Despairing and Hopeful Loneliness: The Monastic Journey in Marilynne Robinson's *Jack*

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THE EPONYMOUS CHARACTER OF Marilynne Robinson's *Jack* is intimately acquainted with loneliness. Having withdrawn from his family in Gilead to the city of St. Louis, Jack has committed himself to "harmlessness." For Jack, this entails eschewing any form of relationship so that his desires to exploit others' vulnerability will no longer have an outlet. Regardless of these continued attempts to self-isolate, Jack meets an African American woman, Della, and falls in love. Despite the hope that love introduces into his life, Jack's existence continues to be characterized by loneliness both in his unorthodox marriage to Della and in her family's inability to accept their relationship. At the conclusion of the novel, Jack and Della are effectively exiled from her family's home and set out to seek a community where their interracial family can be accepted. Throughout the novel, Jack's experience with loneliness is largely negative, yet he is transformed in positive ways through his isolation. The monastic tradition of Saint Antony contextualizes Marilynne Robinson's positive and negative presentation of loneliness in *Jack* and provides a vision for the transformative role of loneliness in the Christian life.

Hagiographical Form

The three-part form of Athanasius' *The Life of Antony* presents a timeline of Christian transformation and the impact of isolation on the Christian life. Athanasius' account of the life of Saint Antony was not only one of the first hagiographies—an account of the life of a saint—but also incredibly influential, "establish[ing] the frame of Christian hagiography" (Clebsch xiii). Douglas Burton-Christie, in his article "The Work of Loneliness: Solitude, Emptiness, and Compassion," characterizes this "frame" in three distinct sections. Athanasius writes Antony's story starting with *anachoresis*, progressing to *askesis*, and culminating in *agape* (31). *Anachoresis* is the response to the call for withdrawal (Christie 31). For Antony, this was a literal call from God to withdraw into isolation in the desert (Athanasius 31-32). Once in isolation, the period of *askesis*, meaning discipline or training, began (Christie 31). It is the time of trial and temptation that Antony experienced in the desert, attacked by demons yet growing closer to God. Finally, *agape* is the emergence from *askesis* and the reconciliation with human community (Christie 31). Antony's *agape* results in a plethora of healings and wisdom imparted to his community (Athanasius 42, 64).

Thus, Athanasius presents a timeline of Christian transformation as the individual is called to withdraw, confront the demonic and God in isolation, then return to benefit the community. In this timeline, isolation is essential in opening the individual not only to negative spiritual realities but also to God's presence: the only path to communal good. In Robinson's novel, Jack is by no means a saint. His motivations and experiences differ significantly from those of Antony, and Jack himself has doubts as to the state of his own soul. While Antony's isolation in the desert is more akin to solitude, Jack's isolation is steeped in loneliness, for he does not have the reassuring relationship with God that Antony does. Nevertheless, Jack's experience of loneliness mirrors the combined negative and positive attributes of Antony's solitude. Jack, like Antony, emerges from his loneliness with an increased awareness of the social ills in his community and an increased desire for the healing of those ills.

Jack's *Anachoresis*: Withdrawal

Antony and Jack withdraw from society; however, only Antony's withdrawal comes from a place of love and dedication to God. Antony hears, multiple times, a direct call to sell his possessions and follow the Lord (Athanasius 31). In following this call, Antony's heart for solitude was pure. As Athanasius relates, Antony's tenet was "that neither the way of virtue nor separation from the world for its sake ought to be measured in terms of time spent, but by the aspirant's desire and purposefulness" (36). For Antony, the rightly placed heart was essential to *anachoresis*. Jack's heart in withdrawal is not rightly placed. His desire to withdraw did not come from a place of openness to God's will for his life; rather, it is rooted in an unhealthy understanding of his relationship to those around him.

