"He was pretty good in there today": Reviving the Macho Christ in Ernest Hemingway's "Today is Friday" and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Lisa Tyler

Mel Gibson's 2004 film The Passion of the Christ*, like Hemingway's 1926 one-act play/short story "Today is Friday," is about the ways in which its creator believed that he had directly benefited from Christ's suffering. Both Hemingway and Gibson were raised by religiously conservative, emotionally repressive fathers, and both declared themselves Catholics. Both men experienced suicidal depression as mature young men, and each found in Christ's torment on the cross both a trope for his own battles with depression and an inspiration to survive his own emotional suffering. In this essay, I first place both men within the sociocultural, religious tradition known as "muscular Christianity" and trace the ways in which they were both influenced by that tradition. I document their emotional volatility and their bouts with profound depression, examining the ways in which each credits faith with enabling him to survive his own dark night of the soul.*

> It is inconceivable that the suffering of Christ on the cross . . .
> would mean anything to anyone unless pain was intrinsically shareable.
> Ariel Glucklich (2001, p. 63)

At Chicago's First United Methodist Church, a group of about 30 people gathered in the spring of 2004 to discuss the film *The Passion of the Christ*. According to a press report, most of those in attendance found the film needlessly, excessively violent. One dissenter, a homeless man and ordained Baptist minister, raised a hand to ask, "Can't a person benefit from someone else's suffering? My brother saved me from getting beat up more than once by taking the beatings himself. I'm going through suffering now. If I look at Jesus' suffering, I know I can do this" (Van Biema, 2004, p. 60). The other attendees listened politely but remained unpersuaded—a problem the speaker later attributed to their own remoteness from suffering.

But that fellow who spoke up, the one who responded to Christ's suffering because it inspired him to endure his own suffering, has a point, one that I think both Ernest Hemingway and Mel Gibson would appreciate. I want to argue that Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, like Hemingway's 1926 one-act play/short story "Today is Friday," is about the ways in which both men believed they had directly benefited from Christ's suffering. Both men were raised by religiously conservative, emotionally repressive fathers, and both declared themselves Catholics. Both Hemingway and Gibson experienced suicidal depression as mature young men, and each found in Christ's torment on the cross both a trope for his own battles with depression and an inspiration to survive his own emotional suffering.

In this essay, after briefly introducing both works, I first place both men within the sociocultural, religious tradition known as "muscular Christianity" and trace the ways in which they were influenced by both that tradition and their upbringing by strict, religiously conservative fathers. I document their emotional volatility and their bouts with profound depression, examining the ways in which each credits faith with enabling him to survive his own dark night of the soul.

As is now widely known, *The Passion of the Christ* portrays the last twelve hours of Christ's life, drawing extensively on the Gospels for much of its content. Hemingway's four-page, one-act play "Today is Friday" focuses on the same event, Christ's crucifixion, indirectly, by depicting the reactions of the Roman soldiers who carried out the execution. Such indirectness was typical for a man who called his own memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, autobiography by reflection (M. Hemingway, 1964) and who once wrote (in an article not published until after his death) "I sometimes think my style is suggestive rather than direct," adding, "The reader must often use his imagination or lose the most subtle part of my thought" (Wagner, 1987, p. 275).

Muscular Christianity

It is important to note that in reviving the macho Christ, both men are (consciously or not) working within the tradition known as "muscular Christianity," a nineteenth-century social, religious, and cultural movement originating in Britain and emphasizing the importance of health and physical fitness in Christian men. It was not a new movement even in the Victorian era: "Throughout Western literature a strong historical connection was drawn between the idealized knightly soldier and the athlete as Christian" (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999, p. 17). Its best known proponents were writers Charles Kingsley, who is now ironically best known for his children's novel *The Water Babies*, and Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, a paean to violence and the British public school of Rugby. (Interestingly, Hemingway owned works by both men—*Tom Brown's School Days*, by Hughes, and two copies of Kingsley's *Westward, Ho!* [Brasch & Watson, 1981].)

The movement was later popularized in the United States via the Young Men's Christian Association: "The development of the YMCA in the United States relied on a muscular Christian agenda to reach a white, middle-class culture" (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999, p. 43). Theodore Roosevelt, a personal hero of Hemingway's childhood (Reynolds, 1986, pp. 28-30, 163, 232), was among the American proponents of the movement.

In considerations of literary history, Hemingway's work is usually opposed to the more pious aspects of muscular Christianity. As Clifford Putney (2001) accurately

notes, America's literary modernists rejected "the Christian manliness of Ben-Hur and other literary heroes of an older generation," instead preferring "Ernest Hemingway's soldier-narrator in *A Farewell to Arms*, a rugged stoic who confessed to have seen 'nothing sacred' in the Great War, and who wanted nothing more to do with 'the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain'" (p. 201).

