Heaven, as it is on Earth:

Representations of literary heavens in contemporary literature, with a focus on Alice Sebold’s The Lovely Bones

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the candidate alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Samantha Tidy

25th January 2009
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Introduction

Abstract

This exegesis examines the landscape of heaven depicted in the contemporary novel, *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. I examine the various characteristics of the heaven (or ‘afterlife’) depicted in Sebold’s novel, with the aim of ascertaining the effects of using this as a narrative device.

Using Ingrid Daemmrich’s analysis of the paradisiacal motif in literature as a framework,¹ I reveal characteristics in *The Lovely Bones* that are both consistent with and challenge traditional literary representations of heaven and which therefore demonstrate that the text utilises the established literary motif of heaven for symbolism and meaning, but in a contemporary context.

I explore the growing trend of contemporary literary heavens by reviewing two other literary heavens that are relevant to this scholarship. I examine where as writers and readers, we ascertain our concept of heaven (in society’s religious foundations and from prior literature), and for the relevance of the key text, I briefly discuss the author’s likely cultural influences. Having established the novel’s lack of alignment with a religious version of heaven, I then examine the nature of and the narrative effect of, the personalised heaven depicted in the novel, *The Lovely Bones*.

In doing so, I explore one of the new portraits of heaven in literature, an example which represents a growing trend away from portraying a classic edenic heaven shared by all humanity (and traditional to literary representations of heaven), toward a contemporary, personalised

heaven that seeks to meet the wants and desires of the individual in our modern society. With reference to literature’s ability to reflect back to us, our society’s beliefs and values, I examine what this new portrait of heaven reveals about society.

Exegesis Outline

The trend of personalised heavens and the larger cultural and literary context

I will explore the growing trend of contemporary literary heavens by reviewing two other literary heavens that are relevant to this scholarship. I will then examine where as writers and readers, we ascertain our concept of heaven (in society’s religious foundations and from prior literature), and for the relevance of the key text, I will briefly discuss the author’s likely cultural influences. Having established the novel’s lack of alignment with a religious version of heaven, I will then examine the nature of the personalised heaven depicted in the novel, The Lovely Bones.

Sebold’s diversion from and affirmation of key scholar’s theories

Using Daemmrich’s framework for the features of paradisiacal landscapes, I will then reveal characteristics in The Lovely Bones that are both consistent with and challenge traditional literary representations of heaven and which therefore demonstrate that the text utilises the established literary motif of heaven for symbolism and meaning, but in a contemporary context.

The changing literary landscapes reveal eschatological evolution

With reference to the nature of literary heavens as depicted in non-contemporary texts (using Ingrid Daemmrich’s research), and the new literary depictions of heaven in The Lovely Bones and other texts explored in chapter one, I will demonstrate that the influence of religion is
declining on the portrayal of heaven in literature. I will conclude that our creative literature has the ability to reflect back to us, a changing concept of the afterlife as influenced by our contemporary times.

**Connection to accompanying project novel**

The analysis of Sebold’s literary heaven and the devices employed in portraying a modern paradisiacal landscape in particular will therefore inform my own writing of the accompanying text to this thesis – a contemporary Australian novel, *The Happiness Jar*, wherein I have created a modern, personalised and identifiably Australian heaven for my character, Rachel Hudson.

**Contribution of this study to academia**

In essence, the contribution of this exegesis to academic study is to highlight the growing popularity of this concept of personalised heavens in contemporary literature, and the trend away from a traditional heaven as depicted in non-contemporary literature, thus arriving at an awareness that literature has the ability to reflect back to us, the evolution of our perception of heaven and the afterlife.

**Definitions**

What is heaven? The term is used liberally by advertising departments around the world, to sell products that rely on our association of a constructed belief set with a tangible object or experience that can bring the happiness associated with heaven. It is no longer simply a religious or spiritual belief – a final frontier for the soul after death, but in the digital age it has become a disposable word to associate with real estate, food, and earthly experiences. The concept of a heaven, or an afterlife reserved seems to have been with us since before our
religions were written down, as the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 1, 2005) states that “it is commonly accepted that conceptions of soul and afterlife must have developed among many human societies, long before the appearance of written evidence.”

**Heaven**

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 6, 2005) states that heaven can be defined as a symbolic expression “found in various religious traditions” suggesting the polar component “of a religious vision: a state of bliss and/or an abode of deity or sacred reality.” Spatially, “heaven is considered to be ‘above’, informed by the human experience of the sky as the expansive space or dome encompassing the Earth and also including the sun, moon and stars…often symbolised by light or brightness as a realm of bliss.” The *Encyclopedia of Religion* pairs this symbolic expression with hell, as being the opposite polar component.

The *Collins English Dictionary* defines heaven as “Noun 1. (sometimes capital) Christianity a) the abode of God and the angels, b) a place or state of communion with God after death. Compare hell. 2. (usually plural) the sky firmament or space surrounding the earth. 3. (in any of various mythologies) a place, such as Elysium or Valhalla, to which those who have died in the gods’ favour are brought to dwell in happiness. 4. A place or state of joy and happiness.”

**Paradise**

Whilst there is limited literature observing heaven as a literary landscape, paradise in literature is the focus of one theorist – Ingrid Daemmrich. In an earlier collaborative text, the authors define paradise as “the concept of an ideal place or time, perfectly beautiful, harmonious, and everlasting”.\(^2\) The earliest textual reference to paradise as a place reserved for after death (and

therefore a sacred paradise) Daemmrich explains, can be found in Genesis, and the Babylonian myth of Adapa, which was later referred to as paradise in the New Testament and closely associated with a spiritual existence after death.³ Thus, Heaven can be defined as a type of paradise, but not the only form of paradise, whereas literary representations of paradise are the focus of much of Ingrid Daemmrich’s scholarship.

**Afterlife**

Heaven is often referred to as the afterlife, both in religious and non-religious settings, and therefore it is important to define this concept, within the context of this study. The afterlife as defined by the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 1, 2005) is the “expectation concerning some form of human survival after death,” which it contextually does not isolate from an “understanding of the nature of the divine.”

**Variations on traditional representations of heavens**

Throughout this exegesis, in referring to literary representations of heaven in several texts, I identify these literary landscapes as having one of several secondary characteristics (personalised, non-religious, feminist, creative); which can be interpreted as being a contemporary treatment on, or a deviation from the traditional religious concept of heaven. Each of these, will be defined in chapter one, with the inclusion of a taxonomy of customised heavens.

**Modern western culture**

As this exegesis seeks reflections of modern, western culture in contemporary portrayals of heaven, the limits of this exegetical study does not allow for a thorough attempt to define the characteristics of a modern, western culture, apart from stating that it refers to current day in a

³ Ibid, p203.
non-eastern cultural context. I must therefore assume that the reader has a comprehension of what a modern, western culture is, and of the characteristics attributed to it by society itself and those reflected in that society’s media (such as in literature, film and music). For the purposes of this exegesis, I will therefore associate (rather than define) a modern, western culture with the presence of consumerist ideals in a democratic society.

**Literature Review**

*The Lovely Bones*

The key text chosen for this study is the contemporary American novel *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. Whilst Sebold’s first book *Lucky* was the autobiographical account of her own rape, *The Lovely Bones* is Sebold’s first novel, and tells the fictional story of the rape and murder of fourteen year old Susie Salmon, in December 1973 on the eve of her high school career. Sebold’s text is told in first person point of view by the main character Susie, who, having just been murdered, is able to watch her family and her killer from her own personalised heaven (in the company of other characters who also have their own personalised heaven, interwoven with that of the character, Susie). After a brutal description of her own rape and murder by George Harvey in a purpose-built underground cave hidden in a cornfield, Susie narrates, in present tense, the many subplots of the story – her killer’s success in destroying the evidence; her father’s obsession with finding her killer; her mother’s withdrawal from the crumbling family and into an affair; and her two surviving siblings and their childhood experiences without her.⁴

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⁴ The heavenly landscape of Sebold’s novel will be thoroughly examined in Chapters 3 and 4.
Academic responses to The Lovely Bones and others texts employing contemporary literary heavens

Whilst Mark Ralls, a pastor writing in the religious periodical *The Christian Century*, reflects on the heavens depicted in novels such as Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (and others such as Mitch Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* – which will be explored in chapter one) and the consequences of, and symptoms leading to, such novels in modern society; no academic paper or scholarship can be found that focuses on the created heaven in the novel, *The Lovely Bones*, or the narrative consequences of using this setting as a narrative device.⁵

No academic research seems to exist that analyses the portrayal of, or the evolution of the heaven motif in contemporary literature, though there exists some observation of the motif in contemporary film.⁶ Whilst the “dead narrator genre” used by Alice Sebold is one that is readily identified in film and literature,⁷ there exists no academic research as to the narrative effect of such a literary device, apart from an investigation into which young adult texts use this device,⁸ and a PhD on the topic of death and the afterlife being central to the theme of maturation in children’s fantasy literature.⁹

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⁷ Various web searches (13th June 2007, 9th December 2007, and 19th August 2008) will reveal reviews of books and films that declare “another dead narrator”, and a growing awareness of this as a genre or literary device that allows the author/film maker to further manipulate the omniscient point of view.
⁸ Goldsmith, F 2004, ‘Dead narrators: a look at some recent novels that feature voices from beyond the grave’, *School Library Journal*, May 2004 vol. 50 iss.5 p.46, viewed 26 March 2006. One of the texts mentioned in Goldsmith’s review is *The Lovely Bones*. As this is a cross-genre text due to the age of the narrator, I include the review as it has a contextual relevance.
⁹ Rosenberg, T 1994, “‘Only more life’: the afterlife, and ideal maturation in children’s fantasy’ PhD. thesis, University of Alberta (Canada). The dead narrator genre, maturation or the theme of the afterlife in young adult literature will not be the focus of this exegesis, as Sebold’s novel is more representative of an adult literary novel with its theme of the violent murder of a child.
Ingrid. G Daemmrich and the Paradise Motif

Heaven as a fictional landscape in contemporary literature does not appear in academic research, but paradise (which I previously identified does not equal heaven, but is a wider term for a type of landscape with which heaven is associated), is the focus of one theorist, Ingrid Daemmrich, whose studies typically revolve around motifs in literature. Ingrid Daemmrich has written a 200-page book that examines the construct of paradise in literature, and is therefore the key theorist drawn upon in this thesis.¹⁰

*Enigmatic Bliss – The Paradise Motif in Literature* is a thorough analysis of not only the role of paradise but the functions of paradise as a literary motif: an examination made possible by documenting its varied appearances as a subject in literature over time.

Daemmrich has constructed a detailed study of the predominant literary texts that use paradise as a motif and examined these texts against her own framework for the study of paradisiacal landscapes. She compares the created paradises in literature and the literary effects of the components therein – some of which are relevant to the created heaven in the focus text of this exegesis – *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold.

Daemmrich traces the history of the concept of paradise in literature in three guises – a sacred paradise projected into a future life after death located beyond the measurable time and space of reality (which is the paradise of the novel, *The Lovely Bones* – a heavenly realm found after life); a mythopoetic paradise actively searched for in an inaccessible exotic land; and thirdly, those invented paradises created as a literary, technological (man-made) or pharmacological artifact (such as a drug that induces a perceived state of paradise).

Within the context of these paradisiacal genres, Daemmrich then analyses the inter-textual components native to these three forms of paradise. Daemmrich’s scope of analysis spans six areas:

1. **Paradise as a Mythopoetic subject** (the attraction of critical analysis of the paradise motif);

2. **Paradise as a Literary Construct** and further examined within this are a) emblematic names, b) author or narrator intrusions, c) intertextual references d) An overemphasis on seemingly insignificant detail and e) humour;

3. **The Enigmatic Landscape of the Literary Paradise** examining a) the vertical/horizontal location of paradise, b) paradise as a familiar setting to the character, c) the warm/cold and dark/light atmosphere of paradise, d) temporal paradoxes (meaning the location of paradise being located elsewhere than at the end of human history) and individual features of paradise such as e) trees/flora, f) water, g) fauna, h) gold/jewels i) mountains and walls;

4. **Networking of [combining] the paradise motif with themes** such as a) quest and the quester’s journey, b) freedom and confinement, c) love and lovers, d) evil and corruption;

5. **Interplay between the paradise motif and cultural constructs** such as a) innocence / ignorance b) gender, c) the static paradise vs. the kinetic paradise and d) creativity; and finally,
6. **Games within paradise**: the use of inversion, parody and trivialisation.

Daemmrich concludes by stating that the paradise motif continues to fuse a stable tradition with radical innovation, which is evident in my selection of Sebold’s novel for this study.