Jack's decision to isolate is a broken facsimile of Antony's holy calling, based on turbulent relationships with his mother and father. Because Robinson begins the novel *in media res*, there are only hints of Jack's original desire to withdraw and his response to that desire. Many of those hints relate to his father. During Jack and Della's graveyard conversation, Della comes to a realization about Jack that provides insight into the reason he withdrew from Gilead. She asserts that "'something happened that made you decide you'd had all the life you could stand. So you ended it there. Except you have to stay alive, for your father.' … 'You don't feel like part of the world anymore.'" (Robinson 73). From Della's perspective, Jack has ended his life in a figurative sense by cutting himself off from the rest of society. His father who waits for him to come home is the only reason he did not end it in a literal sense (47). In this way, Jack's withdrawal is motivated by a desire for death that he cannot satisfy out of a fear of hurting his father.[1]

Jack's isolation in St. Louis is also a result of his inability to live up to his father's hopes, a particular trial for a minister's son. In a reminiscence of his childhood, Jack considers his reputation as a child of vice; "he was great at setting teeth on edge" (Robinson 111). He "would sometimes stand beside his father, grinning, shaking hands as the flock filed out, much more than charming," in part because he knew it would both irritate and embarrass his father to have his prodigal son act so innocent (111). It is from this reminiscence

[1] Interestingly, Antony does desire death at some points in his life albeit for a vastly different reason. During the oppression of Christians by Maximin, Antony desired martyrdom but was unable to give himself over to the persecutors for similar reasons that Jack cannot contrive his own death (Athanasius 65-66).

that Jack himself provides another explanation for his withdrawal from society: "it was in some part as a courtesy to his father that Jack began to slip out of the house before dawn on Sundays" (111). Feeling his inadequacy in the face of his father's virtue, he decided that his only option was to remove himself from not only the life of the church, but the lives of those around him. He is unable to do so by suicide, so he physically removes himself to another city where he can isolate from human connection.

Jack's relationship with his mother also plays a role in his withdrawal. Jack sees his mother as delicate and easily harmed. He sees himself as someone who easily harms. Jack's withdrawal is a solution to the problem of keeping his mother safe from himself. In a reflection on his early truancy and the familial relationships that resulted from it, Jack remembers that

> He could have said [to his mother], 'I found a little creek where the ice wasn't solid yet, panes of ice, clear as glass.' He could even say he liked the sound they made under his boots, how they shattered when he threw them down. She knew about his interest in fragile things, and would have liked to hear that for once no harm was done. But she was fragile, so he could not bring himself to comfort her. Half the time he would roll up whatever he could of his supper in a piece of bread and be out the door again. Better the cold. Better the dark. Why was that? He knew how she felt when he left. He felt it himself. Dear Jesus, keep me harmless. He knew what that meant. Keep me alone. (Robinson 85)

Robinson brings to the forefront the inner turmoil that causes Jack to withdraw. Others, including his mother, are thin and brittle in his mind, like the most breakable ice that he throws to the ground with the greatest force. In order to mitigate his inherent harmfulness, he withdraws from them even though the withdrawal itself causes harm. In this interaction with his mother and the prior commentaries on his father, Robinson reveals the brokenness in Jack's *anachoresis*. Rather than withdrawing as a humble response to God's call, Jack allows his sinfulness and fear to lead him to reject not only his family in Gilead but any possibility for community in St. Louis. How, then, can the same good fruits grow from Jack's loneliness as do from Antony's time in the desert, given that their reasons for isolation differ so markedly?

Jack's *Askesis*: Isolation

Through Jack's *askesis*, Robinson demonstrates God's ability to bring beauty and transformation from brokenness, for Jack is transformed through the loneliness that results from his *anachoresis* no matter his reason for choosing isolation.[2] Although loneliness is a complex feeling that is largely experienced as negative even in Christian culture, the loneliness that can result from isolation in the monastic tradition is, for Christians, an opportunity for deeper intimacy with God. Robinson reconciles both of these realities in *Jack*. Just as Antony's isolation resulted both in painful struggles with the devil and deeper intimacy with God, so too does Jack's loneliness result both in intense wrestling with the reality of himself and in increased

[2] Jack's battle with agency and determinism throughout the novel underscores that his spiritual journey and transformation are not necessarily of his own choosing, yet the results remain the same. For a further exploration of agency and determinism in *Jack* see Mouw, Alex. "'Free to Act by Your Own Lights': Agency and Predestination in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead Novels." *Literature & Theology*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, pp. 198-219.

compassion for others. In Jack's own words, "his life was solitary and ascetic, as it was, almost past bearing, relieved by the library, occasional drunkenness, and lately by lunch with the Baptists" (Robinson 202). His lifestyle, besides the drunkenness, in St. Louis is reminiscent of the asceticism of Antony in the desert, and the outcomes of it are likewise parallel.

