Contrary to what most people believe, there is little biblical information on Satan or the Devil. As Gary Galeotti points out, “there are fewer than 120 verses that refer directly to either Satan or the Devil” (72). Because of this paucity, these authors mainly focus on one aspect of the Devil that is presented in the gospels. For most of these authors, the Devil serves merely as a means of temptation for Jesus. These authors’ works, however, do not make the Devil responsible for Judas’ action; instead, they focus on Jesus’ struggles with his temptations. Burgess shows this through the scene of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, though there does not seem to be much doubt that Jesus will prevail. Both Mailer’s and Kazantzakis’ books start with this scene, but they provide Jesus with other temptations by the Devil. Saramago’s book creates a complex Devil who seems to know as much as God and who may somehow be connected to God, as well. Ricci’s story, however, completely ignores the Devil, as he ignores most of the supernatural aspects of the gospels.

Almost all of these authors portray the Devil as the cause of some sort of temptation. Burgess’, Mailer’s, and Kazantzakis’ novels all show Jesus being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, and both Mailer’s and Kazantzakis’ show the Devil tempting Jesus at other times, as well. Saramago’s novel creates a Devil who seems to be guiding Jesus throughout the story. However, Margaret George’s novel Mary Called Magdalene seems to have Judas become possessed by Satan, though it’s never clear. While camping at Dan, a place with an evil history for the Israelites, Judas “felt its evil influence. In fact, this morning his eyes looked clouded, different” (434). This description suggests the depiction of Mary’s eyes when she is possessed by the demons. After Mary learns of Judas’ plan to betray Jesus, she thinks that Satan may be behind it: “Could Satan have entered into [Judas] back at that dreadful, haunted altar at Dan? Satan tried to get Jesus in the desert; he failed, but he got Judas instead at Dan” (487).
parts of his book, but who also seems to know as much as God. In fact, the Devil tempts God at the end, and Jesus seems to be at a loss as to which one to believe.

The Devil is notable in Ricci’s book by his absence. There is no temptation scene in the wilderness, though Ricci indicates that Jesus spent time in the wilderness after Herod’s soldiers came for John. There are no demons to cast out, only illnesses and injuries from which to be healed. Jesus seems to exist in a world with God, whom he talks about, but without the Devil, whom he never mentions. This approach is not surprising given Ricci’s comment in his notes at the end of his novel that he drew a number of his ideas from the Jesus Seminar, a group of historians who seek to determine how the historical Jesus lived. They put little stock in anything supernatural, especially the Devil.

What is particularly interesting is that Ricci’s approach comes closest of these authors to that of the early church, though for very different reasons. The early church seems to have largely ignored the Devil. As Robert Wernick writes, “It took three or four centuries of debate and speculation for the church to settle on a unified but not quite consistent picture of his history and functions.” It developed the ideas that most people associate with the Devil: he has once been an angel who rebels against God, though the church is not clear as to why or even when; he has been cast into hell; and he will be judged, once and for all, on the Day of Judgment, and condemned to eternal torment (Wernick).

Wernick hypothesizes that one of the reasons the early church did not seem to be concerned with the Devil is that it had greater concerns at the time: “Perhaps the early Christians, members of a small persecuted sect faced with the daily possibility of meeting the representatives of the Roman state in the form of gladiators, lions and howling mobs in arenas, did not need to dream up faces for the Devil.” Also, early Christians believed that Jesus had defeated the Devil and that Jesus was coming back very soon. Why, then, did they need to concern themselves with the Devil’s role in the world when he was already defeated, and they would soon be with God in heaven? The early Christians seemed more
Chapter 6: Merely a Means of Temptation, for Most

cconcerned with understanding God and Jesus than they did with trying to understand the Devil.

Thus, Ricci’s decision to ignore the Devil and focus on Jesus is similar to the early church’s approach; however, Ricci seems to have made this decision out of a lack of belief while the early church accepted the reality of the Devil but did not take time to discuss him.

Burgess’, Mailer’s, and Kazantzakis’ novels all present the Devil’s tempting Jesus in the wilderness, following the gospels. In the Synoptic gospels the Devil (or Satan, as he is sometimes called in the gospels) shows up when Jesus goes into the wilderness to fast for forty days. He appears to Jesus there and presents him with three temptations: turning rocks into bread, throwing himself down from the temple where the angels should catch him, and receiving power in return for worshipping the Devil. Jesus, of course, resists these temptations, and the Devil leaves him to return at a more opportune time. Jesus also refers to the Devil quite a few times in his ministry, though he doesn’t make a direct appearance again. In the parable of the sower, the Devil prevents some people from hearing the Word, and Satan has also kept a woman in physical bondage (she has been crippled for eighteen years) until Jesus heals her (Luke 13:16).

