Chapter 7

An Ordinary Man

Peter’s Confession and Denial

In many accounts, Peter is mainly presented as a disciple with whom Christians can identify. He is brash, claiming that he will not deny Jesus, just hours before he does so, an action that reflects his human weakness. He has been a fisherman, not well-educated, but someone who becomes one of the leaders of the church after Jesus’ death. His human fallibilities enable people to identify with him, while his ultimate rise from a seeming nobody to one of the most powerful people in the church corresponds to human desires to rise above their original station in life. Peter’s reputation seems to be based on only two actions, as Theodore Ziolkowski points out: “the denial of Jesus and the attempt to defend him in Gethsemane” (278). These human characteristics are attractive to writers. The five authors present Peter as an ordinary man who struggles to understand Jesus, but who shares flaws with readers. Despite the high point he achieves when he recognizes Jesus as the Christ, which the five authors portray in different ways, they all also show him denying Jesus, though not always for the reason in the gospel accounts.

Peter’s ordinary nature is usually evident from his being a fisherman, a common trade at the time, respectable enough, but certainly working class. Burgess focuses on Peter’s ordinary nature more than any of the other writers under consideration. In his work, Peter (or Simon as he was known until Simon the Zealot joined the group around Jesus) is one of the first men to become a disciple, though he is not quite the first. Burgess’ book focuses on Peter’s ordinary background, his former trade of fishing, and his speech and actions to remind us of Jesus’ mission to ordinary people. In fact, from the outset Peter tells Jesus that people like him aren’t worth Jesus’ time: “I know who you are, I think. . . . You’re him. Well, I tell you straight—we’re
They Love to Tell the Story

not worth it. We’re nothing. Get away from us. We’re only ordinary people. Leave us” (133). Peter’s reaction here is an ordinary, human reaction, which surely resonates with most readers.

Jesus, of course, doesn’t leave these folks, who end up following him. However, Peter is not initially presented as one who will become the greatest of Jesus’ disciples, the rock upon which the church will be built. When four men try to lower a friend down to the room in which Jesus is teaching by removing the roof of Peter’s house, Peter says, “God, hasn’t a man a right to a damned roof over his head, damn you? Get him away there, damn the lot of you. God almighty, the damned insolence” (134). This language is not what most people would associate with the apostles, especially Peter, but, given his rough life up to this point, it should not be unexpected. Burgess’ setting Peter up as a rough, ordinary fisherman makes his language perfectly appropriate and is used to remind readers that the disciples, even Peter, were far from saints, to begin with.

When Jesus sends the twelve disciples out to preach on their own, Peter’s speech is simple, which is why he is successful. When he explains to them that a political revolution is not what they need, but a revolution of the heart, he says, “Now you don’t put things right in this country or that country until you’ve put things right inside yourself, in here, here, do you get that? Do you see that now? You’ve got to stop hating, for one thing. It’s no good hating the Romans or your mother-in-law or your wife’s second cousin once removed. You’ve got to learn how to tolerate. You’ve got to learn how to love” (192). When someone asks Peter about justice, he responds by telling them the parable of the wheat and the tares. He reminds his listeners that their job is not to understand the theological implications of loving everyone; that job is God’s: “You get on with loving and leave justice to God” (193). Peter is also the only apostle who is upset about having to get rid of his possessions when he chooses to follow Jesus, in marked contrast to Matthew, who gives up much more and does so willingly. Again, both Peter’s plain speech to the people and his grumbling about having to surrender his possessions are consistent with the portrayal of Peter as an ordinary person, someone to whom readers can relate.
Chapter 7: An Ordinary Man

Peter plays a much smaller role in Saramago’s novel than he does in the other works under consideration here or in the gospel accounts. He is still a fisherman, and Jesus spends a good deal of time with him, Andrew, James and John after he leaves Pastor. Peter is certainly not presented as the future head of the church, though his death by crucifixion (upside down) is mentioned. In fact, his named is changed from Simon to Peter, not because he is the rock, (petra) on which Jesus will build his church, as it is in the book of Matthew, but merely because there is another Simon, Simon the Zealot, who joins the group. Thus, Saramago’s novel does not show Peter receiving his name because he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah; instead, it seems to be nothing more than a way to avoid confusion. As in Burgess’ account, Peter is an ordinary man, but, in Saramago’s work, he will remain such.