For Antony and Jack, time alone was not an easy commune with God; rather, "in opening oneself to the cleansing power of solitude, one's soul becomes porous and vulnerable" to demonic power (Christie 33). A time of isolation is a time of purification, but the cost of this purification is an openness to *all* spiritual forces. The demonic power that confronted monks such as Antony was not always the apparition of physical demons and beasts, often it was a necessary wrestling with the self. Christie writes that

> for Antony and the early monks, to speak of confronting the demonic in solitude was another way of talking about confronting the self. It meant facing up to all those anomalous forces at work in the depths of the psyche, forces which are usually kept at bay by the noise and distractions of everyday life but which, in the space of solitude, make their presence felt with alarming intensity. (33)

In this way, Antony's first temptation was a confrontation of his own lustful desires which he was able to resist (Athanasius 34). In Athanasius' account of one of Antony's sermons, Antony clearly states that the demons' "stumbling blocks consist of evil thoughts. … They pretend to prophesy and to predict things to come" (48). Again, Antony underscores this reality by saying "when they come, their actions correspond to the condition in which they find us; they pattern their phantasms after our thoughts" (63). The demonic attack Christians via internal methods, forcing the individual to wrestle with their own thoughts and emotions.

In Jack's *askesis*, this demonic wrestling manifests itself in his battle with the side of loneliness that most closely resembles despair. Josef Pieper, a neo-Thomist philosopher, defines despair as "a perverse anticipation of the nonfulfillment of hope … [it is] a decision of the will. Not a mood, but an act of the intellect" (113-114). Jack is continually beset with this despair; he anticipates the ways in which his hopes will be dashed. During his conversation with Della in the graveyard, Jack thinks of it as "a way of anticipating memories he particularly did not want to have" (Robinson 41). This anticipation of ruined hopes recalls Antony's description of the demons' false prophesying and prediction (Athanasius 48). Jack's future preconceptions reveal themselves particularly in Jack's relationship with Della. When Della gives Jack a poem, he anticipates reading it and tearing her mediocre writing to shreds before he has even looked at the page. Jack is continually casting himself forward into a future where he destroys the good in everyone around him. His assumption that all things shall be ruined in the end is not only despairing, but it is the direct and unique attack on his self by demonic forces.

As he wrestles with the belief that he will inevitably harm those around him, Jack begins to aspire to harmlessness. Robinson reveals that, for him, this harmlessness is yet another manifestation of despair. In a rumination instigated by seeing Della with another man and considering the unlikelihood of a relationship with her, Jack considers that

> It was on the basis of the slight and subtle encouragements offered by despair that he had discovered a new aspiration, harmlessness, which accorded well enough with his habits if not his disposition. Keeping his distance was a

> favor, a courtesy, to all those strangers who might, probably would emerge somehow poorer for proximity to him. This was his demon, an eye for the most trifling vulnerabilities. (Robinson 119)

While Jack is able to correctly identify the "demon" that manifests for him as a desire to exploit others' vulnerabilities, he misses the larger demonic influence—his despair over always causing harm in a relationship.[3] For Jack, harmlessness is a perpetuation of isolation and loneliness which leads him further into despair. He enacts harmlessness in his relationship with Della by cutting off the relationship, and "for a day or two he would take pleasure in the thought that her good life was unthreatened by his Jackness, Jackitude, Jackicity. (Robinson 139). Jack considers his ability to harm as the core quality of his being. Thus, the only way for him to minimize the harm he causes to others is to remove himself from the picture. This is his reality to the point where he considers himself to be his own worst enemy (Robinson 266). Such is the cyclical nature of Jack's encounter with the demonic during his *askesis*. His loneliness internalizes as despair and reinforces his self-conceptualization as one who can only harm others. This, through his aspirations for harmlessness, pushes him deeper into isolation.[4]

The spiritual warfare which manifests for Jack as isolation and despair is also the manner in which the majority of individuals experience and conceptualize loneliness. In his book *Loneliness, Solitude and Companionship*, Robert E. Neale describes loneliness as a state in which "we are aware of absence as a most powerful presence" (21). This absence is a separation from relationship (Neale 22). There is pain in such a separation, and Jack clearly experiences that pain. When Della first sees Jack, she mistakes him for a pastor. To remedy this, Jack acquires a different suit that more properly conveys his identity as a bum. When Della later sees him in the ragged suit, he knows she has realized that he is not the upstanding pastor for which she originally took him. In response to this separation from the possibility of a relationship with her, Jack thinks, "this was misery enough to justify a drink. A binge, in fact. But for some reason he just spent most of the night lying on his bed, feeling an elemental loneliness pour into his bones, that coldness that inheres in things, left to themselves" (Robinson 118). Jack's experience of a coldness in his bones resonates with all humans. In this passage, Robinson emphasizes that the coldness is not unique to him, it is something "elemental" that rises from the core of the earth itself, and, like the cold of winter, its "coldness" precludes new life or change. It is pure despair.

