considering the meaning imbued within them as a representation of the fraternal community that organizes each individual into a corporate whole. The event follows a near-death experience for Jax and Opie, who are kidnapped by the Russian mafia and saved in a shootout with the Galindo drug cartel. There is a determinable *ethos* in the sense of loss as battered club members and their loved ones walk through the rubble that is the clubhouse.

The scene is an accurate depiction of the apocalyptic nature of everyday life for the motorcycle outlaws – there is no certainty that any material place, person, or object can survive the physical destruction that is imminent outside of the terrain of the political empire. As illustrated through the coordinated effort of first-responders and law enforcement officials, the guardians of the empire's interpretation of justice act as soldiers of destruction when it comes to the societal wasteland that lies outside of the border of their political kingdom.

The irony here is that the reality of borders exists differently for parapolitical subjects of the empire. For refugees, social outlaws, and those whose interpretation of morality recognizes but transcends the limitations of humanistic law as a codex for understanding the good, criminality becomes the marketing scheme that widens the division between the citizen-subject and the criminalized outlaw.

Of course, criminality is a natural rhetoric to imbue within political subjects that exercise their agency outside of the confines of the law, but the inability to account for extra-judicial measures levied against these criminalized subjects robs the ethical *ethos* from the empire's theoretical foundation. As such, these subjects are made parapolitical – they appear as if to have the same natural rights as a common citizen, but they are marked in a variety of ways that allow for contingently occurring, yet gratuitous aggressive, violence. The scene itself is a physical description of this reality – Jax angrily kicks a piece of a chair while blood drips from a head wound. Clay wipes the broken sheetrock off of a picture frame of J.T. – an observation of respect for the club founder whose image has been desacralized in the exchange. Different club members seethe as they walk through the wreckage of their symbolic home.

It is precisely at this moment where Tara, whose disdain and lack of trust for the club has not gone unnoticed, speaks up from the middle of the room as having “good news,” and proceeds with the fact that she and Jax are engaged to be married (Erickson & Collins, 2011, S4, E2). Her public speaking act appears uncomfortable, and there seems to be a calculated risk in communicating this fact to the distraught club members at this moment – even Jax inches over to her uneasily while looking out at the various men and women of *SAMCRO* to gauge the response. The reaction is a complete mood change – grimaces and frustration give way to applause and cheers as the *Sons of Anarchy* celebrate the unity, joy, and happiness of the coming event. Clay immediately orders that rounds of whiskey and beer from the club bar for everybody in attendance and the public statement is reflected on as the sort of rhetorical gesture needed to help unify the club in the midst of a psychologically traumatic situation.

The mood change reflects a deeper truth regarding the symbol of engagement as a promise of unity – there is joy in the midst of a turbulent situation. The significance of this is in

how radical the mood change occurs – the scene points out a group of individuals who already have very little by way of material possessions, and who experience biting injustice with little possibility for reconciliation with their wrong-doers. In the moment of this negativity, the announcement of the engagement cuts the tension by presenting a sign of the good. The signifier of the engagement ring represents many things, but the symbol of an eternal, unbroken, relational unity through the promise of the ring calls back to the covenant made between the creator and creation.

This symbolic rhetoric embedded within the text of engagement and marriage is repeated in the previous episode during Opie's wedding. The episode opens to the release of multiple *Sons* from jail, with featured shots focusing on new physical scars cut into Jax's chest. The reunion between the *Sons* that were and weren't imprisoned is a positive and happy moment, but the true signifier of unity occurs towards the end of the episode. Opie and his girlfriend Lyla marry on the Wahewa reservation in the presence of multiple charters of the *Sons of Anarchy*, the Oakland charter of the Mayans M.C., and significant members of the Russian mafia. As said by the new deputy-lieutenant, Eli Roosevelt, "it's a who's-who of bad guys" (Sutter, 2011, S4, E1). In the secular world of motorcycle gang members and porn-stars, one surely wonders why the institution of marriage matters – given the certainty of death and the deconstruction of the historically Christian institution of marriage within the American West, the move to a ceremonial unity seems to lack necessity in the world of the *Sons of Anarchy*.

It should also be noted that Opie's wedding is a Christian ceremony in form only – the content draws more heavily from Indigenous ceremonial customs (which makes sense, given the setting and officiator being an Indigenous person of the Wahewa tribe). In spite of this, there are numerous signs that return Opie and Lyla's wedding to the particular form of Christian

weddings. One example is the above description of the emphasis on rings as an imbuelement of meaning within the sign of an eternal circle as an unbreakable vow, which carries a long tradition of historically Christian symbolism.

Another example would be how the vows themselves are a symbolic testament to the witnesses in attendance that the married couple will cherish and love one another as long as both of them shall live. This materializes in the form of the congregation as a cast of social outlaws that pay witness to the marriage and publicly participate within the marriage vow by including the final lines of the vow itself: "I vow to treat you as good as my leather, and ride you as much as my Harley!" (Sutter, 2011, S4, E1). The humorous addition becomes a symbol to the viewers of the program of the peculiar interpretation of marriage as it exists within the gaze of the social outlaw. It becomes a way in which the religious phenomenology of the motorcycle club structures the imaginary of the religious wedding ceremony as being associated with the loves of the club. More than simply humor, the statement's speakers establish a relational and rhetorical attachment within the symbolic exchange of the vow between the bride and groom; the conclusion of the vow symbolizes the marriage between the bride and the larger collective of the club.

Becoming an Old Lady means marrying into the club, club-life, and the rearticulated dialectic of life and death that comes from pursuing a life as a social outlaw. Opie is deconstructed as the groom and redistributed as part of the construct of the bride with Lyla, and the transcendent entity of the *Sons of Anarchy* becomes the groom of which they marry into. This notion of marriage is similar to how the Christian notion that marriage is not simply the uniting of two individuals, but the symbolic cohesion of two individuals marrying, as the bride of Christ, God. Marriage in both instances does not exist as an immanent dyadic but as a transcendent

triadic. The fact that the club self-describes as a chapel or church furthers the nature of the Christian imaginary and divine real as a guiding and co-constitutive force in structuring the religious symbolic that appears in the form of the Winston wedding.

Despair becomes the third theme present within the secular narrative of the *Sons of Anarchy* as a response to the trauma inherent to the lack. The nature of despair is documented heavily from within Christian theology as a description of the ontic state of being that constitutes human existence prior to Christ's work on the cross. Despair forms the existentialism that structures the hopeless condition of human life as a result of the traumatic separation between creator and creation. The intense emotional pain becomes the terror of neurosis of confronting the Lacanian real – the inability to express or impute an intelligible grammar upon this experience becomes representative of life before the performative transcendence of Christ over death. The semio-biological reality of death rests upon an anti-Christian imaginary stemming from an understanding of the lack rooted within sin-nature that offers symbols to mediate the inexpressibility of the divine real.

Said differently, the ability or inability to understand God, the afterlife, and the concept of eternal life from within such a highly temporalized zone of experience means that the trauma of despair is believed to be even more traumatic given the terror of being unable to be certain regarding life after death in an anti-religious world. Additionally, the reaction to this non-knowing is a signifier of the intrinsic desire to preserve and protect life – the will to life is a trans-dimensionally applicable concept that is observed in a variety of cultures across time. While it is true that Christ's triumph over death on the cross (or rather, through the symbol of the empty tomb) empties the sign of death from any meaningful value, it does not mean that there

isn't recognition and lamenting of the ways in which death structures the Christian world through sin.

“Jesus wept” in John 11:35 is wildly recognized as the shortest verse in the Bible, and it is an exact response to when Jesus' friend Lazarus is revealed to have passed away days before Christ was able to get to him. Jesus recognizes the trauma of death and separation because the very nature of death and separation are only made possible by the lack created by sin-nature which is the negation of the God of creation, love, and the affirmation of life. Jesus recognizes the nature of temporal death as a temporal capacity – this separation exists singularly within the limited present.