Burgess’ Devil only shows up in the temptation scene at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as he presents himself to Jesus in a variety of images. The Devil takes on the shape of Jesus’ mother Mary, calling Jesus to come home, claiming that she is sick. The Devil also pretends to be a beggar in the wilderness who questions whether or not evil is necessary, leading to a discussion of free will. Only at the end of Jesus’ time in the wilderness does Satan present the three temptations found in the gospels.

However, Burgess’ novel treats these temptations as if they are a mere formality for Jesus before beginning the ministry. There is never any question that Jesus will reject these temptations. In fact, the Devil seems to know which verses Jesus will quote in refutation, and he often provides the scripture references in the middle of Jesus’ answer.
Thus, evil seems to be largely absent from Burgess’ work. The focus is on Jesus’ teachings concerning love, and evil seems to be something that exists nowhere near Jesus. Even the betrayals by Peter and Judas are shown to be mere slip-ups that are easily remedied, and the Pharisees’ plotting is shown as simply something that must be done to accomplish God’s plan. In Burgess’ book, the world is well-controlled by God, and evil exists only to further God’s plan, yet Jesus repeatedly emphasizes a free will that never seems to appear in Burgess’ vision.

Burgess’ approach ignores the gospel’s focus on Judas as an instrument of Satan. The books of Luke and John both show Satan entering Judas, and in John Jesus refers to Judas as a Devil, not just a traitor (John 6:70). Whether the gospel writers mean that Judas is actually possessed at the time he betrays Jesus or whether they are simply trying to show the depth of evil involved in his act is unclear; regardless, the fact that they use that term shows a recognition of evil that is markedly absent from Burgess’ novel.

In Mailer’s book, as in the gospel stories, the Devil doesn’t make many appearances. His most important role is early in Jesus’ life when he appears to Jesus in the wilderness to tempt him. Mailer uses Satan for that role, and he mainly expands Satan’s knowledge of scripture to make a longer debate than in the gospels. Satan leads Jesus through the rejection of the temptations of turning stones to bread, throwing himself down from the Great Temple, and worshipping Satan to attain power. Jesus resists these temptations, but after his encounter with the Devil is over, he says, “Nor did I feel that I had escaped altogether” (56). This closing line is cryptic, and Mailer’s novel never seems to return to it. Mailer may be referring to Luke 4:13, which says that the Devil left Jesus after the time in the wilderness “until an opportune time.” Luke here seems to be reminding his readers that temptations are not just a one-time event, but that the Devil keeps coming, always at opportune times. Mailer may be referring to this verse to indicate that Jesus will face temptations later in his ministry, as Mailer depicts Satan’s influence continuing in Jesus’ life, in obvious temptations and more subtly.

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1This description of Judas as a Devil is strikingly similar to Jesus’ referring to Peter as “Satan” because he does not want Jesus to go to Jerusalem to be crucified (Matt. 16:23).
Kazantzakis’ book also makes the Devil appear to Jesus in the desert, claiming that he feels sorry for Jesus who was crying out that he does not want to be alone. As in the Garden of Eden, the Devil appears in the guise of a snake, though this snake also has the “eyes and breasts of a woman” (255). Kazantzakis’ Devil also presents Jesus with sexual temptation, not just through the description of the snake, but also through the snake’s mentioning Mary Magdalene: “... it’s Magdalene you must save! ... Not the Earth—forget about the Earth. It's her, Magdalene, you must save!” (256). However, Kazantzakis’ Devil tempts Jesus not just with sex with Mary Magdalene but with the idea of marrying her.

Unlike Burgess’ story, though, Kazantzakis shows the Devil returning to tempt Jesus at the end of the novel when he, appearing as Jesus’ guardian angel, tempts Jesus with a vision of his life as it could have been if he had not sacrificed himself on the cross. In the desert, Jesus thinks, “But thanks to Magdalene, God bless her, he would be cured; he would return to his workshop, take up once more his old beloved craft, once more make plows, cradles and troughs; he would have children and become a human being, the master of a household” (257). Jesus resists this temptation, though, by acknowledging that God’s will shall be done, while in the desert, and through the support of Judas, as will be shown, when Jesus is tempted on the cross.

