

JOURNEY TOWARD SCEPTICISM:

The Novels of Alden Nowlan

by

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## ABSTRACT

Alden Nowlan's two novels, The Wanton Troopers and various persons named kevin o'brien, reveal to readers the journey of a main character, Kevin O'Brien, from Christianity and faith to scepticism and exploration. The Wanton Troopers shows readers that the practise of religion can be easily manipulated and that, in the novel, religion serves oneself rather than one's God. Nowlan's second novel, Various persons named kevin o'brien, introduces an adult Kevin and his mature, more critical perceptions. The abuse of religion in Nowlan's novels, along with Kevin's doubt and confusion, leave readers wondering what role "God" plays in religious belief -- which is exactly what Nowlan intends. According to Nowlan, to believe that God exists, rather than to acknowledge Him simply as a possibility, is foolish. Instead, he urges readers to consider religion as just one of many possible philosophies, a way of making sense of life, but to also acknowledge that religion is not an "answer" but merely another hypothesis. In the end, Kevin O'Brien, Nowlan's main character, rejects blind acceptance of religion in favor of a more sceptical mindset. He finds his power through writing and thinking, rather than through religion. Religion may or may not be valid, Nowlan's novel asserts, but one's power lies in one's ability to continue to search for meaning, rather than to assume that it has been found.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a painting by Paul Klee of the young Jesus being spanked across his mother's knees. He is naked, and his halo has fallen to the floor. (Nowlan, various persons named kevin o'brien 49)

Alden Nowlan, although primarily known as a poet, also has to his credit numerous prose works, both fictional and non-fictional. However, in his entire literary career, he wrote only two novels, The Wanton Troopers, written in 1961-1962 and published posthumously in 1988, and various persons named kevin o'brien, written intermittently after 1967 and published in 1973. It is surprising to note how few scholars have approached these novels from a critical perspective. Even more surprising, however, is that, although the theme of poverty has been explored to some degree, another primary theme, religion, has been almost wholly neglected by the literary community.

Religious themes in Nowlan's poetry have, however, been explored by Patrick Toner in his M.A. thesis entitled The Passionate Profane: Puritanism and Paganism in the Poetry of Alden Nowlan (1993). Many of Nowlan's poems have religious and mystical themes, and Toner sees a distinct progression in these poems. According to Toner's thesis, Nowlan's poetry "shows evidence of religious exploration, from an embracing of christianity [sic] at one extreme, to a flirtation with the supernatural at the other . . . . Nowlan's quest to find his own personal religious beliefs, in effect the creation of his own 'pagan' religion, breaks down under the contradictory urges that warred within his soul" (Toner Passionate Profane 2,3). In the end, Toner suggests, Nowlan's point of resolution occurs when he finds a "new mythology" within "songs, stories and beliefs of his own Maritime people, which he celebrates in this [the] final phase of his poetry" (Toner Passionate Profane 3). Toner asserts that Nowlan attempts to "find a place for himself in

the larger scheme of things” (Toner Passionate Profane 67) According to Toner, Nowlan the man was on a religious quest: “Nowlan’s struggle to come to terms with religious ideology (-ies) is a theme [so] nakedly obvious throughout his entire canon” (Toner Passionate Profane 1). Thus, Toner asserts that Nowlan’s poetry not only enabled him to explore religion philosophically but also to search for individual religious resolution.

Nowlan’s avid interest in religious themes is reinforced by his decision to explore these themes in his two novels, The Wanton Troopers and various persons named kevin o’brien. Just as Nowlan’s poetry reveals a distinct progression in its exploration of religious themes, so too do his novels. Thus, Nowlan’s main character, Kevin O’Brien, moves from an acceptance of traditional Christianity at the beginning of The Wanton Troopers to religious scepticism in various persons named kevin o’brien.

In Nowlan’s first novel, The Wanton Troopers, there first appears to be a “blind” (unquestioned) acceptance of Christianity by Nowlan’s characters, including Nowlan’s child character, Kevin O’Brien. As the story progresses, Nowlan demonstrates through his characters that a literal adherence to religion can have a negative impact. Instead of the selfless worship that Christianity demands, there is, in The Wanton Troopers, a paradoxical worship of the self. Adult characters use religious rhetoric to justify their own ends, and such hypocrisy, all within a framework of puritanism and fundamentalism, demonstrates how easily abused religion can be. Religious practice in The Wanton Troopers, therefore, has little to do with the possible existence of a higher power; instead, it is a means of adults attaining power. In The Wanton Troopers, characters endorse the concept of God in order to find comfort in their suffering, justify their criticism against others, or empower themselves in situations where they would otherwise feel helpless.

Christianity promotes this sense of power, because God is allegedly all-loving, all-powerful and on the side of His children at all times. For the believers, religion also guarantees entrance into heaven upon repentance or, in the case of Calvinism, at least assures a part in a greater plan. Thus, it is not surprising that Nowlan's characters find solace and purpose within the confines of religious belief. Although sorely and sorrowfully tested, the main character in The Wanton Troopers, an abused but imaginative child named Kevin O'Brien, constantly thinks in religious terms. And, although the overall picture of religion that emerges is negative, the end of this novel shows a distraught Kevin pleading to God. Thus, he is still a Christian, albeit a wounded one, despite all that he has endured. However, the injustice of the unsettling ending, combined with the misuses of religion that Nowlan presents to his readers throughout the book, sets the tone. Many characters in Nowlan's first novel use religion to manipulate other people rather than to worship a higher power. Such a realization invites scepticism, and thus it is not surprising that Kevin O'Brien, Nowlan's main character, becomes increasingly confused and angry. Nowlan's second novel, various persons named kevin o'brien, further explores the religious crisis of Kevin by having him grow up and become consciously sceptical.

In between the two novels in terms of chronology lies one of Nowlan's short-story collections, miracle at indian river (1968). While not all of these stories contain religious themes, the collection does display Nowlan's growing awareness of the abuses in religious practise. In particular, the title story shows the despicable plan of a preacher determined to marry off his young parishioners. Michael Brian Oliver asserts that "Miracle at Indian River" [story] is Nowlan's "most blatant and humorous portrayal of



rural Puritanical fanaticism . . .” (14). Although “Miracle at Indian River” is slightly more elusive than most of Nowlan’s writing, with the preacher being portrayed as a messenger of God, it becomes clear when closely examined that the preacher is little more than a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a trickster with holy status. Nowlan’s religious scepticism is evident in his satirical and humorous portrayal of this manipulative preacher.

The Wanton Troopers, reinforced by miracle at indian river, takes readers from the characters’ almost fanatical endorsement of Christianity at the beginning to some kind of a religious crisis at the end. However, Nowlan’s second novel resolves this crisis, replacing it with scepticism. Various persons named kevin o’Brien is the sequel to The Wanton Troopers, and readers are presented with an adult Kevin O’Brien. The older Kevin possesses a job as a journalist and a tendency toward reflection, fueling the argument for critics who assert that Nowlan’s novels are semi-autobiographical. Tuned into both past and present, the mature Kevin O’Brien seems oddly different from the frightened and angry Kevin O’Brien of the first novel. The child Kevin was heartbroken at the departure of his mother. Indeed, it is a feat of the imagination to justify the young Kevin as being the same person as the adult Kevin who has all but forgotten his mother. Most importantly, though, the mature Kevin is no longer a devout Christian; he no longer turns to God for help or comfort. In this sense, he represents the worldliness often found in the tone of Nowlan’s poetry as well.

Born in the poverty-stricken community of Stanley, Nova Scotia, in 1933, Nowlan himself grew up in an area rich in religious influence. His own community was aware of religion but embraced it with a suspicious air: “My grandmother [who lived with

Nowlan] believed in Heaven and Hell, in angels and Christ – but in witches and ghosts, too. No, they [Nowlan’s Stanley “people”] weren’t concerned really with the moral aspects of religion. None of them were greatly concerned with going to church or things like that” (qtd. in Toner Passionate Profane 12). As for Nowlan himself, he had read the Bible three times by the age of fourteen but claims that it was “not because I was terribly devout, but because it was practically the only book in the house” (An Introduction).

Nominally, his family was Baptist.

In no other part of Canada have Baptists formed such a large proportion of the population or had such a profound influence on the existing popular culture . . . . On Prince Edward Island, the Baptist Church was never an important force, but, in 1901, taking Nova Scotia and New Brunswick as a single entity, the Baptists were the largest Protestant denomination in this area [i.e. the Maritimes] . . . . (Rawlyk 41)

With such a strong Baptist tradition, it is logical that, even twenty years after 1901, the Baptist influence would still be a factor in Maritime religion. Fundamentalism was also strong around the time of Alden Nowlan’s birth, and in the early 1930s, there was much controversy amongst Baptist fundamentalists because of the perceived liberalism of the primary Baptist educational institution, Acadia University, geographically situated near Nowlan’s birthplace:

They [Maritime fundamentalists] had enough of what they regarded as the modernist convention and they were disgusted with what they heard was going on at Acadia [University]. According to them, divinity students were being taught that the Bible was not inerrant; it was like any other book. (Rawlyk 54)

Fundamentalists felt that “Their professors openly scoffed at the ‘divinity of the Lord,’ and the Genesis view of Creation. Evolution was taught as the inspired gospel of the new scientific elite” (Rawlyk 54). To a fundamentalist, “progress” was a word to be

distrusted, not a sign of societal advance but of blasphemous denial of divine doctrine.

Extreme fundamentalism taught that the Earth was created by God in the fashion outlined in the Old Testament and that the purpose of individuals was to procreate and lead pure lives in accordance with God's rules and demands.