Despair functions in two possibilities in this context: it is the only appropriate response to the symbolic negation of the divine real (understanding that those traits, patterns, and behaviors are meaningless, relationally unloving, and/or psychologically destructive) and it is the end-result of repetitive cycles of symbolic affirmations of the lack in lieu of the real. If the rhetorical move is to permit these actions as operating like a wage, then the constitution of a rhetorical register where symbolic labor produces an inevitable, yet certain, response. This libidinal economy becomes the psycho-social space where the motivations and actions of the human subject move across the spectrum of desire by either affirming the rhetorical calling of the divine real, or in the opposite direction by negating the desires/calling of the divine real.

There are three examples of despair as representative of different forms of response to the trauma that comes from being unable to articulate the substance of gratuitous violence that functions as being a part of a world of symbolic negations. The first occurs in the finale of season two when Jax's son Abel is stolen by a former associate of the *Sons* in True IRA member Cameron Hayes. Hayes believes his son to be killed by Gemma in after a dizzying series of

events and miscommunication, so he finds it upon himself to kill a loved one of the *Sons*. Hayes happens upon Tara and Abel, who are being guarded by *Sons* prospect Kim “Half-Sack” Epps. Half-Sack makes a daring attempt to rescue the child after Hayes threatens to kill Abel with a kitchen knife as a “son for a son,” but only to be stabbed in a last minute move that leaves Half-Sack bleeding out (Sutter, 2009, S2, E13).

Realizing this is the confirmation of his decisions, and that retribution by the *Sons* would be imminent, Hayes ties Tara to a chair and flees with the child. Jax realizes that something is wrong after his phone call with Tara was cut short by Hayes, and leaves with Chibs and Opie to investigate. The climax of the episode (and by extension, the season) begins when the Jax discovers the club’s dead prospect, the terror of his beloved girlfriend, and the absence of his firstborn son. In spite of the growing tension between Jax and Clay due to the former’s suspicion of the latter’s involvement in the death of Donna Winston, Jax calls Clay for help in tracking down Hayes. Hayes drives to the docks, where he takes Abel and narrowly manages to escape by boat into the ocean.

The *Sons* see him running when they pull up to the marina, and the scene literally comes down to a footrace with Jax, Juice, and Chibs leading the sprint towards the boat (which is significant because as three of the younger and leaner members it proves that the show is pointing out that every effort is being put forward to correct this wrong). In the end, Jax breathes out a slow and painful realization: “He took my son...,” before repeating and shouting the same phrase (Sutter, 2009, S2, E13). The trauma grows as the distance of the boat widens between Jax and Hayes, and the repetition of the phrase signifies that Jax is in a state of disbelief and utterly in shock to the emotional violence that has been levied against his person.

Jax collapses on the dock, partly into the arms of Clay, and knocks off his riding glasses and hat to reveal a face of pain. The shedding of these two items of clothing to reveal his face is symbolic of vulnerability, which is not typically encouraged in depictions of masculinity. Between frames of Jax pushing the hair out of his eyes and crying, Hunnam's performance matches the camera focus; time shifts between the use of slow-motion and different camera angles so that the viewer can empathize with Jax's unsettling state. As the camera zooms out, Jax throws himself back and screams an unintelligible reverberating guttural cry. This primal roar is exactly what the failure of language is reduced to – mere expression in lieu of symbolic order.

The last notable semiotic element of this scene is the song *Gimme Shelter*, as covered by Paul Brady and The Forest Rangers. The lyrics echo the sense of urgency throughout the last five minutes of the episode, most specifically the phrase "it's just a shot away" (Paul Brady & The Forest Rangers, 2011, para. 9). What makes this relevant is just how close Jax and the *Sons* are to catching Abel, who ultimately ends up just out of their reach. The scene closes to a church choir singing the line on repeat, and the viewer is led to sense that the despair that Jax feels is quite real.

The despair of this response is an excellent cinematic depiction of the encounter with the Lacanian real in its original psychoanalytic form and a similarly good example of the traumatic response structured by the response offered through the symbolic negation of the divine real. In this instance, Hayes' kidnapping represents a symbolic negation insofar as it foregoes his own responsibility in the raising of his son in a lifestyle of violence and lying by scapegoating his anger onto an innocent child of a rival organization that is, at best, only tangentially related to his son's death. This act of symbolic negation has quite real consequences for people in the narrative – while it will eventually lead to his own death (despite his feeling justified in the kidnapping as

a form of moral retribution), it also causes intense emotional trauma across the *Sons of Anarchy* motorcycle club. The feeling of relational loss for Jax occurs in what might be one of the most performatively hopeless scenes in the entire series – while there are scenes where his hand is forced to choose between impossible decisions, there is never quite a scene where the fear of non-knowing is so materially present. Of course, the non-knowing associated with death is inherent to all traumatic situations that separate one from loved ones that pass away, but insofar as there is a sense of permanence attached to those deaths he is freed from the psychological torture of questioning their fate.

That is not the case for his son; while it is entirely plausible that Hayes will murder Abel as penance for the perceived injustice of the club's killing his son, there is also the possibility that his son is being tortured, raised with different beliefs, or existing under any number of unacceptable conditions. The critical difference between the season two fate of Abel and other deaths throughout the series is that death for the *Sons of Anarchy* is a virtual certainty that remains as a constant within their everyday social life. Death is a known unknown, whereas kidnapping acts as a form of psychological torture; an unknown unknown. The injustice of Abel's kidnapping becomes legitimate grounds for any number of rhetorical defenses of Jax's requisite actions, but the fact that an unintelligible scream is the very best that Jax can muster before slipping into a near-catatonic depression (as articulated in the few weeks that pass before the next season's first episode begins) produced a symbol that confirms a metanarrative of justice and violation that underlies human activity.

Focusing on the scream as a rhetorical symbol is important for psychoanalytic understandings of the Christian symbolic order as a structuring of the divine real. The scream is important because it illustrates a truth about the divine real, which is that the symbolic order

operates across a spectrum of avowal and disavowal, hope and trauma, awe and terror. If the real represents the subliminal excess that cannot be captured in language, then the scream as a non-articulate event becomes a gesture that suggests a reverberation at the heart of God. This reverberation becomes something of a sonic echo that forms the foundation of pre-modern axiology. The reason why this indescribable, yet determinate, axiological foundation is pre-modern is because the Real becomes an appeal to authority that governs the metaphysical actions and reactions of human psychology. It is axiological because of the meta-structure of value that causes such hurt within the character of Jax is not rationally conceptually, as theorized within modernism, nor subjectively determined as theorized within postmodern thought. Jax's pain is primal; this primordial response is one that attempts to flee the body like electricity runs through a current. It fails to cohere through grammar because it appeals not to the symbolic order, but to the order of the divine real – an appeal to very nature of existence.

This understanding of nature is more intimately familiar with the very constitution of reality than any of the words of wisdom in J.T.'s book, then the bullets and prison-shanks that contour the lived experiences of the outlaw, and more than any of the actions that Jax takes to reconcile his embodied situation with a different symbolic exchange. The result is a combination of exhaustion and expression – there are not enough words, nor the correct grammars, to cohere reconciliation to this deeply emotional response. The cry is the refusal to engage in symbolic exchange as a means of rationally determining the club's next move to retrieve his son. It is a recognition of the primal nature of reality as being continuously fragmented through the symbolic negations present through the sin nature.

The lack as sin nature is exhausting because it takes the possibility of hope, such as the symbol of hope in Abel as signifying a promise of a future no longer riddled with the violence

that is symbolically immersed within the image of the *Sons* reaper lifestyle, and robs it with the reality of the every day. This psychological state signifies the state of desire; that it is easier to refuse the desire of the real because at a fundamental level it is hard, at times even painful, to dwell within that register. The symbolic negation of the divine real is an affirmation of hopelessness. The despair of the solecistic cry becomes the situational reaction to the gratuitous accumulation of negations – the only constant and appropriate response to the trauma of the lack.