Mailer does not add much at all to the characterization of Peter, save for making him a bit less sure of himself and of Jesus than the gospels show. More than any of the other disciples, Peter is shown attempting to live up to the model Jesus sets for the disciples, but he constantly falls a bit short. When Jesus walks on the water, Peter is the disciple who tries to go out to him, but, as in the gospel stories, he is unable to. However, in Mailer’s novel, Jesus does not rebuke him for his lack of faith; instead, it is then that Jesus recognizes that “Peter wanted to be loyal. Yet [he] also knew that there would come a time when he would have to fail [Jesus]. For his faith was in his mouth, not his legs” (123). Peter tries to be loyal to Jesus and do whatever it takes to be a good disciple.

As Mailer draws from the gospel stories of Peter’s walking on the water, he also uses the episode when Jesus wants to wash the disciples’ feet. In this instance, Peter originally does not want Jesus to wash his feet. When Jesus insists, Peter responds, “Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well” (John 13:9). In Mailer’s novel, Peter also does not want Jesus to wash his feet, believing that this action is beneath Jesus. When Jesus tells Peter that this must be done or he can have no part of Jesus, Peter responds, “Then not only my feet, Lord, but my hands and my head” (207), almost an exact quote from the gospel of John.
However, Jesus is accurate in saying that Peter’s faith is in his mouth. Though Peter is the only disciple who is allowed to protest that he will not deny Jesus, Peter is also the only one whose account of the denial of Jesus is shown. The others merely run off, but Peter denies Jesus three times in order to save himself. Mailer follows the gospels in showing Peter deny Jesus thrice. Earlier in the work, though, we see evidence of Peter’s fear that blossoms in his denial of Jesus. After Jesus has healed Peter’s mother-in-law, Peter encourages Jesus to leave, away from the people who will be seeking him the next morning: “People seek for you now, and I fear they will be many. I would warn you. They are curious. They wish to witness miracles,” and when Jesus decides to move on to other cities, he says that he is now “thinking with the wisdom of Peter” (75). Here, Peter seems to be afraid that the people will expect too much of Jesus, that they will drain him of his power, or perhaps of the attention the miracles will draw. Regardless, he does not want Jesus in his house when anything happens.

Kazantzakis also follows the gospels in his presentation of Peter. When Kazantzakis first introduces Peter, Philip describes him as fickle:

Forgive me, Peter, but you haven’t developed good sense to match your white hairs. You flare up in a flash and burn out just as quickly, like kindling. Wasn’t it you who roused us to come here in the first place? You ran like a madman from boat to boat and shouted, “Drop everything, brothers; a man sees a miracle only once in his life. Come on, let’s go to Nazareth and see the miracle!” And now you’re smacked once or twice on the back with a lance, and right away your mind turns upside down, you change your tune and shout, “Drop everything, brothers; let’s go home!” You’re not called “Weathercock” for nothing! (40)

Throughout the rest of the novel, Kazantzakis focuses on this aspect of Peter: his short-lived enthusiasm balanced by his fear. There are times when Peter lives up to Jesus’ expectations of him. When all of the other disciples are talking about the places they will go to spread Jesus’ message, Peter
Chapter 7: An Ordinary Man

thinks of what they are going to eat for dinner. The other disciples chastise him, but Jesus says, “You have food on your mind, and you talk about food. When you have God on your mind you’ll talk about God. Bravo! That’s why men call you the Windmill. I choose you. You are the windmill which will grind the wheat into bread so that men may eat” (303). This scene is similar to Burgess’ portrayal of Peter as an ordinary man who speaks plainly, and, in both novels, Jesus commends Peter for his honesty and simplicity. However, the books also take Peter beyond this point.