Nowlan's understanding of the fundamentalism prominent in Maritime society in his youth is demonstrated in both of his novels, particularly in the character of Martha O'Brien. In The Wanton Troopers, Martha epitomizes the fundamentalist view by taking to heart each word of the Bible, believing in the wrath of God and lecturing on the duty of human beings to accept "God's will" (e.g. poverty) without resistance. Kevin and his mother, Mary, are the exceptions to this fundamentalist view, the only characters who rage against accepting their mediocre existence. They retain hope. Thus, they both revolt against Martha's religious severity and ultimately leave Lockhartville (although Kevin remains there until the second novel).

One should remember, of course, that Nowlan's boyhood Stanley was a very small community and that religion in his family was looked upon not so much with awe as with suspicious reverence. For example, in addition to appeasing God, Nowlan's grandmother "played the autoharp and believed in witches" ("Poet's View of Canada" 61). Also worth noting is that The Wanton Troopers is set in a poor, working-class community (Lockhartville) akin to Nowlan's home community of Stanley. In both cases, the view of religion is likely to be affected by impoverishment. Being poor makes people feel helpless, alone and desperate; poverty creates the need to depend on something or someone. In Nowlan's novels, religion fills this need.

Certainly Alden Nowlan himself had a strong spiritual side. In 1975, he said that he had a “very strong, almost primitive, sense of the sacredness of objects and things”:

. . . I named one of my early books *The Things Which Are* after St. John the Divine being told by the angel to write ‘the things which thou hast seen and the things which are’. . . . There is a kind of truth in a beer can, you know. If you say, “There’s a beer-can,” that’s something everyone can establish. They can go and see if it’s there. But if you say “the ineluctable Providence is shining down upon you,” you don’t know whether it is or not. (Int. with J.Metcalf 16)

Nowlan is not proclaiming disbelief here, but he does “qualify” belief in a conventional view of God. As Thomas Smith asserts, “Alden Nowlan’s poems demonstrate what is still possible when one has courage to face without denial the worst truths of our time and ourselves” (Foreword 23). Nowlan would be happy with this assessment, as it suits not only his poetry but also his prose and his life. In a poem appropriately called “Religion,” Nowlan asserts that “The real religion of an age / consists of what men / find it impossible / to disbelieve” (*Between Tears and Laughter* 95). In his own life, Nowlan seemed willing to explore almost anything, even the reactionary; “One evening of talk at his house led to his founding, with philosopher Ferrari and others, of the Flat Earth Society, which grew into an international organization” (Gibbs, Intro. xvi). Granted, many Nowlan scholars believe that the Flat Earth Society (FES) was not meant to be taken seriously:

At its core was a valid assertion -- that societal assumptions should not be pre-empted by accepted scientific fact . . . . Still, like the Stuart Monarchy [another far-fetched -- yet possible -- theory of Nowlan’s], the FES was initially founded as an excuse to distribute titles and positions, to form committees, to publish pamphlets and membership cards, and to organize meetings, all the while satirizing such acts. (Steeves lvi)

Those who argue that there was *no* substance to the Flat Earth Society might be intrigued by his poem, “Scratchings,” which states that “No one is more / pitifully foolish / than the person / who attempts to prove / by argument / that the world is round” (Nowlan, *I’m A Stranger Here Myself*, 74). Despite the obvious irony here, the mere fact that Nowlan contemplated the possibility of a flat Earth reinforces the view of him as a speculative if reactionary thinker. Nowlan believes in challenging orthodox views. Thus he is iconoclastic enough to show readers through his prose (and poetry) that religion may ultimately be more about human beings and their need to understand the world than about a divine being.

Patrick Toner argues that Nowlan’s life was “grounded in” puritanism and that, in fact, “Nowlan invites his reader to be aware of the effect of puritanism in his life and in his society with titles such as *The Rose and the Puritan* [poetry collection] and ‘Poem for the Golden Wedding of my Puritan Grandparents’” (*Passionate Profane* 7). Even Nowlan’s place of birth reinforces this perception: “If the Maritimes has a ‘bible belt,’ then Hants County, Nova Scotia, the place of Nowlan’s birth and childhood, would be the buckle on that belt” (Toner *Passionate Profane* 10).

Michael Brian Oliver recognizes this aspect of Nowlan’s work, but his analysis is, to use Toner’s word, “over-psychologised” (*Passionate Profane* 35), full of eloquent but decorative metaphorical language:

. . . an incessantly rampaging Puritanism has divided life for Nowlan’s rural Maritimers into the two traditional realms of light and darkness, the world of light occupying the upper level of consciousness and representing social rationalism, and the world of darkness occupying the lower level of consciousness and representing individual passion . . . the upper realm of light includes such qualities as reason, conscience, and social role, and

the lower level of darkness includes such qualities as imagination, desire, and individuality. (Oliver 9)

By allowing himself to question the world and understand it in different ways, Nowlan challenges his own engrained puritanical standards. However, as Michael Oliver and Patrick Toner both argue, Nowlan eventually becomes “a man fully aware of himself, but not self-conscious, a man emptied of personal evasions, ready to view life philosophically and ready to share his observations with his readers” (Oliver 28). Indeed, Nowlan seems more than ready, in his two novels, to share with readers the views and questions on religion and God that Toner identifies as also informing Nowlan’s poetry.

In his thesis, The Passionate Profane: Puritanism and Paganism in the Poetry of Alden Nowlan, Toner’s primary claim is that Nowlan’s poetry reflects both a religious exploration and a progression. According to Toner, Nowlan’s inner conflict is projected into his poetry as he tries to break free of his puritanical background without necessarily giving up his religion completely:

On the one hand, Nowlan sees a need to invest ordinary events in life with a sacramental importance yet on the other, he expresses a need to break through the ceremonial trappings of religion in order to experience the faith and power that lie beyond. (Passionate Profane 3)

Toner further asserts that “Nowlan’s religious ideas as expressed in his poetry became more self-centered and personal at the time of his life when he was being ‘discovered’ as a poet, and when his entire life was being threatened by cancer” (Passionate Profane 2). However, the result for Nowlan was not, in the traditional sense, religious. Rather, it was a peace of mind, a compromise between scepticism and Christian dependence:

Nowlan has reached [in his last two poetry collections] a reconciliation between his need to reject what he sees as his

harsh religious upbringing and his need to find a religious myth with which he can identify. His faith finds a balance between his superstitious “cult of one” and the restrictions of a more organised religion. (Toner Passionate Profane 3)

Nowlan presumably finds a spiritual space but within the fellowship of human relationships and customs. Within this fellowship, there is a unique spiritual bond of a verifiable, trustworthy kind. To Nowlan, the ordinary is sacred.

Toner writes that “Nowlan mistrusts the impersonal exercise of power” (Passionate Profane 25) and its authoritative and mysterious nature makes religion impersonal and immensely powerful. Toner acknowledges that Nowlan is not above criticizing “those institutions that use religious trappings to impose conformity on people’s lives” (Passionate Profane 22), and religion itself, as an organization, is a tool for creating and maintaining conformity. Thus it makes sense for Nowlan to strive for something different, to find a belief without the confines of absolute complacency and “blind” commitment. In his life, one can only guess the result of his own searching, but in his prose, he never finds a suitable compromise; thus Kevin O’Brien, the main character of Nowlan’s novels, eventually loses his Christian faith in favor of a more sceptical stance.

The religious progression of Kevin O’Brien from a “blind” acceptance of Christianity to a more critical religious outlook is mirrored by the progression in Nowlan’s poetry as explored by Patrick Toner. Although one could turn to any one of various poems to illustrate Nowlan’s ability to examine religious themes, one particular poem, from What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread (1993 140), seems most appropriate:

### **A White Book Lies Open**

A white book lies open  
on the Pope's coffin.

A page rises,  
stands upright  
for a moment,  
falls  
and is still.

As if the corpse  
had stood up  
in its white burial  
garments  
to draw just one  
more breath.

Seeing this,  
our ancestors  
would have dropped  
to their knees.

We call it the wind.

Here, Nowlan presents an ambiguous view of religion, even an agnostic view, as it “tilts the balance away from the miraculous possibilities of conventional Christianity” (Toner Passionate Profane 56). Such ambiguity reinforces our image of Nowlan as an open-minded explorer.

In an sacrilegious article, called “The Gospel according to Gadh [God]” (17) and published in 1982, Nowlan’s view of Christianity is uncompromising. Nowlan compares the universe to “a little one-story house with an attic called Heaven and a basement called Hell” (17). Gadh “eavesdrops” on the “inhabitants” of his house, and “If, in the course of his eavesdropping, he overhears someone mutter, ‘There is no Gadh,’ he throws a tantrum and will not rest until the poor sod is shut away in the basement called Hell” (17).



Nowlan goes on to comment on how odd it is for the Devil to punish those in Hell, as they are his followers rather than Gadh's followers and concludes that "It goes so contrary to experience that a man might reasonably suspect that Gadh wasn't being wholly honest about the Devil" (17). Even Gadh's values and credibility fall under Nowlan's irony:

Gadh is not much concerned about war, famine, plague and pestilence. He is not concerned at all about the exploitation of one human being by another. What worries Gadh, what can positively infuriate him, is a naked human body. He is also obsessed with who sleeps with whom . . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 also abhors drinking, rock music and most books, apparently because of his abiding fear that somewhere someone might be happy. (17)

Nowlan ends his article by submitting that "the deity described by the TV evangelists is grossly ignorant, unspeakably silly, despicably vain, insanely paranoid and disgustingly dirty-minded . . . . I would far, far rather worship George Burns" (17). Perhaps Nowlan is merely playing "devil's advocate" here, but his view as a writer, just over seven months prior to his death, is definitely that of an ironist.

Only a few months later, Nowlan remains sceptical or cautious but his views seem a far cry from those of the man who wrote the sarcastic commentary on "Gadh." He asserts the opinion that every person is "utterly and permanently alone" and that "our associations with other people is just a sort of merciful way [uh] that God has given us, momentarily concealing that fact from ourselves" (An Introduction to Alden Nowlan).