The other temptations that the Devil presents to Jesus are those of power and even of becoming God himself. The Devil appears to Jesus as a traveler in the desert and as an archangel, but Jesus recognizes him for who he actually is. In both guises, the Devil reminds Jesus of his childhood wish for power: “Do you remember when you were a small child still unable to walk, you clung to the door of your house and to your mother’s clothes so that you would not fall, and shouted within yourself, shouted loudly, ‘God, make me God! God, make me God! God, make me God!’” (263). The Devil even tells Jesus that the dove at his baptism called Jesus the son of God. Although this turns out to be true, the Devil is using the event here to cause Jesus to think of himself highly, putting pride before his mission of salvation. While most readers are unable to identify with Jesus’ particular
temptation of power, Kazantzakis reminds his readers that most of us have, at some point in our lives, craved power and that we may not have given up such childhood desires. The fact that the Devil exploits this desire when tempting Jesus is Kazantzakis’ way of reminding readers that the Devil does the same to us.

The main, underlying temptation—the “last temptation” of the title—that runs throughout Kazantzakis’ novel is the appearance of the Devil as Mary Magdalene. It is not just that Jesus is tempted sexually by the appearance of the Devil as Mary Magdalene; it is the fact that Jesus simply wants a normal life. The Devil preys upon this longing when Jesus is on the cross, and it is only thanks to Judas that Jesus does not succumb. This temptation reveals something about both Jesus and the Devil. It humanizes Jesus, making him more like the reader, someone who does not want to accomplish anything greater in life than just to live a simple, normal, happy life. For the Devil, however, the temptation expands the role he plays in the gospels and shows how he attacks one’s weakest spot. Most of us cannot identify with the temptation to turn stones into bread or rule all the kingdoms of the world, but most readers can identify with the temptation not to do a hard task that is asked of us when there seems to be an easier alternative in sight.

Mailer’s book, too, shows the Devil revisiting Jesus throughout his novel, even though Jesus resists the temptation in the wilderness. In fact, Jesus refers several times to things he learns from Satan or from the effect Satan has on him during that encounter. When he calls Peter and Andrew to be his disciples, Jesus says that “Between their eyes and mine passed an agreement across this space of water; I could feel how God had enabled me to steal a few skills from the Devil. In truth, I could now employ Satan’s manner when speaking” (68). However, the exchange is not all for the good. Before Satan leaves Jesus, he wants to touch Jesus’ hand, and Jesus let him: “And because I had wanted him to leave, I had touched my right hand to his, and knew in the same instant that I had surrendered a share of the Lord’s protection. Only a small share. And I was certain that God had taken much back from Satan” (69).
Later, however, when Jesus relates the parable of the workers, a difficult parable for most people to accept, God chastises him: “Enough! In your speech is the seed of discontent. When you are without Me, the Devil is your companion.” Jesus has to admit that he “no longer knew to whose voice [he] listened” (141). It is interesting that Mailer shows Jesus seemingly influenced by the Devil, especially in relationship to performing miracles, because, in the gospels, Jesus is compared to the Devil by the Pharisees for his ability to cast out demons. Jesus rightly points out how absurd such a notion is: “How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come” (Mark 3:23–26). Mailer’s portrayal of Satan here, though, is a reminder that evil has power, and he presents us a battle in which the outcome seems in doubt, unlike in Burgess’ novel, in which Jesus’ triumph is ordained.

In Mailer’s novel, Satan also tempts Jesus when he first enters the Temple. Jesus is offended by the gross display of wealth that he sees there when the Devil appears to him. Immediately after Jesus tells the listeners that they cannot serve both God and Mammon, the Devil tells him that his followers will also give in to greed: “Before it is over, the rich will possess you as well. They will put your image on every wall. The alms raised in your name will swell the treasure of mighty churches; men will worship you most when you belong to me as much as to Him. Which is just. For I am His equal” (158–59). Mailer’s Devil here invokes a popular temptation that draws on the history of the church: the idea that the followers of Jesus will succumb to exactly those things he preached against. Of course, in light of that history, the Devil’s prediction is right, but Jesus is not hampered by this knowledge. Instead, he seems to believe that enough good will come out of his actions that he proceeds regardless, which becomes especially ironic in this version because Mailer’s Jesus questions if his crucifixion serves any purpose at all.