Her examination of paradise in signifiers taken from three of the above areas will form the framework of my analysis of Sebold’s novel, as my intention is to compare the traditional representations of heaven, with the contemporary representation of heaven, using *The Lovely Bones* as an example. My aim in doing so will be to arrive at an understanding of how literary representations of heaven over time have changed, and to suggest reasons they have changed; some of which are alluded to below, in my review of the theological reactions to modern literary representations of heaven.

**The Lovely Bones as a secular humanist text**

Although no purposeful study on the heaven depicted in *The Lovely Bones* exists, Lynn Bulock in her masters thesis analysing the theological aspects of the traditional mystery novel finds that Sebold’s novel is an example of a Secular Humanist perspective, in part due to the nature of the heaven depicted, where there is no clear presence of a God, no trappings of religion, and the narrator has the ability to restore revenge on her murderer.\(^\text{11}\) She finds support for her contention in the characteristics of Susie Salmon’s heaven, where “heaven is more of an idea of an alternative existence than a place that is earned” and where each person is their own saviour.

**The changing perception of the afterlife**

Whilst Helen Sword in her essay “Necrobibliography: Books in the spirit world” seeks to

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discuss the growing genre of ghostwritten accounts of the afterlife, she does make reference to the trend of creative writers imagining a continued existence beyond death, Alighieri Dante being amongst the most significant. She notes that nineteenth century authors tend to describe a “sparkling domain of relentless domesticity, a celestial retirement village” where “the chaos of productivity is eliminated in order to insure [sic] the pleasures of consumption.” Early twentieth century accounts of the afterlife promise a realm free of “material discomfort and modernist angst” and more modern publications tend to depict a “Sunny vacationland part Swiss Alps, part Key West, where one can stroll through ethereal meadows, discussing poetry with the spirit of John Lennon, or sit under a palm tree, typing Earth-bound messages on a celestial computer.” The predominant subject of her text is “real” accounts of the afterlife, rather than fictional afterlives, however, the notion of our modern comprehension of the afterlife is evident in this genre, and she has, in her brief reference to three centuries, given her own overview of changing perceptions of the afterlife.

My exegesis does not attempt to create an overview of the changing perceptions of the afterlife over time; it seeks to highlight a new trend (and its catalyst) in the contemporary representations of literary heavens.

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Context Review

The influence on my own creative project

In seeking to create a personalised heaven for my character Rachel Hudson in my novel, *The Happiness Jar*, I needed to appreciate how other contemporary authors had manipulated the literary device in order to understand the narrative consequences of creating such a landscape – I needed to question the rules behind the creation of the other-world, and find the connections between the character’s life on earth and her influence on the creation of the heaven landscape.

In writing a contemporary Australian text, I found myself asking what ‘heaven’ would be to an Australian reader. After creating a traditional ‘shared’ heaven, containing pearly gates and a non-descript cloud backdrop without any cultural reference, I found that landscape irrelevant to my intended audience, and as a writer, I believed it was ineffective as a narrative device for characterisation. Therefore I had to ask myself, what would an Australian reader put in their own personalised heaven? It wasn’t until I arrived at an understanding of the narrative effect of American author Sebold’s created heaven (which is an American landscape – that of an American high school), that I was able to manipulate my own literary heaven, into one that had meaning for the character of Rachel (a classic Australian weatherboard house and backyard), and therefore, the Australian reader. In order to write what I hope is a successful novel, I needed to reflect on contemporary desires for the afterlife, and what could be meaningful in a modern society.

Reviewer responses and theological reactions

*The Lovely Bones* received many positive reviews in the media upon its release. Amongst these, there are several negative or critical references in both the media and in theological journals, of the heavens created in such contemporary novels such as *The Lovely Bones* (and others explored
in chapter one), declaring that these “heaven lites” and “neato heavens” are examples of a society’s fascination with controlling God’s final frontier; perceived by these critics as a sacred and holy space in our religious doctrine that should remain the creation of a God separate to and more powerful than humankind.  

**Reviewer praise, but with concerns over the heaven setting**

Claudia Fitzherbert, a British book reviewer writing for the *Spectator*, writes highly of Sebold’s mastery of the theme of rape across both of her books. She notes that in reference to the heaven setting, some readers might find fault when the author takes a troubling landscape, “and bathes it in a sugary mist”.  

Joy Press writing for New York’s *Village Voice*, gives a positive review, however she notes that Sebold’s portrayal of heaven as “a place in the clouds where spirits watch over us has always seemed a bit twee (not to mention overly optimistic) and the book does fall prey to a few celestial clichés”.  

**Fear of changes to moral traditions with such texts**

One book critic has discussed contemporary literary heavens as evidence of society’s declining moral beliefs. David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times*, incites distrust of such texts and of Mel Gibson’s film *Passion of the Christ*, but maintains that Mitch Albom’s novel *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* is the one to fear the most:

The heaven that is popular with readers these days is nothing more than an excellent therapy session. In Albom’s book, God, to the extent that he exists there, is sort of a genial Dr Phil. When

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you go to his heaven, friends and helpers come and tell you how innately wonderful you are. They help you reach closure. In this heaven, God and his glory are not the centre of attention. It’s all about you.  

Brooks suggests a nihilistic future that faces a culture with this mentality:

Americans in the 21st century are more likely to be divorced from any sense of a creedal order, ignorant of the moral traditions that have come down to us through the ages and detached from the sense that we all owe obligations to a higher authority…the really corrosive cultural forces come in the form of the easygoing narcissism that surrounds us everyday.

This narcissism will be discussed in the conclusion of my exegesis, as a symptom of a culture that increasingly demands texts that deviate from the religious traditions of heaven.

Brooks supports his arguments by referring to Christopher Lasch’s popular 1970s text *The Culture of Narcissism*. Cultural historian Lasch argued that anti-religion is a therapeutic mindset “that tries to liberate people from the idea that they should submit to a higher authority, so they can focus more obsessively on their own emotional needs”.

**A symptom of a society lacking imagination**

Stephen Webb, a Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Wabash College in Indiana, offers a solemn theological viewpoint, as he notes that Sebold’s novel draws our attention to the current health of religious beliefs in society:

Although the heaven of this story is not full of crosses and saints, it provides more material for somber theological reflection that a score of Sunday sermons...this argument displays a spectacular

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failure of the religious imagination. When there is more talk of heaven in novels and movies than in sermons, the church must shoulder much of the blame for confusion and doubt about the afterlife.\footnote{Webb. S 2002, ‘Earth from Above’, \textit{The Christian Century}, vol. 119, Iss. 21, P. 20-24, viewed 17 June 2008, ProQuest.}

Webb further observes this lack of imagination as a symptom of a greater evil:

Heaven should be something we sing about but instead it is something we sell. Consumerism makes it an adjective, not a noun. We have heavenly chocolate and heavenly mattresses, but few images of heaven that both provoke and persuade – provoke us to consider why we cling so fast to this life and persuade us that the truth of our lives will be preserved after we die.

\textit{Consumerism is the new religion}

However it is Mark Ralls (the pastor of St. Timothy United Methodist Church in Brevard, North Carolina) who offers a reason for these new novels appearing on the bookshelves, when he writes about the contemporary heaven that has taken over funeral orations and has become the fascination of contemporary culture (music, film and literature).\footnote{Ralls, M 2004, ‘Reclaiming heaven: what can we say about the afterlife?’ \textit{The Christian Century}, vol. 121, iss 25, p.34-35.} He sees these modern portraits of paradise as being symptoms of a modern culture preoccupied with consumerism, “a way to emphasize continuity” and to “validate not repudiate, all we have been before.” Ralls says:

Death, of course, is not the only thing that brings us grief. We also mourn our failure to live authentically and fully. Rendered anonymous by faceless corporations and disintegrating communities, people are no longer sure their lives have significance. George Steiner describes this spiritual malaise as a “core-tiredness”, the loss of “our capacity to hope, to truly speak in the future tense.” Part of the cultural fascination with the perfected state of heaven stems from our reaction to this loss. This is the point where (authors such as) Albom offer(s) reassurance.
Ralls, as a Christian theologian, notes that neither of the novels written by Albom or Sebold include God as a character, and laments that this is a symptom of contemporary culture and an indictment on Christians.

**Consumer demand for texts in this genre**

Regardless of the fear that narcissistic heavens in contemporary literature is cultivating in theological circles, heaven’s presence in fiction seems guaranteed. Daemmrich herself notes “the persistent attraction of the paradise motif in literature”. Authors will continue to find themselves playing God, in the ultimate creative fantasy, weaving what they imagine is the final frontier of human existence. Whilst science fiction continues to imagine what lies on the dark side of the moon and beyond, science has the means to one day discover it. Death on the other hand is final and not a gateway for explorers to return from, to bring back tales of heaven and feedback on whether our authors got it right.

**What this consumer demand tells us**

In selling us this self-centric heaven, where characters have at their fingertips the ability to weave themselves a personalised heaven with manicured lawns and peppermint icecream, authors such as Sebold and Albom have written bestselling novels, which reflect back to us an evolving and commercially successful landscape of heaven depicted in literature. This popularity tells us that the age-old question, “what happens when we die,” is a consistent cause of fascination and anxiety in our post modern age.

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23 In testimony to their success, Albom’s novel was made into a film in 2005, and Sebold’s novel will be released as a film in 2009.
Reactions in the media and within the clergy as detailed above make a statement that faith in the
digital age is becoming consumerist and therefore is reflective of a modern western culture.

**Research questions**

Therefore, the main research questions that underpin this exegesis are the following:

1. What do the new, contemporary portraits of heaven in literature, look like?
2. What influences the imaginative landscape of heaven created by contemporary authors?
3. What is the narrative effect of using heaven as a setting in contemporary literature?
4. Using *The Lovely Bones* as an example, what traditional devices as identified by Daemmrich, does Sebold employ in creating a contemporary literary heaven?
5. How does Sebold divert from the traditional use of the heaven motif in literature?
6. If Sebold’s novel is representative of a growing trend of contemporary portrayals of heaven in literature, what does this tell us about the emerging depictions of heaven?
7. What does the demand for, or success of such literature, tell us about society’s perception of the afterlife?
8. If literature imitates life, what does this tell us about society?
Chapter One

*Heaven as a human creation* – a sample of the personalised heavens portrayed in contemporary literature

1.1 The contemporary context of Sebold’s novel, *The Lovely Bones*.

Heaven or paradise has been a popular setting for creative literature over time, as Daemmrich finds in her thorough analysis,\(^2\) however for the purposes of this study, it is important to comprehend the breadth of this motif in contemporary literature and why Sebold’s text is apt to represent that body of literature, and therefore the chosen novel for further examination in this exegesis. Sebold’s novel sold one million copies in its year of release and continues to be a bestseller. Alice Sebold is just one author from a growing list of contemporary writers, who has written a fiction text set in heaven or the afterlife, with the action taking place in real time after the main character is dead.\(^3\) Typically, this has been the arena of American literature, though

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\(^2\) Daemmrich’s book length text listed in footnote 1 refers to a wide bibliography of more than fifty texts, each depicting a form of paradise. She finds trends and consistent characteristics in each of those texts to support a framework for analysis of paradisiacal landscapes.

\(^3\) The following is a list (though by no means complete) of other significant contemporary (since 1989, in the twenty years preceding this exegesis) adult fiction and young adult fiction novels that have utilised the ‘personalised heaven’ landscape as a setting, or alternatively, the narrative is told from an afterlife or heavenly realm (either first or third person point of view). I have included the young adult genre as the motif is a popular inclusion in this genre, and *The Lovely Bones* can be categorised in both young adult and adult fiction. The list is not designed to be concise, merely a representation of the popularity of the motif in contemporary literature, and does not include books that can be termed new age or religious (of which there are many).

**Young Adult Fiction:**


**Adult Fiction:**

Australian literature does reveal classic twentieth century texts, such as Peter Carey’s *Bliss* that tackle death and heaven as subject matter, or rather the near-death experience as a vehicle for a character’s redemption from their existing life.\(^26\)

I have chosen Sebold’s novel and the two other American novels that are looked at briefly below, for their cultural provenance, as the contemporary influences of the American culture are readily recognisable in each of the texts. Also, the reactions by theologians and book critics alike to the heavens presented reveal that the heavens portrayed have left a saccharine taste in the mouths of some readers, or, they simply warn of the theological implications of deviating away from the traditional heaven that religions suggest we believe in. Other such novels (including some of those listed in footnote 25) did not attract such reactionary criticism.