Jack internalizes this despairing loneliness by both acting as if and seeing himself as less than alive. His experience

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[3] Jack's view of himself as inherently harmful is presented as objective truth in parts of the novel, a result of Robinson's free indirect discourse that blurs the lines between Jack and narrator. For more on Jack as an unreliable narrator who has an inaccurate understanding of himself, as well as the way his self-concept connects to racism and original sin, see Horton, Ray. "Seeing in 'the Darkness, Visible': White Supremacy and Original Sin in Marilynne Robinson's *Jack.*" *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2022, pp. 223-243.

[4] Minimization of one's negative effects on others is not always a problem. Antony also wishes not to be a burden on others during his *askesis*, so he plants a garden in order to be self-sufficient with his food and reduce the work others must do for him (Athanasius 69). This comes from a place of love for others; however, Jack's desire for harmlessness is rooted in self-hatred, a very different motivation. This again underscores Jack's brokenness in his *anachoresis* and in the beginning of his *askesis*, contrasting with the beginning of Antony's spiritual journey. See conclusion for comments on the redemptive nature of Jack's journey.

coheres with a reading of loneliness in the Old Testament in which loneliness is akin to death. Samuel Hildebrandt undertook a word study of the phrase "I sat alone" and concluded that "the lonely, [are portrayed] as somehow less alive and 'less there'" in the Old Testament than individuals who were living in community (524). In Hildebrandt's reading, "isolation is not simply being cut off from others and loneliness is not merely a painful condition; rather, to be alone is to slowly succumb to the power of death that invades life" (524). Equating loneliness with living death recalls once more Jack's reason for *anachoresis*; he desires death, but—unable to enact his own literal death—he settles for, in Della's words, "'living like someone who has died already'" (Robinson 72). Like Antony's spiritual battles, Robinson emphasizes Jack's spiritual battles through his desire not to be living. Jack tells Della: "Sometimes I wish I were just a suit of clothes and a decent shave. Uninhabited, so to speak" (Robinson 42). To the woman he loves, Jack is able to confide that he wishes he was not a human being, even preferring to be a soulless shell of a man. In this confession, Jack conveys a despondency devoid of hope.

The deathlike despair that Jack experiences leads him to think of himself as not only lifeless but fundamentally less than human. Jack believes he is more akin to Satan than to a sinful human being. Twice, Jack tells Della that he is "the Prince of Darkness," and he means it genuinely (Robinson 40,48). He considers himself to be devoid of light and possibility, like a fallen angel, like the Devil. Jack thinks of himself this way again when his landlord notices the geranium in his room and extrapolates correctly that it is there for Della. The landlord subtly reminds Jack of his powerlessness against the law that does not allow him and Della to be together. As a result, Jack feels "buffeted like Satan, falling through the billowing voids" (Robinson 170). Jack always considers himself to be in the process of falling from grace, and he sees no other reality. Slowly, he has stopped seeing himself as a human beset by demons; rather, he is one of the demons. In comparing his actions towards Della with those of hers toward him, Jack reflects that "when defects of character *are* your character, you become a what" (Robinson 118). He does not even consider himself to be a "who." In sinking so far into despair, Jack loses the ability to see himself as human, identifying with his demonic assailants instead.

Jack's demonic wrestling is fundamentally a wrestling with a despair characterized by seeing himself as perpetually damned to hurt anyone with whom he enters into relationship. While wrestling with spiritual forces is, for Antony, a challenging yet edifying experience, Jack is unaware that he is experiencing spiritual warfare. Because he believes harmfulness is fundamental to his nature, Jack does not distinguish between himself and the demons that afflict him; however, those around him do. When Jack confides his harmful desires to the minister of the Baptist church he has begun to attend, the minister tells him, "You should remember that the part of you that makes you try to avoid doing harm is as much yourself as any of these impulses are. Maybe you should try calling them 'temptations'" (Robinson 230). The minister challenges Jack's understanding of himself. Rather than being defined by harmfulness, perhaps he is defined by the concern for others that led him to pursue harmlessness. And perhaps the harmful desires are temptations that can be resisted. This minister has offered Jack hope and the possibility of relationship with others. From this hope, Robinson constructs a reality in which the loneliness Jack experiences in *askesis* is not purely negative.