The second example of despair as a symbolic reaction to the trauma of the lack operates through the death of Tara in the season six finale *A Mother's Work*. The context for this episode is largely found within Jax's monologue that begins the narrative. Jax writes about the accumulating trauma that underwrites the rhetoric of sovereignty of his time as the outlaw king of the *Sons*. The entire season features the escalating conflict between Jax and Tara, as well as the ripple effects as different characters throughout Charming react to this tension. The plot returns to issues presented earlier within the series by stressing the danger of miscommunication as a super-folding of the series back onto the conflict between the *Sons* and Opie in season one. Tara struggles with the ways in which Jax is unable to cleave from his position as club president to assume his role as a father to Abel and Thomas.

As he chooses between families there are multiple instances where Tara is seen as offering Jax a chance to run away with her; conversely, there are conversations that Tara is not privy to where Jax attempts to unload the violent business that was associated with *SAMCRO* so that he can not only leave the club, but also so that he can leave the club without a risk of being exposed to the blowback of rival outlaw organizations such as the Irish, the Russians, or the organization of August Marks (who is now running the drug empire that includes the One-Niners gang following the death of Damon Pope).

In Jax's mind, he needs to set the affairs of the *Sons* in order by brokering relations with the Mayans, Marks, the Russians, and the Irish so that the violent business of the gun and drug trade can be removed from *SAMCRO*. In the previous season, he begins networking with the pimp Nero Padilla to revive the escort service of Diosa through their porn studio in Cara Cara. Along with the Teller-Morrow auto mechanic service, the *Sons* would be free to earn legitimate money while retaining their social outlaw status – a reversion from their previous ontic as both a social and a legal outlaw organization. The intensity of the doubled status of the socio-legal outlaw subjects the *Sons* to a new gradient of violence that becomes the motivation for Tara's desire to flee from the life of the club.

Much of the final episode is rooted in the twofold question of Tara's betrayal: first, as to whether she betrayed Jax by taking a deal with the police and, second, as to where she is with Abel and Thomas if that is not the case. Police presence communicates a rhetoric of her betrayal to the *Sons*, and this idea is heavily inferred to be true by Unser when he learns that the local police department ordered a massive file upload on Jax Teller's legal history. As Bobby rightly points out, if Tara would have ratted then "they would all be arrested already" (Sutter & Collins, 2013, S6, E13). After successfully tracking her down, Jax and Tara are able to have a conversation where the impetus of Tara's desire to take the children and run is revealed as a maternal form of protecting them from the life that envelops Jax with so much pain.

A previous conversation with the San Joaquin County District Attorney, Tyne Patterson, and Jax revealed that both parents are simply attempting to affirm a productive and lively future for their children – the act of Tara's running away isn't grounds for retribution so much as it is symptomatic of Jax's inability to be responsible for the issues that affect his household. As a result, Jax volunteers to be responsible for a KG-9 weapon that caused a school shooting that

links back to the club by theoretically sacrificing himself for his biological and club families. He turns the kids over to Tara, the presidency over to Bobby, and volunteers to turn himself over to the legal authorities at the end of the day.

Elsewhere, a drunk Gemma is misinformed by Unser that Tara must have confessed to the cops to remove Jax – a conversation to which she immediately drives off in search of Tara. The scene ends through a particularly violent twist, where the years of mistrust and mirroring between Gemma and Tara as the alpha-female protagonist and proverbial queen of the *Sons of Anarchy*. After attempting to drown Tara in the kitchen sink, Gemma lands multiple attacks to the back of Tara's head with a grill fork. Tara's lifeless body falls to the floor while an incoherently mumbling Gemma falls next to her exclaiming "it had to be done – she ratted" (Sutter & Collins, 2013, S6, E13).

As Lt. Roosevelt runs into the house in response to the crashes occurring in the kitchen, he reveals that it wasn't Tara, but Jax that took a deal to protect Abel and Thomas. Roosevelt is about to call in the murder when Juice, who arrives on Jax's orders to find Tara, shoots him twice in the back – killing him. Juice then removes Gemma from the scene of the crime, along with all evidence that could place her there. Juice disperses the murder weapons that could share Gemma's DNA (including some clothing, a clothing iron, and a now broken grilling fork) across several dumpsters – realigning his allegiances to Gemma against Jax in the midst of the accumulating trauma of the season.

The final scene of the season traces the various plotlines to their respective ends; the Mayans and the Triads sit to a deal monitored by Nero, Gemma returns the truck to Unser while visibly distraught and in a different outfit, Jax bids tearful goodbyes to the *Sons of Anarchy* and his actual sons before returning to his house, and district attorney Patterson comes to the house

with several cops prepared to arrest Jax to complete the legal arrangement made earlier in the episode. As articulated in the previous chapter, this scene even features the mysterious image of the Homeless Woman – a characterization of the divine real attempting to break through the symbolic order of the show’s cinematic arrangement. The return of her character indicates that a rhetorical element always exists in the moments of traumatic revelation to attempt a gesture towards the good.

In a sense, the structure of feeling that moves through Jax’s embrace, kisses, and final words to his closest friends and family in this scene is perhaps foreshadowing the spiritual death of Jax. The club president loves Tara more than anyone and, following the previous season’s violent end of his best friend in Opie, he struggles to find his way back to the good. The constant attacks on his loved ones make it difficult for him to remember and preserve a rhetorical relationship to the good; his journaling expresses that struggle. In a sense, Tara is a reminder of the beauty of life. She is a confidant that he has trusted with his struggle between right and wrong, and in the life of violence and seductive lures to outlaw power, she acts as a moral center that humanizes him. Tara encourages Jax to be greater than he is and to be greater than the club. The postmodern terrain of deconstruction that is physically represented in the anarchistic lifestyle of the *Sons* frees Jax to defend the innocent, exert justice against the corrupt, and to offer a model of life that is unshackled from the expectations of legacy or fate. The problem is that this mode of deconstruction reverts on itself, and makes it impossible for Jax to know what is right or wrong outside of himself truly. The love that Jax has for Tara is the *telos* of many of his narrated actions: a rhetorical move that mirrors the theological design mirrored within creation.

The *telos* of the created person is to affirm and offer love as God lovingly affirms His creation. While the methods of the *Sons of Anarchy* and the Benedictine monk may differ in some respects, the motivation too many of their actions remains the same – to structure their desires towards objects that will allow them to best love and be loved, by others. The presence of Tara, not by her works and how what she has to offer Jax, but simply by existing creates a psychoanalytic object that operates like an anchor for the flow of his desire. Jax's desire for Tara is consistently one of loving affirmation, and the human impulse to love changes him over time so that he can better love Tara. The change in both individuals over the course of the show, both in descriptively positive and negative contexts, is enormous.

Ultimately, this points to the reality that the way in which desire is disciplined ultimately shapes the ontological essence of that being to become more like that which it desires. In this case, Jax becomes more like Tara. He fiercely fights for his family, whereas in the earliest writing of his character the viewer notes that he can't even bring himself to see his baby in the hospital. Tara's encouragement for him to leave the club, while not happening during her lifetime, finds realization in his final moments. In this sense, the love shared between Jax and Tara inspire the radical moment of hope that ultimately ends the series.

The intensity of this disposition of desire is unfortunately known, not through the performance of care that is shared between the two, but rather by the traumatic separation that occurs in Tara's death. The brutal attacks on Jax's loved ones in Opie and then Tara are ontological attacks on who he is: it stabs at the flow of desire that makes him love and become more loving. The death of Tara becomes a sort of spiritual death for Jax because it unhinges his desires from the tropes of hope and love and releases him to desire vengeance. If the events that

will lead to Opie's death are indicative, it is that these attacks on the soul of the individual may overdetermine their experiences with trauma and violence.