Other contemporary American authors, such as Mitch Albom and Adena Halpern, make fictional statements as to the mechanics of the afterlife, using one character’s journey as a

proposition of what all humanity will perhaps one day experience. The resulting novels are fictional studies on how events after death may transpire, to render more meaning to pre-mortem existence, and to offer salvation in death. Of course, as fiction, they merely suppose at the afterlife, as no author can ever claim to be accurate, but they are evident of the fascination that contemporary literature has, with the notion of an afterlife or heaven. The two novels examined below by authors Albom and Halpern display heavenly landscapes that can be seen as physical manifestations of a modern American culture – decorated with amusement parks, family homes, classic cars and designer goods.27

1.2 Mitch Albom’s The Five People You Meet in Heaven.

*The Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom is the eighth of Albom’s nine books,28 and is the story of Eddie Maintenance, an amusement park maintenance worker, who on his 83rd birthday, dies whilst trying to save a little girl from a broken and falling amusement ride. Told in third person, the story of Eddie’s life is revealed as a subplot of events surrounding certain birthdays, whilst Eddie in ‘heaven’ encounters five people, in five heavenly realms (each a resident of a personalised heaven chosen specifically for each of those five people). Each person guides Eddie in the afterlife to arrive at a comprehension of his life’s meaning and the reason for their interconnection in each other’s real lives. Finally, comprehending the richness of his life’s meaning, he arrives in his own personalised heaven: a constant playing out of the purpose of his life. The novel describes six customised heavens in total, and each heaven holds particular meaning to its individual occupants.

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Of the six heavens portrayed, the most significant is Eddie’s personalised heaven – the landscape is identical to the main environment that he occupied whilst on Earth – it is Ruby Pier, where he worked as a maintenance worker – an amusement park filled with rollercoasters and rides, littered with colour, fairy floss candy and balloons. The heavenly landscape of Albom’s novel is the same as a pier would appear on Earth:

A pier filled with thousands of people, men and women…so many children…filling the boardwalk and the rides and the wooden platforms…he floated up above the sand and above the boardwalk, about the tent tops and spires of the midway, towards the peak of the big, white Ferris wheel…(206).

Mitch Albom, in the interview I conducted with him for the purposes of this exegesis, admits that the heavenly landscape of his novel is actually Coney Island, where he himself spent time in his youth – it is a modern American setting, with its foundations based on a real earthly place.29

The other characters’ perceptions of their own personalised heavens are different to what Eddie sees when he visits them – for example, the Captain’s heaven appears like a World War II battlefield to Eddie: “fallen trees and blackened rubble…lifeless terrain. He heard thunder…explosions, or bomb blasts – and he instinctively fell to the ground, landed on his stomach” (58). The Blue Man’s heaven appears exactly like Ruby Pier of yesteryear – the pier of Eddie’s childhood. For the Captain and for the Blue Man, their own perception of their heavens is of a more classically edenic heaven. It is the heavenly landscapes portrayed as they are to Eddie, which are founded in real Earth based locations – creations of humanity, and not that of a higher God or deity.

Eddie perceives Ruby’s heaven just as she sees it – it is a Diner, set in the 1930s, complete with a marble counter, swivel stools and elderly people eating pie:

A boxcar-shaped building with a stainless steel exterior and a red barrel roof. A sign above it blinked the word: ‘Eat.’ High backed booths, shiny countertops, a row of small-paned windows across the front, which from the outside, made customers appear like riders in a railroad car...plates of steaming food in the most succulent colors: Deep red sauces, yellow butter creams (104-5).

Again, this is a classic American setting – the Diner being an icon of modern American culture, and it has been used here as a tableau for a literary heaven.

1.3 Adena Halpern’s The Ten Best Days of My Life.

Halpern’s novel is classically consumerist in its portrayal of a literary heaven.\(^\text{30}\) In this ‘chick lit’ genre novel, the characters have customised experiences of heaven, which are located, depending on how good you were in life, on one of seven levels of heaven. Each person chooses (though, this is reliant on the powers of a higher order) the contents of their heaven and for the main character of twenty-nine year old Alexandra, this involves living next door to an attractive man, with whom she flirted in the queue for entry into heaven after her death – caused by a car accident – with a Red Mini Cooper. Her abode in heaven is a familiar neighborhood house (one that she had preferred to her own childhood home in real life) with a bedroom for a closet which includes an endless list of designer clothing, shoes and handbags:

Marc Jacobs, Valentino, Oscar de la Renta…Theory and Diane von Furstenberg, Ella Moss, Rogan and Vince and Moschino…and they all fit perfectly! Christian Louboutin, Yves St Laurent,

Chloe, Manolo…all in my size and none of them pinch! And the bags!...Mulberry, ohhh, Lanvin, the Louis Vuitton signature bucket bag, Henry Cuir – hello, my darling! (19)

In heaven, Alexandra has “no cellulite or boob stretch marks or acne, or pimples or oily skin” (21), and the fridge contains whatever you want to eat, from chocolate mud cake to “french fries from Macdonalds” (20). Her Grandma, who lives around the corner with Alexandra’s other favourite deceased ancestors, drives the lemon-coloured Cadillac Coupe DeVille (14) she coveted on Earth, and Alexandra can watch all her favourite TV Shows and movies on her giant plasma screens. It’s a portrait of the ultimate consumerist American Dream, and a culmination of fashion and the perfect appearance, with goods and services on command. It positively affirms that wealth in the real world is an earthly version of paradise.

1.4 Human creation as the foundation for the heavens created by Albom, Halpern, and Sebold.

The heavens or ‘afterlives’ that Sebold, Albom and Halpern have described are not the typical heavens that religious doctrine has come to promote.31 From first glance, there are no religious constructs that identify their created heavens as being the heaven supported by a certain faith, nor is there the clear presence of a god or deity.32

The heavens therein are modern, atypical, and completely at the discretion of the authors, who have modeled fictional landscapes for their own literary devices. The greater concept being adhered to by each of the three authors, is that the afterlife is a personalised landscape for each

31 See Appendix A, which outlines the heavens of the major religious faiths.
32 The heavens do contain some religious concepts, but not enough to be considered a major component of the novel’s landscape construction: Halpern’s literary heaven does involve entry via the gates of heaven, a Christian concept, and, it contains seven layers of heaven, which is both a Hindu and Buddhist concept. One of the personalised heavens in Albom’s The Five People You Meet in Heaven does appear as an edenic garden, which could be considered Islamic or Christian. See Appendix A for more on the heavens depicted in these religions.
character. The authors each create personalised heavens that are privileged or restricted to the individual characters themselves, and not a shared heaven destined for all who might arrive in one, which is the doctrine supported by the main religion (Christianity) of the cultural background (American) of the three authors (see Appendix A). Whilst in some texts (such as Halpern’s and Sebold’s), these heavens do intersect one another in a shared heavenly space, it is not significant enough to suggest that the whole heavenly landscape is a collective one.

What is evident for each of the main characters in three such texts – Susie Salmon in The Lovely Bones, Eddie in The Five People You Meet in Heaven, and Alexandra Dorenfeild in The Ten Best Days of My Life, is that the heaven is exactly what that person wants – all of the landscapes fulfill human desire for an ideal state which “both contrasts sharply with the real existence of the ‘fallen’ state of humanity and represents human longing for release from the oppressiveness of reality and evil;” which, Daemmrich identifies, is a characteristic of paradise.33

What Sebold, Albom and Halpern have done is create heavens which satisfy the characters’ desire to have what they want, when they want it. This is a notion that can be identified as being a characteristic of the modern, American society from which these authors come – a consumerist culture addicted to constantly evolving in its ability to meet our personalised and collective wants.

Together, these literary heavens portray an evolving portrait of heaven in literature – away from the classic edenic heavens, referred to in Daemmrich’s analysis of paradise in literature over time, towards a culturally dependent and consumerist landscape – one where humanity’s resources and creations takes the place of the traditional heaven, previously the domain of a

separate and more powerful God figure or deity, as depicted in the religious doctrine referred to in Appendix A.

As writers are invariably the Gods of their own universe, it is evidenced above that the universes these writers create for readers, now portray humans as the Gods of their own heavens. In this contemporary literature, no longer is it God or a higher being that is the creator, it is humanity that declares what is fit for paradise.

1.5 Taxonomy of personalised heavens in a sample of contemporary literature.

The customization of heaven for narrative effect by these authors results in the landscape having characteristics where the reader can acknowledge a deviation away from the traditional representation of heaven. Juxtaposing these literary heavens allows us to build a taxonomy of the resulting types of heavens. A summary of the types of heavens portrayed in the novels of Sebold, Albom and Halpern, as well as other possible deviations that such texts might consider, are highlighted in the taxonomy of personalised heavens below in figure 1 (please note, some categories may overlap):
Figure 1. Taxonomy of personalised heavens in a sample of contemporary literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF HEAVEN(S) PORTRAYED IN EACH TEXT</th>
<th>MY DEFINITION</th>
<th>TEXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A traditional heaven</td>
<td>A heaven that supports the doctrine of an established religion (such as those outlined in Appendix A)</td>
<td>Alice Sebold’s The Lovely Bones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A customised or personalised heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape reflects needs or desires, relevant to the individual and not the population at large</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A consumerist heaven</td>
<td>The notion of paradise is driven by earthly ideals of consumerism</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feminist or anti-patriarchal heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape supports feminist ideals and does not support masculinity or patriarchy as the predominant authority</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A familiar heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape is recognisable to the inhabitants as being a location they can recognize from their existence on earth</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An unfamiliar heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape is unrecognizable as being a place they have ever seen before</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A modern heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape relies on the readers’ recognition of a modern culture</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A domestic heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape represents a home or family environment</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An irreligious heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape is unconcerned with or indifferent to religious matters</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A didactic heaven</td>
<td>A paradisiacal landscape where occupants learn from their actions</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A nostalgic heaven</td>
<td>A paradisiacal landscape that relies on the occupant’s past to associate the heavenly realm as a paradise</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An anti-religious heaven</td>
<td>In its portrayal of heaven, the text refutes or contests religion and faith</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A narcissistic heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape endorses a fascination with human beauty or appearance</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cultural heaven</td>
<td>The paradisiacal landscape depends on the readers’ recognition of cultural factors</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A creative heaven</td>
<td>A heaven where the occupant has a creative influence (either intentional or unintentional) over the landscape</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above survey, it can be observed that all of the three texts share similar characteristics. The heavens therein are all personalised, familiar, nostalgic, cultural, irreligious and modern.
In portraying the afterlife, the combination of these characteristics reflects the experience of modern life in a western culture, where nostalgia for a happier past affirms our place in our familiar world.

Consumerism guarantees the personalisation of products and services that confirm our individuality, and as the theological reviews outlined in the context review attest, religion is losing its grip on society.

Insofar as art imitates life, the novels therefore reflect the latest phase in the evolution of our perception of the afterlife.
Chapter Two

Heaven’s origins – Where do authors get their idea of heaven? Religious, literary and cultural foundations for creating literary heavens

2.1 Religious foundations as influence on literature.

Global statistical religious data declares that there are around 4,200 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, cultures and movements in the world.\footnote{34 Unable to find any official religious statistical data monitored by an international organisation, I have compared many online sources, and believe that www.adherents.com is the most accurate for this comparison.}

The most popular faiths (or statements of non-faith as the third inclusion suggests) are Christianity, Islam, Non-religious/Atheist, Hindu, Chinese Traditional religion, and Buddhist, in that order. The heavens portrayed in these religions are summarised in Appendix A, for the purposes of understanding the breadth of the heavenly landscape in our collective imagination.

Of the heavens subscribed to within those five religions, each depicts different but not dissimilar portrayals of a paradise waiting for the faithful souls upon death.\footnote{35 For the purposes of having a heaven to describe, I have removed Non-religious/Atheist from the list explored as in this faith, heaven does not exist.} Out of those five faiths, Christianity is the only religion considered to be a Western religion, as the other four faiths originate in Eastern or Asiatic countries. Therefore, as this exegesis looks at a contemporary novel from an American and Western society, I will consider the heaven supported in the religion of Christianity, as having a lasting and significant influence on that society’s literature.

The Christian faith, being the most popular religion in the world, tends to avoid describing the afterlife in detail. Whilst the bible refrains from concise descriptions of a heavenly realm, the Encyclopedia of Religion (Vol. 1, 2005) states that heaven is a place where Christians “might know and enjoy the state for which God had created them in his own image – that is, God-
centred and totally free of moral imperfections.” At its core, Christianity declares that heaven is the abode of the divine, and The Encyclopedia of Religion (Vol. 6, 2005) states that this is a “reconciled relationship with God”.

As reconciliation with God is the defining principle of Christianity, it is pertinent to note here, that Sebold’s novel (or any of the other three referenced above in the taxonomy of personalised heavens) does not include the presence of any God, or higher deity with which to have a reconciliation, and therefore, her novel does not subscribe to the greater Christian perspective.