The authors all draw on the gospel portrayal of Peter as a leader of the disciples and use that to build to his confession of Jesus as the Messiah. In the gospels, Jesus includes Peter in a select group of disciples. Only Peter, James, and John witness Jesus’ transfiguration (where Peter again says something that doesn’t seem appropriate; Luke 9:28–32), and this same group accompanies Jesus farther into Gethsemane than do the other apostles (Matt. 26:37). Peter seems to be singled out even beyond this small group, however. When the temple tax collectors come to see why Jesus does not pay the temple tax, they address Peter, who then talks about the tax with Jesus (Matt. 17:24–25). When Jesus returns from praying in Gethsemane and finds the disciples sleeping, he addresses Peter, but not the other disciples, by name (Mark 14:37), and when he appears to the disciples after the resurrection, he again singles Peter out and tells him to feed his sheep or lambs (John 21:15–19).

Despite a focus on Peter as an ordinary man, in many cases not showing him to be the future head of the church, these novelists depict insight for which he is most known: recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. In the gospels, when Jesus asks the disciples who they believe him to be, it is Peter who answers with what would become known as the Great Confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Each of these authors draws on this gospel scene in different ways.

Mailer’s novel, for example, taints what is Peter’s triumphant scene in the gospels. After Jesus has healed many people, he is exhausted and admits that there are some days he does not know who he is. Thus, he is prompted to ask his disciples, though he phrases the question as “Who do they say I
am?” After they answer with the beliefs they have heard that he is Elijah or John the Baptist, Jesus asks them who they think he is, and Peter, [perhaps] “thinking of how [Jesus] had walked upon the water—asked gently: ‘Can one say that you are the Christ?’” (130). Peter’s grand declaration of Jesus as the Messiah is reduced to a question inspired solely by one miracle. Peter does not demonstrate belief that Jesus is the Christ; rather Peter voices the possibility that Jesus might be, and Peter seems to be asking for approval of such a thought rather than asserting it.

Oddly enough, however, that seems to be sufficient for Jesus: “Since I felt like an ordinary man in all ways but one, I could love Peter for the strength that his conviction gave me. Now I knew with more certainty than before that I must be the Son of God” (130). Despite Mailer’s focus on Peter’s doubts and fears, Jesus is still inspired by his loyalty, even if that loyalty is found only in his mouth. Not only does this scene in some ways diminish Peter, it also diminishes Jesus, showing him as someone who needs the approval of those around him, which, ultimately, makes him more human.

Saramago also shows Peter making the declaration that Jesus is the Messiah much less assuredly than is seen in the gospel narratives. In Saramago’s work the declaration comes as a result of Thomas and Judas’ reporting what John the Baptist has said, that someone would come who would baptize with fire and the Holy Ghost. When Peter does say, “So you are the Messiah whose coming John prophesies” (354), Jesus merely responds that it is Peter who said so, not Jesus. Peter is not rewarded for his insight as he is in the gospels, and the declaration does not carry the same weight. As in Mailer’s novel, Peter here does not seem sure of what he is saying, though at least he does not quite frame it in the form of a question.

Some of these authors connect this confession to the Roman Catholic idea of Peter as the first pope. Burgess describes Peter two or three times in terms that can only be referred to as papal, and, given Burgess’ background, this approach is not surprising. The first instance of this approach is a keystone passage for papal authority in the Roman Catholic church. When Jesus asks the disciples who he is, only Peter responds that he is the Messiah. Jesus then tells him that he will be the rock upon which the church will be built, and
the one to whom “I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (200). However, Burgess does not leave it at that; he expands upon the Biblical account:

[The church] must go on for ever. So there must be a body of men and women to hold the truth and teach the truth, and it must have a head or leader. This leader must, when he dies, pass on his authority to another leader. And so it must go on. It is easy for words to be distorted through time and ignorance and stupidity and, indeed, malice. But authority must prevail and say: the word means this. As all priests in the Old Law come from Aaron, so all priests in the New come from this blessed Peter. The authority shall not solely be to ensure that the message is passed on undefiled, but also to condemn and bless. Now there is a danger, long after our time yet perhaps again not so long, that men unchosen by our Peter here may believe that they and they only know the true meaning of the message, and they may set up, in good faith, churches pretending to teach the truth. But if they are not chosen by Peter or those that succeed him, they must merit condemnation. A church, you see, is no more than a body holding to the same faith, but it is false speaking to speak of a church, as it is false speaking to speak of a God, since there is only one God and only one church. (201)