It becomes difficult to interpolate joy, hope, or love in a world where the symbol of those divine attributes is exchanged with the horror of abjection. These events will leave Jax cold and bitter; even his children and remaining friends can no longer save him from the life of despair that comes from this relational fracture. The removal of his moral anchors in Tara and Opie mean that there is nothing to stop him from indulging in the self-driven desire that leads to murder. Perhaps psychoanalytic counseling would suggest to Jax that the *object petit a* that speaks from the heart of the divine real to give life to the love and wisdom found in the symbolic representations of Tara and Opie would reveal that those symbols are not the source of desire, but the channeling of it. On the other hand, the nature of this trauma and his life's discipline of desire might have left him without a redemptive resource to aid him. The struggle of the following scene is that the attack on Tara is while in its own sense an evil of the most ontologically profound degrees, simultaneously an ontological attack on everyone that she has spiritually affirmed and was lovingly affirmed by.

The scene's final nine minutes begin with Noah Gunderson & The Forest Rangers' song *Day is Gone*, which acts as a phenomenological symbol to establish the mood of the scene as the camera follows Jax to what would be the pivotal moment of despair that turns Jax from the good of the divine real forever. The song itself acts as the backdrop for empathizing with the motorcycle outlaws as they attempt to accept the reality of Jax's potential final moments with them – as well as Jax's final discovery of the spiritual robbery of his wife.

The lyrics are a solemn march through the *ethos* of regret, love, and the fundamental despair of the separation of loved ones. The lyrics of "I would take it back for just another

minute, just another chance with you..." is contrasted with the later lyric of "I can see the darkness through the cracks; daylight fading, I curse the breaking. The day is gone. The day is gone" (Noah Gunderson & The Forest Rangers, 2013, para. 3). These lyrics symbolize how the regret of not truly valuing the beauty of a beloved other are made painfully real when confronted with the reality of the end. The entire season featured the fissures of the relationship between Jax and Tara as legitimate problems in an otherwise truly loving relationship. The problems that Tara has with Jax being associated with the club and a world of violence are not unfounded; her life in the past six seasons moves from the safety of civil society into the risk of physical fights, kidnapping, sexual assault, bodily harm, and the incapacitation of her hand (which, by extension, stops her ability to practice her passion of medical surgery and help others). It also has led to a state of constant emotional terror of the threat of violence onto her kids and the misery of living in a world where the love of her life is at risk of constant captivity or death. Conversely, Jax's anger with Tara never trades off with an affirmation of her, as evident in his move to sacrifice his lifestyle (and possible life) for hers. The value of the song reinforces the rhetoric of the show's narration: as Jax discovers his dead wife, his disbelief gives way to pure heartache.

Jax's discovery of Tara begins as he walks into the room, suspecting possible danger, as he sees blood on the kitchen floor. As he slowly walks in he takes in the full frame of the event: his high school sweetheart and the self-proclaimed only person he ever loved turned wife and mother of his children lying lifeless in a pool of her own blood. What separates this scene from most other scenes is the performance that conveys disbelief and resignation to the reality of this death are not normative reactions for Jax. The common reaction is for him to run to save his loved ones, to check for life, and to mourn both loudly and expressively. This grief puts Jax on another level of despair where he resigns to the inevitable endpoint of his lifestyle's disastrous

effects that he tried to prevent from reaching his family. Jax drops his gun and cries as he slowly walks over to Tara. He's often seen in this scene holding his head as to say that he cannot believe that this violent robbery of life, love, and spiritual value has occurred. Jax either fails to recognize Patterson and the cops walk into the house, or he doesn't care; it is as if time has slowed to a stop in this moment. His body physically shakes violently as he attempts to cradle Tara's body and kiss her one last time. The acting performance of Charlie Hunnam in this scene is so gripping that it nonverbally communicates a single truth; the horror of recognizing death as separation reminds us that this is not the way life was meant to be.

The deaths of many of the major characters (Opie, Tara, and Gemma) are generally physical attacks to the back of the head. It is curious as to what rhetorical purpose this serves, but in terms of narration, it allows the viewer to spend time focusing on the face of the victim. The death of Tara is a hyper-violent and sickening moment, and the gratuitousness of this event is added by the many layers of violent trauma that affects the spiritual network of the show. For example, the physical trauma obviously causes Tara's body to die, but there is a sense of regret that strikes deep within the spirit of Gemma almost immediately following the fight.

This understanding of her wrong as a strike to the very core of the good is an understanding that Gemma has functionally severed her maternal relationship to her family by murdering the relational bonds that Jax has to family. He can no longer trust her; the intensity of her drunken and misinformed betrayal of Tara not only works against the many warnings that Jax served his mother but also robs her son and grandsons of the love Tara anchored within them to remind them of the good. The despair of not knowing her family by the actions of her own hand is a relational cut that separates her from the last living community she is able to occupy –

as the protection and love that comes from both the club and biological family are the only communities that an outlaw is able to exercise agency within.

In a sense, Gemma becomes death by becoming an outlaw to outlaws and giving herself to the many different symbols that negate the calling of the divine real's life-affirming desire of the 'other.' Gemma's inability to move beyond the failures of miscommunication is because of an abnormally psychological affirmation of the self by rooting her desires inward to accumulate power, money, and social capital. This conditioning process is what trains her desire to misunderstand and refuse conflict resolution in favor of affirming her righteousness over the sometimes legitimate moral claims of the so-called other. In this case, Tara is the otherized subject in contradistinction to Gemma. Gemma is offered the chance to understand, reconcile, and communicate with Tara and, instead, Gemma gives herself over to the self-indulging desires of drunkenness, ignorance, and violent erasure of the other as a tactic of conflict reconciliation.

The escalation of conflict between two subjects that are connected by femininity, maternity, and love of Jax, Abel, and Thomas is rooted within a desire to eclipse the spiritual other found in Tara's differences, as opposed to an affirmation of their sameness. The violent end of this relationship echoes as a confirmation that despair becomes the structuring modality of Gemma; in killing Tara and Tara's metaphysical connection to the world, Gemma has committed an act that severs her ability to hope for a world beyond despair: despair has become the framework for how she understands the world moving forward. This is proven true as Gemma wrestles with the guilt of her crime until the point where Jax confronts her in her childhood home.

Gemma's resentment, as symbolized by her traumatic return to her crimes and acceptance of death when Jax discovers her, is a recognition of the significance of the divine real

in spite of her despair. Gemma feels that her actions have caused her to become a person that did something wrong, and so begins the Cartesian split whereby she resents herself for this cardinal sin, while simultaneously affirming herself to the point where she is unable to take responsibility for these sins by giving herself over to the despair that impairs her ability to see the good in the first place. This battle of wills is heart-wrenchingly sad, and while many may sympathize with Gemma in the end, the symbolism of her every action is a confirmation of an individual that isn't other-loving so much as she is self-loving. Gemma's love places her survival against the spirits of others every time.

The final example of despair as a semiotic expression of the lack functions through the death of Jax's best friend Opie Winston in the fifth season's third episode, *Laying Pipe*. In this scene, Jax, Opie, Chibs, and Tig are in prison and attempting to seek protection through their alliance with the Galindo cartel while being pursued by the One-Niners gang. The One-Niners are part of a larger crime syndicate controlled by the narcotics kingpin named Damon Pope in Oakland, California. Damon Pope's daughter, Veronica Pope, was murdered in a fit of racial rage by Tig when he attempts to retaliate against the Niner's leader Laroy for an alleged attack on Clay, after Clay lies about gunshot wounds he suffers from Opie are scapegoated onto generic black gangsters. The reason why Opie attacked Clay is because he learned that the then club president personally murdered his father, Piney.

The placement of Jax, Opie, and Tig is particularly important because while they are united as members of the *Sons of Anarchy*, the scene's portrayal divides them in terms of performative *ethos*. Tig has struggled with the guilt of killing Donna, and considering both the revelation that the Niners were not involved in the attack on Clay but also Pope's retribution by gruesomely burning Tig's daughter Dawn alive for the accidental death of Veronica – a daughter

for a daughter. This act of vengeance is the first part of an organized plan by Pope to levy consequences against the *Sons* for the personal and public attack made against his image. Part of this orchestration was Pope's framing specific *Sons* as guilty for the murder of his daughter by planting fake witnesses that place Jax, Chibs, and Tig at the scene of the crime so that he could control all of them through the prison.