But an occasional literary critic has noted Hemingway's earlier indebtedness to muscular Christianity. Although he does not specifically make the connection to the religious movement, Warren Bennett (1995) has linked "Today is Friday" with Ezra Pound's 1909 poem "The Ballad of the Goodly Fere" and suggested that the theme of both is "the masculinization of Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 203). Hemingway biographer Carlos Baker, who has openly admitted he "dislikes" "Today is Friday" (1969, p. xiv), has complained that its "dialogue read[s] like a locker-room discussion among high-school sophomore football players" (Baker, 1969, p. 169)—thus linking Christianity with athleticism.

Like Gibson's film, Hemingway's short story also takes its place in a larger societal dialogue about how we see (or should see) Jesus. It is possible that it is a direct response to Bruce Barton's 1925 book *The Man Nobody Knows*.[1] Although there is no direct evidence that Hemingway read Barton's book, it is probably significant that Barton is the son of the Hemingway family's minister (Monteiro, 1997, p. 74). Ernest's father was the Barton family doctor (Fried, 2005), and Barton, a founder of the Madison Avenue advertising agency BBDO, reviewed *The Sun Also Rises* for *Atlantic Monthly* (Fried, 2005).

In *The Man Nobody Knows*, Barton (1925), who was 13 years older than Hemingway, attempts to "re-masculinize" Jesus by portraying Christ as a highly successful proto-advertising executive who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world" (unpaginated). Like Hemingway and Gibson, Barton is contemptuous of what he sees as the wimpy image of Jesus. "A physical weakling!" Barton (1925) writes in an unpaginated foreword. "Where did they get that idea? Jesus pushed a plane and swung an adze; he was a successful carpenter. He slept outdoors and spent his days walking around his favorite lake. His muscles were so strong that when he drove the money-changers out, nobody dared oppose him!" *The Man Nobody Knows*, while controversial, was fourth on the nonfiction bestseller list in 1925 and reached first place by 1926 (Montgomery, 1985).

As for *The Passion of the Christ*, Björn Krondorfer (2004) specifically linked the film to that tradition in an essay in *Cross Currents.* Patricia J. Williams (2004) presented Gibson's film with a mock award in her column in *The Nation:* "Best Harangue in the Style of Father Coughlin went to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, for . . . its reinvigoration of flayed-muscular Christianity as X-treme sport" (p. 9). Leon Wieseltier (2004) writes of Gibson's Christ in *The New Republic*, "He is what the early church fathers, writing with admiration of their martyrs, called an 'athlete' of suffering" (p. 19). One scholar has characterized the protagonist of the movie as "the action hero Jesus" (Lawler, 2004, p. 67). Gibson himself has conceded that he wanted to show us a different and more overtly masculine side of Christ than the usual Hollywood version: "He's usually fairly effete and not a powerful presence, which clearly he must have been" (*Mel*, 2004).

Both works draw on sports themes in their depictions of the Crucifixion. "He was pretty good in there today"—the refrain of the admiring and relatively sympathetic first Roman soldier in Hemingway's "Today is Friday"—makes Christ sound like a particularly tough prizefighter. It's probably not coincidental that one alternate title Hemingway ultimately rejected for "Today is Friday" was "One More for the Nazarene" (Smith, 1989, p. 154), which sounds suspiciously like "One more for the Gipper." While we now associate those words with the late President Ronald Reagan (who uttered them in the 1940 film *Knute Rockne All American*), they were originally a variation of the famous (albeit possibly apocryphal) last words of the legendary George "The Gipper" Gipp, Notre Dame's first All American football player, to coach Knute Rockne in December 1920. Gipp died at 25 of a strep throat infection that turned into pneumonia in an era before antibiotics (Howald, 2003).

Hemingway's play on those words casts the Crucifixion as the "Big Game" of the college football season. While that might seem in questionable taste, the poet Allen Tate has suggested that Hemingway's attitude toward all sport was "rooted in a religious sensibility" (Stoneback, 1991, p. 129), and in his now classic article on Hemingway's religious beliefs, H. R. Stoneback (1991) argues that "Sport as a redemptive ritual is central to Hemingway's life and work" (p. 136). Similarly, in a review entitled "Tough Guy," one critic writes of *The Passion of the Christ*, "It's like viewing an uneven boxing match in which we are forced to watch the underdog, pinned against the ropes, get beaten to within an inch of his life" (Petrakis, 2004, p. 40).