The Devil’s strongest temptation nonetheless occurs when Jesus is on the cross. A Roman soldier insults Jesus and says that he wishes Jesus
were Barabbas, so he could wipe his filth on his face. The Devil appears to Jesus then and tells him to join him, so they can humiliate the soldier. The Devil then goes even further, though, and promises to take Jesus from the cross. Jesus is tempted, but he resists, and the Devil leaves. The temptation for revenge rings especially true for modern readers. The idea of Jesus as someone who turns the other cheek can be troubling, and the possibility that Jesus might step down from the cross to set someone straight is a strong temptation. However, as before, Mailer’s Jesus is focused on what he sees as his mission, even though he later wonders if it does any good.

However, Jesus also believes that Satan inspires exaggeration; thus, the gospel writers have fallen prey to his influence, as well. By not relying on the truth of the story, he feels they have shown their lack of belief in him: “Many of those who had been near me were given to exaggeration; not one had believed in the Son or in the Father sufficiently to say no more than the truth. . . . When a man sees a wonder, Satan will enter his tale and multiply the wonder” (243). In the end, Jesus sees his followers still struggling with Satan, and, in many cases, they have simply given themselves over to him without knowing it: “There are many churches in my name and in the name of my apostles. The greatest and holiest is named after Peter; it is a place of great splendor in Rome. Nowhere can be found more gold. God and Mammon still grapple for the hearts of all men and all women. As yet, since the contest remains so equal, neither the Lord nor Satan can triumph” (247). It seems that the Devil’s prediction of Jesus’ followers and money has come true, yet Jesus does not seem to mourn this end much. Even though Jesus sees them losing many battles, he also sees them winning some, as well. The war may still seem up in the air, but Jesus thinks God has a plan somewhere.

Saramago, however, develops the Devil much more than do any of these other authors, though he does not follow any of the gospel stories in doing so. The Devil becomes a major character in Saramago’s work, though the reader is not certain of who he is until late in the book. He first appears as a beggar at Mary and Joseph’s door in the days early in Mary’s pregnancy; in fact, he tells Mary that she is pregnant before she has told Joseph. He does
not tell her anything about the uniqueness of her pregnancy, but he does fill a bowl with soil that glows. When the elders of the local synagogue suggest that Joseph bury the bowl behind their house, a plant grows from it. The plant is nothing but stalk and leaves, and they cannot kill it or prune it, no matter what they do, so they learn to live with it. The beggar returns years later, uproots the tree, and drags it after him as he walks away. Jesus has just left home to go and determine what happened in Bethlehem relating to his birth and his father. The beggar has also been seen walking beside Mary while she and Joseph are heading to Bethlehem for the census, and he is one of the shepherds who comes to provide the family with food after the birth of Jesus. At this point in the book, the beggar seems to be nothing more than an angel sent by God to look after Jesus. It is interesting that both Kazantzakis’ and Saramago’s works show Satan in a kindly guise, as a type of guardian angel. On one level, of course, this technique suggests simply that we often do not recognize evil when it is in our midst, but these stories go beyond this point to show a Jesus who does not recognize evil either. This certainly lessens the appearance of the divinity of Jesus, whose gospel persona always recognized the Devil and demons, and it seems to elevate the Devil to a level higher than what he occupies in the gospels. In the gospels, Jesus is always in control, while in both books by Kazantzakis and Saramago, the end result often seems in question.

After Jesus has discovered the truth about his birth in Bethlehem and the children who died there because of his father in Saramago’s novel, the beggar appears to him and allows him to work with him as a shepherd. He tells Jesus that he should simply call him Pastor. Jesus works with Pastor for four years, though he almost leaves several times, mainly due to Pastor’s blasphemy: Pastor does not perform any of the ceremonial cleansing rites, nor does he offer thanks at the appropriate times during the day, but Pastor’s argument that he “wouldn’t like to be a god who guides the dagger in the hand of the assassin while he offers the throat that is about to be cut” (193) is what causes Jesus to begin to leave. Because Pastor knows about Jesus’ nightmares, though, Jesus stays to learn from him. The idea that Pastor knows more than Jesus and, seemingly, as much as God will become an
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important theme that underlies his character throughout Saramago’s work. It also presents a more Manichean worldview than any of the other authors do, with the Devil seemingly much more equal to God.