There are demons in the desert, but God is there too.

In *askesis*, both Antony and Jack experience God's renewing power through their isolation and loneliness. When Antony exiled himself to the desert, changes began to occur within him. Not only did he grow in his ability to stave off demonic influences (Athanasius 34, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41), but he grew in hope, in understanding of himself, in relationship with God and with others. Christie asserts that in the monastic tradition it is in the pain of isolation that we are inexplicably made new (34). This recreation of self, enacted by God, affects the orientation of the self towards others. Athanasius describes that in Antony "it was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest [of the monks], but the stability of character and the purity of soul" (81). Antony was grounded in himself, consistent in the person God created him to be. He also had a "purity of soul" that can only result from proper relationship with God. After his isolation, this was physically visible to those around him, even to those who had never seen him before.[5] In the desert, Antony's isolation opened him to self-renewal, and it became visible to those around him. This is the hope of loneliness, and the renewing process of *askesis* for Jack as well.

In *askesis*, Jack experiences the innate connection between loneliness and hope. In "Considering the Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Love," Robinson defines hope as "a felt lack, an absence, a yearning" (225). With this definition of hope, loneliness becomes innately hopeful. Neale considers this characteristic of loneliness to be a search. He asserts that loneliness is active rather than passive; it is an attempt to resolve absence and demonstrates a faith in the possibility of relationship (Neale 22). In just such a way, Jack's loneliness is a felt lack of community, a yearning for others. As this yearning causes Jack to seek out relationship, those around him become the hands of God that transform him. Time and time again in Robinson's novel, Jack's loneliness leads him to hope for a relationship with Della despite his despair that he will hurt her. When Della buys a new hat, Jack realizes that "he was in love with her. That did it. That hat brought out glints of rose in the warm dark of her skin. Women know that kind of thing. She, Della, wanted him, Jack, to see that particular loveliness in her" (Robinson 125). As Jack realizes that Della wants him to see her as beautiful, he begins to open himself up to connection with her. Robinson's use of their names—"She, Della, … him, Jack"—reinforces that connection. Each one sees the other as truly different from themselves, creating space for love. In identifying their difference, they come closer to truly loving each other. Jack notices this as it happens, and he hopes that Della does love him.

Throughout the novel, the hope in Jack's loneliness opens him to Della's love, and over time he starts to let go of despair. When Della visits his room and falls asleep before he gets back, Jack realizes that he has no reason to be guilty although it is his default reaction. Della made the choice to come to him. (Robinson 198). Actions like this break Jack out of his cyclical thoughts of harm and harmlessness, opening him to hope and change. About halfway through the novel, Jack starts to realize that no human relationship is without risk of harm. He

[5] Yet another parallel between Antony and Jack is this outward purity that those around them notice. Della sees Jack's purity and comments that "once in a lifetime, maybe, you look at a stranger and you see a soul, a glorious presence out of place in the world. … I've seen a few others. Kids at school. Yours is the brightest." (Robinson 208-209). Her comment is interesting considering Jack's self-conceptualization as a bum, defined by his outward clothing rather than his inward soul.

realizes that in his relationship with Della "harmlessness was more than he could aspire to," yet he was also unable to do anything "baldly self-interested" (Robinson 138). Jack has begun to see himself as human rather than inanimate or satanic: an individual with the power to hurt others but without the desire to. As his relationship with Della deepens, Jack comes face to face with the fact that he can make another person sad, can harm her, yet he is no longer afraid of doing so (Robinson 205). In this way, Della helps Jack realize that he cannot aspire to harmlessness. She forces him to reckon with the despair that led him to harmlessness in the first place and abandon it for further hope.