Given these odd (but not historically novel) conjunctions of sports and religious faith, it's probably not coincidental that Hemingway's official biographer, Carlos Baker (1969), dismissed "Today is Friday" as "tasteless" (p. 321), and film critics have responded to *The Passion* with comparable distaste, complaining in *Newsweek* of the film's "relentless gore" (Ansen, 2004, p. 60) or characterizing it in the *New York Times* as "an unnerving and painful spectacle that is also, in the end, a depressing one" (Scott, 2004, p. E1). In his film, Gibson is insistent that Christ endured more physical suffering than some viewers can bear to witness.

Not coincidentally, both Hemingway and Gibson would have been indirectly familiar with the principles of muscular Christianity. Hemingway's father attended Oberlin College in Ohio (Sanford, 1999, p. 23), where he played on the football team, and "Oberlin College served as the cradle for the fledgling physical education profession and the muscular Christianity movement" (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999, p. 30). Ernest's paternal grandfather, Anson Hemingway, was general secretary of the Chicago YMCA—the chief institutional proponent of muscular Christianity in America—and a close friend of Dwight L. Moody (Sanford, 1999, p. 18), the fundamentalist evangelist who has been described as "the champion of an indigenous, American brand of muscular Christianity in the final decades of the [nineteenth] century" (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999, p. 32).[2]

Gibson, too, would have been acquainted with muscular Christianity. After the Gibson family's move from New York to Australia in the sixties, Gibson's father enrolled 12-year-old Mel in St. Leo's Christian Brothers School, "run by an Irish religious order, with an emphasis on religion, sport and discipline" (Pendreigh, 1997, pp. 37-38). The school modeled itself after the British public schools (Clarkson, 1999, p. 36)—in other words, the birthplace of muscular Christianity. Gibson's American

accent made him something of an outcast initially, and the teachers were evidently given to corporal punishment; he and a classmate would compete to see who could get the most “strappings” in a day, and Gibson won—with 27 (Clarkson, 1999, p. 37; Pendreigh, 1999, p. 38). One biographer suggests that there were rumors that some boys at the school were sexually molested by the priests (Clarkson, 1999, p. 38). Gibson, who told a friend that the priests at the school were brutal (Clarkson, 1999, p. 37), was later publicly quoted as saying, “Some of them were regular sons of bitches” (Clarkson, 1999, p. 38).

Strict upbringing

Both men were raised by strict, religiously conservative fathers. Perhaps partly as a result of his Oberlin education, Hemingway’s father disapproved of dancing, drinking, smoking, and card-playing (Sanford, 1999, p. 39). Mr. Hemingway believed in corporal punishment, and Hemingway’s sister Marcelline recalls her father using a razor strap occasionally and then compelling his children to kneel and ask God’s forgiveness for their transgressions. The Hemingway household upheld high standards: Jack London’s works were forbidden for their “coarseness” (Sanford, 1999, p. 107), and after reading *In Our Time*, Hemingway’s father wrote Ernest that “no gentleman spoke of venereal disease outside a doctor’s office” (Sanford, 1999, p. 219). Ed Hemingway was horrified by the news of the breakup of his son’s marriage and wrote, “Our family has never had such an incident before and trust you may still make your get-away from that individual who split your home. . . . Put on the arrows of God and shun evil companions” (Mellow, 1992, p. 342). He called the adulterers “Love Pirates” and wrote that he wished them in hell (Mellow, 1992, p. 342). As Hemingway’s older sister recalls of her father, “the rules he had in his own mind as to what was right and what was wrong were very rigid. With him it was black and white with very little gray between” (Sanford, 1999, p. 39).

Mel Gibson’s father also sees morality in absolute terms: “There’s right and wrong, and that’s all there is” (Pendreigh, 1997, p. 26). “The greatest benefit anyone can have is to be a Catholic,” he once said. “You have the life-long satisfaction of being right” (Clarkson, 1999, p. 5; Pendreigh, 1997, p. 26). Hutton Gibson, Jr., entered a Catholic seminary as a young man and studied to be a priest but eventually dropped out. He seems to have felt the Catholic Church was not sufficiently conservative in its practices, and he particularly opposed the Church’s move away from the traditional Latin Mass and other reforms resulting from the Vatican II conference (Clarkson, 1999, p. 41; Pendreigh, 1997, pp. 26-27; Perry, 1993, p. 10). He apparently believes that Jews have infiltrated the Catholic Church (Clarkson, 1999, pp. 41-43; Pendreigh, 1997, p. 26).