The viewer later learns that there are two conditions for freedom from this plague of violent assaults: first, that Tig will be left alive to be forever imprisoned so that Pope could exact his subjective form of justice whenever he is reminded of the absence of his daughter and, second, that Jax must choose a remaining club member to fight to the death before they can be released from prison. The impossible decision where Jax has to choose between his childhood best friend in Opie and his moral confidant in Chibs becomes the moment of impossibility where the impulse for sacrifice is offered to Jax as the new leader of the *Sons*. Jax's being required to make impossible decisions is seen as a value of good leadership by Pope, Clay, and other leaders of violent organizations (such as the Real IRA and the Galindo Cartel). This performative connection between unethical and violent leadership models and the philosophical display of utilitarian pragmatism as an ethical axiom is deliberate; it requires the externalization of the scapegoat mechanism to satiate the thirst for violence.

The symbolic characterization of Jax as a Christ-figure becomes apparent in this instance because when asked for the final decision Jax utters the phrase "we decide our fate" (Sutter, Nunn, & Sagal, 2012, S5, E3). The ethics of pragmatism are tested in the rhetorical symbol that Jax offers in this scene; by recognizing and indicting the logic of both money and power as symbols of Pope's variable strength, he undercuts the ability for rhetorically pragmatic prescriptions of value to become a mechanism of control over Jax. By accepting a deontological

perspective, Jax chooses the morally difficult path insofar as his fate is likely to be aggrieved by violence, further persecution, and death. If each member fought simultaneously against an armed prison-guard then, while they might die with honor by offering their lives for their friends, they are all but securing death as their fate.

Opie recognizes the impending nature of their fate during a previous conversation in isolation with Jax. While it is implied the friendship between the two would have been characterized by open honesty prior to the series, the return of Opie at the beginning of the *Sons* constructs a version of Jax that is highly protective of Opie. The relationship that Jax has with Opie changes him to keep secrets that could emotionally unsettle Opie, even if that temporary drama could be worked through with psycho-rhetorical intervention. It is because of this that the relationship between Opie and Jax is described as an intimate and familial one, but also one where a repetitively traumatized Opie becomes increasingly unsure about his loved ones. When Opie confronts Jax with the knowledge of whether he knew Clay was behind the murders of his loved ones, it is revealed that Jax has not been entirely honest with him.

It is another moment of foreshadowing where Jax explains the entire situation that has forced Jax to make pragmatic sacrifices in order to keep his loved ones (extending from both his family in Tara, Abel, and Gemma, to his club) alive. Opie's analysis of the situation comes in the midst of an internal crisis that he has been enduring, as Opie is portrayed as struggling with finding joy in the midst of his tribulations ever since Donna died. Opie's relationship to his children, the club, and even a new wife in Lyla all fail to numb what appears to be a deep wound that frames his performance. Opie voluntarily joins Chibs, Tig, and Jax when they go to prison by attacking the sheriff as arrests the three in an effort to, as Gemma describes it, "remain close" (Corrado, 2012, S5, E2). He also leaves \$20,000 with Lyla to take care of his kids – a moment of

foreshadowing that signifies that he is, in effect, putting his affairs in order to prepare himself and those around him for his inevitable death. The thoughtful consideration of the precarious situation that Jax has to undertake seems to be the final symbol of love through friendship and family that Opie forms as he and Jax are reunited with Chibs and Tig before the decision of the fighter and Jax's announcement about fate.

The scene that follows is arguably the hardest scene to watch in the context of the series considering the relative unexpectedness by which Opie becomes the sacrificial scapegoat to bring peace against Pope's crusade against the *Sons*. While the above context provides foreshadowing, these subtle textures in the scene are signifiers that collectivize to form the symbolic network of the cinematic frame; they are elements designed to go unnoticed so that the viewer can move through gradients of dramatic trauma. The three radically different reactions to this form of rhetorical and semiotic injustice of Opie laying down his life for his friends as a response to the fractured nature of the world (and to release them from how that particular sin-nature of violence has ensnared the *Sons of Anarchy* through his death) are a useful semio-cinematic framework for the reaction of the viewer. Each club member proposes a different psychological response, but all three are united by the common thread of a slow realization of what is to come. This realization is a recognition of the lack as a separation of the *Sons* from the indescribable and determinate nature of the divine real. Despair forms in different ways, but despair itself is the univocal reaction to the symbolic order that plays out on screen through the death of Opie by each of the *Sons*.

The cinematic chain of events truly begins when Jax determinately announces that nobody will force him to rhetorically choose the life or death of any of them – their fate is their own to grasp and do with what they wish. The four of them are in a small room, and as Jax

turns to presumably begin the fight between the *Sons* and the four, armed, correctional officers (which would seal their fate), Opie intervenes. He puts one hand on Jax's chest, both to hold Jax back and to propel himself forward, and head-butts the senior correctional officer that asks if Jax will decide who lives and dies or would he get to choose. This breaks the officer's nose, which leads to his cursing and overruling Jax's agency.

Jax jumps to the aid of Opie but is immediately pulled back by a Chibs, a screaming Tig, and another officer. As the friends are separated, the *Sons* are left in the small room with a protected window framing the trauma that is about to unfold. A pipe is kicked to Opie, and as the officer commands him to "keep it interesting, shithead," it is apparent that the corruption of the prison guards illustrates a level of depravity that is so psychologically engrained that Opie is reduced to a disposable object for the masturbatory violence of the prison-guard (Sutter, Nunn, & Sagal, 2012, S5, E3).

Jax's eyes are filled with tears and he, along with Chibs, regularly beat against the window in a futile attempt to overcome the symbol of the naturalistic and immanent plane of existence presented by the glass that allows them to see the trauma of death, but is otherwise helpless to do change its constitution. Opie looks at them with a look of remorse and says "I got this," but this remorse almost appears like that a person might express to a dying loved one; it is an attempt at providing security by misrepresenting reality in saying that everything is going to be okay when all evidence points to the contrary (Sutter, Nunn, & Sagal, 2012, S5, E3). In a sense, this lie is more loving than the truth, because the truth is that Opie is a loving and caring individual riddled with the bullets of trauma and he still manages to hope for a future where his sacrifices (whether minor, such as taking extra work to provide for his children, or major by laying down his life for his friends) can affirm the continued life of his loved ones. The truth is

that by any juridical sense of fairness, Opie does not deserve this fate, but the reality is that this fate will envelop him, all the same. The prison guards retreat behind their own glass screen, and four prisoners are released into the room to kill him.

In spite of this, Opie fights valiantly: an initial swing permanently downs the first attacker, and he counters following attacks with punches and head-butts. A larger attacker is able to grab him from behind, and a prisoner in front of them manages to wrestle the pipe loose. The first major blow comes from the pipe cutting (and likely breaking) part of his face, which causes him to collapse to the ground. The camera quickly cuts to Jax, who is fully crying and wincing from the empathetic pain of watching his best friend hurt. An important sign here is that Jax moves his hands from the glass to his hair – his body signifies that it does not know what to do to stop what it perceives as a negative reaction to what is occurring.

From his knees, Opie reaches out with his left hand towards his brothers while blood pours from his mouth through his beard, immense swelling from his left cheek, and his long hair falling around him as the pipe is tossed to the larger attacker.

Said attacker circles behind him and the final symbolic portrait of Opie is offered to the *Sons of Anarchy* (this term referencing both the actual club members and the viewers of the program). In this moment, there are five camera cuts between Opie and Jax; Jax has his hands outstretched horizontally in a picture that seems to mirror Christ's outstretched hands on the cross (although this is an emotional cross for Jax to bear). Chibs occupies a smaller glass pane to Jax's right, and Tig has turned his back to avoid witnessing this moment on Jax's left. These reactions all are small signs to construct the larger symbolic responses of despair in the moments to come. The final cut-scene returns to Opie, illuminated by the light in a way that almost signifies something angelic, and smiling through his last breaths.