Asked about the possibility of an after-life, he responds:

The only way in which I really ever found it possible [you know] to believe in a self-conscious life after death, is in a kind of shadow world, which perhaps wouldn't be all that

pleasant. You know, [uh, uh], in a world in which perhaps you don't even know that you're dead. (An Introduction to Alden Nowlan)

Unlike many people who are afraid to ponder death, Nowlan confronts it. In 1966, while living in Saint John, Nowlan had reluctantly gone to the doctor regarding a lump on his throat and had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. He survived, although his face “became swollen and numb. He grew a beard from then on because he could not shave” (Scott 23). However, he was not at all certain at the time that he would survive. He even chose pallbearers and gave funeral instructions. Physical changes had jaded his perception of himself but, not one to be defeated, he developed greater literary power as a result of his battle: “According to Claudine Nowlan [his wife], the crisis had the positive effect of turning Nowlan’s energy away from journalism and toward serious literary production” (Smith, Foreword 17). Nowlan had faced his own mortality and, knowing his time on earth was limited, he had wanted his work to be significant.

Thinking about death, however, did not become a negative endeavor for Nowlan. In fact, he claimed in an interview, at forty-nine, that considering death for ten minutes each day was a healthy rather than a morbid idea that human beings should ponder: “[Those who did would be] much happier during the rest of the day and probably much kinder to the people around them” (An Introduction). In retrospect, one realizes that Nowlan’s desire to understand and persevere, to clarify and examine every particle of life, is what makes his novels’ religious message so powerful. Never content with easy answers, he never ignores the complex nor the obvious.

As for Alden Nowlan’s personal conclusions about life, death, life-after-death, and God, Nowlan’s interview leaves the impression that he was ultimately a sceptic,

which is appropriate for a man who spent his entire life posing questions. The most important thing to remember about Nowlan, however, is that, whatever his personal views might have been, he was not afraid to raise difficult questions, and the main character in his novels, Kevin O'Brien, confronts these same questions.

## CHAPTER ONE

“It was raining so hard that Kevin thought God must have torn a hole in the sky and let all of the rivers of heaven spill upon earth.”

(The Wanton Troopers 7)

These opening lines of Alden Nowlan’s The Wanton Troopers, a book written in 1961-1962 and published posthumously in 1988, introduce the main character, Kevin O’Brien. They immediately draw attention to his imaginative nature, a trait of vital importance to both this novel and its sequel, various persons named kevin o’Brien. But more importantly, readers are aware, from the first sentence of The Wanton Troopers, that Kevin O’Brien sees himself as a Christian; he believes in God. Such awareness is important, as it immediately directs the attention of readers towards one of Nowlan’s central themes, religious consciousness.

In The Wanton Troopers, Nowlan’s character, Kevin O’Brien, begins at a point of unexamined Christianity and progresses steadily toward impending religious conflict and confusion. Thus, it is appropriate for Nowlan’s opening lines to be ambivalent. One could argue that God’s “spill” of rain may be a kind and merciful gift, as no living thing could survive on Earth without rain. However, this “spill” could also be interpreted as anger, or wrath, supported by the alleged violent act of “tearing a hole in the sky.”

Certainly it could also be argued that the reference is an allusion to the Biblical flood:

[after the flood] God remembered Noah . . . and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged; The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the water from heaven was restrained . . . (Gen. 8:1-3)

Thus, Nowlan introduces, in his succinct opening sentence, elements of an imaginative main character, religion, and ambiguity. Throughout the rest of the novel, Nowlan ties

these aspects together. By exposing the futility of Kevin's religious faith and the abuse of religion by other characters, Nowlan leads Kevin toward an awareness of religious ambiguity. What emerges, at the end of the novel, are the seeds of Kevin's religious scepticism.

Kevin and his grandmother, Martha O'Brien, are both religiously obsessed, in that most of their thoughts and actions are considered in light of their religious beliefs. Although the obsession itself does not falter in the progression of the novel, there are many instances where readers clearly see that characters are not using religion to worship God so much as to protect, comfort, or empower themselves. In Lockhartville, it is clear that religion serves a multitude of purposes. Characters like Martha turn to religion to justify suffering, vindicate anger or criticism, empower themselves. Also, by reinforcing threats of religious punishment, Martha trains Kevin to think in ways which she deems appropriate. Thus, Nowlan's point about conventional religion is that it is a convention, created by human beings for their convenience.

A second aspect of religion in the novel lies in the religious progression of the central character. At the beginning of the book, if there is one character in The Wanton Troopers who truly seems to *believe* that God exists, it is Kevin O'Brien. However, although Kevin may seem too young to manipulate religion, his adherence to religion is shown to be utterly self-serving, as it is a childhood faith based upon personal need rather than sacred doctrine. Unlike Martha, Kevin is not self-righteous; thus, he does not purposely twist religious doctrine for his own purposes. Yet he is surrounded in the community by the tendency of people to use religion for their own purposes. Thus, religion, which starts as a comfort for him, inevitably becomes a source of conflict. At

the end of the novel, although he still professes to be a Christian, Kevin has been wounded, and readers are confronted not with his former blind faith but with his youthful desperate entreaty to God for answers. Kevin tries to maintain faith in the Christianity upon which he has built his young life, but after all that has happened, it can no longer sustain his trust. He still possesses the desire to believe in God, but he calls out to a God who may not answer.

The best example of a completely self-serving “religious” character is Martha O’Brien, Kevin’s grandmother. She constantly gives lectures to Kevin on various “sins” and frequently sings religious songs:

*There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins,  
And sinners plunged beneath that blood  
Lose all their guilty stains  
(Wanton Troopers 59)*

Such songs suggest that Martha is a Christian woman who believes in God. Moreover, her lifestyle suggests Christian asceticism: “She lived on crackers, soaked in milk until they’d become an oozing pulp, but her soul was nourished on the flesh offered in sacrifice to the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob” (Wanton Troopers 20). However, to “sacrifice” means to “offer” or “relinquish” something. In fact, the only thing Martha has relinquished voluntarily is hope. Giving up hope of a better life to live a humble and religious extremist existence is what gives her days apparent meaning and thus satisfaction. She is poor, so she accepts this as “God’s Will.” Because she has no realistic escape from her impoverishment, she accepts the inevitable. She is an older woman with arthritis, living in a place where even her younger, healthy son, Judd, cannot find steady employment. She lives a life which offers little relief and no chance of improvement.

Consequently, to cope with her meagre life, void of future prospects, Martha protects her religious convictions with an iron grip. Religion is the only power that Martha possesses: “Martha seemed to read [the Bible] less with piety than with grim satisfaction” (Wanton Troopers 59). Her “grim satisfaction” is likely a result of stoicism. She sits up singing religious songs late at night, holding a warm brick against her paining body, nursing discomfort. Consequently, Christianity allows her pain to have meaning: “‘Yer poor -- allus was an’ allus will be. There ain’t nothin’s gonna change that. The Good Lord meant fer it tuh be. The Good Lord meant fer folks like us tuh take what’s handed out tuh us an’ be grateful fer it” (Wanton Troopers 139). Martha’s stoicism is seen by her as a Christian virtue, but as Nowlan reveals, it is camouflage for her despair.

One could argue that Martha believes in predestination, reflecting an almost seventeenth-century Puritan outlook:

. . . some men are born rich and some poor, some intelligent and some stupid, some are lucky and others unfortunate, some are happy and some melancholy, some are saved and some are not. There is no reason but that God so ordained it. (Miller and Johnson 56)

Martha often rebukes Mary and Kevin: “‘We’re poor people,’ Grandmother O’Brien said. ‘It ain’t fittin’ fer people like us tuh put on airs’” (Wanton Troopers 20). There is no other way for her to maintain an illusion of purpose or control, so she sings religious songs repetitively, perhaps trying to convince herself that she is religiously inspired.

However pious Martha O’Brien pretends to be, she is vindictive. She undermines the integrity of those whom she does not respect. For example, she dislikes June Larlee, a friend of Kevin’s mother, so she deliberately sets the mark of the Devil against her:

“‘Eh, yes, Laddie -- when God was on the earth, women like her was stoned -- stoned to

death, laddie. Can't yuh see that sinful white flesh of hers turnin' black under the stones" (Wanton Troopers 90). Reinforcing the readers' perception of her hypocrisy is the fact that, after saying this, ". . . Martha O'Brien laughed!" (Wanton Troopers 90). Martha's entire religion is *self*-centred. She uses religion to empower her sense of self-righteousness.

Martha's self-serving use of religion is also evident in the way in which she manipulates it to maintain her status within the O'Brien household. She constantly bickers with Mary, her daughter-in-law, simply because Mary represents a spark of light in Lockhartville's world of darkness, hopelessness, and poverty. For example, Martha disapproves of Mary's gentle way of handling Kevin's temper (arguing with him, rather than disciplining him). Thus, when Mary abandons housework to deal with one of Kevin's outbursts, Martha self-consciously performs a household task. Then, when Judd asks why she has done so, she answers, "'Oh, I try tuh make myself useful, Judd. The pain's been somethin' terrible tuh day, but I do try tuh make myself useful'" (Wanton Troopers 38). Thus, Mary looks less competent in Judd's eyes, and "Martha would smile and look across at Mary while Kevin scowled, hating the cruelty and triumph he saw in her wrinkled, walnut-coloured face" (Wanton Troopers 39). However, in sequences such as this, Martha projects to her son an image of herself as a "Christian martyr" and therefore gains ascendancy over her daughter-in-law.