2.2 Literary influences on representing heaven.

An analysis of prior literature using heaven as a setting will not be the focus of this exegesis, as Daemmrich has already compiled this in her theoretical text. However, it should be acknowledged that the existing body of earlier literature using the heaven motif, combined with the influence of religion, may serve to influence writers in subliminal and immeasurable ways.

Literary interpretations of paradise in earlier texts form the foundation of subsequent texts, as Daemmrich states:

In order to incorporate the vision of perfect bliss into its structure, each text begins with previous concepts. It then manipulates them by adding, subtracting, radically altering or rearranging the signifiers and significations of paradise to fit its context. It interweaves familiar and predictable features with unfamiliar, unpredictable ones…Literature continuously reinvents paradise in its own image.

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36 See Appendix A, for an analysis of the bible’s evidence of the concept of heaven in the Christian faith.
By continuously reinventing paradise, the motif has propelled itself into an evolving literary concept, as the concluding statement of Daemmrich’s key text declares: “Like literature itself, the paradise motif continues its enigmatic function of fusing a stable tradition with radical innovation”.\(^{38}\) With this culture of evolution, Daemmrich has traced the path of paradise’s trajectory in literature over time, identifying the most significant texts that use the paradise motif.\(^{39}\)

While it is not possible to ascertain the literature influencing Sebold, it is possible to reflect on her experience in a cultural setting that subscribes to a religious and socially accepted belief in heaven.

**2.3 Where does Sebold get her idea of heaven?**

As any writer needs to research the building blocks to creating any fictional landscape, where does Sebold acquire the building blocks in creating a heavenly landscape? As a writer within a western contemporary society, the heaven that she has created seems reminiscent of a modern American landscape, complete with peppermint icecream, high school sports and glossy magazines. Her literary heaven does not cohere to the traditional heaven found in our literature (literature identified by Daemmrich), nor is it founded in the Christian culture from which she comes (as stated above).

Alice Sebold, since her book’s release, has been interviewed by many journalists,\(^{40}\) namely to discuss the subject matter of her first novel, when compared to her first book, *Lucky* – an

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\(^{38}\) Ibid, p207.

\(^{39}\) An overview of the texts Daemmrich has used to map this trajectory is too large an undertaking for this exegesis – her bibliography is a useful overview here.

\(^{40}\) For the purposes of this exegesis, three interviews have been chosen (see footnotes 43 through 48).
autobiographical account of the effects of being raped;\textsuperscript{41} but journalists have also responded to the themes of the personalised heaven in her novel. When Sebold was asked about her use of the dead narrator, she replied:

I didn’t consciously construct the idea of telling the story from heaven….I had my character and I knew where she was and what had happened to her. It came out of the blue, or out of my subconscious.\textsuperscript{42}

Sebold freely admits that the influence of using heaven as a narrative device was a subconscious choice. In the same interview, she is asked about how she developed the idea of a personalised heaven for each person:

I really believe in the sense of play, and I wrote a lot of versions of heaven for people in the book and for people in my life…There were certain things that just made sense to me, like you don’t have to stop thinking about things you were curious about on Earth.\textsuperscript{43}

In this response, Sebold indicates that the concept of heaven for her as a writer wasn’t just one firm belief to which she needed to subscribe to, rather, she had the ability to weave many versions at will. She did not feel constrained to abide by a preconceived religious doctrine of what heaven should be.

Australian journalist Kerry O’Brien asked her more directly about how she arrived at her creation of a literary heaven:

I created it by creating Susie, who created her own heaven, but I always think of it as Susie’s heaven, not my own, and I arrived at it via the character of Susie. It’s often the thing that’s the

\textsuperscript{41} Sebold, A 1999, Lucky, Scribner, New York.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
most difficult to describe – I can’t even describe it to myself – which is characters give you their world, somehow…so it was a 14 year old girl’s heaven.\textsuperscript{44}

O’Brien questions her influences more directly, with regards to her spiritual journey, to which she responds:

I think that maybe if I had had a more classic religious upbringing I would not have been able to write the heaven as I wrote it because I would have felt like there were more “shoulds” in place.\textsuperscript{45}

In admitting that her novel does not come from a traditional religious model, Sebold herself declares her novel as contrasting the traditional depictions of heaven. O’Brien in the interview points out that critics observed Sebold’s heaven to be “curiously godless – that being in heaven was like participating in a self-help encounter group, that it was oddly consumerist – that to get something all you had to do was desire it enough”.\textsuperscript{46}

In Publisher’s Weekly, Ann Darby questioned Sebold about her own idea of heaven to which Sebold responded:

For me, heaven would be a lack of alienation. I think that for me heaven isn’t about couches and milkshakes and never having a troubling thought again. As opposed to a place that is just blinding comfort, I gave Susie a place to investigate, a place where she could come to understand the world and the people in her life.\textsuperscript{47}

Whilst none of the interviewers asked Sebold directly, “where do you believe you have acquired your concept of heaven?”. Sebold has indicated above that she hasn’t sought to subscribe to a heaven founded in religion, and in fact, was not raised in a religious environment. The ambition

\textsuperscript{44} The 7.30 Report, 2005, \textit{Sebold joins Sydney Writers’ Festival}, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, viewed 31 May 2005, \url{<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1377138.htm>}
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
to stay true to a traditional portrayal of heaven was not a literary device she employed. The contemporary portrayal of a non-traditional heaven does not concern Sebold as an author, though she doesn’t appear to believe in the kind of heaven she created for the character of Susie, either. She therefore does not claim to know what heaven is, and whether or not it truly exists.

2.4 Limitations on understanding cultural influences.

Whilst we can reason that a religious upbringing has not influenced Sebold’s creation of a literary heaven, we cannot document the contributing cultural influences on Sebold’s creation of a literary heaven, apart from knowing that she has lived all her life in the United States of America (in Philadelphia, and New York City), which is perceived to be a consumerist society.

Capturing exactly what the effects of the American culture are on one author and her creative work is extremely difficult to document, as the American society is a multicultural one, where media (television, film, music) constantly reinvents that culture until it is an anthropological blur. Therefore, the originating culture that influences the author in question (and her readers) is somewhat indefinable.

American society can however, be defined as a modern western culture, and for the purposes of understanding the author’s cultural influences, it is assumed, as stated in the introduction, that the reader of this exegesis has a contextual understanding of a modern, western culture; a society with consumerist ideals.
Chapter Three

*Earthly comforts and high school dreams – the literary heaven depicted in Sebold’s The Lovely Bones and its narrative effects*

3.1.1 A set of interwoven personalised heavens.

Sebold gives her protagonist a personalised heaven, set in an American high school; a context relevant to the earthly life she has just left behind:

> When I first entered heaven I thought everyone saw what I saw. That in everyone’s heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin. That all the buildings were like suburban northeast high schools built in the 1960s. Large, squat buildings spread out on dismally landscaped sandy lots, with overhangs and open spaces to make them feel modern. My favourite part was how the colored blocks were turquoise and orange, just like the blocks in Fairfax High (16).

The landscape of heaven, as Sebold has constructed it, is a heaven particular to the perception of this one character. Sebold admits “It [is] a 14 year old girl’s heaven”, 48 and thus suggests that within the world of her novel, each character has their own customised heavenly landscape; and that the greater concept of heaven adhered to, is a place where the paradisiacal landscape appears different to those who reside in it.

Susie tells us that her heaven is set amongst other personalised heavens that interweave with her own:

> After a few days in heaven, I realised that the javelin-throwers and the shot-putters and the boys who played basketball…were all in their own version of heaven. Theirs just fit with mine – didn’t duplicate it precisely, but has a lot of the same things going on inside (17).

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<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1377138.htm>
This is further clarified when Susie notices that her friend Holly sometimes “seemed like she wasn’t paying attention, and other times she was gone when I went looking for her. That was when she went to a part of heaven we didn’t share.”

These personalised heavens have their own smell – for Susie, her heaven smells like the skunk, as she always loved the smell of this animal on Earth for it was “fear and power mixed together” (40). For the character of Frannie, heaven smells like grade A tobacco, and for the character of Holly, it smells like kumquats (40).

Heaven in The Lovely Bones, whilst sometimes a shared space, is therefore divided into personalised landscapes that hold meaning for each member of its larger community, according to the desires they had on Earth.

3.1.2 Narrative effect of a personalised heaven.

The narrative effect of creating a personalised heaven is, for Sebold, a powerful one. It allows her as author, to reveal the age, desires, and state of innocence of the character Susie. The setting tells us more about the character, as it is a reflection of the character’s personality – it reveals her favourite smell, her favourite icecream. We know that Susie has been raped and murdered, and this backdrop forms a constant reminder of her unrealised teenage dreams. Here, Sebold uses the heaven setting as a tool for characterisation.

3.2.1 Gratification of earthly desires.

The architecture of Susie’s heaven is built with previously unanswered wants and desires – the fruit of the imagination she had whilst alive. It is as if the things she held in her imagination just before she died – the immediate future where she believed she would find happiness, has
become real in her heaven. Susie tells the reader (16) “Sometimes, on Earth, I had made my father drive me by Fairfax High, so I could imagine myself there” and later:

We had been given, in our heavens, our simplest dreams. There were no teachers in the school. We never had to go inside except for art class for me and jazz band for Holly. The boys did not pinch our backsides or tell us we smelled: our textbooks were *Seventeen, Glamour* and *Vogue* (18).

Susie’s heaven includes a comfortable swing set (17), the old-time street lamps that she had admired in the school play *Our Town* (41), and a house that doesn’t resemble the house she lived in on Earth, as Susie tells us she hadn’t like it – “I hated how our house looked out onto another house and another house and another – an echo of sameness riding up over the hill.”

Susie’s roommate Holly, having been Vietnamese in her life, didn’t want an accent in heaven and so she changed her name to her favourite movie character, from *Breakfast at Tiffany*’s. Their combined heaven (where their personalised heavens interweave and appear the same to both girls) has “an icecream shop where, when you asked for peppermint stick ice cream, no one ever said ‘It’s seasonal’; it has a newspaper where our pictures appeared a lot and made us look important.”

### 3.2.2 Contemporary characteristics of the traditional use of the motif.

Whilst abundant food, and gratification of earthly desires are characteristics of the Islamic heavens (explored in Appendix A), the simple desires that are gratified in Sebold’s novel are found within American culture (athletic sports, peppermint icecream, glossy magazines), and they are not traditional components of the heaven subscribed to in the predominant American faith, Christianity.

These desires are consumerist, twentieth and twenty-first century desires, complimenting, and possibly extending what the girls experienced on Earth.
Sebold has taken the concept of heavenly gratification one step further than established religion, and aligned it with the personal desires of the individual. The role of customising personal preferences can be seen as a symptom of contemporary society, and the building blocks for Sebold’s literary heaven come from this culture: one that seeks to meet the consumerist needs of the individual. Therefore, we can see the origins of Sebold’s world-building rules, in creating her own literary heaven.

3.2.3 Narrative effect of gratifying earthly desire.

The narrative effect of granting her characters’ earthly desires is again, a device for characterisation. A comprehension of the teenage dreams and desires held by Susie, position the reader to understand her mental and physical age at the time of her death. It contrasts the violence of her rape and murder, and renders the crime even more horrific, in light of the victim’s age, given that her dreams were so childlike.

It also serves to propel reader engagement, as readers may consider the possibility of the personalised heaven model presented, being a possible world for themselves, where their own earthly desires might be gratified. Sebold relies on the readers’ signification of the heaven motif and builds upon it with the possibility of personal reference, as Daemmrich identifies, this is a characteristic of paradise settings – they build upon previous uses of the motif, until they reinvent themselves.49

3.3.1 Divinely influenced limitations.

Heaven for Susie and Holly isn’t a paradise of infinite luxury, with no presence of pain or negative emotion. Soon after they each arrive in heaven, they discuss their new environment:

“Do you like it here?”

“No.”

“Me either.” (18).

Susie identifies that her most important desire is not attainable: “I could not have what I wanted most: Mr. Harvey dead and me living. Heaven wasn’t perfect” (18). Susie feels many negative emotions in heaven – embarrassment for others (80), faintness (95), loneliness (123) and frustration at the inability to warn people (138).

Sebold has not created a literary paradise where everything meets your every desire, and in doing so, acknowledges that there is, within the world of her novel, a higher order to things and the existence of laws that cannot be broken by human desire. Susie is able to watch her family from heaven, but she is not able to change the lives of her surviving family. She is not able to steer the police toward finding her killer. Sebold, whilst creating a literary heaven that meets commonplace earthly desires, has shown restraint in creating a heaven that washes away all earthly pain.