Like Hemingway’s father, he resorted to corporal punishment. “Hutt believed in the power of the hand. If the children did not behave they got hit,” one family friend told a biographer (Clarkson, 1999, p. 18). Gibson’s father prohibited not just the usual cursing, smoking, and drinking, but also television, comic books, and most movies (Clarkson, 1999, pp. 18-19).

Emotional volatility

It’s interesting that both Hemingway and Gibson have chosen to revive muscular Christian themes in their art from a *Catholic* perspective; the muscular Christian

movement has its roots solidly in English and American Protestantism, and Catholic involvement has traditionally been marginal (Putney, 2001, pp. 87-89). I think it's significant (and revealing, and again, not coincidental) that it is the Catholic Church that has the strongest strictures against suicide of perhaps any mainstream Christian denomination. Both Hemingway and Gibson experienced profound emotional depression as young men. While Hemingway is known to have suffered from manic depression late in life and ultimately committed suicide, it has never been conclusively determined when the mood disorder first manifested itself. Noting that most people with the disorder begin to experience symptoms during their twenties, Peter L. Hays (1995) makes a persuasive (if admittedly speculative) case that Hemingway was already experiencing symptoms as early as 1923-25, when he would have been 23 to 26 years old.

Hemingway wrote "Today is Friday" in May 1926 (Smith, 1989, p. 154). He claimed to George Plimpton to have written it along with "The Killers" and "Ten Indians" all in the same day, possibly during a manic interlude. "I had so much juice I thought maybe I was going crazy," he told Plimpton (1986, p. 122). His mood did not last long; that same month he wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "I feel too low to write" (Baker, 1981, p. 203). Hemingway's self-disgust was profound: He signed another letter to Fitzgerald, "Ernest M. Shit" (Baker, 1981, p. 205).

Hemingway was guilt-stricken over his adulterous affair with Pauline Pfeiffer. In February he had sailed to New York to switch publishers, and upon his return, stayed in Paris with Pauline rather than going on to Schruns, Austria, where his wife, Hadley, and their son were staying (Baker, 1969, pp. 165-66). As Hemingway himself (1964) later acknowledged in *A Moveable Feast*, "I did my business in New York and when I got back to Paris I should have caught the first train from the Gare de l'Est that would take me down to Austria. But the girl I was in love with was in Paris then, and I did not take the first train, or the second or the third" (p. 210). In a passage that does not appear in the published book, he wrote that "the unbelievable wrenching, killing happiness, selfishness and treachery of everything we did gave me such a terrible remorse" (Baker, 1969, pp. 165-66).

Hemingway's conscience seems to have tormented him for a long time over his betrayal of his wife. "Ernest felt very sorry that he was doing this to me," Hadley herself told researcher Alice Sokoloff (Diliberto, 1992, p. 230). "He had dreadful remorse. It made me suffer to see the way he suffered for me. I don't think he ever did get over it, but I tried to make him feel it was all right" (Diliberto, 1992, p. 230). Biographer Carlos Baker (1969) notes that Hemingway was contemplating suicide as early as March 1926 (two months before he wrote "Today is Friday"), citing as evidence Hemingway's own journal entry, in which he contemplates the mechanics of suicide at some length:

> I like to think about death and the various ways of dying. And I think probably the best way, unless you could arrange to die some way while asleep, would be to go off a liner at night. That way there could be no doubt about the thing going through and it does not seem a nasty death. There would only be the moment of taking the jump and it is very easy for me to take almost any sort of jump. Also it would never be definitely known what happened and there would be no post mortems and no expenses left for any one to pay and there

> would always be the chance that you might be given credit for an accident. (Baker, 1969, p. 167)

Hemingway resumed his affair with Pauline at the end of March, and Hadley confronted him about it later that spring (Baker, 1969, p. 168). Hemingway was profoundly troubled by his betrayal of his wife and later confessed in a November 12th letter to Pauline, "Last fall I said perfectly calmly and not bluffingly and during one of the good times that if this wasn't cleared up by Christmas I would kill myself" (Baker, 1981, p. 222). He wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald in September 1926, "Still having been in hell now since around last Christmas with plenty of insomnia to light the way around so I could study the terrain I get sort of used to it and even fond of it and probably would take pleasure in showing people around. As we make our hell we certainly should like it" (Baker, 1981, p. 217). In November, he wrote Fitzgerald, "Anyway I'm now all through with the general bumping off phase and will only bump off now under certain special circumstances which I don't think will arise. Have refrained from any half turnings on of the gas or slitting of the wrist with sterilized safety razor blades" (Baker, 1981, p. 232). Clearly, before writing "Today is Friday," Hemingway had experienced suicidal thoughts and what certainly sounds like clinical depression.