As he embraces hope in loneliness, Jack's understanding of himself is renewed in the same way that Antony was renewed in *askesis*. In his book *Loneliness*, Clark E. Moustakas expresses the impact of loneliness on the self. He writes that loneliness is one of the few experiences in modern life "in which man communes with himself … [and] comes to grips with his own being" (Moustakas 102). Moustakas includes the caveat that this communion is only possible when loneliness is confronted head-on and courageously (102). When Jack starts to hope, he confronts his loneliness without succumbing to despair, and this honesty renews his understanding of himself. In a conversation with the Baptist minister, Jack thinks about his intentions with Della, and "it surprised Jack to realize that, in some part of his mind, he aspired to being an impeccable white gentleman" (Robinson 186). In hoping to end his loneliness through a relationship with Della, Jack is attuned to who he actually wants to be: respectable, worthy of relationship. Robinson demonstrates this renewed, authentic understanding when Jack gives his "actual name," Jack Boughton, to the minister, saying it is who he truly is (Robinson 188). Furthermore, after Della and Jack are married—in their own way—, Jack realizes that he is "a person of consequence" (Robinson 211). While, for him, this means he is in a position where he can harm Della, it also reveals a shift in his thinking. Instead of wishing he was merely a suit of clothes or thinking of himself as the devil, Jack realizes that he is a person with a responsibility towards another. Although he is able to harm Della, he can also love her.

This renewal of himself—by way of loneliness and relationship with Della—makes possible the renewal of his relationship with God. Just as Antony's time in isolation created an openness to God's cleansing power, so too does Jack's loneliness open him up to feel the force of God's character. Throughout the book, Jack is constantly talking to God, using phrases such as "sweet Jesus" and "dear Jesus" (Robinson 87, 85). At the beginning of the novel, Robinson's use of free indirect discourse makes these feel more like instinctual phrases that Jack thinks out of habit to convey desperation and despair: "oh, sweet Jesus, the guard actually put his hand on her" (77) or "dear Jesus, he couldn't even decide to leave his room" (87). Over time, Robinson demonstrates Jack's internal changes as the phrases change to "Dear Jesus, keep me harmless" (85) and "Ah, Jesus, get her home, keep her safe" (211), and start to sound like prayers. As Jack's loneliness shifts to hope and leads him towards a relationship with Della, his understanding of God deepens. When Jack finally visits Della's family, she keeps holding his hand when he sits after greeting each family member. It causes him to ponder "how one human being can mean so much to another human being in terms of peace and assurance, as if loyalty were as real as gravity. His father said it had to be that real, because the Lord is loyal. Jack was just then feeling the force of the idea" (300).

The loneliness-*cum*-hope that led Jack to Della allows Jack to understand God's loyalty.

While Jack is transformed for the better through the relationships towards which loneliness drives him, even the loneliness itself provides a deeper intimacy with God. As he thinks of taking Della after hours to the dance studio where he works, Jack thinks that Della "might have no idea yet that embarrassment, relentless, punitive scorn, can wear away at a soul until it recedes into wordless loneliness. Maybe apophatic loneliness. God in the silence. In the deep darkness" (Robinson 250). Loneliness provides Jack with an insight as to *how* we understand God. An apophatic understanding of God is one in which God's character is made plain via the things God is not. As Christian Wiman put it, God is felt in God's absence (Wiman 61). Jack realizes that God appears in the silence. In the moments that seem devoid of God, that is where God meets us. Thus, loneliness is where Jack encounters God.[6]

As Jack progresses in his hope, his understanding of himself, and his relationship with God, he begins to recognize that loneliness is not a singular experience specific to himself. Just as Antony "sympathized and prayed [and] … encouraged those who suffered to have patience and to know that healing belonged … only to God," so too does Jack come to terms with the ubiquity of suffering (Athanasius 73).. Moustakas professes that to be human is to be lonely. By virtue of being individuals with individualized experience, humans are cut off from others. We are othered from each other, that is, lonely (Moustakas 101). Jack understands this in his marriage to Della. Many times, Jack refers to his relationship as a "lonely marriage" (Robinson 210), being a married man as "a higher order or loneliness altogether" (224), and even that "solitude could be the proof and seal of marriage" (219). Jack comprehends the universality of loneliness and its power that even marriage cannot overcome. Loneliness is something he and Della will both always be experiencing no matter how much they may feel "as if they had solved loneliness" in a given moment (Robinson 268). This is partly by nature of their relationship: a white man and an African American woman who are legally prevented from marrying in the state of Missouri. Yet, it is also the nature of all human relationships. So, Jack comes to grips with the reality that loneliness is fundamental to being human, and it will be present with him and with Della wherever they go.