3.3.2 Narrative effect of including divine limitations.

The narrative effect of this is to invoke a sense of injustice and sympathy for the character of Susie. This serves Sebold as a narrative device, as it develops in the reader, an understanding of a main theme of the novel – rape.

The anguish and effect of rape and murder cannot even escape heaven, and it therefore testifies to the horror of the crime committed. This may even signify to the reader that such an experience cannot be healed by death. Sebold, as an author whose first book was an autobiographical account of being raped, makes a bold statement here – that some human actions can be so detrimental to the human experience that the healing required extends past
death. Susie does eventually ascend to a higher plane of heaven where she no longer needs to watch her family, but Sebold suggests in the ambiguity of Susie’s last comments, that the effect of her rape and murder may never leave her – when a travelling couple finds the charm bracelet, the only evidence of Susie’s body having ever been located near the sinkhole, the wife says, “This little girl’s grown up by now,” to which Susie as narrator says “Almost. Not quite.” This would suggest that there is a part of Susie that remains forever, a child – the innocent victim of an adult crime.

Sebold therefore, with the constraint shown in making an imperfect heaven, makes a powerful statement as a writer – that humans have the ability to permanently damage one another, even past the point of death.

3.4.1 Interaction with the living.

Sebold gives her protagonist a tool for observing those she has left behind. Susie has a gazebo in her heaven where she can watch events on Earth as the ultimate, omniscient narrator: “our neighbours the O’Dwyers had had a gazebo; I had grown up jealous for one” (34). From here, Susie is able to read what the character Ruth writes in her diary (117), and hear the thoughts of her family as they interact with others (33). She can watch their imagination (116), observe the content of their dreams (97, 173) and perceive their naivety and the hidden motivations of their actions (99). Susie is able to see back in time, and review the lives of others including her murderer, George Harvey (96). She can also revisit moments in her own life which were dear to her (150). Closer to the action, Susie is able to stand next to members of her family as a ghost (141, 144). However, she cannot be heard when she tries to talk to them, though they sometimes say or write that they can hear her (59, 91, 92) or feel her when she is present (279, 281, 295). As time passes, Susie explains, “I had begun to spend less time watching from the
gazebo because I could still see Earth as I walked the fields of heaven,”(119) suggesting that she is constantly watching those on Earth from within her mind.

3.4.2 Narrative effect of interaction with the living.

As a tool for characterisation, the gazebo and its window on the thoughts and actions of all the other characters, allows Sebold to display the characters through the eyes of Susie, and for the reader to see them as Susie sees them. It determines the point of view used in the novel.

As a narrative device, Sebold has chosen a powerful form of point of view – total omniscience of a first person protagonist central to all events in the novel, able to see everything in the present and past, from the point of view of any of the characters, including the antagonist George Harvey. It is both subjective (Susie’s thoughts and actions) and objective (other character’s thoughts and actions) narration, affording immense freedom as a writer. The only restriction for Sebold in using this point of view is that the narration is through the lens of a fourteen year old girl, who would, as an earthly narrator, most likely be a more naïve character. Sebold however does not position the narrator as a naïve child, rather, as a girl who has been forced to quickly become an adult and one that has the experience and wisdom acquired through death.

3.4.3 The Inbetween.

Susie refers to the Inbetween, a space where she is able to somehow interact with the living, “where heaven’s horizon met Earth’s” (34). For Susie, the Inbetween is a place she can sometimes enter in order to interact with or affect the living and the first time she does so, she is able to touch and be seen by Ruth Connors, as her soul exits the Earth (36). The second time is to make herself visible to her father in a time of his anguish, and he sees her in a glass reflection (46). Later she appears in the room but only one family member can see her (245). She can blow
out a candle (140) and has the ability to appear like a glimmer or shadow to guide her sister whilst she breaks into the murderer’s house looking for evidence (180), when Susie says that she is “pushing so hard on the Inbetween to get to Lindsey that I suddenly felt I might hurt her when I meant to help.”

It is suggested that living children have the ability to enter this Inbetween easier than adults (91, 95, 208) and even explore it creatively (34, 217) but that Susie must show restraint when manipulating this dimension around children.

The most extensive manipulation of this Inbetween comes in the conclusion of the novel, when Susie tells the reader that she “fell to Earth” (299) as she steps inside the adult body of her friend Ruth for several hours, and makes love to her childhood sweetheart, Ray Singh, eight years after her death.

3.4.4 Narrative effect of the Inbetween.

As a literary device, Sebold uses the Inbetween for narrative effect in that her deceased character can, within reason, still interact with the remaining living characters, which propels suspense. Susie continues to be a character in the novel after her death, and, in using the victim as the narrator, Sebold harnesses the narrative effect of informed insight into the thoughts, words, actions and personal history of every character, whilst retaining Susie’s personality.

This additional layer of insight heightens the sense of suspense for the reader as there is a further element of intrigue as to the nature of the mechanics of Susie’s heaven. The nature of how Susie is able to affect those on Earth is never explained; it is simply the unfolding of the narrative, and therefore Sebold’s novel retains an element of wonder, as trying to explain the mechanics of a post-mortem world would render the novel somewhat stale.
3.5.1 Temporal consistency: time in heaven passing as time passes on Earth.

Susie as the narrator of the novel’s action on Earth, watches events at the same rate at which they pass on Earth. Keeping the time in heaven passing at the same rate as it does on Earth, allows the character of Susie to grow as a person, though not in age.

However, in addition to real time observation, Susie can return (as identified above in 3.4.1), to review other characters’ previous experiences in the past to which she was not privy until her death, and the accompanying all-seeing perch she has from heaven. She can also revisit her own past experiences in real time, witnessing them again, and narrating their meaning post-mortem for the reader.

Therefore Susie has both the ability of ‘informed’ reflection on her life in the past and present, and to grow as a consequence of that observation, even though she is dead.

3.5.2 Narrative effect of the novel’s temporal pace.

In keeping the time passing in heaven, as it does on Earth, Sebold gains character development. Were Susie to be stationary in a possible future and recounting past events, the reader’s interest would be lost. For a novel to be interesting, there needs to be a change or growth perceived in the main character, and so in The Lovely Bones, Susie’s experience spans one of infinite damage caused by George Harvey’s actions, towards one of healing and the ability to ascend to a higher heaven (see 3.6.1). Allowing Susie to grow in heaven with the wisdom gained in watching real time events after her death, gives Sebold the benefit of narrative effect through character growth.

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Sebold could have chosen the far past tense for Susie to recount the story from, and gained the ability of recounting events from an even higher platform – from Susie’s point of view in her final heaven, but in doing so she would have lost the elements of suspense gained in present tense, as the reader anticipates seeing justice unfold on George Harvey, Susie’s rapist and murderer, in real time. This further compounds the sense that Susie is an innocent victim, whose childhood has been stolen. The reader is positioned to sympathise with Susie.

3.6.1 A higher heaven.

At night, as Susie watches souls lift from nursing homes, she comes to realise “how these deaths seemed choreographed from somewhere far away. Not our heaven” (154). It might appear to the reader that the heaven reserved for Susie is one for those who still have business with the living, as the above quote suggests that older people may not require such a ‘purgatory’. Susie is told that there is a higher state of heaven that she is not currently accessing. She acknowledges that the heaven she is in does not seem paradisiacal:

I thought if this were heaven, truly heaven, it would be where my grandparents lived. Where my father’s father, my favourite of them all, would lift me up and dance with me. I would feel only joy and have no memory, no cornfield, and no grave (120).

Frannie tells Susie that she can have that, though it is not easy to switch to it:

You have to stop desiring certain answers…if you stop asking why you were killed instead of someone else, stop investigating the vacuum left by your loss, stop wondering what everyone left on Earth is feeling, you can be free. Simply put, you have to give up on Earth (120).

Frannie also alludes to this being a two-way relationship “when the dead are done with the living, the living can go on to other things.” Gradually, through the course of seeing her family find some form of resurrection, her grandfather enters her heaven and they dance, as she had imagined (260) which Sebold uses to show that Susie is indeed, moving closer towards this higher heaven. It is at the end of the novel, when Susie sees that her family has survived her
death, and found a way to reunite and live again, that she leaves them behind, no longer needing to watch them constantly (322). She enters a higher heaven that is not so much about safety and “gritty reality” (324). Susie calls it “wide wide Heaven” (the first time Sebold uses the capital letter H for heaven) “because it includes all my simplest desires but also the most humble and grand.” However, even in this sacred realm, it is still a place defined by man-made earthly objects:

There are cakes and pillows and colors galore, but underneath this more obvious patchwork quilt are places like a quiet room where you can go and hold someone’s hand and not have to say anything…This wide wide Heaven is about flathead nails and the soft down of new leaves, wild rollercoaster rides and escaped marbles that fall then hang then take you somewhere you could never have imagined in your small-heaven dreams.

Sebold alludes to, yet does not attempt to describe this higher heaven in detail; rather it is her ambiguity that gives meaning to the heaven she creates.

It is also from this heaven that Susie either observes the accidental death of her murderer, or, as the reader might perceive it, exacts revenge, by making an icicle fall from a tree above her murderer’s head, whilst he is trying to corner another potential rape victim. After seeing the protagonist learn of the many ways in which she can interact with the living (such as causing candles to blow out and making herself appear in reflections), whether or not it is she who makes the icicle fall and causes her murderer to fall down a remote ravine, is left for the reader to decide.

3.6.2 Narrative effect of the inclusion of a higher heaven.

Sebold chooses not to describe this higher heaven to narrative effect. The realm is left up to the reader to imagine, possibly because as a writer it is too difficult to paint the higher reaches of a celestial paradise that no human can accurately chart; a challenge that faced Dante in the Divine
Comedy, as parts of Paradiso are actually a description of his inability to describe the beauty of Paradise: “And from then on my vision rose to heights/higher than words, which fail before such sight” and “How my weak words fall short of my conception, which is itself so far from what I saw that ‘weak’ is much too weak a word to use!” Daemmrich acknowledges the inability of writers to fully capture the beauty of paradise, as she states “Even the longest texts must end, and even the most inventive creators cannot communicate fully their own created visions of perfect bliss” (192), and declares that “the purest literary paradises are those that invite readers to undertake their own imaginary quests” (101). Sebold now joins this list of authors.

The absence of a description of this landscape in Sebold’s novel, apart from this one paragraph, allows the reader to speculate as to the nature of this higher heaven in his or her own imagination, and to perceive an ending to a story that in the novel, continues after the end of the action being recounted. In this way, the novel might seem to have its own afterlife.

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Chapter Four

The ways in which Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* both supports and challenges Daemmrich’s theories on literary representations of paradise

4.1 Overview of Daemmrich’s framework of analysis of paradise.

Daemmrich, in writing her text *Enigmatic Bliss: The Paradise Motif in Literature* has provided a framework for analysing literary representations of the paradise motif. Using examples in countless literary paradises over time from Dante’s poem *The Divine Comedy* in the 14th century, through to Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz* she divides her work into six chapters which form a thorough examination on the ways in which the heaven or paradise motif has been used in literature for narrative effect.52 For the purpose of this exegesis, I will term those characteristics as explored by Daemmrich as being the traditional uses of the heaven motif.

When Daemmrich’s body of work is used as a basis for the textual analysis of Sebold’s novel *The Lovely Bones*, some of these traditional characteristics are reinforced by Sebold’s portrayal of heaven, which serves to support Daemmrich’s study. It allows us to view the correlation that Sebold’s novel has with other texts that portray heaven or paradise.

Although Sebold’s use of the heaven motif in *The Lovely Bones* for the greater part supports Daemmrich’s theory on the traditional characteristics of a literary depiction of paradise (and subsequently the sacred paradise of heaven), some characteristics of the literary heaven portrayed in Sebold’s novel reveal opposing, and therefore what I shall term contemporary uses of the motif. Therefore, such a textual analysis will help us to arrive at an understanding of how the portrayal of heaven is evolving in literature.

52 See the Literature Review in the introduction, for a synopsis of the framework Daemmrich offers.
I have applied three areas of Daemmrich’s framework to the literary heaven depicted in *The Lovely Bones* to arrive at a meaningful textual analysis of Sebold’s use of the heaven motif.

 Whilst the other three areas of analysis do relate somewhat to the key text being examined, it is Daemmrich’s study of landscape and individual features, themes, and cultural interplay that allow us the most meaningful textual analysis of Sebold’s literary heaven. Though several examples can be found that support the framework, only one or two examples are given to support each point.

### 4.2 The ways in which Sebold’s novel reinforces the traditional use of the heaven motif.

Sebold’s novel affirms Daemmrich’s observations in regard to landscape and features in traditional representations of heaven in literature. Sebold does this through her use of a) *familiar settings*, b) *temporal paradoxes* and c) *fauna*.