That Mary is the target of Martha's wrath is not surprising given that Mary is, by far, her biggest threat. Mary endangers Martha's entire belief system. If Mary's hope for the future were to spread to Martha, it would inevitably uproot the foundation of stoicism upon which Martha's whole existence is built. Thus, Martha is eager to discover fault



with her, as is illustrated by her reaction to Mary's dreams for Kevin's future. At one point, Mary tells Martha that there is genuine hope for Kevin, that he will not grow up to work at the dreaded mill like his father:

“When Scampi [Kevin] grows up, he's going to work with his brain. His hands are going to be soft as a girl's -- like the hands of men who work in offices and stores in Larchmont. When he's a man, my baby is going to have nice, soft, pink hands just like he has now. You wait and see.” (Wanton Troopers 21).

Martha's response is a “half snort and half grunt,” which is “Martha's way of dismissing them [Kevin and Mary] as hopeless” (Wanton Troopers 21).

Martha's criticism is grounded in hypocritical religiosity. She accuses Mary not only of being wrong but also of “sinning,” thereby making it difficult for Mary to retaliate. Martha's hypocrisy emerges in her attitudes towards Mary's yearning for youth and life. Mary, like Kevin, has an active imagination. She nurtures it by reading romances. She also starts attending dances in a nearby town: “There were times, Kevin's mother said, when a person had to dance or die” (Wanton Troopers 71). In retaliation, Martha makes Mary's excitement regarding dancing seem “evil:”

Grandmother O'Brien said that dancing was sinful. Salome, dancing before Herod the King, had demanded the head of John the Baptist. John the Baptist, grandmother O'Brien said, had founded the Baptist Church. Ever since his death, the Baptist church had condemned dancing. (Wanton Troopers 71)

Martha's attempt to mar Mary's enjoyment is the only way for her to appear “better” than Mary. By accusing Mary of “sinning” rather than just dancing, Martha is asserting her alleged moral superiority over Mary and, at the same time, is gaining credibility with her son (Judd). Martha is content only when she criticizes others.

By contrast, Nowlan makes Mary a likeable if self-deluded character. She is a kind and loving mother, a patient and humble wife, and she keeps care of her home and family. However, she craves focused attention and a more joyful existence, even going to dances in Larchmont to seek the interest of a man and the thrill of being alive. Unlike Martha, she refuses to accept poverty as a proud existence:

Kevin had seen his mother spring from her chair in the midst of supper, snatch up food and dishes and run with them to the pantry . . . she had spied an approaching visitor. Mary was bitterly ashamed of their bread and potatoes, humiliated by their cracked plates and tarnished cutlery” (Wanton Troopers 35).

Mary holds tight to her dreams. In fact, she is so committed to denying her life that she fantasizes a better condition, writing letters to an imaginary aristocratic lady, Lady Astrid Villiers: “*Geoffrey, the man whom I met in Boston last summer (Mary had never been to Boston) wants me to run away with him to New York. But I have told him that my duty is here with my little boy*” (Wanton Troopers 132). Mary is different. Whereas Martha is driven by despair, Mary is driven by hopeful visions of escape. Mary was born in Lockhartville but “spoke of the village in the manner of one who had come here from Halifax, or even from New York. ‘I don’t understand these Lockhartville people,’ she would say. ‘I’ve never seen such people in all my life!’” (Wanton Troopers 36) Thus, Mary retains a sense of possibility in a community without prospects and seeks hope in the midst of other people’s undeviating despair. Furthermore, she tries to instil these values in her son by giving him special attention, fun times, and warnings about the repercussions of a loss of spirit:

“It’s wonderful to be alive, Scampi [Kevin]. You don’t know how wonderful it is until you’ve been dead. Sometimes I think that I’ve been dead for years and years. I work in this old house

and I'm dead. I don't feel anything. Then I go into the hall and hear the violins and see the people dancing and, all of a sudden, I'm alive again! It's like rising from the dead, Scampi!

.....  
 There isn't anything worse than being dead." (Wanton Troopers 82)

To those, like Martha, who must believe that their suffering is not only meaningful but inevitable, Mary's insistence on maintaining hope is dangerously unacceptable. Thus, Mary becomes a scapegoat for "religious" Lockhartvillians like Martha. She is even targeted for her unconventional behavior by Kevin's school-mates. When Kevin is tormented in a graveyard by school bullies, Mary is the target of their abuse: "'Now say: Key-von O'Brien's mother is the biggest old whore in Lockhartville'" (Wanton Troopers 98). Because Lockhartville's parochialism finds power in despair, the unconventionality of Mary is dangerously close to sacrilege. Thus, in her search for meaning and joy, she becomes an outcast to all Lockhartville residents.

Despair ultimately leads to Mary's departure from Lockhartville. Despair, however, is not the only catalyst. She has, after all, endured many years of Judd's sporadic employment, alcoholism, and violent episodes. What leads to her sudden departure is a confrontation with Martha's religious hypocrisy. When Judd is forced to sell a cow, Martha cites a divine "curse" as the cause: "'It jist seems like God's tryin' tuh punish this here house fer some awful sin that's a-goin' on in it'" (Wanton Troopers 166). Mary sees a more logical reason for the family's problem: "'Judd being out of work for three months has a helluva lot more to do with it than God has'" (Wanton Troopers 166). In the argument which ensues, Mary threatens to kill Martha, inviting Martha's response: "'Is it a murderess yuh'd be, eh! Come ahead, me girl, I dare yuh. One more sin won't make no difference now. Yuh'll burn in hell!" (Wanton Troopers 166). Faced with an

unacceptable life as humble wife and daughter-in-law, Mary abandons both roles, leaving the community -- and its gnarled religion -- forever.

In leaving the O'Brien household, Mary leaves behind two scarred males. The first, her husband, is warped by his society's stress on the importance of masculinity. Judd likes to draw but is ashamed of this hobby because doodling is not considered manly: "Kevin knew that his father would have died rather than have any man in Lockhartville know that he had amused himself by making pictures. Such games were for children and idiots" (Wanton Troopers 58). Even when Judd merely comments to Kevin that the sky is "pretty," the narrator reveals that "As always, their voices, in speaking to one another, were formal, muted with shyness" (Wanton Troopers 23). It is no coincidence, then, that Judd quickly undercuts this revelation of his sensitivity by telling Kevin a joke. Moreover, Judd does not use language more than is necessary. He compensates for his inability to express emotion by surprising his family with the occasional splurge of food (Wanton Troopers 56), by buying Kevin a watch (Wanton Troopers 143), or by taking him hunting (Wanton Troopers 59). Preferring physical tasks to expression through conversation, Judd is a slave to the work ethic:

Every evening, Judd worked in the garden. The only fertile land he possessed was a narrow strip between the heath where he pastured his cows and the swamp where they drank. But, slaving every night, after his eleven hours of drudgery in the mill, Judd made this soil yield all of the vegetables that his family ate. (Wanton Troopers 83)

Whereas Kevin, the creative O'Brien, "loved the smell of the manure-seasoned earth, the fragrance of ripe peas and squash, the feel of the soft corn stalks and abrasive turnip tops on his feet and legs," Judd, the unimaginative labourer, "attacked the land as though it

were an obdurate and untractable beast” (Wanton Troopers 83). Kevin has an aptitude for words but Judd is inarticulate.

Despite their differences, Judd does influence Kevin. Frustrated by his economic and class powerlessness, Judd turns to alcohol and violence as a way of empowering himself. However, violence is so condoned by the masculine culture of Lockhartville that, when Judd punishes him by hitting him with a strap, Kevin not only feels that the violence is justified but even resents his mother’s sympathy:

He [Kevin] knew that she [Mary] had been weeping. And suddenly, he hated her for her weakness . . . . He felt that he had deserved his whipping. It had been a purgative, cleansing him of secret sins. He was a vile, worthless thing and he loved his father for having thrashed him. (Wanton Troopers 27)

Thus, even Kevin becomes corrupted by the cult of masculinity of which Judd, his father, is a part.

However, Judd is also a slave to Martha’s warped religious views. Following Martha’s example of intolerance, he criticizes Mary for having Catholic roots: “He [Kevin] wondered what was wrong with being Catholic. His mother’s people, the Dunbars, were Catholics” (Wanton Troopers 119). Judd also subscribes to Martha’s views on predestined poverty. Yet he does not attend church but hides from church-goers (Wanton Troopers 22). He seems to be almost pagan in his consideration of religion: “All the mill people held the Bible in superstitious respect. So it was with Judd. When his mother read, he threw his cigarette in the stove; he would have considered smoking during a Bible reading the most egregious vulgarity” (Wanton Troopers 58). Judd follows Martha’s example blindly, because it is appropriate to his parochial, unquestioning approach to life.

Whereas Judd is scarred by growing up in the masculine, narrow-minded environment of Lockhartville, Kevin, the second scarred male whom Mary leaves, is scarred by growing up in the tension-filled, hypocritical home of the O'Briens. However, in his sensitivity, Kevin finds an imaginative outlet in believing in God and in accepting the Bible, both of which have a profound influence on both his thoughts and actions. Kevin constantly views the world in a metaphorically religious way. For example, when he is talking about sheep, readers are told that "Whenever he looked at them, he wondered why God had compared men to sheep. Horses would have been so much better" (Wanton Troopers 43). Likewise, Kevin becomes "Kevin-David," a prophet, whenever he needs extra strength. His thinking in terms of Biblical analogies reveals his association with the stories of the Bible: "David was Kevin's favorite among the prophets, kings and judges of Israel. He re-enacted the story of David until it seemed to him that he was not assuming the role of another, but repeating scenes from his own dimly remembered past" (Wanton Troopers 113). This tendency is reinforced when, picking blueberries, Kevin says that Mary reminds him of "'Ruth -- Ruth in the Bible -- gleanin' in the Boaz's corn field'" (Wanton Troopers 86). It is no surprise, considering Kevin's taste for story-telling, that the Bible appeals to him. Biblical stories appeal to the epic imagination in him: "In this secret [Biblical] world, Kevin found somewhat the same sense of power and security as he obtained from his mother. And, unlike his mother, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob never abandoned him" (Wanton Troopers 110). Kevin, like the child Nowlan, has fantasies of becoming a prophet (Cockburn qtd. in Toner 12). As he gets older, he also dreams of being a prophet, Kevin-David:

As Kevin-David, he [Kevin] played the harp until the evil

spirit departed from Saul. And as Kevin-David he went down into the valley of Elah to face the champion of the Philistines, Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span and whose coat weighed five thousand shekels of bronze, and there he slew him with a stone from his shepherd's sling and smote off the head with his own sword, and when he returned from slaying the Philistine, the women came out of the cities with instruments of music and sang . . . (Wanton Troopers 113)

The Bible expands Kevin's imagination by allowing him to fantasize about becoming a Biblical hero from the Old Testament.