In knowing that all humans experience loneliness, Jack's experience provides him with an increased compassion for others. In his reflection on Thomas Merton's solitude, Christie narrates that "the ache of loneliness he feels, which is bound up for him with ecstatic longing, seemed to break open within him a new space of vulnerability, a deepened capacity for intimacy and compassion" (42). Moustakas details the same experience in that "loneliness paves the way to healing, to true compassion, to intimate bonds with all living creatures" (103). In feeling his own loneliness, Jack's ability to resonate with others' loneliness increases. This empathy is a fundamental aspect of his relationship with Della. In their graveyard conversation, they engage in the following exchange:

> 'You're very sure of yourself. At ease in your skin. While I—"
> She stopped. 'You actually said that.'

[6] For more about the theological implications of Robinson's fiction, specifically in *Jack*, see Smith, James K. A. "Making the Truth: Fiction as Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Jack*." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2022, pp. 244-256.

> ‘What? Well, yes, I suppose I did … It’s true, though, isn’t it?’
> ‘No. Much of the time it isn’t true. When I find myself trapped in a white cemetery, it definitely isn’t true.’
> He said, ‘You may not believe this, but I have had something of the same experience. A number of times.’
> She laughed. ‘I’m sorry, but I actually do believe you.’ (Robinson 49)

Jack commits what is generally a grievous faux pas. To assume not only that Della is comfortable in her own skin, when skin color has made her life so different from his, but also that he, a white man, can somehow understand her discomfort is presumption of the highest order. Yet Della believes him when he claims a share in her experience. She sees the loneliness in which he exists and realizes that the socially imposed barriers that exist between her and other people, exist in similar ways for him. He can understand her to some extent because of his own encounter with loneliness.

Jack’s loneliness-engendered compassion manifests itself in his relationships with others besides Della. In his job at a shoe shop, Jack considers that the improvement of business after a few weeks of him working could be because of him. He considers the loneliness of the store owner before he worked for her and understands that, somehow, he broke her isolation and made the shop more appealing in doing so (Robinson 83). Jack empathizes even with imagined strangers in the same way. He remembers the way his father would treat someone new who was passing through their parish, that “the stranger would have stepped out of loneliness, moved by hope or nostalgia, then slipped back into loneliness, forgotten as soon as he was gone” (Robinson 165). Because of his own experience of loneliness and isolation in St. Louis, Jack relates on a deeper level with these lonely wanderers who once were the beneficiaries of his father’s hospitality. Instead of seeing them from the outside and “forgetting” them as soon as they slip away, Jack is able to imagine their whole lonely journey, not only the point where his path intersects with theirs. The work of loneliness in Jack’s life does not stop at renewed compassion for others. As his *askesis* comes to a close and he reintegrates with society, the empathy Jack gained through loneliness provides him with eyes to see the injustice in the world around him.

Jack’s *Agape*: Emergence

Antony’s monastic journey demonstrates the benefit that isolation provides not only to the individual who experiences it, but to the community as a whole. When Antony embraced “human community” after his *askesis*, he provided not only physical healing, but social healing as he “reconciled in friendship [those who were hostile to each other], urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ” (Athanasius 42). Antony is able to bring this reconciliation and unity because of the clear vision God granted him during his solitude. In one example of this vision, a boat of men come to Antony and the boat stinks. The men claim it is from the fish in the boat, but Antony says the fish is not the cause. He casts out a demon that is in one of the men and the stench goes away. Only then do the others realize that the stink was from the demon and not the meat (Athanasius 78). Antony sees reality more fully than those around him do, but he is able to impart his vision to the rest of his community. While Jack does not transform his society the same way Antony does, his experience of loneliness and Della’s amelioration of it allow him to see the brokenness of his racialized society and long for its healing. Through loneliness, Jack receives the clarified vision which was Antony’s first step towards societal transformation.