With the inclusion of themes traditionally associated with texts that use the heaven setting, Sebold reinforces the traditional manipulation of the themes of d) *evil and corruption* and e) *love*.

With regards to the use of cultural constructs in the depiction of heaven, Sebold’s novel supports Daemmrich’s theory on the use of f) *creativity*.

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53 Ibid, chapters 3,4 and 5 respectively, for individual features themes, and cultural interplay.
a) Familiar settings

Daemmrich cites several texts that link distance with familiarity. That is, texts that place the paradise in a landscape familiar and meaningful to the protagonist, so that the created literary paradise carries more meaning. In texts that use a familiar landscape, she finds that the “paradise reflects both an inner and outer landscape”.  

The literary heaven in Sebold’s novel is a landscape of personal familiarity, somehow selected by the occupant or chosen for them, for the meaning that the landscape held for them whilst alive. For each of the characters, the location of their personalised heaven reinforces what would have, or did bring them happiness whilst alive (see 3.1.1 through 3.2.3 for an examination of Sebold’s use of the personalised heaven). It is the backdrop for their search for inner bliss, in a familiar outer paradisiacal landscape – a personally projected, future earthly state of perceived bliss.

Sebold’s novel correlates with the traditional portrayal of heaven as defined by Daemmrich – in that the protagonist Susie is not only located in an outer sacred paradise, but she seeks an inner peace or state of bliss – that of accepting her violent death and the people she has left behind on Earth.

Susie eventually finds her way towards an inner paradise (the higher heaven referred to in 3.6.1), from within this familiar outer landscape, when she is able to voluntarily stop watching her family.

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In using this familiar landscape, Sebold has not deviated from the traditional treatment of the heaven motif; she, like other authors before her, benefits from the narrative device of using a familiar landscape – that is, the landscape carries more meaning.

b) Temporal paradoxes

The landscape of paradise in Sebold’s novel continues its correlation with the traditional use of the heaven motif, in presenting a temporal paradox.

Daemmrich finds that traditionally, paradise is placed “at all points of the time continuum in order to fulfill diverse textual functions”.\(^{55}\) The literary heaven that Sebold portrays is a projected time (a future point on the time continuum) in the life that Susie would have experienced, were she alive.

Daemmrich states “in expressing nostalgia for a location or condition of former or future bliss, such narratives incorporate a critical stance toward the corruption and loss of innocence, freedom, and bliss of the present age”.\(^{56}\)

Susie Salmon’s chosen heaven is clearly an expression of nostalgia for a future state of bliss. Susie as narrator, in recounting details of her heaven, says:

High school would have been a fresh start. When I got to Fairfax High I would insist on being called Suzanne, I would wear my hair feathered or up in a bun. I would have a body that the boys wanted and the girls envied, but I’d be so nice on top of it all that they would feel too guilty to do anything but worship me…I would overtake high school in a matter of days, not years, or


\(^{56}\) Ibid, p69.
inexplicably, earn an Oscar for Best actress during my junior year. These were my dreams on Earth (16).

If it weren’t for George Harvey’s corrupt actions (the murder of Susie at age fourteen), she would have entered into this perceived future state of bliss – the earthly heaven of a young girl on the cusp of adulthood.

The earthly bliss Susie misses out on (but which is portrayed as a heavenly landscape) is juxtaposed with the loss of innocence in the present age, continually reinforced by the action of the novel – the breakdown (and final resurrection without her) of her family after her violent murder. Susie remains in her heaven, for the majority of the novel, a teenager – suspended in time, at the point in which the loss of innocence occurred. Sebold allows us to fully comprehend the evilness of Harvey’s actions, when Susie’s youthful form and missed opportunity of adulthood is a constant reminder.

Sebold therefore uses a device traditional to portraying literary heavens – that of presenting a temporal paradox and within it, nostalgia for a state of future bliss, to incorporate a critical stance against the corruption of innocence.

Sebold uses this temporal paradox as a narrative device, to juxtapose the innocence of her protagonist Susie, with the antagonist George Harvey, her murderer, and therefore, propel meaningful action in the novel.

It is Daemmrich’s framework of analysis that allows us this greater understanding of Sebold’s novel, and of the narrative effect that the heaven motif offers authors such as Sebold.
c) Fauna

Daemmrich explores the effect of including animals in literary paradises, which are represented as either good or evil – the classic example being that of the serpent in the bible’s Garden of Eden; good animals reinforce the identification of paradise, and evil animals contribute to the downfall of paradise.

Sebold’s literary paradise has within in it, what Susie refers to as “riches in furry packages” (34). Her heaven is filled with “tiny dogs, and big dogs, dogs of every kind,” (34) which run around in the park outside her room. She lists their many varieties and characteristics. The highlight for Susie is when they group together to sing and wail in tune to Holly playing her saxophone, and this scene is shared with other women where their heavens interweave. The singing is typically accompanied by dancing with the dogs, and this, Susie repetitively refers to throughout the novel, as being her Evensong.\(^{57}\) In this, the dogs harmonise with the serenity and beauty of her paradise and the perception of this characteristic as serene is reinforced in the heavens of other characters.

For Susie, this becomes an even more personalised component of her heaven, as when their family dog, Holiday, eventually dies in real time on Earth, he joins with the other dogs in Susie’s heaven during Evensong, and recognises her:

I waited for him to sniff me out, anxious to know if here, on the other side, I would still be the little girl he had slept beside. I did not have to wait long: he was so happy to see me, he knocked me down (231).

\(^{57}\) It is interesting to note here, that in Sebold’s non-religious representation of heaven, she has a reference to ecclesiastical song. This is a rare religious inclusion, but not substantial enough to consider her literary heaven as a Christian heaven.
Sebold, in using animals to populate her literary heaven, has used a traditional element of the heaven motif as defined by Daemmrich, in a contemporary text, to positively reinforce the concept of heaven in her novel.

d) **The theme of evil and corruption**

Evil and corruption are themes that Daemmrich has explored as being traditional within texts that use the paradise or heaven motif, and Sebold’s novel validates Daemmrich’s observation on how such texts traditionally treat this theme.

Evil and corruption are strong themes in *The Lovely Bones*; the novel’s action being propelled by an act of murder and rape, and the inability of authorities to catch the murderer.

Daemmrich finds that “as the antithesis to the corruption and evil of present human activity…paradise signals the nostalgic dream of a realm unspoiled by evil and immune from corruption”.58 This is clearly the signifier for the literary heaven depicted in *The Lovely Bones*. It is a nostalgic dream that creates Susie’s heaven and it is the future she would have entered into, had George Harvey not corrupted that dream with his evil act. Heaven in *The Lovely Bones* is therefore a realm unspoiled by him, and immune from his corruption. Susie’s heaven is the antithesis of George Harvey’s present evil.

Like other literary representations of heaven, Sebold’s novel depicts a paradise in a horizontally or vertically distant time or space, which Daemmrich’s states will:

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58 Ibid, p135.
…exemplify the motif’s role to propose a dynamic contrast to depictions of the present age as evil and corrupt. In order to reinforce the temporal and spatial distance of paradise from evil and corruption, texts… typically begin with the perspective of the present, degenerate times. 59

This is clearly evident in the representation of heaven in The Lovely Bones. It is a paradise vertically distant from the time and space where the present age depicts evil and corruption.

The action of the novel begins in chapter one with the degenerative act of Susie’s rape and murder. This action propels her entry to heaven.

Susie’s death takes place below the Earth, in a dug-out underground cave in the cornfield near her house. This may in fact signify hell within the world of Sebold’s novel, given that hell is portrayed in some religions as being below the earthly domain, and it is a living hell that Susie endures before her murder.

Sebold aligns the three realms of heaven, Earth and hell vertically in her novel – heaven is above the Earth (and the hellish cave), where the utmost evil is committed. Sebold reinforces the distance of paradise from evil, as Susie continues to observe George Harvey, the antithesis of herself in the present degenerate times, from her safe and separate perch in heaven.

From observing this example, we can see that Sebold’s portrayal of the theme of evil and corruption, supports the traditional representation of heaven in literature, as defined by Daemmrich.

e) The theme of love or lovers

Daemmrich identifies that the theme of love can be represented in a variety of ways, ranging from “signification from spiritual self-transcendence to physical desires and jealous possessiveness.”

The theme of love in *The Lovely Bones* is a catalyst for the climax of the novel. Susie Salmon kisses classmate Ray Singh, in the weeks before her death. It is her first and only experience of earthly love, and precedes the loss of her virginity through rape, just before her murder. Sebold explores the effect of Susie’s death on Ray, and their near miss in earthly love, post-mortem via the friendship with Ruth Connors. Susie watches Ray’s thoughts, his conversations with Ruth and the experimentation with sexual acts between those two friends, who both see it as a way to keep Susie present in their lives. For Susie, her romantic love for Ray continues in heaven, as “spreading out in my heaven after death had been a moonbeam that swirled and blinked on and off – Ray Singh’s kiss” (304).

Susie continues to watch Ray from heaven eight years after her death, and as she becomes aware that she is soon to move on from observing events in real time on Earth, she stops watching her family, to focus more closely on her ‘lover’:

> I had always been in love with him. I counted the eyelashes of each closed eye. He had been my almost, my might-have-been, and I did not want to leave him any more than I did my family (283).

When Ruth and Ray are together on Earth, Susie manages to fall to Earth, to enter as a spirit into the body of Ruth Connors, now a woman in her early twenties with the ability to sense spirits. Ruth feels Susie’s presence nearby and asks her, “Don’t you want anything, Susie?” (295). Shortly after, Susie falls to Earth and occupies Ruth’s body. It takes time for Susie to become

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60 Ibid, p125
accustomed to being in a body again, and Ray comes to realise that Susie has possessed Ruth’s body.

Daemmrich notes that “grieving lovers seem displaced in a landscape that promotes peace, joy and serenity, their sorrows draw both landscape components and other figures to...sympathise with the aggrieved lover”.

This is the case with Susie’s fall to Earth – it is both facilitated by heaven itself, and by Ruth. Whilst residents of heaven are shocked by Susie’s fall to Earth, they reluctantly let her go:

I heard a voice calling me from heaven. It was Franny’s. She ran toward the gazebo, calling my name. Holiday was barking so loud that his voice would catch and round in the base of his throat with no break.

However, it appears, heaven itself has facilitated this earthly fall:

I was feeling the weight of Ruth’s body, both the luscious bounce of breasts and thighs but also an awesome responsibility. I was a soul back on Earth, AWOL a little while from heaven, I had been given a gift. By force of will I stood as straight as I could.

Susie as the grieving lover has prompted the components of heaven (and other figures) to sympathise with her, and allow her this reunion with Ray.

Daemmrich has identified the narrative consequences of using the theme of love within paradise and as an author using the heaven motif, Sebold too, benefits from these consequences – she is able to demonstrate the sympathy of the landscape and of the other characters towards Susie and this act results in Susie’s spiritual self-transcendence, which is further examined below. This final earthly interaction is Susie’s gateway to redemption in paradise.

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61 Ibid, p129.
f) The cultural construct of creativity

Sebold’s novel affirms Daemmrich’s analysis of creativity and the creative arts in paradise as being the traditional interplay with cultural constructs in texts with the paradise motif.

Daemmrich makes reference to creativity in paradise as a decline in perfect bliss, as “true paradise does not encourage creativity, for it is by definition a perfect creation”.62 However, whilst Adam in Genesis of the Bible was encouraged to tend to his garden,63 Daemmrich finds that when human effort is encouraged in paradise, the notion of perfection has the power to shift, and therefore “paradise then becomes a human creation”.64 She finds that:

…the paradise motif in literature captures the urge lauded by Western culture to invent, build and create. Yet, the motif also questions, undermines and reinvents these creations of paradise. As a result, it reshapes the notion of creativity from simple linearity to a complex, unpredictable but nevertheless, interconnected network of possibilities.

Sebold’s created heaven is the epitome of a Western creation – it is taken from the social fabric of American society – it is an all-American high school. As the creator of the novel, she reinvents paradise for allegorical meaning. She hands the creative process to her characters – Susie, and the other women populating the other personalised heavens, who then have the creative power to invent, build and create their own world.

As a result, Sebold has reshaped the context of an afterlife as a human creation. Heaven appears now, in the world of her novel, to be “an interconnected network of possibilities.” It is the act of human creativity that creates this heaven – it is a creative heaven.\textsuperscript{65}

However, in the world of Sebold’s novel, a divine dichotomy exists in that a higher power lies behind the ability to honour the occupants’ desires, though it is never revealed, nor represented as a deity or God. This signifies that there is a partnering between the higher power, and human creativity. And so, in returning to Daemmrich’s findings above, the notion of perfection does indeed shift in the case of The Lovely Bones as a consequence of the inclusion of human creativity. Susie does not see her heaven as a state of perfection, rather it is a backdrop for learning how to move on to a higher heaven, or higher state of perfection. So Sebold’s novel does in fact support Daemmrich’s theory.