There is no evidence that Mel Gibson has ever been diagnosed with either depression or bipolar disorder. Yet his emotional volatility has been widely publicized and was evident very early in his career: "Intriguingly, Mel was at the time already becoming a two-levels personality, even admitting once that he had 'this maniac inside, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde thing'" (Clarkson, 1999, p. 44). One of the extras on the 1984 film *The Bounty* called him "a bit of a Jekyll and Hyde figure . . . in the day all solemn while at night he got drunk and did wild and crazy things" (Clarkson, 1999, p. 159). (Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is regarded by one researcher who herself has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder as a particularly apt rendering of what it is like to have "conflicting, or polar, selves" [Jamison, 1993, pp. 126-27].) An early girlfriend reported that Gibson had extreme mood swings: "He could have very solemn moods and be very miserable, [and] then he would be up again. I remember discussing the fact of there being no middle ground with him. He said he was on an even keel but the truth was that one moment he was funny, [and] the next he was quiet and introverted" (Clarkson, 1999, p. 75).

Biographers have noted his bouts with alcoholism, an affliction that he has said runs in his family (Clarkson, 1999, p. 316). While not all alcoholics are mentally ill, alcoholics are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with manic depression, perhaps in an attempt to self-medicate (Jamison, 1993, pp. 37-38); Hemingway, who was diagnosed with manic depression late in life, was himself a lifelong alcoholic. Gibson repeatedly drank until he blacked out (Clarkson, 1999, p. 193) and (like Hemingway) has sometimes become involved in bar brawls (Clarkson, 1999, pp. 269-70). He liked to mix a double Scotch with beer, a combination he called "liquid violence" (Clarkson, 1999, pp. 159-60). In April 1984 he was arrested in Toronto for drunk driving after he rear-ended another vehicle; he later pled guilty (Pendreigh, 1997, p. 109). "What I probably needed were some guys in white jackets," one biographer has quoted Gibson as saying about that time in retrospect. "I was going around the twist. I knew I had to channel the maniac inside me. I had to get hold of

it" (Perry, 1993, p. 128). He later conceded that a doctor had diagnosed damage to his liver as a result of his excessive drinking (Perry, 1993, p. 148).

His emotional volatility manifested itself in other ways, as well. In *Fade Out: The Calamitous Final Days of MGM*, Peter Bart writes of Gibson's 1984 film *Mrs. Soffel*, "By the time the shoot was over, some $50,000 had been spent to repair damage inflicted on his rented house in Toronto as a result of the actor's after-hours tantrums" (Pendreigh, 1997, p. 112). Gibson behaved erratically in interviews, cursing, spitting, confessing he was intoxicated, and calling *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* "a piece of shit" to an on-set reporter (Perry, 1993, pp. 135-37; Pendreigh, 1997, p. 117). In 1993, the tabloids published embarrassing photographs of a drunken Gibson drinking from a woman's high-heeled shoe and otherwise acting out and misbehaving after too much carousing in a Modesto, California, bar two years earlier; by the time the story had appeared, Gibson was a recovering alcoholic attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Clarkson, 1999, pp. 255-58; Perry, 1993, pp. 230-40). In a 2004 interview, he said, "I checked into a few places and sorted myself out. I didn't make a big noise about it" (*Mel*, 2004).

In August 2006, however, Gibson pleaded no contest to a charge of driving under the influence and was sentenced to three years' probation (*Mel*, 2006). A vitriolic anti-Semitic outburst during his arrest received worldwide publicity and resulted in two public statements of apology from the star, who was also sentenced to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings several times a week for a year. Gibson volunteered to enter a rehabilitation program and make public service announcements.

Gibson has publicly admitted his own difficulties with emotions: "I'm not the most articulate guy. I think a lot of men from Australia are not too good about expressing their feelings" (Pendreigh, 1997, p. 160). Nevertheless, he began seeing a psychiatrist soon after a promotional tour for *Hamlet* (Clarkson, 1999, p. 301). The scene in which Martin Riggs, Gibson's character in *Lethal Weapon*, holds a gun to his head genuinely frightened the director with its intensity, and both the director and Gibson later told (probably apocryphal) stories in which they claimed the gun might have had a real bullet in it (Perry, 1993, 152; Pendreigh, 1997, pp. 126-27). It's probably not coincidental that he has chosen to play so many troubled characters who flirt with suicide—not just Riggs, but also Fletcher Christian and Hamlet: "In all three instances, the viewer is left uncertain of whether he is performing like a lunatic to unsettle his foes or if he really is a lunatic who has lost control" (Perry, 1993, pp. 211-12). Gibson himself has been quoted singling out Hamlet's mental instability as the central element in his personality: "He's a minefield of contradictions and ambiguities and can be both acutely sensitive and brutally cruel, and he has no sense of proportion or timing. Hamlet can be rational, yet volatile. The man was a livin' time bomb and that's how I decided to play him" (Perry, 1993, p. 200). During the filming of the 1991 movie *Hamlet*, Gibson confessed to a friend "that sometimes he felt like shooting himself" (Pendreigh, 1997, p. 151).