The danger that Jesus refers to of those who would set up other churches clearly refers to both the schisms in the church and the Protestant reformation. Burgess seems to be criticizing those who question the authority of the Catholic church, merely using Peter’s confession and Jesus’ response as a springboard for his own theological/political views, rather than as a way to further develop Peter’s and Jesus’ characters.

Burgess uses Peter to exemplify later Christian practices near the end of the book, as well. When the disciples are separating to return to Galilee in the hopes of meeting Jesus there, “Awkwardly Peter sketched a blessing with his right hand. The shape of the gesture came to him without thought—hand down, hand across, hand across, a figure of four made out of a movement
They Love to Tell the Story

of three, a kind of mystery,” and he tells them, “God and his blessed Son be with you. And the soul that belongs to both of them” (297). The obvious reference to the Holy Spirit at the end, though Peter does not know to whom he refers, completes what appears to be a typical, though early, Christian blessing. The fact that Peter does it naturally reinforces the idea that he is chosen by God to carry on the work that Jesus began.

Burgess, a former Roman Catholic, certainly is aware of how his church views Peter. The Roman Catholic church has long based the papal authority on Jesus’ statement to Peter after his confession: Pheme Perkins writes, “Since the Reformation, Catholics have emphasized the Petrine foundation of papal authority in Matthew 16:17–20. The definitions of papal authority promulgated at Vatican I in Pastor Aeternus understand Jesus’ words to Peter in John 1:42, Matthew 16:15–20, and John 21:15–16 as the historical transmission of a ruling power much as the Roman emperor might designate a successor” (3–4). Burgess sees Peter as the future head of the church, but certainly with flaws. Burgess may be acknowledging the church’s humanity and its accompanying flaws, which is why his book suggests that Peter’s denial of Jesus is worse than Judas’ betrayal. The book may also be reminding the reader of Christian forgiveness: that the disciple who behaves the worst ultimately can become the leader of the church.

In contrast to Burgess, Michèle Roberts, in *The Wild Girl*, shows Peter after Jesus’ resurrection as a leader who seeks to make the church’s hierarchy patriarchal by removing the women from leadership, a criticism of Catholicism.1 Roberts draws from the gnostic *Gospel of Mary* to show how Peter and the disciples initially turned to Mary to hear what she

1She also criticizes Catholicism by her depiction of a dream Mary has. Mary sees “a tall man in a stiff golden robe and with a high gold crown upon his head” who is leading the burning of women and books. He tells Mary that “these are the works of witchcraft, . . . and they shall burn, all the paper and the female flesh on which the devil writes his testament” (168–69), a reference to the Inquisition. Dan Brown echoes this critique in *The Da Vinci Code* when he writes, “Malleus Maleficarum—or *The Witches’Hammer*—indoctrinated the world to ‘the dangers of freethinking women’ and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them. Those deemed ‘witches’ by the church included all female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers, and any woman ‘suspiciously attuned to the natural world.’ Midwives also were killed for their heretical practice of using medical knowledge to ease the pain of childbirth—a suffering, the Church claimed, that was God’s rightful punishment for Eve’s partaking of the Apple of Knowledge, thus giving birth to the idea of Original Sin. During three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five million women” (125).
had to teach them: “Sister, . . . we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of the women. . . . Therefore, if you have seen him, tell us the truth. Tell us all the words of the Saviour which you remember and which we have not heard” (107–08). However, Peter does not like what she teaches, so he calls her testimony into question: “Say what you like, . . . but I don’t believe a word of this. I don’t believe that the Saviour ever thought such things. If he had, he would have told them to us while he was still alive. Who ever heard such ridiculous teachings? Mary is raving. She has made them up” (111–12). In contrast to the Gospel of Mary, however, no male disciples come to her aid and allow her to speak the truth that Jesus has taught her. Instead, Peter becomes the leader of the church and keeps the women from preaching the gospel: “Mary, . . . listen. First of all we knew Jesus as Man. Now since his resurrection, we know him as God. The fact that God became Man, that the Word took flesh as Man, means that it is for men to come after him and baptise others and offer the bread and wine. It is as simple as that. You women have a different role. Not a lesser one: a different one” (131). In the same way that Burgess seems to use Peter to present a positive view of the Roman Catholic church and the papal leadership, Roberts uses Peter to show how the Roman Catholic church has barred women from serving as priests.