Sebold, in manipulating the cultural construct of creativity in The Lovely Bones, supports Daemmrich’s principles of traditional literary heavens, but places it within a contemporary context.

4.3 The ways in which Sebold’s novel challenges the traditional use of the heaven motif.

Sebold’s The Lovely Bones dramatically challenges Daemmrich’s theory in two ways: with the effects of \textit{a) the sexual act} when combined with the theme of love and through Sebold’s use of \textit{b) the cultural construct of gender}.

\textsuperscript{65} See the taxonomy of heaven in chapter one for a definition of a creative heaven.
Where paradise has normally been a patriarchal construct according to Daemmrich, Sebold successfully creates a matriarchal heaven, with new meanings for the representations of female characters. Here, her novel directly opposes Daemmrich’s contentions.

It is pertinent to note that Sebold’s novel challenges the traditional literary depiction of paradise, with regard to both sex and gender. As the second half of the twentieth century saw both a sexual and a feminist revolution, it appears that Sebold’s novel reflects contemporary values, and therefore we can see clearly the effect of contemporary times, on Sebold’s portrayal of heaven.

**a) The sexual act**

Whilst the portrayal of the theme of love, as shown above in 4.2e, supports Daemmrich’s demonstration of the traditional uses of the heaven motif, she does acknowledge that “the relationship between the theme of love and the paradise motif is unstable and unpredictable”. Sebold does use the theme of love according to Daemmrich’s examples (4.2 b), but as we see below, she also deviates from it, when she incorporates the theme with the sexual act.

Sex in Daemmrich’s theory undermines the paradise, whereas in Sebold’s novel, the sexual act brings Susie closer to a higher state of heaven.

The sexual act is one that Daemmrich acknowledges is part of paradisiacal landscapes, but that:

…narrowing the complexity of love to a predominantly sexual focus calls attention to its power in undermining the permanence, serenity and bliss associated with paradise.  

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67 Ibid, p134.
It is here that Sebold segues from the traditional use of the theme of love and lovers in literary paradises, and illuminates Susie’s spiritual transcendence with a sense of sexual freedom. Upon her fall to Earth, Susie takes the opportunity afforded to her, to have sex with Ray Singh. It is a beautiful experience, contrasting sharply with the opening scenes of the novel, where Susie is brutally raped.

Whilst the scene has a predominantly sexual focus, the course of actions empowers Susie. As Susie says of her act with Ray, “I had never been touched like this. I had only been hurt by hands past all tenderness” (304). The sexual act with Ray Singh becomes a rite of passage, perhaps replacing the act of corruption when George Harvey violently took her virginity.

In *The Lovely Bones*, sex does not serve to undermine paradise, as it does in traditional heavens as defined by Daemmrich; it serves to restore a state of bliss. Sebold has therefore provided a contemporary treatment on the theme of sex in paradisiacal landscapes, and in doing so, contrasts the traditional representation of heaven in literature. Her manipulation of the theme of sex signifies that the use of the heaven motif is evolving – perhaps influenced by the changing perception of sex in society.

It appears that for Susie’s transcendence from her current heaven to “wide wide Heaven” to take place (324/5), she needs to fulfill this act of sexual love. Heaven allows her this fall to Earth, so that she can resolve her own transcendence from her prior state of conflicted emotions. It is the climactic act that brings about her healing, and therefore her final redemption from her earthly life.

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68 Ibid, p133.
In this, Sebold has used the theme of love and the act of sex with her earthly lover, to offer the character of Susie redemption from her death, and more specifically, her rape. Love has prompted self-transcendence.

b) Gender
Traditionally, literary representations of paradise strongly reflect a patriarchal society, as Daemmrich demonstrates. She states that the canon of literature using the paradise motif has been the domain of male writers, following a strong and continuously reinforced tradition of portraying men as:

…the questers, antagonists and designers of their own paradisiacal bliss. Women are assigned stationary positions in either the non-paradisiacal reality abandoned by questers or paradisiacal spaces, where they frequently function as focal objects of the male quest. True paradisiacal bliss is often achieved when the male questers have conquered or been given the desired female object.  

In preventing women from “independently posing or proposing themselves,” in a patriarchal society, the canon of paradisiacal literature “supports paradise as a male construct to be shared between masculine writers and readers”, however Sebold as a female writer, has created a text that can be read and appreciated by either gender. Therefore, her novel challenges the canon of paradisiacal literature.

Sebold diverges from the canon of patriarchal paradises in her use of the paradise motif, and uses gender to shape a matriarchal heaven that deviates strongly from traditional gender representations of paradise. In doing so, she creates a powerful arena to make a bold statement

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70 Ibid, p160.
on gender roles, namely the roles of rapist and victim. She creates a feminist heaven where a female can not be harmed by a man.\textsuperscript{71}

Susie Salmon’s heaven (and where it intersects with the personalised heavens of other characters) is populated entirely by women, and very infrequently, elderly men. The virility and power of young or middle aged men is completely absent from her paradise. Having been the fourteen year old victim of rape in her earthly life by a middle-aged man, it is as if all possibilities of sexual threat have been removed from her heaven, and the absence of this, is in fact a paradise for the young Susie. She meets George Harvey’s many other victims in heaven. There are two other main female characters in Susie’s heaven, Holly her flatmate and Frannie, her intake counsellor. Many other unknown women live there, who upon the nightly singing of the dogs reveal themselves, to Susie’s delight:

Other doors opened then, and women stepped out from where they lived alone or with roommates…Mrs. Bethel Utemeyer, the oldest resident of my heaven would bring out her violin. Holly tread lightly on her horn. They would do a duet. One woman, old and silent, one woman not past girl yet. Back and forth, a crazy schizoid solace they’d create. The song reverberated until Holly for a final time, passed the tune over, and Mrs. Utemeyer, quiet, upright, historical, finished with a jig. The house asleep by then; this was my Evensong (35).

Susie revels in the female environment, safe at last amongst her gender, and in a heaven without any threatening male presence. It is a female dominated society, and where a male presence exists, it is in the form of elderly and harmless men who represent either patriarchal love in the form of her grandfather (261) or respectful deference from older men (304). They exist to complement the community, and have no power to harm it.

\textsuperscript{71} See the taxonomy of personalised heavens in chapter one for more information.
Sebold’s novel, in conflicting Daemmrich’s theory of patriarchal domination in literary paradieses, challenges the traditional portrayal of heaven or paradise in literature, and the role of gender in constructing that heaven. In doing so, she has created a matriarchal heaven that serves to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, drawing our attention to the prior traditional patriarchal form of paradise. We now notice more fully, the effect of rape on the victim, and the journey that the character must take to overcome it.

As an author dealing with the theme of rape (and one who has written a memoir of her own personal experience of rape), Sebold is only able to restore freedom to the character of Susie, in the absence of a male-dominated world. Where previously “true paradisiacal bliss is often achieved when the male questers have conquered or been given the desired female object” as Daemmrich states above, Sebold turns this around for her own purposes. She completely challenges the concept of paradise, in this one act. She takes back the desired female object that represents paradise in a patriarchal system and gives the female object back to herself, with restored dignity, in the absence of men. It’s a statement of complete power that transcends any prior representation of heaven in literature.
Conclusions

Whilst Sebold’s novel supports many of Daemmrich’s findings on the portrayal of heaven in literature (as discussed in 4.2), her novel *The Lovely Bones* challenges the traditional use of the motif in significant and culturally relevant ways – that of sex and gender (as discussed in 4.3). In addition to those findings, the detailed examination in chapter three of the literary heaven depicted and of the narrative effects employed reveal a contemporary heaven of a personalized nature, where earthly desires are gratified and the absence of any religious deity or God invokes a clear sense of change in the established view of heaven (as outlined in chapter two).

Sebold’s novel is therefore a justified representation of a contemporary literary heaven, and consequently serves to indicate the evolution of the representation of heaven in literature.

1. If Sebold’s novel is representative of a growing trend of contemporary portrayals of heaven in literature, what does this tell us about the emerging depictions of heaven?

By identifying that *The Lovely Bones* reflects the values of contemporary culture, we can now look to the many other texts that support this growing trend, and recognise a similar treatment of contemporary culture. An analysis using Daemmrich’s framework, of the novels of Albom and Halpern discussed in chapter one, would be likely to return the same result; that the traditional portrayal of heaven in literature is being challenged by newer signifiers, to reflect our contemporary times. As Daemmrich continually contends, “each text begins with previous concepts and then manipulates them by adding subtracting, radically altering or rearranging the
signifiers of paradise to fit its context”. The context for the reader continues to evolve, and so too, does the writer’s imagination to cater for the context.

Observing the way in which the portrayal of heaven in literature continues to change, allows us to perceive the evolution of our literary imagination – and thus, confirms the final contention of Daemmrich’s text, that “like literature itself, the paradise motif continues its enigmatic function of fusing a stable tradition with radical innovation”.

So what does Sebold’s deviation affirm about the new depictions of heaven? At its most evident, it is a lack of influence from religious traditions. Sebold, and other authors working in the same genre of contemporary portrayals of the afterlife (as outlined in the taxonomy of heavens in chapter one) do not include the presence of God. They not only deviate from what Daemmrich perceives as the traditional use of the motif, but they deviate strongly from religious concepts of heaven. God as the creator of heaven (in a Christian context) no longer plays such an important role – it is humankind itself that is creating heaven, or deciding what comprises the heavenly landscape. When it comes to portraying heaven, Religion is losing its grip on literature.

In literature, heaven is now filled with man-made objects and buildings which affirm consumerist ideals – classic American cars, designers handbags and matching shoes, in the case of Adena Halpern’s *The Ten Best Days of My Life*; rollercoaster fun park rides and American diners in Mitch Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*; and an American high school, in

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73 Ibid, p207.
74 As discussed in chapter two.
Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*. The contents of our literary heavens reaffirm human creativity, and that man is the God of his own creation.  

2. What does the demand for, or success of such literature, tell us about society’s perception of the afterlife?

If successful literature in the marketplace represents what it is that people want to read, then these new depictions of heaven tell us that the desired afterlife perceived by some readers, is also evolving.

Whereas the earliest and most successful literary portraits of the afterlife presented journeys where God’s initial commandments and his desire for man to avoid the deadly sins are reaffirmed (such as Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*) the new contemporary portraits of the afterlife steer religious guilt away from a fascination with material objects, and toward a eschatological reward for consumerist ideals and humanly constructed arenas such as high schools, fashion, and fun parks.

Readers no longer want to read about purgatory and punishment for sins, they want an affirmation that what humanity is creating in the real world is approved of in the afterlife; previously represented as the domain of God or a higher power. In addition, they want reassurance that what they have created will continue for eternity. The shift, to be precise, is one away from God as creator of heaven, towards man as creator of heaven. God’s approval for human creation is no longer needed, as Man is approving of it himself, in literature. Faith in the digital age is becoming narcissist and consumerist.

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75 I use the term man in its traditional sense of referring to humanity – further divided into man and woman.
3. If literature imitates reality, what does this tell us about society?

Daemmrich states that “literature continuously reinvents paradise in its own image”, meaning that new depictions of paradise, build and grow upon prior depictions of paradise. Literature, like art, imitates life or rather, in the context of heaven, our ideals; literature is therefore a reflection of our cultural expression. Our literary depictions of paradise therefore have the ability to tell us what we believe paradise to be, and in return, what we know of ourselves.

This tells us that society’s fascination with paradise, or heaven, is Godless. Therefore, it is the contention of my exegesis that the popularity of contemporary portrayals of heaven in the sample of contemporary literature examined, tells us that humanity’s faith has shifted; away from God as creator, and towards humans as creators of their own heavens, and possibly their own universe.

I return to the words of Mark Ralls, who as a 21st century pastor, believes that the success of the new genre of customised afterlife texts stems from a spiritual malaise; a feeling that George Steiner says is a result of the loss “of our capacity to hope, to truly speak in the future tense. Part of the cultural fascination with the perfected state of heaven stems from our reaction to this loss.”

It is perhaps a fear of the unknown or a lack of spiritual imagination that leads to these literary representations of heaven being so similar to contemporary life.

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The popularity of such texts therefore suggests that humanity feels disillusioned with its creation of a world with an uncertain future. As the Earth teeters on the threshold of disaster – when the ramifications of climate change (a consequence of human creation) appear more and more inevitable, our future tense is becoming less distant, and increasingly, out of our control.