However, under the influence of Martha, Kevin also begins to think of the "sin" of the world. This emerges in his reaction to his uncle Kaye's antics. When Kaye tries to justify stealing by introducing a Robin Hood-like theory which he calls "'Equalizin'" (Wanton Troopers 34), Kevin argues on Biblical grounds that stealing is wrong: "'It's in the Bible, Thou shalt not steal.' God wrote it down and put it in the Bible. Grammie O'Brien [Martha] say God wrote every word in the Bible" (Wanton Troopers 33). Kevin again reacts when he finds Kaye lying naked with June Larlee. Aside from shock at what he has seen, Kevin also struggles to understand the Biblical story of Adam and Eve: "after eating the fruit, Adam and Eve had known that they were naked, and they had sewn fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. Why were they naked? Grandmother O'Brien said that nakedness was a great sin. And she was wise in the ways of God" (Wanton Troopers 108). Martha's influence emerges again when Kevin finds acceptance and friendship with Nancy; he is disturbed by a dream she has which involves nudity: "The dream disturbed him. It smacked of the darkness and uncleanness spoken of so often by his grandmother" (Wanton Troopers 160). Thanks to Martha's influence, Kevin feels certain that nudity is "Devilish!" (Wanton Troopers 59) and feels equally sure that

sexuality is somehow obscene: “He stirred uneasily, thinking of the little, nervous, gnawing pains he felt sometimes in his loins and nipples. But these were things not to be spoken of: dark, shameful things of which one tried not to think” (Wanton Troopers 161). Thus, when Nancy tries to entice him into sexual experimentation, he is both panic-stricken and guilt-ridden: “He would not have been more horrified and disgusted if her face had turned to a fleshless, grinning skull before his eyes . . . . In his mind there rose the figure of the serpent -- a wriggling, hot, obscene thing” (Wanton Troopers 163). Because of Martha’s admonitions, Kevin cannot separate sexuality from shame, and thus he tries to be an a-sexual being. Moreover, Kevin’s growing fear of going to Hell stems from Martha’s assurances that Hell does exist and that sinners belong there:

. . . alone in the kitchen, Kevin lifted the lid of the stove and held his hand over the flame until the heat rasped his palm like sandpaper. This was what it was like in hell! *Oh, please God, forgive me, he prayed. I won’t think anymore about sinful things. I promise I won’t, God!* And he rubbed the tears from the corners of his eyes and set the lid back in place. (Wanton Troopers 109)

Kevin’s deep fear is indicative of Martha’s ability to induce strict obedience in Kevin by creating religious terror. Nowlan shows readers that the power of religion is used not just to inform and teach but also to dictate and control.

Kevin O’Brien, although a likeable character, is a very angry young boy who desperately desires protection and power. He is constantly in situations over which he has little or no control, and he becomes infuriated with the people and circumstances surrounding him. Religion is his only security, and thus it is the agent of his anger and actions, as seems to be the case for most of the characters in The Wanton Troopers. When, in a fit of anger, his father stabs a cow with a pitch-fork, Kevin is over-whelmed:



“Kevin clasped his hands to his chest as if he had been speared. ‘Oh, please, daddy. . . . Oh, please, God,’ he whimpered” (Wanton Troopers 85). Worth noting is that Kevin does not yell or pray to God; he *whimpers* in defencelessness in the way in which dogs do. Impotent himself, he defers to the power of God.

Although Kevin has a kinder heart than Martha, he sometimes reflects her vindictive influence, at least in his thoughts. Thus, he calls upon God to intervene not for religious justice but for personal revenge. Kevin’s desire for retaliation comes out in various instances. For example, when Mary hurries him off to Sunday School one morning so that she can talk to her friend June Larlee, Kevin is intensely jealous: “He hated the smug, teasing insolence in her [June’s] grin. He hoped she would die in agony and burn forever in the deepest pit of hell” (Wanton Troopers 40).

Resentment over the loss of Mary’s attention also provokes thoughts of revenge when Mary brings home Ernie Masters, a gentleman whom she has met in Larchmont. Kevin reacts with jealousy because he feels powerless to stop Mary’s growing detachment from her home and family: “Rising quickly, she [Mary] embraced him [Ernie] and kissed his cheek. *Like Judas kissing Christ*, he thought bitterly” (Wanton Troopers 127). In his powerlessness to do anything, he returns to his grandmother’s image of a vengeful God as a way of coping with his feelings:

Kevin prayed fervently that God would send a thunderbolt from heaven and strike this man dead. He prayed that God would empower him to strike off his head as David had struck off the head of the giant Goliath. (Wanton Troopers 127)

It is fitting that Kevin thinks here in terms of an epic Biblical figure, because it is only by identifying with such a figure that Kevin, or Kevin-David, can address his feelings of

anger and injustice. Kevin, the child, may not be able to handle the trials and tribulations of life, but Kevin-David, the prophet, messenger of God, can.

Ernie Masters gives Kevin a silver dollar to spend and sends him outside.

Continuing to cope with the situation by thinking in terms of Biblical analogy, Kevin perceives the dollar as “a bribe, like the thirty pieces of silver which had been paid to Judas for his betrayal of Christ” (Wanton Troopers 129). When he goes outside, he angrily throws the dollar away, again imagining himself to be a participant in a modern religious epic:

He had performed an act comparable to those recorded in the Word of God. He compared himself to Abraham who had been willing to give up his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering unto the Lord. Then, remembering how God had sent a lamb as a substitute for Isaac, Kevin half-expected a million silver dollars to fall from the sky and lie like mounds of clean snow around his feet . . . . (Wanton Troopers 129)

In identifying himself with Abraham, Kevin develops an elaborately self-inflated sense of power and purpose. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he then turns to God as an imaginary religious hero in prayer, asking for faith and *power*:

“O God,” he prayed aloud. “O God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, make me one of Thy mighty ones! Make me one of Thy kings and prophets O God of Israel. Give me the faith to move mountains and the power to call down fire from heaven on the enemies of the Most High! Give me the staff of Moses and the Sword of Davie! Oh God, make me like unto David and Isaac and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Solomon! Thy servant, Kevin, asks this O God. Amen.” (Wanton Troopers 129-30)

However, this prayer is said only after Kevin has childishly thrown several stones in anger. He is looking for the power to defeat Ernie Masters and to keep Mary from steadily drifting away from him. His prayer, then, is less a display of religious belief than

a display of despair and desperation, a piece of dramatic assumption, bordering on foolish, melodramatic exaggeration:

Perhaps he was Jesus born again! . . . . But did not the Bible say that on His second coming Christ would fall from the sky with a shout? If that were so, then he could only be a prophet -- a forerunner like John the Baptist. But, in any case, God would give him a sign in due time. And if he were to be crucified, God would give him the strength and courage to endure the nails. (Wanton Troopers 133)

The main difference between Kevin in this scene and other characters in the novel who call upon God is that Kevin innocently dramatizes himself. He does not intentionally misuse religion for his own purposes; instead, it provides him with a coping mechanism. Nor does he publicly profess his faith, except to argue morality with Uncle Kaye and to tell Nancy of his prophet dream. Thus, his religious posing is more acceptable to readers than that of other characters because Kevin really *wants* to believe in God. Moreover, whereas Martha's religion is one of despondency, Kevin's, by contrast, possesses vitality (even in its vengeful moments). Thus, he is not yet resigned to poverty and he therefore resists Martha's version of religion: "There was nothing that Kevin found more frustrating than his grandmother's sermons on the certainty of poverty and the duty of humility before one's betters" (Wanton Troopers 21). Martha and Kevin both use religion as a coping device, but whereas Martha needs a religion that reinforces despair, Kevin seeks a religion of action. And thus, they clash.

However, as the novel progresses, Kevin's ability to sustain his hope begins to decline. Despite his begging God for assistance, there are no answers. Judd continues to be violent after the incident with the cow; his next victim is the poor cat that he decapitates with an axe after it is caught "playing" with a string of sausage (Wanton

Troopers 88). The persecution of Kevin at school declines but still presents problems. And when he finds friendship in Nancy, even his conviction to be a prophet loses its appeal. Thus, Kevin's faith is tested many times. The final test involves Mary's departure, and there, especially, God does not measure up to Kevin's expectations.

After her violent argument with Martha, Mary leaves Lockhartville, assuring Kevin that she will return someday. However, "in that moment he [Kevin] knew as though God Himself had told him that never again would he be able to reach her" (Wanton Troopers 168). It is at this critical moment, teetering on the edge of despair, that Kevin finally realizes that he does not understand God. His faith is crushed, and so his reason to believe vanishes. Thus, he is no longer able to give his heart to God as he had formerly done, and he falls victim to hopelessness: "The world was too huge and strange. He could never hope to understand it . . . . He wished he were a fencepost, a blade of grass, a twig -- anything that did not have to think, and feel and struggle with unanswerable questions with which God badgered human beings" (Wanton Troopers 169). Kevin's resignation to the idea that all cannot be known is his first big step toward scepticism. But Kevin needs to believe in God, and so the novel closes on the heartwrenching plea of a young boy, searching for hope in a world full of now-undeniable despair:

Saul has slain his thousands  
and Kevin-David his ten thousands.  
Oh, please God.  
Please.  
Please, God.  
Don't let mummy leave me, God.  
Don't let him say it again, God.  
Don't make it so I have to fight him, God.  
Make them stop, God.