With respect to this scene, the final picture of the differing reactions by Jax, Tig, and Chibs signify how despair functions differently through their respective persons. The unconscious mediates trauma through this hope against hopelessness, which is, in turn, symbolic of a larger impulse towards the good – an indication that the body is primordially designed to hope in spite of despair. Psychoanalyzing the forms of despair that are performed through cinema is important because it helps differentiate the ways in which despair becomes a formative reaction that structures the human subject's rhetorical response to trauma.

Tig's response to the traumatic event of Opie's brutal murder is interesting because it involves the number of symbolic negations and affirmations he has made in response to the divine real's call to affirm life. Tig is responsible for the death of Donna, the near-death of Opie, and it is because of his non-critically reflective loyalty to the destructive leadership of Clay that he exerted vengeance on the alleged attackers of the One-Niners – the specific miscommunication necessary to place Opie in prison in the first place.

If Tig had been more sensitive to how a critical affirmation of the divine real would call him to question the commands of his superiors, as well as a rigorous questioning of his own desires, it is plausible that he would not have acted out of a self-driven desire for vengeance as a form of reconciliation of past wrongs. The symbol of forgiveness and alternative means of conflict resolution could be offered to resolve the varying levels of issues he believes to exist.

The lack of analytical reflection in Tig becomes the death drive that moves the plot of the *Sons of Anarchy* to its logical conclusion; the symbolic negation of life found in the divine real means the miscommunication, conflict, and conflict escalation are all but inevitable as a result of this mode of human activity. In spite of this dark characterization, Tig (while displaying sociopathic tendencies) is not an unloving individual.

It is because the desires of his heart have been structured against the divine real that he acts according to violent ends early within the show. There are other examples where Tig comes to the aid of socially denigrated individuals – offering his life as a scapegoat for the club, rescuing a pit-bull from a dog-fighting ring, and engaging in a romantic relationship with the transgender Venus Van Dam in a queerphobic world that literally sought to kill her. This struggle between right and wrong weighs heavy in the form of guilt, as per Kim Coates' performance.

Tig watches the fight in silent resolution; he literally stands still as he gazes out onto the fight between Opie and his attackers. When it becomes apparent that Opie is unable to fight back (specifically in the moment where his attacker circles him for the final blow), Tig turns his back to the wall. The performance is juxtaposed to both Jax and Chibs, but the inability to watch Opie as he dies seems to symbolize the inner spiritual guilt of his club-brother being forced to die for his sins brutally.

The lack of symbolic exchange between Tig and Opie is its own symbolic exchange; the inability to deal with the traumatic outcome of his sins is symptomatic of a deeper metanarratological structure of value. Tig's recognition of wrongs, and inability to confront the evil meant for him, implies that there is a subliminal ledger of right and wrong that is being imbalanced. Rhetorically, Tig's inability to look at the sacrificial lamb in Opie mirrors the language in Habakkuk 1:13 where it is written "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" In this moment where Tig is convicted of the sins that connect him to Opie's death, he physically cannot turn to see the wickedness of death claim Opie when he has betrayed the good in a number of ways. This inability to gaze upon the

violence of this death is a reaction to the symbolic negation of the divine real itself; an act of evil through the murder of a good soul.

If Tig's reaction is one of solemn passivity, then Chibs' psychological reaction is one of an active and divine reaction to injustice. Tommy Flanagan's performance in Chibs is interesting because of how vocal and expressive it is, which is not generally characteristic of the character's reaction to the traumatic events that occur in the desert of the real that constitutes their outlaw apocalypse. Chibs' entire upbringing has been shrouded with violence. His own face was scarred from when it was ripped apart, which was symbolic of a relational ripping of him from his homeland, his beloved wife and daughter, and his dignity. The scars cut across his mouth, so the terror of the Lacanian Real is curiously fractured considering the symbol of relational violence becomes intimately connected to his own facial symbol. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, Chibs is generally an emotionally conservative character on the show. It is this psychological resolution and moral consistency that leads Jax to name him as the next *SAMCRO* president following the events of the series.

That conservative character is not what is performed at this moment. Chibs seems to rail against the window in an uncontrolled manner – his entire body throwing his head and hands against the left-hand side window in a humanistic effort to break through the wall of glass that refrains his power from affirming and protecting his friend. In a rhetorical move similar to Jax in the above season two example, Chibs screams out illegible cries against the injustice of the fight. As a matter of fact, Chibs' cries are the only nonverbal elements as the scene comes to a close. His wailing reverberates through the scene in a way that perhaps a child might cry; there is a sort of reckless abandon to this sound that feels as if something so painful that it warrants the type of violation to cause an infant to cry has occurred. The sound of Chibs' cries creates an eerie sense

of hollowness and recognition of the despair that both the characters and the viewers are meant to feel as a response to the nature of the situation, which is to say, the nature of existence.

While the audio of Chibs is amplified, the visual semiotic is impaired as the lighting on his face is darkened. This cinematic move is likely meant to create a complementing frame across Chibs, Jax, and Tig. Chibs and Tig are mostly relegated to the smaller windows to the left and right of Jax, who is heavily featured in the main window. Chibs cannot easily be seen, but he is easily heard. This is contrasted by Tig who can be clearly seen but says nothing. Jax performs the middle section of this theoretical Venn diagram by moving between verbal and nonverbal gestures of bodily resistance to the evil that unfolds before him. As mentioned above, the psychological responses of Jax vary in terms of expression. He moves between screaming and banging his hands against the window and silently crying. The grief that works its way across his face symbolizes the utter pain of watching his best friend suffer such a gruesome death.

More than the physical aspect of being attacked, and the emotional toll of the injustice of a situation where an innocent man is put to death because of prison guards being on the payroll of a drug kingpin, there seems to be a subliminal struggle for Jax (as the president of *SAMCRO*) as the responsibility of keeping his fellow club-members alive starts to evade him. In a way that radically contrasts Tig's reaction, Jax can't seem to tear his eyes away from Opie – perhaps this is an attempt to give Opie the hope of knowing that he's not alone by offering, if only by the nonverbal communication of eye contact, an optical connection so that Opie knows that he is not alone.

The pain of Jax's expression(s) signifies that this relationship he is able to offer Opie is the last relationship he will ever have to offer his friend – one of seeing, and being seen. As soon as the fatal blow is delivered to the back of Opie's head, Jax turns around and angrily resigns to a

sitting position. The significance of this turn has much to do with how relationality operates in this scene. After Opie dies, there is no relationship in which Jax can invest his emotional pain. As a result, the negative emotive response turns into anger and, as club president, he begins plotting revenge so that he can avenge Opie's death. In a short meeting following this incident, Jax speaks with Damon Pope, and while Jax's new disposition as a friend seething with anger is still quite real, the understanding is that this was a matter of business. The depersonalized nature of violence becomes a symbol of outlaw leadership that he attempts to teach Jax – considering how Jax manipulates the perception of the relationships between him, Tig, and Pope at the end of the season it can be argued that Pope may have succeeded in this lesson.

The different experiences of the three surviving club members in reaction to the scene as it plays out are truly reacting to a series of signs and symbols. By understanding that the symbolic order that constitutes this scene acts as a bilateral reference of the dialectic between good and evil the viewer understands that, at a fundamental level, the symbolic is unable to overcome itself. Said differently, the terror and dread of this slow realization is the existential understanding that the trauma of biological death is inevitable as a result of living a life through the inheritance of sin-nature. This inheritance of violence slowly unveils itself as an onto-genetic relational cut between the self and the divine real's offering of pure life.

There are no actions, grammars, or cosmic abilities to reconcile the terror of the evil that is associated with this form of violence from the humanistic position. There is no reconciliation available to humans to ward off the inevitable encroachment of the veil of death over the faculties of the mind. Death, as a symbol, structures a cold and violent *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* that are best characterized as despair because it is a natural conclusion to an otherwise hopeful

beginning. The hope of life that comes from intersubjective affirmations of meaning through finite pleasures is robbed of value when confronted by the nihilism of the death symbol.