Faith and salvation from suicide

Both Gibson and Hemingway draw on a longstanding tradition within muscular Christianity that its peculiar combination of faith and athleticism could cure depression—or, to use the late nineteenth-century term, "neurasthenia"—an illness

characterized by "headaches, backaches, worry, hypochondria, melancholia, digestive irregularities, [and] nervous exhaustion"(Putney, 2001, pp. 26-28).

Gibson has acknowledged to a reporter that faith has helped him with the problems in his life (Perry, 1993, p. 222). More recently, he has publicly credited his faith with literally saving his life: "At the height of his stardom, he has said, he was drowning in fame, wealth, drink and despair—until he fell to his knees, asked God's help and returned to the rigid Catholicism of his youth" ("Gospel of Mel," 2004, p. 82). In a 2004 interview with Diane Sawyer, Gibson has perhaps been most open about the role his faith played in saving him from killing himself, telling interviewer Diane Sawyer that the film originated in a suicidal moment he experienced 13 years earlier:

> Am I going to jump? Am I going to go on? I don't want to do either. I don't want to live. I don't want to die. You ask yourself all these Hamlet questions, and eventually you just have to say, 'I'm not good enough to figure this out. I don't know. I just don't know. Help! If there's anything out there, help!' And if you're lucky, you'll recognize the signs of that help. (*Mel,* 2004)

When Sawyer probed for specifics, asking, "You thought of jumping out a window?" Gibson responded, "I really did, yeah. I was looking down thinking, 'It is just *easier* this way.' You have to be mad—you have to be insane to despair that way. But that is the height of spiritual bankruptcy. There's nothing left . . ." (*Mel*, 2004). He turned to prayer, rereading the Gospels and meditating upon their meaning. "I had to use the Passion of Christ and wounds to heal my wounds," he has said ("Gospel of Mel," 2004, p. 82). He told Sawyer "I have to" believe in the Gospels' message. "Have to?" she asked, and he affirmed, "I have to." "For?" she responded. "For my own sake," Gibson answered. "So I can hope" (*Mel*, 2004). By his own testimony, then, it is his faith that saves him from the sin of suicidal despair.

Hemingway was less overt about recognizing faith as a source of strength in his own struggles with mental illness. But in January 1926 (just five months before composing "Today is Friday"), he wrote, "If I am anything I am a Catholic. Had extreme unction administered to me as such in July 1918 and recovered. So I guess I'm a Super-Catholic. . . . Am not what is called a 'good' Catholic. . . . But cannot imagine taking any other religion seriously" (Meyers, 1985, p. 184). H. R. Stoneback (1991) has documented that Hemingway attended Mass regularly from December 1925 to 1927 (p. 129).

Perhaps part of the attraction of Catholicism for both men is the role that it gives Mary. Women have generally received short shrift in the Protestant muscular Christian tradition; crafting a *Catholic* muscular Christianity offers scope for a revision of that traditional exclusion of women. In an implicit condemnation of the disciples, Hemingway notes in his short story which followers remain with Christ throughout his final hours: "Just the women stuck by him" (Hemingway, 1938, p.358), a point that is then reiterated twice more in the text. Of course, he also has the soldiers admire Mary Magdalene's good looks and vulgarly acknowledge the tradition (now widely discredited by Biblical scholars) that she was a prostitute ("I used to see her around the town," says the first soldier [Hemingway, 1938, p.358]). Gibson emphasizes the Virgin Mary's sufferings as a mother and makes her the

audience surrogate, the focal character of Christ's passion. We witness Christ's sufferings through her eyes.

In their art, both Hemingway and Gibson make it clear that Christ is so important partly because his suffering is not that different from ours. Betrayal is the shared human condition (Flora, 1993). Probably because of preoccupation with his own guilt, it is also the theme of all three of the short stories Hemingway finished in a single day in 1926 (Flora, 1993, pp. 18-19). The title of "Today is Friday" refers not only to the Good Friday of the Crucifixion but to *today*, the day we read this play. Its contemporary dialogue further suggests that we are complicit in Christ's death.