I promise I won't ask you for anything else. I'll never ask you for anything again. Please God.  
 (Wanton Troopers 171)

The last two words of the novel, "Please God," speak volumes (171). Now a wounded Christian, Kevin searches, desperately, for a way to maintain his faith. Sadly, the one character who truly desires religious faith is also the one character who may become unable to sustain it, thereby leaving the ending of the novel unresolved.

The title of the novel, The Wanton Troopers, reinforces the ending. The word "wanton" means "careless," "reckless" and/or "unjustifiable." One could argue that the characters in Nowlan's novel, the "troopers," are soldiers of poverty or despair. However, one could just as easily argue that they are metaphorical soldiers of religion. Thus, participation in formal religion in this novel can variously be seen as "careless," "reckless" or "unjustifiable," and the "troopers" are those, like Martha, Judd, and Kevin, who partake of it. Mary is not a "trooper," however; she is, in fact, the polar opposite. Seen by Martha as a sinner, she is the one character who gets out of Lockhartville, who has promise of hope because she refuses to lay down and die. Martha is like a drill sergeant, commanding obedience from Kevin (and others) and influencing not only his behavior but even his thinking. Judd is like the field officer, who does not think much about strategy but simply carries on, violently. And Kevin, the only character besides Mary who possesses a degree of hope, is fittingly wounded in the battle for light. He will, in Nowlan's next novel, become a sceptic, because in Nowlan's fictional world, it is impossible to know that there is a God.

## CHAPTER TWO

Perhaps I should begin this book with a page containing nothing except a question mark. As a child I ached to put the question into words, but never could. Nor can I find the proper words for it now. That child, Kevin O'Brien, would stop whatever else he was doing when he felt the question returning. He would press his chin against his knees, screw his eyes shut and tighten his fists on his temples like two halves of a vice: doing to his body what I, the man Kevin O'Brien, do to my mind. (Nowlan, various persons named kevin o'brien 1)

These opening lines of Alden Nowlan's second novel, various persons named kevin o'brien, a novel written after 1967 (but published in 1973), are very different from the opening lines of The Wanton Troopers. But the difference in the openings is appropriate, because although Nowlan's various persons named kevin o'brien was his first published novel, it was *written* as the sequel to The Wanton Troopers. At the end of the first novel, young Kevin is left begging: "Where is God? Why does he not answer?" And most importantly, he implies "Will he answer?" Young Kevin O'Brien is in doubt and conflict. Nowlan's second novel presents the aftermath to this conflict. The Wanton Troopers exposes hypocritical uses of Christianity by Martha and the nature of tested childhood faith in Kevin; various persons named kevin o'brien reveals a questioning spirit and even self-mockery.

Whereas Nowlan developed a sequential narrative in The Wanton Troopers, he orders the second novel around episodic details. A third-person unnamed narrator presents Kevin's story. There is no strong connection between the chapters, except that Kevin O'Brien remains the protagonist. There are no longer diverging themes as there are in Nowlan's first novel, where the young Kevin identified with religious figures. Various persons named kevin o'brien may be a novel, but it is in the form of Kevin's self-

reflective commentary on the subject of his earlier life and faith. Various persons named kevin o'brien is an internalized novel, dramatizing Kevin's inner thoughts and beliefs rather than his outer actions.

Writing of Nowlan's poetry, Patrick Toner asserts that Nowlan's "middle years" show "a restlessness driving him to examine and question religion from all perspectives, even the wider philosophical question of why we have religion in the first place" (Passionate Profane 58). As he tried to categorize Alden Nowlan's religious writings, Toner faced a dilemma:

At Carleton, I ploughed through everything the man had written and discovered, to my annoyance, that not all of his *oeuvre* fit into my thesis. Was he a fundamentalist Christian or a neo-pagan? Nowlan, typically, confounded me first by arguing passionately for one side and then switching sides and arguing on behalf of the other. (Toner "My Unusual Relationship" 57)

Anyone reading Nowlan's novels also faces this problem. In The Wanton Troopers, Nowlan shows how people manipulate religion or how they read self-identification into Biblical parallels. However, in various persons named kevin o'brien, Nowlan reveals Kevin's life without a firm religious belief. However, as the title of the work, various persons named kevin o'brien, suggests, the character of Kevin O'Brien has evolved significantly during the years which have elapsed since The Wanton Troopers. Kevin has left Lockhartville and become a journalist. Like Mary, his mother, Kevin had never adapted to the Lockhartville mindset, despite having been born there. At the end of Nowlan's first novel, The Wanton Troopers, Kevin was a young, wounded Christian. Now, at the beginning of various persons named kevin o'brien, the adult, twenty-five year old Kevin O'Brien is coming back to Lockhartville for a visit. His enduring imagination

has survived his childhood years, and now, as the narrator tells us, he uses his journalistic writing as a vehicle for interpreting the world around him. Thus, he brings to his memories of his childhood mature, adult perceptions:

The protagonist changes too. The teenaged Kevin O'Brien that the twenty-five-year-old Kevin O'Brien remembers was piteously young for his years, whereas that person considered himself to be unusually mature; there were even times when he thought of himself as an old man. The matter is complicated further by the fact that none of these former selves will die until the final Kevin O'Brien is dead. (various persons 23-24)

The adult Kevin seeks what neither the Bible nor religion could offer him as a child – an ability to comprehend the nature of human experience. As a child, Kevin tried to cope with reality by escaping through fantasy:

The latter worlds of Kevin O'Brien's creation had been almost purely internal: visions with which he entertained himself to fall asleep. But the earlier ones had required certain physical apparatus. They were sacramental rather than mystical. He had made kings and queens and their soldiers and subjects, using scissors and pages torn from exercise books, and he had clothed them with crayon and housed them in palaces and fortresses made from cardboard boxes imprinted with the names such as Schwartz Peanut Butter and Kraft Pure Orange Marmalade. (Wanton Troopers 38)

Furthermore, when he felt threatened, Kevin imagined himself to be a Biblical hero (e.g. Kevin-David), and such identification allowed him to feel more in control of his life. Now, as an adult, Kevin uses his own perceptions and analysis. He depends on himself, his own senses and intelligence, and his primary tool is his gift for writing. Having developed from an imaginative child into an adult journalist, he uses writing as a way of recording and analysing various incidents in his life:

Almost from the time when he first learned to write



he has made sporadic attempts to keep a diary. The problem is that he can't resist putting down what he regards at the time as important, although he knows very well that the point of keeping a diary is to record trivia . . . (various persons 51)

The adult Kevin does not aspire to be a prophet, nor does he use the Bible as a basis of comparison for his life. Relinquishing his search for faith, he no longer requires religion. Now twenty-five years old, Kevin remembers his grandmother as a woman who was quite different from the one depicted in The Wanton Troopers. In that novel, Martha was a vindictive hypocrite. Now, Kevin recalls only her vitality and her self-reliance. Kevin reads intelligence and resourcefulness in Martha's actions:

As a young woman, after her husband went to Saskatchewan to harvest wheat and did not return, she had gone into the woods alone, with a horse, an axe and a bucksaw, and come out with wood enough to keep her five small children from freezing although, despite the fire, it got so cold at night that water froze in the kitchen pails. (various persons 55)

However, the adult Kevin also knows that she was a role-player who, as an "old woman wore a black wig shaped like a soup bowl and boasted about her jet-black hair. . . She rouged herself with bits of crepe paper moistened with saliva and bragged about the youthfulness of her cheeks " (various persons 55). Martha is a con-artist, but the adult Kevin acknowledges, with some admiration, her ingenuity and vitality:

She had bought an autoharp from a salesman who wore a white linen suit and a straw hat and told her, as she never tired of repeating, that she was a contralto. A contralto. She could interpret dreams and pronounce curses. As a child she had known a witch who made tables dance. She had ridden on a street car in Boston. She could dance a clog, a jig or a hornpipe. She had seen the face of Jesus in the sky. She could make up rhymes. She could live on two dollars a week. And she was a

contralto. With jet-black hair and cheeks as apple-red as any sixteen-year-old girl's. (various persons 56-57)

Although Kevin was embarrassed by his grandmother when he was a teenager, he now has a grudging respect for her spirit of financial independence. When Martha tells the story of her father, Kevin's great-grandfather, Joe Casey, and his salesman tactics, she identifies with her father's canniness:

To obtain the money for sugar and tea . . . he sold stove wood in Wolfville and always just before entering the town he reined his horses, climbed down from his wagon and adjusted his load, propping it up here and there with crooked sticks, so that it would appear to be larger than it was. Joe Casey could fool a townsman into believing a cord was two cords and a half. His daughter [Martha] was so impressed with his skill that she was still celebrating it more than forty years after his death. (various persons 58-59)

In fact, although humiliated by Martha when he was young, Kevin now recognizes her fierce drive for dignity and independence. To her, money was "almost sacred" (various persons named kevin o'brien 57). Thus, when she follows her father's illegal path and changes prices with chalk at rummage sales, she is partly doing so to control her own fate. She even cheats the overseer of the poor so that she will have enough money to bury herself properly (various persons named kevin o'brien 61).