Death is best understood then as an economy or politics of hopelessness inherent to a purely immanent and naturalistic world; a world incapable of transcendence, redemption, or reconciliation. This flattening of ontology into a linear temporal experience of life means that the witness of life is, similarly, a meaningless and fleeting gesture as time accelerates to claim all souls. Witnessing the fissure of this death through the symbolic negation of life found in the divine real expresses itself by, as Jax says, “watching his best friend get beat to death” (Sutter, Nunn, & Sagal, 2012, S5, E3).

Conclusion

The subliminal understanding of communication proposed in this thesis concludes that all communication is, inherently, a Christian form of communication. The gravity of this claim is that it offers a radical change to how communication research is studied in relation to its fidelity to master-signifier found within the divine real. All rhetoric is religious rhetoric because it utilizes the medium of the symbolic order as an engagement with said divine real. Communication, once understood in its analytically semiotic form, is then placed along a polemic spectrum of meaning that either affirms or negates the purpose that coheres meaning to the narratological text. Communication studies research the different signs, symbols, and networks in an attempt to understand the purpose, value, and practical application of semiotic discourse in its relation to everyday life. The theological subtext of this interaction assumes that there is something intrinsically valuable to meaning, that meaning comes from a place deep within (or subliminally beyond) ourselves, and that the drive to understand how meaning-making operates is pedagogically significant for in the human search for wisdom.

Christian scripture suggests that, although God is a transcendent entity, cannot be properly understood through the immanent natural world that there is, indeed, an omnipresent relationship that He has with creation. The claim to God's omnipresence works inter-dimensionally, inasmuch as there is a physical understanding of place where the divine other is said to occupy all places at all times. One such example of the mystical nature of God's presence is written in Psalms 139:7-10, where King David writes about how there is no place, including heaven or hell (written as Sheol) where God's presence would not be felt. Another example would be when the prophet Jeremiah writes in chapter 23:24, "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord." In Matthew 5:22b, Jesus extends this logic of physical place onto the metaphysical plane of cognition when He says "that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." It is in this moment that the full range of communication, both in terms of verbal expression and nonverbal emotive reaction, are heard by God. By recognizing the claim that Christian theology has made within as maintaining an intimate relationship between the creator and the created, all theories of communication must produce an answer to the essential question: where is God in the communicative exchange?

Understanding communication as operating the semiological study of signs is aided by the language and theories of Jacques Lacan, but situating Lacan's triadic theory of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary within theological prose is a necessary corrective to answer these pressing questions better. As such, the only logical conclusion is to view the symbolic order along a polemic spectrum of avowal and disavowal in relation to the divine real. All signs offer an index towards truth in its subjective encounter with reality, but the degree to which any particular sign can account for the larger totality of the object being interpreted is based on the

degree by which the subject pursues the Real of communication that sustains and structures the relationship between subject and object. The shared meaning that spiritually connects communicating subjects and objects is always represented through the shared middle connection – but there is never a language, grammar, or heuristic capable for expressing the totality of the meaning of an object. God, if not the concept of God, operates most cleanly as this interpretation of the Real: a mystical force that constitutes the meaning of the object with a sense of totality that exceeds the ability to be known in the symbolic world.

An example of this is the rhetorical expression of ethics in a postmodern world. The sense of personal violation, the hope for reconciliation in some form or fashion, and the desire for justice all act as universal constants in the inner dialogue of the wronged human subject. The interaction that the human subject has with another subject (a dialogical dilemma) or a non-dialogical object (the concept of nature, or inevitability of death) is based on particular symbols that the subject chooses to use to reconcile the inexpressibility of the Real. As articulated through the *Sons of Anarchy*, Jax's final ride is based on an analysis of his situation, the future of his family, and the livelihood of the club is a decision to embrace death as a form of radical alterity that breaks with his symbolic order. Jax's death becomes the closest affirmation of a deontological affirmation of life; his performative sacrifice mirrors the symbol of Christ's sacrifice as a way of referring to the joy inherent within divine affirmation.

The correlative dialectic that this polemic suggests places symbolic codes along a spectrum of affirmation and negation; celebration and drama, joy and trauma, hope and despair. It is a fundamentally existentialist order, as it readily admits that the failure of language (as symptomatic of the greater failure of the human condition) means that communication will never truly establish the clear link necessary to articulate pure thought. In light of this concession, a

theological theory of language should be able to organize the energy of symbolic expression along axiomatic lines that account for this dialectic.

Communication is the necessary intermediary that gives a voice to the rallying calls of justice. By extension, one must assume that the rhetorical reaction to an axiom of right and wrong signifies a design where divine justice both exists and has become traumatized. The symbolic negation of the Real requires reconciliation, and it is in this moment where trauma works back to understand the Real as the master-signifier necessary to create a corrective. The *Sons of Anarchy* consistently speaks to this code on a variety of levels, but the return to Christly sacrifice as an inversion of the scapegoat mechanism to affirm an ‘other-centric’ form of ethics is a rhetorical confirmation of Christian theology, semiotics, and psychoanalytical exchange as a narration of the good to the public.

Ultimately, the integration of these three academic disciplines offers a framework of analysis that concludes that the fantasy themes and tropes that emerge from rhetorical artifacts exist in a spectral relation to the divine real. Lacanian psychoanalysis proves that a referential symbol exists in a limited, albeit relational, capacity to the thinking human subject. It provides the language for understanding the psychological interaction that different people share in their narration of literature and cinema as an expression of their values, virtues, struggles, and vices. In a certain sense, the modern world is neurotically obsessed with Christian thought – a question that every critical theorist must address in their interpretation of the virtues and vices of the human struggle.

Why do the dialectics of Christianity present themselves so consistently across the literary world; even though the seemingly secular nature of a television program that features gratuitous accounts of physical and psychological violence, sexual lust, and apparent

lawlessness? The return to historically Christian tropes requires a grammar to articulate the experience of this inevitable emergence of the religious imaginary. If the religious imaginary and the divine real present themselves as coherent articulations of the psychoanalytic understanding of the world, then it only logically follows that the symbolic order is, indeed, a Christian symbolic.

Christian theology grants coherency to the meaning and unicity to these symbols, in the sense that the axiological subtext of the show is understood and validated throughout Christian scripture. If this particularly Christian form of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to be permitted, it needs to be able to make sense of how its analyzed subject is interacting with the world. Christian theology's explanation of right and wrong, as well as the historically Christian themes and tropes that become present in societal narrations of particular sub-cultures, helps to understand the decisions and outcomes that occur throughout the *Sons of Anarchy*. The show's explanation of desire animates the various characters, as well as the flow of desire suggested to the third-party participant in the viewer, and this meta-structure of desire helps understand how human claims to sovereignty, gratuitous violence, and the social dialectic of the citizen/outlaw operate at a real level. In a certain sense, these characters can be real people; how and what they desire becomes open for debate and analysis to produce more ethical disciplines of desire. Christian theology helps guide this relationship with the concluding action of the series to give clarity regarding how the symbolic order always returns to a unicity under Christian thought.

Communication, by way of rhetoric and semiology, explains how those symbols cohere into textual, heuristic, and phenomenological constructions of the world. The semio-cinematic breakdown of the media screen allows for viewers, film critics, and critical theorists to deconstruct a scene at a metalevel. The three orders of the sign, the symbol, and the network

allow for these analysts to question what each scene is attempting to convey in their semiotic choices. The phenomenological experience that occurs through nonverbal communication is, too, articulable at the level of the sign. Allowing for a semiotic register of nonverbal communication is essential because it helps understand the intrinsic relationship that phenomenology studies and semiotic studies have with one another. The idea of a deconstructed symbol allows for each variable sign to be assigned and understood within the context of the divine real.

The possibilities for analysis at the border of contemporary film semiotics and religious studies are endless, but it ultimately helps understand how the texts (whether by scripts or analytical description) cannot be stripped of the religious supernaturalism that occurs in different cultures. Understanding rhetoric as a movement in energy is structurally similar to how mystic spirituality is, too, an energy that can be sensed and understood with relative ability. The kinship that rhetoric has with spirituality studies means that understanding how a theology of rhetoric affects rhetorical analyses will ultimately sift what is valuable for rhetorical study, as well as provide critique for previous rhetorical analyses' prescription of value.