Gibson chooses Aramaic and Latin dialogue, yet despite this potentially distancing choice, his film, too, underscores the audience's complicity in Christ's execution: "It's the director's left hand nailing Jesus to the cross. The cameo is more than a Hitchcockian gimmick. Gibson feels his telling of the Passion holds all humanity responsible for the death of Jesus. And he has said, 'I'm first on line for culpability. I did it'" ("Gospel of Mel," 2004, p. 88). In addressing a group of religious leaders in Chicago, Gibson told them, "For culpability, look to yourself. I look to myself" (Neff, 2004, p. 33).

Critic Wirt Williams (1981) contends that in Hemingway's *Weltanschauung*, all men share not only in the guilt for Christ's betrayal but also in Christ's suffering: "they are born to be crucified and to triumph, if they can, within that crucifixion" (p. 164). Philip Young (1966), alluding to a famous line from *A Farewell to Arms*, makes a similar point: "the world not only breaks, it crucifies, everyone," and "when it comes, and they nail you up, the important thing is to be pretty good in there" (p. 130).

The importance of pain

Both Hemingway and Gibson are using the Crucifixion as a trope for the intense physical and mental suffering of depression. Referring to Christ's trial, scourging, and the procession up the hill to His execution, Diane Sawyer observes that "In Gibson's film it becomes an intricate, almost unrelenting choreography of pain" (*Mel,* 2004). Many viewers find the film's violence gratuitous, and one New Testament scholar has publicly complained that Gibson has put brutality at the heart of Christianity (*Mel*, 2004). While the scholar meant this comment as a criticism, it accurately describes Gibson's project. For Gibson, Christ's pain *is* the point. "He was beaten for our iniquities. He was wounded for our transgressions. And by His Wounds we are healed. That's the point of the film," Gibson told Sawyer, drawing on Isaiah 53:5.

In some ways, *The Passion of the Christ* is the apotheosis of Gibson's career, a career devoted to playing battered and bruised icons of masculinity. Notable examples include his characters in the films *Lethal Weapon* (where Martin Riggs is sprayed with water and then shocked with electricity while he hangs by the wrists from the ceiling), *Payback* (where Porter is shot, run over, repeatedly beaten, and sledgehammered), and *Braveheart* (where William Wallace is stretched on the rack and then disemboweled). As Jeffrey A. Brown wrote presciently in 2002, "The self-sacrificing, Christ-like violence suffered by Gibson's characters not only proves the superiority of their manliness but also sanctifies the supposedly higher moral value of that manliness. The Gibson protagonist suffers not just for himself but for a higher purpose, and thus his followers in the films (and by extension we in the audience) are saved" (Brown, 2002, p. 137).

These characters prefigure Gibson's direction of actor James Caviezel as the protagonist of *The Passion of the Christ.* "This is a Jesus who can take the pain," one film critic has said. "Mel Gibson has reinvented Jesus in his own image" ("Gospel of Mel," 2004, p. 83). Gibson has acknowledged that the film's intensity is intentional:

> I wanted it to be shocking, and I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge, and it does that. I think it pushes one over the edge so that they see the enormity—the enormity of that sacrifice—to see that someone could endure all that and still come back with love and forgiveness even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule. (*Mel*, 2004)

As Gibson himself puts it, "Pain is the precursor to change. That's the good news" (*Mel*, 2004).

Hemingway draws on Tertullian, a native of Carthage (now Tunisia), North Africa, born around 150 A.D. and the first Christian theologian to write in Latin, to make the same point. An alternate title Hemingway rejected for the story is "Today is Friday, or The Seed of the Church" (Smith, 1989, p.154). The second title is an allusion to Tertullian's famous quotation, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" (qtd. in Pearse). Christ's martyrdom is what causes Christianity to blossom.

While I am presenting a case here for a particular reading of these two works, it is important to note that both Hemingway's short story and Gibson's film have been read as distasteful, and in the case of the film, even as sadistic or pornographic. Both works also have troubling anti-Semitic elements. Hemingway uses the term "kike," which belatedly reveals that George, the tavernkeeper, is Jewish, only after he has George say of the Crucifixion, "I'll tell you, gentleman, I wasn't out there. It's a thing I haven't taken any interest in" (Hemingway, 1938, p. 357). His humor here is unpleasant and heavy-handed. As for Gibson's film, Diane Sawyer cited the history of the Passion Plays as incitements to anti-Semitism; traditionally, Jews have feared the Easter season because Good Friday was a day of pogroms ("Gospel of Mel," 2004, p. 86). While it is not in my judgment genuinely anti-Semitic, the film does show some stereotyped Jewish figures and does seem to hold the Jewish high priest Caiaphas more responsible than the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for Christ's crucifixion.