In all of this, then, Martha is hypocritical but also admirable. She betrays the religious principles she claims to honor by cheating people out of their money so that she has independence. Yet she also draws moral distinctions such as the one between lying to people and outwitting them: "thou shalt be cunning as a serpent. Blessed are those who survive, saith the Lord" (various persons 59). Similarly, she draws the line between outwitting and stealing:

She could as readily have slipped the shoes [which she altered the price of] into her shopping bag and paid nothing. But that would have been theft, and theft was a sin. (various persons 59)

In both cases, Kevin the adult now recognizes Martha as hypocritical and yet feisty.

Thus, it is not surprising that Martha was singing on the night of her death:

Next morning when Kevin got up she was lying down in her room but by then it no longer mattered; the doctor had been there and gone and that didn't matter either. But it mattered very much, not only then but ever afterwards, that his grandmother, an old peasant woman, had sat up all through the last night of her life, singing songs to entertain herself and Death. (various persons 64)

Kevin admires Martha's spirit, even on the night of her death.

Because she is intelligent, Martha manipulates religion to attain power. She is controlling rather than humble, and she maintains her position purely through illusion. Although in The Wanton Troopers she constantly claims to accept her life as God's will, she emerges in various persons named kevin o'brien as a fighter: "Her laughter [on the night she died] was so joyous that it tickled the nerves in his [Kevin's] throat so that he also laughed" (various persons 63). She also emerges at the close of her life as a woman both steeped in religious folklore and yet grasping for the worldly:

She [Martha] had sung "I Come to the Garden Alone."  
 He had heard her sing it often before her illness. "That's a Billy Sunday hymn," she always explained. Proudly. Her brother -- one of her brothers, David, who was killed with the Sixth Mounted Rifles, or Joseph, who could drink a forty ounce of navy rum and shoulder a hogshead of flour without batting an eye -- her brother had heard Billy Sunday preach in Boston or Bangor or Portland and afterwards they took up the collection in baskets and every basket will filled to overflowing with five, ten, twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar bills. She described the baskets of money as Mary or

Martha might have described the miraculous loaves and fishes.  
(various persons 53)

Having confronted his own religious conflicts, the adult Kevin is far less confused than the child Kevin and, upon returning to Lockhartville, shows no sign of his former obsession with religion. In fact, the new Kevin is often sacrilegious. As an adult, Kevin says, with his hands down the pants of Laura, his mistress, Kevin mutters, ““Jesus . . . . Jesus”” (various persons 92). He also develops a story of a surrogate god, ending it with what seems to be a blasphemous parody:

I’ve made up a story in which a man and a woman have a baby which they keep in a windowless room. When it begins to understand what is being said to it they tell it that it is God. The baby grows into a child. “You are God,” the parents keep telling him. There is nobody to contradict them, nothing, except perhaps a voice in the child’s mind, and if he hears such a voice, they tell him that it is the devil, tempting him. So he grows up and one day the doors are thrown open and, for the first time, he goes out into the world, of which he has been taught to believe that he is God . . . . I’m not sure what happens then. But I suspect that he has only to stretch out his hand to raise the dead. (various persons 115)

As a journalist, Kevin has lost the sense of vulnerability that he had at the end of The Wanton Troopers. His world is more defined by the philosophy of Santayana: ““Each of us should travel as far as he can into the past . . . since none of us knows how far he will travel into the future”” (various persons 129).

Throughout The Wanton Troopers, the intersection of past and future almost envelops Kevin. Mary’s departure from Lockhartville at the end of the first novel is an inconsolable loss to him, and he is left at the brink of disbelief. However, in Nowlan’s sequel, Kevin seems not to remember his mother:

My memories of my mother are so sparse that when I was a

child and a young man there was an empty place in my past which I attempted to fill with a succession of almost wholly imaginary women with little in common other than that for nine months each of them had held me in her womb. (31)

What Kevin does remember are past Christmases. The decorative aspect obviously appealed to him, perhaps because it constituted a rare display of physical beauty in his home. As well, the festive colors and mystical emotion were attractive to Kevin's imaginative, artistic side, as is illustrated by his associating gift-giving with the birth of the Christ child: "If the three wise men had been wiser they'd have known they needn't bring gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ Child. He'd have been equally happy with a shiny button, a little sugared milk and a single flower" (various persons 80). Thus, even years ago, Kevin saw the Christmas story not through the eyes of a devout Christian, but through the eyes of a creative child. As he notes, he and Stevie would have "knocked on wood or performed some similar rite of exorcism if we'd been confronted with a third strand of paper rope or another box of glass balls. For the old decorations weren't simply pretty things we hung on a tree; they were Christmas" (various persons 80). Sacredness had little to do with the season.

Thus, Christmas was, for the O'Brien family, a time of genuine celebration. Food was plentiful, the house was ornamented, and spirits were high. But as Kevin reflects on this in adulthood, he realizes that the joy of Christmas had less to do with religion than it had to do with the temporary alleviation of despair:

In retrospect I suppose it was poverty that caused us to eat grapes, oranges and nuts only at Christmas. But we didn't think of it that way at the time; we no more expected grapes in July than we expected snow. Those delicacies were sacramental to the season. At least that's what we children felt. It was though Christ had ordained that they should be eaten in

honour of his birth. (various persons 80-81)

Obviously, such Christmas rituals appealed to Kevin's imagination, giving him the sense that he was a part of something important. Thus, Kevin remembers eating grapes which "offered a trinity of tastes -- the hot roughness of the skin, the cool secret inner pulp, so full of juice that you both drank and ate of it, and the crisp nutty seeds you broke between your teeth." He remarks that "It was a religious rite, the eating of those grapes, although we didn't need to call it religious" (various persons 81). Acknowledged and enjoyed privately rather than proclaimed publicly, this "religion" of Kevin and Stevie's was a quiet feeling of personal spirituality. Their joy stemmed from the fellowship and relative tranquillity which was apart of their lives during the Christmas season:

When I come to think of it [past Christmas celebration], it was all very religious. Religious in the subconscious and mystical rather than in the liturgical and public sense. It was the human spirit finding joy in an almost intolerable environment. Even the gods must sometimes envy man's gift of laughter. (various persons 83)

The adult Kevin now uses the word "gods" instead of "God," a statement of the distance that he was travelled from his boyhood belief. Now that he is a much-travelled journalist, the tone conveys Kevin's sense of adult scepticism. The narrator reinforces the change in Kevin by describing Kevin's experience as an adult coming back to visit Lockhartville: "there are frequent moments when it is as if he [Kevin] were a ghost returning into the past to spy upon one or another of his former selves" (various persons 3). These selves trace the stages of Kevin's progression. As a child, he believes the Biblical stories. As an older child, his conflict creates religious need. And finally, as an adult, he is a sceptic.

In his adult search for meaning in life, Kevin does not limit himself to Christianity as an answer. Like a sociologist or anthropologist, he looks for the interconnectedness of things. While at a Lockhartville dance, he sees a timeless connection: “It [the dancing] was the way his ancestors had danced, Kevin knew, before pouring out of their bogs and mountains with swords and daggers in their hands and weird Gaelic war cries on their lips” (various persons 135). As a child, he had been taught that religion contained all the answers. As a journalist, Kevin now sees himself as part of a historical human chain, rather than as a participant in an unknown divine plan. Thus, instead of seeking answers from God, as he tried to do as a child, he now finds an outlet by writing his memoirs: “He has tried over the years to find the meaning of various incidents in his life and to give form to them. The briefcase that he carries with him on this trip contains a number of manuscripts in which he has attempted to explore and explain his past” (various persons 23).

This sense of insecurity is further illustrated by his frequent dreams of war: “Many of my war dreams are fearful, particularly those involving air raids, in which, incidentally, I’m always on the ground, never among the attackers. Sometimes after the bombs fall the sky changes colour, turns purple, green, or red, and I know the world is about to end” (various persons 29). The adult Kevin still has these war dreams a few times each year, and he tells readers that they are “notable not for their frequency but for their persistence: I’ve been having them almost all of my life” (various persons 30). Kevin sees himself as “a veteran who has never been to war” (various persons 30), and readers know that he has battled self-doubt throughout his life. And so, it is fitting for one of the chapters of various persons named kevin o’Brien to be “The Imaginary

Soldier” (23), for like the “wanton trooper” of his childhood, he is now an ambiguous soldier at war only with himself. Near the end of the novel, Kevin goes to a dance with his cousins, but he cannot decide how to act or feel: “Sentimental slush, a part of him said. Shut up, you cynical bastard, another part of him answered. For five years he had been a reporter and editor on a daily newspaper in another province, but he liked to pretend sometimes that he was a displaced logger. Tonight he felt like one” (various persons 132). Although the adult Kevin has learned how to fill a space in Lockhartville, he is still never comfortable in his role.

At the dance with his cousins, Kevin “drank deeply, knowing they were watching to see how well he drank. In Lockhartville, a man who could not drink was consigned to the same hell as the weakling, the coward, the cuckold and the castrato” (various persons 130). Thus, Kevin is never truly free to be himself because the community is still pervaded by the perceived masculinity of his father’s days. Only in the power of his writing can he express meaning. As a child in The Wanton Troopers, Kevin turned to religious analogy to fulfil these needs and was disappointed. However, where religion failed, reading, writing and insight succeeded. In various persons named kevin o'brien, Kevin recognizes the importance of the books that shaped his outlook:

Looking around him now he sees that the magazines are gone, but that a few books remain, scattered about the floor. He picks up a number of them and glances at their titles: *Joe’s Luck*, by Horatio Alger; the *Selected Poems* of Rupert Brooke; *Androcles and the Lion*, by Bernard Shaw; *The Case of the Velvet Claws*, by Erle Stanley Gardner. In those days he read confessions and movie fan magazines in precisely the same spirit as he read Dostoevsky or Kafka. They were all of them windows through which to seek a clearer and broader view of the



universe in which he found himself. (various persons 86)

Writing memoirs allows Kevin to gain new perspectives on the people in his life.