As with any thesis, certain delimitations should be noted to clarify the scope of the critical engagement of the thesis itself. The *Sons of Anarchy*, in spite of being a show that has a determinate ending, provides an almost infinite potentiality for further research. This thesis focused on the unspoken code of the club as the ethical foundation for actions that would occur later within the show, on the specific character of the Homeless Woman in her relation to the plot and other characters, on the historically Christian themes of celebration, drama, despair, and hope to help articulate commonly mobilized affects by the director, and a semiotic breakdown of the scene to explain how different elements of the show constitute a deeper meaning. It is certainly an assumption that robust Christian apologetics would forego the possibility of proving

that the Christian God both exists and could adequately be described as the terrain of the Lacanian Real. That being said, the conclusion that this thesis reaches regarding analyses' of the secular symbolic order as being deeply indebted to Christian thought, images, and value seems to signify its own psychoanalytic apologetic for the reality of God and the possibility of a divine real. The thesis attempted to use three examples per thematic response to help articulate how the rhetorical artifact of the *Sons of Anarchy* communicated itself to the world.

While the reality remains that a 92 episode television series cannot be adequately captured within a single master's thesis, the attempt to explain how this theological interpretation of communication proves the rhetorical artifact to be a fundamentally Christian artifact (in spite of its apparent secular appearance) works through each episode of the show. The code is the ethical axiom that structures decision-making as an unspoken, yet referential, rule that governs the symbolic expressions of the characters. The code is a nonverbal humanist rhetorical artifact that communicates Christian values through the sub-cultural lens of the motorcycle-outlaw.

The character of the Homeless Woman helps explain the religious rhetorical interactions that occur between characters within the assumed space of the *Sons of Anarchy*'s proverbial world. The Homeless Woman is, herself, a symbolic expression of God and presents herself accordingly with mystical qualities generally reserved for a supernatural character throughout the program. Her relation to traditionally Christian symbols confirms some of the rhetoric between characters as referential to the divine real. For example, the Gemma example of being "a good Christian girl; just need to get home, see my daddy" just moments after seeing the Homeless Woman speaks to the way in which language itself is affected through parapraxis as a reference back to the divine real (Sutter, Murray, & Barclay, 2014, S7, E12).

If the analysis of this thesis risks the imputation of Christian meaning *onto* the imaginary of the *Sons of Anarchy*, then the reoccurring themes of the show speak to how Christian history works its way through the act of communication itself. The failure of language itself triggers a certain traumatic response; how sub-cultures and writers separately respond to this, whether by accepting the violence of the situation as drama or despair or by mediating the violence of the situation by returning to Christian affirmations of God through celebration and hope, ultimately speaks to a persistent and undeniable presence latent within rhetoric.

Why the characters and writers respond to the trauma of rhetoric through the verse of Christian theology should question how rhetoric's response to trauma in the symbolic order is an act that has been understood through the existentialism of Christian thought for thousands of years. In addition to this form of analysis, choosing to analyze the subtle signs and signifiers by focusing the cinematic scene as a semiotic network helps grant clarity to the meaning offered by the writers, directors, and performers. How music, props, clothing, color, and the setting itself are used to affect the viewer is essential towards a critical analysis of cinema.

A full character analysis of several characters, including but not limited to Jax Teller, Gemma Teller-Morrow, Clay Morrow, John "J.T." Teller, and Juan Carlos "Juice" Ortiz, Opie Winston, and Chibs Telford and their respective histories would have been useful in terms of applying a Christian communicative analysis of trauma. With the aim of limited discussion, the thesis focused primarily on the Homeless Woman, and Jax's particular point of view to gauge how traumatic responses to the lack inherent in sin-nature was expressed, with minor deviances. As with any writing assignment, limited time means limited focus. The decision to focus on particular interactions from the particular standpoint of the series protagonist, followed by

collective responses to trauma was necessary to offer a qualitative analysis of the rhetorical artifact properly.

There is ample room for further study, as a new theory of communication can then be used to understand how communication operates from a religious perspective in several literary and cinematic contexts. The obvious applications are within film and media studies, although the possibility of a religious theory of semiotics suggests that Christian theologians take up the study of signs, phenomenology, and rhetoric in their understanding of Christian thought. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, this study will hopefully lead to discussions regarding the theological role of the symbolic, because the value-neutral attempt to navigate through psychoanalysis ultimately is antagonistic to an understanding of Christian semiology. Understanding religion as an abstract element of symbolic exchange, (as opposed to a master-signifier that overdetermines the possibility of exchange), fails both the analysand and the analyst and reveals the form of psychoanalysis practiced as a matter of ideological preference as opposed to sociological and apologetic accuracy. The debate between Christian integrative psychology and the holdout characterized as psychoanalysis is a fairly new dialogue within psychoanalytic circles; the ultimate hope would be that this thesis would act as the one important speech of many in a fruitful dialogue between Christian psychoanalytic and (post)modernist psychoanalytic studies.

In terms of how this understanding of subliminal communication could further extrapolate meaning from the case study in the *Sons of Anarchy*, there were multiple areas of focus that were removed from the original scope to complete this thesis. A more thorough analysis of the Homeless Woman could be cross-applied to academic work already done by gender theorists; the symbolic expression and exegesis of a female understanding of Jesus Christ

would have a profound impact upon the world. Counter-hegemonic interpolations of Jesus Christ at an identitarian level would allow for discourse regarding how the gendered symbolic exchange that the Homeless Woman shares with Jesus Christ acts as a subtle disruption of patriarchal thought through media representation. The representations of the Homeless Woman as disenfranchised through the rhetorical dimensions of class studies and disability studies would allow for additional fruitful dialogue across the intersectional study of social justice and oppression.

A robust analysis of Gemma Teller-Morrow's traumatic interactions with the divine real through the symbolic order could be productive, but analyzing the traumatic effects and rhetorical response to rape requires significant care. Similar analyses of particular infringements of the human subject through gratuitous violence (such as the death of Tara and its affective force on the viewer, as well as Jax) could have much to say about the relationship between violence's initial occurrence and subsequent representation through the text of the screen.

One of the symbols that appears early and often through an analysis of the *Sons of Anarchy* is the influence of Shakespeare on the writers. By understanding how the sublime functions through communication one can analyze how literature informs literature. By proverbially pulling the thread of how meaning is interwoven through different cultures, art forms, and ideologies, the Christian foundation of communication can help explain the relationships that occur (and reoccur) through sociological narrations of the self through cinema. In a post-literary cinematic world, Girard's (1987) theory that society is best understood by how they choose to represent themselves is doubly true, considering the sheer quantity of representations available through contemporary cinema.

The effect that this theo-semiotic understanding of communication hopes to have on the study of communication is what other dimensions of the intersectional theory of justice have had on communication studies in the past few decades. What critical race theory meant for racial studies and feminist standpoint theory did for gendered bodies is what this theological interpolation of communication hopes to achieve for how religion operates as a subliminal floor for the theater of human life. By analyzing and understanding religion as the legitimate foundation for the whole of social life, this understanding of Christian theology *in* communication hopes to explain how and why different individuals organize under different ethical frames of existence.

There are three examples of how this could operate, and how further study could affirm or negate these claims: by explaining how and why religious subjects interact with both one another and non-religious subjects, the communication that occurs within the religious experience, and how media situates the viewer in an abstract affective role which requires an intermediary analytical grammar. A theological understanding of communication differs greatly from each of the normative prescriptions for the topics listed and would further engagement with this theory would allow for a greater understanding of how communication operates in a variety of contexts. In spite of the history of Christian rhetoricians, there is almost research being conducted to produce a grammar of theology, or conversely a theology of language. If understanding one's relationship to the divine essence and creator of all reality helps to structure and organize how the subsequent fields of ontology, epistemology, and axiology operate, then this is a matter of paramount importance for the student of rhetoric.

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