In Mary Called Magdalene, Margaret George effectively reverses this portrayal. Peter initially opposes Mary, especially in connection to her having special knowledge or visions, which would relate her to the gnostic portrayal of Mary. Peter even asks Jesus, “Why do you favor her? . . . What does she know and understand that the rest of us can’t?” (422). When Peter has a vision, he will not allow her to help him interpret it until she proves that God has indeed chosen her to receive visions from him: “I cannot trust your interpretation, unless you can convince me that God does reveal things to you. So you must describe to me my vision” (431). After God shows Mary Peter’s vision, though, Peter accepts her as an equal and treats her like that for the remainder of his life. However, Mary finds a church that believes that Peter has received a special role from Jesus, a reference to the later belief of Peter’s role as the first pope. When a young person in the church asks
about Peter’s ability to forgive sins, a clear reference to the orthodox belief in absolution, Mary responds, “I have never heard Peter say that... And I have spent a great deal of time in his presence. I don’t think Jesus designated a successor. He knew we were all unworthy—or all equally worthy” (592–93). Thus, while it is clear that Peter’s followers will succeed and develop into the Roman Catholic church with Peter as the first pope, George presents a Peter who does not seek such a position, nor does he ever claim it for himself, and a Mary who understands that about him and is not in conflict with him.

Kazantzakis also presents Peter as the future leader of the church, more affirmatively than Roberts, but much less so than Burgess. Peter has Matthew recount what Jesus has said to him when, as the disciples argue about who will be greater in the kingdom of God. Matthew grudgingly admits that Jesus told Peter, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my church”; and “And whatever you bind upon earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (378). Despite the fact that raising this point shows a decided lack of humility, it also shows the greatness that Jesus has in mind for him. However, Kazantzakis does not develop this idea further, as his novel does not consider the church after Jesus’ death. Thus, in contrast to the novels by Burgess and Roberts, it is unclear how Kazantzakis’ novel sees Peter’s role with respect to the papacy and the church hierarchy, in general.

These authors, however, play their portrayals of Peter as future church leader, as in the gospels, against his misunderstanding of Jesus’ mission and his denial of Jesus. In the gospel of Matthew, Peter is shown to be flawed in his view of Jesus immediately after he has confessed him to be the Messiah. After he makes his confession of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus tries to explain to the disciples what he must suffer in Jerusalem, but Peter does not understand what Jesus’ plan is, so Peter tries to stop him. In return, Jesus refers to Peter as Satan who does not “have in mind the things of God” (Matt. 16:23).

Burgess presents the most complicated portrayal of Peter in this regard, although it’s unclear whether it is of Judas or Peter that Jesus speaks when
he talks of someone’s betraying him. ² Jesus tells the disciples that he “must be betrayed, sold to the enemy—and by one of you here” (241). Peter does not “sell” Jesus, but Judas doesn’t either; he does what he believes is a good thing, and it’s only when the Jewish leaders give him the money that he realizes what’s happened. The matter is further complicated by the question of who dips his bread in the bowl at the same time as Jesus. Jesus tells John, although none of the other disciples overhear, that “He who dips his bread in the dish of the juice of the meat when I dip mine—it shall be that one [who will betray him]” (241). Peter notices that Judas has not finished his bread, so he offers to help Judas get the rest of it down. He tells Judas that it’s hard to eat when it’s dry, so “he grabbed the bread that Judas held in limp fingers. . . . And he dipped it into the meat juice at the very same moment as Jesus. John drew in his breath in shock. Jesus warned him with a look to say, show nothing. Judas took the bread from Peter and, while Peter kindly watched, ate it” (243–44). Thus, both John and the reader are left to wonder over whom Jesus meant. He may have meant Judas since Judas ate the bread, but, literally, it should be Peter he is talking about.