It seems evident that both artists intended their work to be understood as a tribute to Christ's suffering, but if that was in fact the way the story and film were intended to be read, then both have been subjected to multiple misreadings. Audiences have read the linkage of sport and faith in Hemingway's film as a trivialization of faith (rather than as an elevation of sport); similarly, filmgoers have found it difficult to relate Christ's extraordinary physical suffering in Gibson's film to their own lives. Neither work, then, has entirely achieved its creator's goals for it. Yet both men value these works. Hemingway asked for the manuscript back when he sent the play off to be published (Smith, 1989, p. 155) and included "Today is Friday" in anthologies for the rest of his life. Gibson has admitted to investing roughly $30 million of his own money into his film (*Mel*, 2004).

Christ's choice

Both men seem particularly fascinated with the *self-willed* quality of Christ's suffering on the cross. Perhaps it is because both contemplated escaping from their own emotional suffering through suicide that they both so admire a Lord who chose to endure suffering that He could easily have chosen to escape. Christ voluntarily *chooses* the Crucifixion. Biblical scholars have pointed out that Jesus could have escaped from the Garden of Gethsemane before His arrest but chose not to take any of the possible escape routes, instead allowing Himself to be captured and put on trial (*Mel*, 2004). As one of the Roman soldiers explains in "Today is Friday," "He didn't want to come down off the cross. That's not his play" (Hemingway, 1938, p. 357). He also chooses consciousness: "When Jesus was offered wine with myrrh (Mark 15:23) before he was put on the cross, a palliative to lessen the pain, he refused. He suffered the lengthy agony of crucifixion cold sober by choice. The centurions, on the other hand, afterward resort to alcohol and are a '*little cock-eyed*'" (Bennett, 1995, p. 206). The second soldier in "Today is Friday," the least sensitive of the three, simply refuses to believe that Christ would willingly have accepted this death: "When they first start nailing him, there's none of them wouldn't stop it if they could" (Hemingway, 1938, p. 357). The irony lies in the fact that Christ could stop it but chooses not to.

There is a haunting implication in the film that Christ Himself may have come very close to the kind of suicidal despair that both Hemingway and Gibson experienced: "Gibson's Satan . . . functions throughout this film as the visual and constant reminder of the temptation to terminal despair that tortures Jesus even more than his physical punishment" (Woodward, 2004, p. 15). If we accept this reading, Christ becomes—like Hemingway, like Gibson—a man battling suicidal despair to triumph spiritually not just in spite of, but because of, his own suffering. It is in this sense that Christ becomes an exemplar for all of us: "'Today is Friday' is Hemingway's assessment of the degree to which Christ is a true exemplar figure for modern man" (Bennett, 1995, p. 204).

I want to suggest that both "Today is Friday" and *The Passion of the Christ* are works of gratitude—moral reparations, working off a debt. These men are trying to give to others (and perhaps especially to vigorous, athletic, otherwise healthy young men suffering from depression) what they believe Christ has, through His suffering, given to them—a spiritual exemplar, the moral strength to reject suicidal despair, a sense of hope. As usual, Gibson (2003) is more open about his aims, writing in his (unpaginated) foreword to the book *The Passion: Photography from the Movie* The Passion of the Christ, "My new hope is that *The Passion of the Christ* will help many more people recognize the power of His love and let Him help them to save their own lives."

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Notes

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[1] George Monteiro has traced the relationship between Barton's work and Hemingway's in more detail. Barton's book was heavily influenced by his father (Fried, 2005, p. 89), the Rev. William Barton, who like Hemingway's father received a degree from Oberlin (Fried, 2005, p. 8), center of the Muscular Christianity movement in America. Intriguingly (given the thesis of this essay), Barton—like both Hemingway and Gibson—experienced his own bouts with mental instability. According to his biographer, he suffered from insomnia intermittently until the late 1920s (Fried, 2005, pp. 18-19, 82-83, 142, 240n29) and described himself soon after his senior year of college as "frightened" that "[he] might lose [his] mind" and "on the edge of a nervous breakdown" (Fried, 2005, p. 19).

[2] Kathleen Verduin (1987) has traced the presence of muscular Christianity in Hemingway's writings but mentions "Today is Friday" only briefly and does not note Ed Hemingway's involvement in the movement as a result of his Oberlin education.

Lisa Tyler, Professor of English
Department of English, Sinclair Community College, 444 W. Third Street
Dayton, OH 45402-1460/USA
e: Lisa.Tyler@sinclair.edu