Pastor forces Jesus to leave after Jesus has seen God, though. Jesus tells him that God asked for a sheep to sacrifice, and Jesus willingly offers the lamb that he saved from being sacrificed for Passover a few years before. At that point, Pastor tells him, “You’ve learned nothing, begone with you” (222).

The Devil does not reenter the story until God appears to Jesus again to tell him exactly what will be expected of him. God and Jesus are out in a boat on a lake covered by mist when Pastor swims up to the boat and climbs in, which is when God tells Jesus clearly that Pastor is the Devil they had just been discussing. Jesus notices that “without God’s beard they [God and the Devil] could have passed for twins, although the Devil was younger and less wrinkled” (310), which agrees with Saramago’s assertion in the first chapter that “good and evil do not exist in themselves, each being merely the absence of each other” (6). This view of the Devil coincides with one of the main ways Satan was viewed by the early church: “One of the ways the early church chose to explain Satan was through the dualistic approach. Even before the New Testament the influence of dualistic thinking especially from Persia was spreading throughout the Ancient Near East. Zoroastrianism held to two primary powers. One was good and the other was evil” (Galeotti 74). This Manichean view of the universe gives Saramago’s Devil as much information and power as his God.

In fact, the Devil seems to know everything that God knows, including God’s plan to sacrifice Jesus for the good of humanity. The Devil, in fact, is somehow working with God: “The Devil . . . is condemned to eternal complicity in God’s schemes, of which he is weary, and differs from God chiefly in his pity for the victims” (McKendrick 31). This portrayal of the Devil is strikingly similar to the Satan portrayed in the book of Job, as Harold Bloom points out, “Saramago seems to take us back to the unfallen Satan of the Book of Job, who goes to-and-fro on the earth, and walks up and down on it. And yet Job’s Satan was an Accuser; Pastor is not” (158).
Saramago’s Devil is similar to God in that he can also see the future, though he admits that he is often deceived in what he sees, as he believes his own lies and is unable to tell the true future from the false one. What is most interesting in this meeting, though, is that the Devil tries to prevent Jesus from having to go to the cross, not because he is afraid of what it will do to him, but because he does not want all the bloodshed that will come after Jesus’ death (God had listed for Jesus all the martyrs and wars that will be fought in his name). He says to God,

Today I use it [his heart] by acknowledging Your power and wishing that it spread to the ends of the earth without the need of so much death, and since You insist that whatever thwarts and denies You comes from the evil I represent and govern in this world, I propose that You receive me into Your heavenly kingdom, my past offenses redeemed by those I will not commit in future, that You accept my obedience as in those happy days when I was one of Your chosen angels, Lucifer You called me, bearer of light, before my ambition to become Your equal consumed my soul and made me rebel against You. (331)

The question that has to be asked here, of course, is whether or not Satan truly wants this to happen to avoid the future bloodshed or whether he sees his end in the sacrifice of Jesus and wants to protect himself. It appears that Saramago’s novel is showing God as unforgiving and more willing to endure the sacrifice of his son and scores of humans than accept Satan back into heaven. Further complicating that idea, though, is one of Pastor’s last comments before he leaves the boat: “Never let it be said the Devil didn’t tempt God” (331). However, temptation does not always refer to sinning; we can be tempted to do something good, but refuse to give into that temptation. Given the gospel background of Satan’s tempting Jesus in the wilderness, though, Satan is probably trying to trick God here. Saramago’s novel, though, does not give God a defense, so he also ends up looking bad in this situation, reinforcing the idea that good and evil may
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be nothing more than two sides of the same coin. Harold Bloom argues that Saramago’s Devil is “the only Devil who could be aesthetically and intellectually appropriate as we conclude the Second Millennium. Except that he cannot be crucified, this fallen angel has far more in common with Saramago’s Jesus than with Saramago’s God. They both are God’s victims, suffering the tyranny of time, which God calls truth” (162).

The Devil remains an instrument for temptation, but only for Jesus, here. He does not enter Judas at any point, nor does he seem to tempt anyone else. Ricci’s story, given his historical slant, ignores him completely, while Burgess’, Mailer’s, and Kazantzakis’ novels show him tempting Jesus in the wilderness, and, with Mailer and Kazantzakis, at other times in their novels. Only Saramago’s story develops the Devil into anything more than a test that Jesus must pass in order to be the Messiah.