An additional complication comes from the reaction of the people who accuse Peter of knowing Jesus, leading to his denial. As in the gospel stories, Peter denies Jesus three times before the cock crows. In Burgess’ novel, Peter says he is where he is because he is waiting for some man to bring him money. Thus, when he denies Jesus for the last time and leaves crying, one of them says, “Crying, did you see that? Come to get some money, he said. You know what that’d be for, don’t you? There’s a word for that. There’s some men as would sell their own mothers” (249).

Burgess’ novel isn’t arguing that Peter sells Jesus out, but it raises an important question about the characters of both Peter and Judas (and the reader), as well. Judas approaches the religious leaders in an honest effort to

²Most writers tend to let Judas off the hook when it comes to his betrayal of Jesus, but they do not usually do so for Peter. Christopher Moore is a notable exception to this approach. In Lamb, his Judas clearly betrays Jesus, but Joshua (Jesus) tells Peter, “You will deny me three times, Peter. I not only expect this, I command it. If they take you when they take me, then there is no one to take the good news to the people” (414). Moore’s book doesn’t show Peter’s denial, but he does seem quite downcast after the crucifixion, so it’s likely that he does exactly what Jesus commanded him to do.
help Jesus, but he is used by them to arrest Jesus, leading to the crucifixion. Peter, however, has no honest intentions when he denies Jesus; he is merely trying to protect himself. However, Judas is the one who has always been vilified as a result of the gospel stories. Burgess’ novel asks the reader to examine motivation and action and to understand that good in one area does not always lead to or result from good in another area. At one point in the novel, Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders as to why the prostitutes and tax collectors are, according to Jesus, entering the kingdom of God first. Jesus responds with a story of two sons. When one is asked if he will work in the field, he replies that he will, but he does not. The other one, asked the same question, responds that he will not, but he does. Burgess’ novel seems to echo this story in its depiction of the behavior of Judas and Peter: Peter says that he will not betray Jesus, yet he does; Judas seemingly betrays Jesus, but he perhaps doesn’t. The readers can easily see themselves in both characters.

The other four authors under consideration present Peter as simply afraid, an understandable reaction, leading to his denial of Jesus. Kazantzakis’ novel presents Peter as one of the most fearful disciples throughout his work. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, the disciples contemplate leaving Simon’s tavern, where they are supposed to meet him. They have finally decided to leave when Jesus arrives, and he asks them whether or not they are leaving. Peter is the spokesman who tells Jesus, “John heard your footsteps in his heart and we were just going out to welcome you” (295). Jesus knows he is lying, but he chooses to ignore it at the time. This scene gives the reader an early indication of Peter’s willingness to lie to protect himself. Also, when Jesus is speaking in Nazareth, after his time in the wilderness, his brothers come to try to physically drag him away, and they also attack the disciples. One of the townspeople grabs Peter around the throat and says, “It looks as if you’re on his side, eh!” Peter, however, denies the accusation: “No! No! I’m not!” (310) while Judas is the one to support Jesus.

This denial prefigures Peter’s denial after Jesus has been arrested, the culmination of Peter’s fears. As in the gospel story, three different people
comment that Peter was with Jesus, and he denies knowing Jesus every time. When the cock crows, he remembers Jesus’ prophetic words concerning his denial, and he leaves the courtyard weeping. When the disciples visit Jesus during his temptation on the cross, Peter has deteriorated to the point where Jesus hardly recognizes him. Peter says, “The troubles of the world came upon me. I married, had children, received wounds, saw Jerusalem burn. . . . I’m human: all that broke me” (485). What really breaks Peter, however, is not having a chance to redeem himself after his denial of Jesus. In the gospel accounts, especially the gospel of John, Peter is one of the first disciples to believe in the resurrection, and, in the gospel of John, Jesus singles Peter out to tell him to “Feed my sheep” (John 21:18). These post-resurrection events are what enable Peter to be healed and to become the foremost apostle and the foundation of the church. Without those events, as in the scenario presented by the devil in the scene of the temptation on the cross, Peter simply becomes an old, broken man.