Through the process of writing, he exorcises demons and ghosts, learns to accept himself as he is, and recognizes his imaginative talent. He also makes a living for himself as a journalist. Writing provides for the adult Kevin the personal power that the child Kevin lacked.

Like his character, Alden Nowlan himself had dreams of becoming a prophet, and both had these dreams as a result of being entrapped: “The prophetic desire revealed in Nowlan’s writing . . . has as much to do with power as with theological concerns” (Toner Passionate Profane 38). In like manner, both Kevin and Nowlan became journalists (writers) which, as Toner asserts, is indeed a power in itself: “What becomes evident, then, in the growth of Nowlan’s christianised personal religion is that, although one is an outcast in being an artist, there is a certain amount of power associated with it as well” (Toner Passionate Profane 48). Thus, Kevin O’Brien no longer possesses, as he did as a child, an unattainable need for power:

. . . I have been prey to dreams in which I could be omnipotent.  
 But I am putting that behind me now; I am squeezing the slave  
 from my ego and need no longer play at being lord of the universe.  
 The mind digests experience as the body digests food . . . . But,  
 unlike the body, the mind has no permanent mechanism to distinguish  
 quickly between what ought to be assimilated and what ought to  
 be evacuated: often it rejects the nutrients and absorbs the wastes.  
 (various persons 117)

By rejecting conventional religion for the power of the pen, Kevin accomplishes what

Nowlan’s poetry strives to do: “reach toward a oneness with the universe and the self”

(Toner Passionate Profane 50). Thus, it seems that both Alden Nowlan and his fictional

creation, Kevin O'Brien, achieve peace within themselves when they question conventional philosophies and turn, instead, to their own insights and writing as their source of power.

## CONCLUSION

Like all discoverers, Nowlan was an individualist who dared to turn his back on his society in order to discover new territories of his own, be they the physical territories of the Fredericton that differed so much from his Stanley home, or the uncharted territories of his soul. (Toner Passionate Profane 90)

In Poet's Progress, Michael Oliver contends that, at least as a poet, Alden Nowlan's attitude is simply that, "in spite of cultural disinheritance, loneliness, and death, 'It's good to be here'" (46). When he is looked at as a novelist, perhaps one might consider adding "in case *here* is all there is." In both The Wanton Troopers and various persons named kevin o'brien, Nowlan's intent is to show his readers the journey of Kevin O'Brien from confused religious youngster to self-aware adult sceptic.

Nowlan introduces scepticism into his fiction by showing his readers how easy it is for people to manipulate religious doctrine to attain their own ends or how inconclusive may be the results of blind faith. However, Nowlan does not find it surprising that humans still tend to seek the presence of a higher power. On the contrary, he realizes the importance religion holds for many people: "Always at the heart of his religious quest is the human element" (Toner Passionate Profane 91). Thomas Smith writes that Nowlan's "job is to portray human beings of all kinds . . . in their frightening complexity, humanity and similarity to the rest of us" ("My Family Was Poor" 61), and that is exactly what he does. He creates Martha because she is so much like many human beings, grasping onto life and using religion as a source of authority. In fact, novelist David Adams Richards, a friend of Nowlan's, claims that Nowlan "would be the first person to go to the wall for somebody's religious beliefs" (qtd. in Toner Passionate Profane 81). And Toner writes

that “Conversations with others who knew Nowlan confirm this toleration of, and interest in, religions other than conventional Christianity” (Passionate Profane 81). Belief in general, Nowlan admits, is instinctive. The world does not always make sense, and, as rational beings, Nowlan concedes, human beings search for order and logic. Thus, it is natural for people like Martha or the young Kevin to grab the coat-tails of religion as a life preserver in a sea of chaos.

Nowlan ultimately rejects religion as an answer to questions in his characters’ lives: “To wish to live in an idyll, Nowlan implies, is eminently human; to actually believe you can do so is naive if not downright cretinous” (Keefer 188). Through the development of his main character, Kevin O’Brien, in two novels, Nowlan shows readers that the same religion which is used to gain power and comfort can ironically also provide just the opposite: helplessness and pain. The young Kevin calls repeatedly for God’s help and presence, yet he receives no answer. “God” is, as Nowlan might have added to his article, “The Gospel According to Gadh,” an absentee landlord at the end of The Wanton Troopers. Thus, Nowlan and Kevin conclude that He may not listen at all, and the only real power lies within one’s ability to admit the possibility of aloneness. One of Nowlan’s poems in the Smoked Glass (1977) collection is entitled, “If I could be certain, God;” it explores the concept of God’s existence, but the point of the poem is that one *cannot* be certain. Thus, as Toner asserts, Nowan’s poems, “overtly religious or otherwise, are engaged in trying to . . . find a place a place for himself in the larger scheme of things” (Passionate Profane 67). This is certainly what his fictional character, Kevin O’Brien, is trying to do.

Like Alden Nowlan himself, Kevin eventually sees life as a mystery. By becoming a sceptic, Kevin has moved away from his childhood Christianity, but he believes in life. Kevin admits that he does not have all the answers, but he does not settle for false or uncertain ones, and he does not stop searching. Thus, the challenge Nowlan issues to his readers is to find the bravery within themselves to be like his main character, Kevin O'Brien. Through internal soul searching, rather than faith in an external (and ultimately unknowable) force, Kevin concentrates on *creating* his place in the universe, rather than on *explaining* it. And this, Nowlan would agree, is a journey well worth taking.

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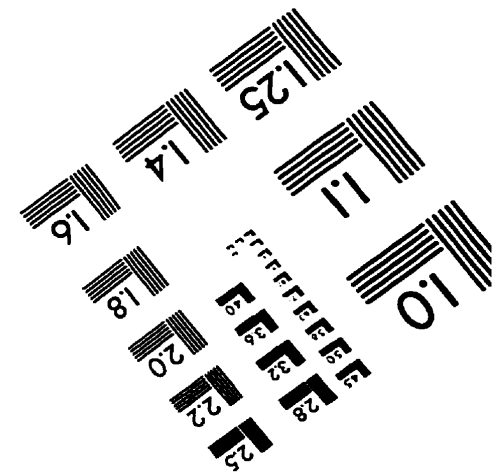
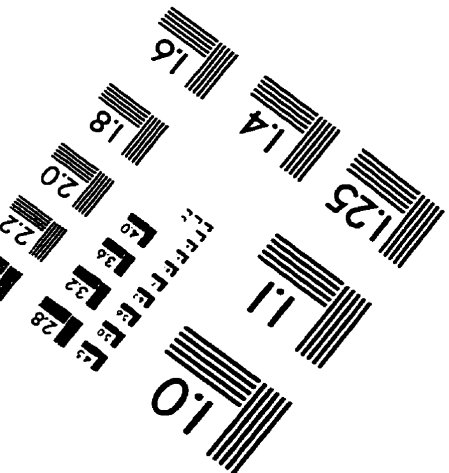
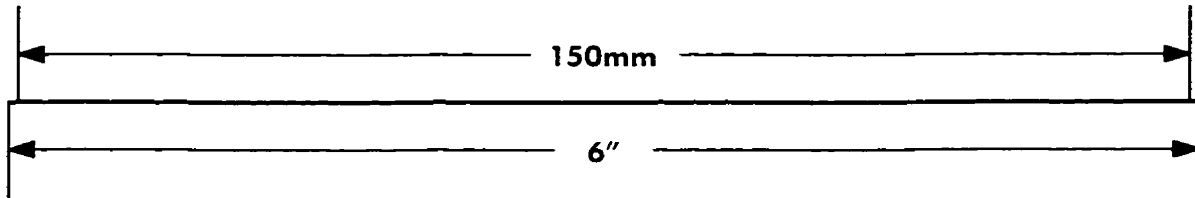
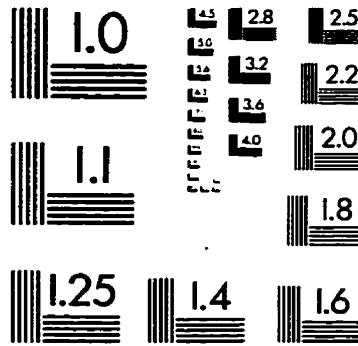
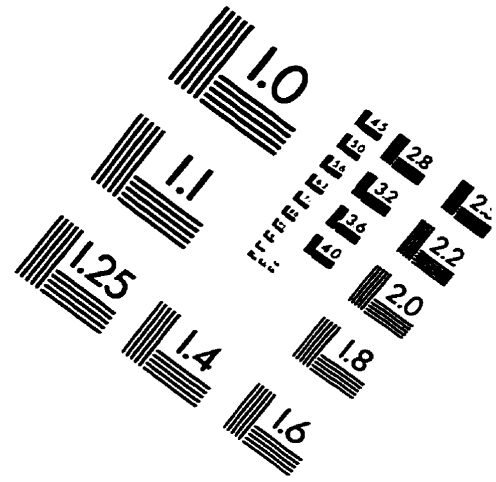
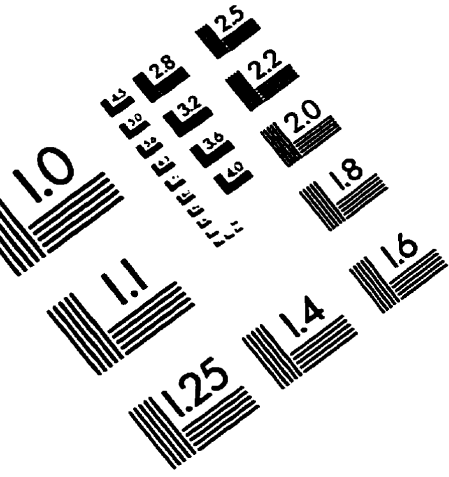
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