Through loneliness, Jack identifies his potential to harm others, allowing him to see and mourn that same propensity in the society around him. As he considers the planned demolition of the African American neighborhoods of St. Louis, Jack is terrified by the idea that the demolition is a physical manifestation of the harm he internally envisions. He reflects that "he was [society's] essence, its epitome" (Robinson 237). *Askesis* revealed to Jack the brokenness within himself, and that understanding gave him the eyes to see the parallel brokenness in the society around him. One poignant instance of this is the impetus of Jack leaving Chicago—where he ran as a last-ditch effort to protect Della from himself—and his return to Della. In Chicago, Jack embodies the internal change from despair to hope as he begins a new life in which he has a comfortable home, a steady job, and is even having a new suit made. For Jack, this is akin to donning a new personality. The whole time, he envisions Della there with him, living as husband and wife. Finally, he tells his landlady that his wife is African American, and she is outraged at their illegal relationship. Jack is equally outraged at her heartless response to the point where he must plead, "dear Jesus, don't let me lay a hand on this woman!" and wait "for the outrage that flooded him to recede enough to allow him to move or speak" (Robinson 294). Now, Jack can physically feel the injustice suffusing his society. It angers and saddens him that the world in which he lives is one that does not allow him to live together with his wife. It is a society in which humans are divided solely based on arbitrary physical characteristics.[7]

Even after he leaves Chicago and engages with Della's separatist family, Jack sees the division which is the brokenness of society. For all their hospitality, Della's family still rejects Jack in the end. They are willing to support Della and the child she and Jack conceived, but they cannot allow a white man to be a part of their family because of their separatist beliefs. Jack represents, to Della's father, the harm of racial brokenness. Jack feels the injustice of this, responding that Della's father does not know him as an individual very well, but he understands that he must leave (Robinson 305). Della also understands that her own family is not a place where she and Jack can find acceptance as a pair. Her family has imposed their own isolation from the world, yet it isolates her from them as long as she stands with Jack. The result of this separatism is Jack and Della both leaving her family and setting out, still searching for a community that will accept them. Such is the brokenness that Jack is able to see in society as a result of his own loneliness. Humans reject each other. Family rejects family, conceiving new forms of loneliness. Jack is powerless to do more than mourn, to create change. So, he and Della continue on.

In part, the brokenness inherent in Della's family's rejection is so poignant because Jack's loneliness had already driven him engage in a loving, accepting community. In St. Louis, Jack—almost unintentionally—becomes part of a black Baptist church. It starts when various parishioners mistake him for a beggar outside the church; he goes inside to return the money they dropped into his hat, stays for the service, and for the lunch that follows. Out of shame, he is "certain" he would never go to the church again, yet, somehow, he comes back the very next Sunday (Robinson 162). Just like the communities Antony established that maintained "love and harmony … for

[7] For a nuanced discussion of Robinson's engagement of structural racism in *Jack*, see Engen, Abram Van. "Della's Rage: Race and Religion in Marilynne Robinson's *Jack*." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2022, pp.172-189.

neither perpetrator nor victim of injustice was there," this church community welcomes Jack with love and harmony despite his racial identity as a perpetrator of injustice (Athanasius 64). Unlike Della's family, this African American community accepts Jack as a brother, engaging in friendly song competitions on the piano and feeding him with a genuine kindness to which Jack is unused (64). In the midst of loneliness, this warm welcome pulls Jack back to the church. Even Jack's relationship with the pastor of the church, as it develops, is akin to that of a father and a son. According to the minister, Jack is a "son of the church" (166), and Jack tells the minister, "as if to his father, the very things he would never tell his father" (169). Although the minister disapproves of Jack and Della's relationship just like Della's family, Robinson uses the Baptist church to provide an example of a loving, accepting, biracial family. This is exactly what Jack and Della could not find in her family and leave to seek at the end of the novel.

In the final page of the novel, Robinson reveals the clear vision of the world that is present in Jack and Della's relationship, and she instills hope in the reader that Jack and Della may someday be able to enact transformation. In one of the final paragraphs, Robinson recounts that "they were together, after their fashion, and the world was all before them, such as it was" (309). In keeping with the free indirect style that characterizes the rest of the novel, this phrase blurs the boundaries between Jack and narrator. In a sense, Jack is the narrator, and it is his conceptualization of the world to which the reader is exposed. Therefore, the qualification of the world, "such as it was" demonstrates the vision Jack and Della, like Antony, possess in confronting it. They see the world as it truly is: unjust, racialized, broken. In ending in this way, Robinson allows the reader to share in Jack and Della's true vision and hopeful confrontation of the world.

So, as Christians—like all humans—embark on desert journeys shrouded in loneliness, they know that hope can rise from despair, new sight can grow from isolation, and God will renew all things: the demons, the desert, and his disciples. Thus, like Jack and Della, all Christians "hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,/Through *Eden* [take] their solitary way" (Milton 642).

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