Ricci’s Peter is as conflicted as the Peter in the gospels, complete with a denial, though a different one, and for completely different reasons. In the gospels, Peter fears for his life if he is associated with Jesus; thus, he denies knowing him. Ricci’s Peter has this fear, too, but only after the crucifixion. Peter begins teaching, along with Jacob, Jesus’ brother, after the crucifixion, but only after enough time has gone by so that Peter is no longer worried that the Romans are looking for anybody associated with Jesus. Thus, Ricci’s Peter has still been afraid of being accused of guilt by association, a fear that exists at a different time from that of Peter of the gospels.

Instead, Peter denies Jesus while he is alive because he believes that Jesus is a bastard. Jesus has never told the disciples about his parentage, and he seemingly hadn’t planned to. The truth emerges only because Zadok, one of the priests, confronts Jesus with this information in the presence of the disciples. He says to Jesus, “Though I hear the man isn’t a Galilean at all but a Jerusalemite, at least on the mother’s side. On the father’s side it’s not as clear. . . . Who was he, your father? . . . I might have known him” (408–9). Jesus doesn’t respond, and the disciples are all shocked, but none more than Peter. Peter is the only disciple who speaks to Jesus about the matter, and all
he can say to him is, “You cheated us” (412). The other disciples hoped that everyone would stay with Jesus, but after Peter declares his side openly, it becomes harder for them to do so.

As in the gospels, Peter later regrets abandoning Jesus. Peter is present at the cross, but that’s where he tells Simon (the narrator), “I ought to have stood by him. . . . It was what he taught us.” The narrator knows that that would have meant certain death, “But it seemed that was his point, that he’d rather be up there on the hill than watching from below” (448). Peter is finally able to admit that he should have been willing to give his life for Jesus, and he becomes willing to do so after Jesus’ death and possible resurrection.

Peter begins to believe that even the crucifixion will be understood, given enough time: “We always came to understand the hardest things with him. . . . Maybe even this we’ll come to understand” (449). In the end, he does come to some understanding of it, or at least he comes to enough of an understanding of it to begin spreading Jesus’ teachings again. Simon of Gergesa believes that Peter needs to understand Jesus’ illegitimacy as much as he needs to understand the crucifixion, and he understands why Peter never mentions that: “It wasn’t for me to say he did anything wrong not to let out the truth, when often enough it happened that a truth of that sort, that didn’t mean anything, stood in the way of one that did” (453). Thus, in Ricci’s novel Peter ends up in much the same place as does the Peter of the gospels: he denies Jesus near the end; he comes to accept his denial and Jesus’ death (which the Peter of the gospels also did not want to occur); and he spreads Jesus’ teachings after Jesus’ death.

Saramago’s novel still shows Peter denying Jesus, but Jesus does not predict that Peter will do so, and, in fact, the Last Supper is markedly absent. Instead, when Jesus is being taken to Golgotha, three different people ask Peter if he has been with Jesus, and he denies that he has been all three times. There is no cock crow, nor does Peter show any remorse. Instead, the scene switches to the women who are also following Jesus. As with many of the other biblical accounts, Saramago’s novel presents this episode matter-of-factly, as a scene that needs to be covered before moving on to other more important scenes. As such, the character of Peter is never fleshed out.
All five authors present Peter as a man with whom their readers might identify with. He is an ordinary fisherman who is afraid when he sees what happens to Jesus. He denies Jesus, and, in most cases, then feels remorse. In the novels by Burgess and Kazantzakis, there is a suggestion about the future leader of the church Peter will become, but the other novels leave their portrayal of Peter in the present.