Perhaps with the realisation that we are the creators of our universe, humanity might evolve further towards a society where we take more responsibility for our actions (and in this context, our environmental impact). In a world without God, it is humanity that must be responsible for what it creates.
Appendix A – Heaven as it is depicted in the five most popular religions of the world

Our collective imagination is influenced by the cross-cultural communication of our societies’ most popular religions. For the purposes of understanding the influence on writers and readers, a summary of those religions is included here. As stated in chapter two of this exegesis, the most popular faiths (or statements of non-faith as the third inclusion suggests) are Christianity, Islam, Non-religious/Atheist, Hindu, Chinese Traditional religion, and Buddhist, in that order. I have omitted Non-religious/Atheist from this study, as no heaven is included in that belief system. I will give a general overview below of the heaven belief (and where applicable, the context for this belief) depicted in the five most popular faiths of the world (based on the information in the religious texts on those religions where applicable, and the information found in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vols. 1 and 6, 2005).

1. Christianity.

The foundation of the Christian religion is the resurrection (rebirth) of the faithful through Jesus Christ. Jesus, a prophet who lived 2000 years ago, preached the need for conversion towards a God-oriented life and for love of one another. Paul, a disciple of Jesus, claimed to have encountered Jesus as a ‘spirit’ after his death. Paul interpreted Jesus’ resurrection to mean that he had conquered sin and death for all of humanity. Paul then perceived and preached that death was not God’s creation, it was the work of Satan, and that it had been brought into the world by sin. He believed that Jesus had conquered sin, and therefore death, as he had achieved a spiritual body after death. Paul’s conviction was that Jesus had made resurrection possible for all of humanity.

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The Bible is the holy text of the Christian religion, and in it, the book titled *Revelation*, offers a scenario of ‘the end times’ when it was believed that Jesus would return to Earth in one thousand years at the time of a divine battle with Satan, who would at that point be permanently defeated. It was believed that Jesus would again return another one thousand years later, when the whole of humankind would be judged according to their sins. This shift led Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) to conceive of a “City of God”, the domain of God’s love (where Jesus resides), which was separate to the earthly realm, which was the domain of self-love. Augustine however did not describe heaven, and its landscape was left to the imagination.

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 1, 2005) says that:

with the final judgment pushed considerably into the future, people’s concern became sharply focused on the fate of the individual immediately after death. The dualism of the soul and the body was firmly established by the Middle Ages and death was seen as the separation of the soul from the body. The postmortem journey to heaven or hell became the most widely accepted pattern of understanding the destiny of departed souls.

Pictorial imagery began to emerge which revealed a three tiered universe, with “heaven perceived as above and hell down below. In heaven, souls would be reunited with all the loved ones who had preceded them, even though earthly relationships such as husband and wife, were not supposed to be carried over into heaven.”

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) promoted the belief that in heaven, citizens were able to see God face to face, and to know him, and that this vision was the ultimate goal of humankind. Hell came to be known as the realm of punishment for unrepentant sinners. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 1, 2005) states that “Dante’s fourteenth century masterpiece, *Divine Comedy*, is the definitive literary representation of these widespread beliefs about hell, which were
established enough to find their ways into the teachings of the church.” The Roman Catholic Church (a division of the Christian religion) defined Purgatory (some twenty years after the appearance of Dante’s imaginative description of it) as the location where the dead (who die in a state of moral and religious imperfection) prepare themselves for the vision of God.

In the Bible itself, the foundation text of the Christian faith, heaven is referred to throughout, however key references include:

- The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.\(^7\)

- For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.\(^7\)

- For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.\(^8\)

- But according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.\(^8\)

- For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.\(^8\)

- But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.\(^8\)


\(^8\) Ibid, John 3:16.
2. Islam.

The afterlife is central to the way in which Muslims (those that follow the Islamic faith) understand humankind’s earthly existence. The afterlife gives meaning to what is seen as a short life, entailing suffering, loss and death. The afterlife places humankind within a divine plan, and gives the faithful a sense of purpose and destiny. The quality of the life after death is determined by the moral quality of the earthly life, and Muslims are encouraged to be constantly aware of the ephemeral nature of life, and the need to prepare for the afterlife. The afterlife acts as both a consolation for believers, and an incentive for performing good deeds. The Encyclopedia of Religion (Vol. 1, 2005) in referring to the Qur’an (2:86 and 3:77) proposes that within the Islamic faith “those who violate God’s covenant are described as having ‘purchased the life of this world at the price of the life to come.’”

The Qur’an, is the holy text and foundation of the Islamic faith, and it documents two periods of the life of Mohammad – the Meccan period (where apocalyptic passages herald the coming of the next life) and the later Medinan period. The Qur’anic message reveals a Day of Judgment, or Day of Resurrection. The Encyclopedia of Religion (Vol. 1, 2005) tells us that Muslims believe:

- the next world will arrive in the wake of the destruction of this one – at an unknown point in time, referred to as the Hour, unknown to all but God. The blowing of a cosmic trumpet will annihilate all creatures and destroy the familiar universe; a second sounding of the trumpet will resurrect all humankind to face the final reckoning. Every soul is called to contemplate its book of deeds and its deeds will be weighed in scales. A light balance will dispense a soul to hell, whereas a weighty one will merit paradise.

Hell is described in detail as being a place of intense fire and beatings, where souls ingest fetid boiling water, blood and thorns in the face of black, smoky wind.
Souls that travel to heaven are led in the company of angels, through open gates where upon they take up residence in their own exclusive garden within the “Gardens of Eden”. Souls recline in:

jewel-encrusted beds, dressed in the finest silk, arrayed in heavy brocade and adorned with silver bracelets surrounded by bashful and amorous virgins resembling hidden pearls, they are waited on by stunningly beautiful youths who serve them the purest intoxicants, bring them endless varieties of fruits, and are constantly at their service.

The wine that is drunk does not cause heads to throb, not inspire idle talk or sinful urge. In the history of the Muslim faith, narratives further detailing the nature of heaven were later added to the Qur’an that say that the heavenly existence is free of bodily fluids – there is no excretion or salivation.

Further modifications to the nature of heaven in the Qur’an were made by a group of Muslim theologians known as traditionalists, who introduced the idea of a temporary hell, where the prophet would intercede on behalf of sinners. Two religio-political parties emerged, the Kharijites and the Murji’ites, unconvinced by the amendments made by the traditionalists. A further school of thought formed in the eighth century - the Mu’tazilites, who also rejected the idea of the temporary hell or Muhammad’s intercession. The Traditionalist doctrine did however, become the most popular school of thought for the majority of Muslims.

Sufism, an offshoot of Islam, questioned whether the descriptions of Paradise in the Qur’an should be taken literally or symbolically and promoted a more spiritual understanding of the delights of heaven. Modern Muslims recognise the difficulty of accepting a literal interpretation
of the Qur’anic descriptions of heaven. However, a corporeal afterlife has always been maintained in the imagination of Muslims, as has the importance of leading a moral life.

3. Hindu.

The earliest representation of heaven in Hinduism is in the Vedic literature (1500 – 1200 BCE). Heaven is portrayed as the realm of the fathers who go there to be with the gods. Yama, the God of the dead, oversees the heavenly realm associated with the sky, and the dead, associated with the stars. The God Varuna is associated with order in the earthly realm. Welfare after death is associated with participation in ritual, sacrifice and offerings to the gods whilst alive. Heaven in Vedic Hinduism is a place where personal identity remains, and earthly pleasures abound in full measure. There is no test for entry into heaven; however neglecting ritual participation in life indicates relegation to a hellish realm of darkness. Brahman Hinduism presented a heaven where earthly pleasures and joys were in further abundance.

The Upanishads (6th to 1st century BCE) brought about the rise of Hinduism proper, and with the integration of the idea of reincarnation, a cyclical view to human existence developed, where earthly existences were intermittent with the intermediate states of heaven and hell. The level of heaven or hell experienced in between the earthly existences on this cycle called Samsara, depended on one’s karma (consequences of actions in the earthly realm). The heaven and hell realms are on multiple levels, with seven realms of heaven above the earth, and seven realms of hell below the earth (or up to 21 levels in some instances).

The goal of human existence in Hinduism is to remove oneself from the cycle of Samsara, and to enjoy Nirvana, the union of the soul with the divine reality, or God.

Modern Chinese Tradition finds its roots in Confucian teachings, however, the path leading to Confucius’ influence on the aspiration to achieve harmony in society, and the earliest understanding of heaven, dates from the Shang dynasty (1500 – 1050 BCE).

The first written evidence of heaven in the Chinese Tradition in the Shang dynasty identifies that heaven was reserved only for royalty. A perception of the afterlife in the lives of commoners appears between 400 BCE – 220 CE, when inscriptions appear on tombs referring to the good deeds of the deceased. The ‘underground’ is mentioned, where the deceased noble will serve his lord after death. The place is not described in any detail, but is indicated as a common place for the dead. Indications of human sacrifice (of servants and concubines) and textual evidence suggest that kings and rulers needed their servants after death.

During the Eastern Zhou period (770 – 256 BCE) two terms appear to represent the netherworld – the Yellow Spring (referencing underground water, and a metaphor for the netherworld), and Dark City. Dark City was said to be ruled by Lord Earth, which the Encyclopedia of Religion (Vol. 1 , 2005) describes as having “dreadful horns on his forehead, and a great humped back and bloody thumbs, pursuing men, swift-footed: Three eyes he has in his tiger’s head, and his body is like a bull’s. A sinister-looking horned python.”

Early Daoist views (4th century BCE) perceived no afterlife, and that physical life was simply a gathering of the qi/chi (energy) ether in the universe.

Later, the afterlife becomes bureaucratic in the Western Han period (2nd century BCE), an underground ruled by lords, magistrates, ministers, commanders and police. This is a reflection of the evolution of the society at the time; a unified empire. In time, the living were able to buy
wooden slips (evidence dates from 79 BCE) that represent contracts of sacrifices, and prayers to the underground rulers. The dead could take the wooden contracts to the Heavenly Sire to testify to the prayers made on their behalf. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol.1, 2005) states that within this system, “the dead were referred to as ascending to heaven and descending to the Yellow Spring,” upon death. Contracts have also been found that indicate the purchase of land for the dead, and the belief that the dead pay tax in the netherworld, and that they faced forced labour.

During the Eastern Han period (1st century BCE), a new abode for the dead appeared - Mount Tai, possibly due to several sacrifices and ceremonies performed there by various kings and emperors over many years. Burial chambers and underground tombs began to appear, which looked like replica models of aboveground houses for the dead to occupy in death, and sometimes contained dummies so that the dead would not be lonely. There was the belief that the dead interacted with the sick as their graves were lonely and solitary.

Through the Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE) tomb paintings reveal the afterlife as being a place of happiness; represented by scenes of banquets, hunting and traveling, wine and food.

Confucians (those influenced by Confucius who lived 551–479 BCE) accepted ghosts and spirits, and yet did not describe the afterlife as it was the unknown world of the spirits. The Confucian tradition advocates harmony in human affairs (through family and friendship) as the way to perfect harmony in the cosmos, and heaven forms the ontological grounds for moral teachings.

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Vol. 6, 2005) states that in the Confucian influenced Chinese Tradition, “if harmony is achieved in human affairs, harmony with Heaven will be assured.”
Heaven is presumed to be the “impersonal force underlying the cosmos, the ultimate sources of order and morality.”

5. Buddhist.

The Buddhist view of heaven is similar to the Hindu belief, in that multiple earthly existences are intermittent with experiences in multiple heavens or hells, on the cycle of Samsara. Death is seen as a transition between these existences. Nirvana is the ultimate goal, achieved when a soul no longer clings to desire, which is a result of ignorance.

Upon death, karma determines entry into any of the heaven or hell realms, and rebirth may occur as an animal, as a human being, or as a ghost.

From sources within the various religious texts in Buddhism, there are eight hot hells below the earth, where suffering consumes bad karma. Sixteen minor hells are attached to each of those eight hot hells. There are six sensual realms of heaven, inhabited by gods and kings, and two other realms of heaven only accessible to those practiced in discipline and mediation. In these heavens, it is said gods are free from sensual yearnings. Various texts identify differing numbers of heavens within these realms, ranging from thirteen, to sixteen and eighteen, distributed in four different groups that correspond to modes of meditation. The ultimate goal of Nirvana, transcends the highest of these heavens. Bodhisattvas are souls/Buddhas who have elected to forego Nirvana, until all sentient beings can do so, and hence, Bodhisattvas are able to manifest themselves in diverse forms to assist in liberation from suffering.
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