

SAMPLE CHAPTER FROM  
*The Death of Thomas Merton, A Novel*  
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## THE DOUBLE LIFE

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A MOMENT LATER HE REPROACHED himself: why feel he had to *do* anything about the problem of allegiance to Rome? In a post-Christian world it was only a matter of time before everything would be worked out in inevitable stages. Already thousands were quitting the Church—lay, religious, and secular clergy. Soon there would be tens and hundreds of thousands who would simply walk away, not bothering with permissions, ignoring Excommunication.

Most would not leave for the reasons separating *him*, but because—as Marshall McLuhan was insisting—the basilisk of the age, electronic technology, would brainwash them, alter their reflex systems, their values, habits ... and thus themselves. The Church one day would simply seem obsolete. Without angst they would just leave.

Why perturb himself?

Because the *urge* to educate those who had looked up to him for so long was too ingrained to be lightly waived aside, the *need* to communicate an indispensable element in his struggle to settle the question for himself: it was vital that he solve his problems by persuading *others* to his viewpoint or at least attempting to do so.

As he had been doing for twenty years past.

Loyal even now despite his dismay with so many things about them, holding fast to the long association as he felt himself being pulled irresistibly into waters for which he had little more preparation than a drowning man coping with the waves that threaten to devour him.

His real public, his multitude of readers, the solid core that had stayed with him through all his years of vagaries, would tend to forgive him almost anything he did or wrote.

They were so *proud* of him, forcing him on the attention of the Protestant “world”: *compelling* him to be famous. Demonstrating again the ghetto mentality of the Roman Church—Thomas Merton, *their boy*. See how deep he is, Jews and Protestants! Do *you* have anyone who can write like that!

*Look, world, he’s discoursing on God.*

Yes, their overeager credulity often maddened him, their inability to criticize when criticism was the crying need. Made that way by their “good Catholic” conditioning, they could see no wrong in the leader: the Cardinal, the local pastor, or Thomas Merton ... “the most famous Catholic alive except for the Pope.”

But at other times he had quite enjoyed what they gave him. The hero-worship—in their eyes, voices, letters. The international renown, Popes and Cardinals writing to him, sending

gifts, expressing concern. The testimonials year after year—the hundreds, the thousands who had come into the Church, into religious life, because of his books and because they felt “so close to him and to what he was doing.”

Wasn't that why he had written so obsessively for so long, struggled so hard at the monastery, going without sleep to get the extra few pages done every night—night after night, year after year?

*Fame is the spur....  
To scorn delights, and live laborious days*

It was all true. Particularly since at Gethsemani they were not supposed to talk to him about his books, scarcely to have heard he was a writer!

Yes, the fame was sweet.

The thin, wind-borne sound of frolicking voices from one of the swimming pools in the near distance beguiled him briefly, interrupting the monodrama of his mind in dialogue with itself....

But in the end his irritation, his pitying impatience, always returned.

*I'm afraid of Catholics*, he had written to someone in the last year or two. A militant feminist theologian with whom—she being a public critic of the Church—he felt free to express his misgivings. He recalled the phrases:

*“I am afraid of Catholics. All Catholics ... all down the damn line.”*

He feared them because they seemed satisfied with a system that had alienated and bewildered *him*; feared them because they represented a state of being he had fully known and with much travail had transcended; feared a personified past so enamored of him it might once more engulf him into its orbit.

He saw in their deferential obedience, their contented credulity, their awed acceptance of forms as truth, of rituals as divine, and of the priesthood as “men of God” ... the callow convert coming that night to Gethsemani long ago, writing those compulsive books of piety, thinking the Mass *was* sacred, the estate of the priest *from Christ himself*, the Church *the* transmitter of Truth, the Virgin the one who *really* decided who were to be the saints of God!

*I am afraid of Catholics* ... and of the Church that had made them echo-chamber *versions of each other*, pattering of Theology (a totem word that would save their souls by repeating it enough) and the “Monsignor” and the “Holy Father” and “His Eminence His Eminence”—as though by repeating titles enough *that* would save them.

Pagans....

Thomas Merton, priest of pagans.

Yes, for all his “fear” of them and of their system he could still give speeches like this morning's, say Masses with an appearance of sincerity, and wink and grin and grimace: master of the democratic gesture.

When and where would it end?

One day, in the strain of his double life, he would break out in some talk that would scandalize everyone, thereafter make any rational course of action, such as he now contemplated, impossible.

The accumulation of nervous tension would do the acting for him.

The weakling's way.

Bare-footed on the stone terrazzo floor—the room dominated by the uneven rumble of the high stationary fan on its metal stand near the window opposite—he paced half-naked slowly back and forth, his movements in rhythm with the inner dialogue.

*Come out*, the Voice had declared to his ideal audience. Leave it.

Had *he*? *Could* he?

Inwardly there was no shadow of a doubt. But the same question, building up week after week, persisted: how to implement this?

Could he dare make it known what he felt, what his position truly was, and thus bring about a bitter wave of disillusionment for thousands of his admirers, some of whom were here at the conference? That morning he had looked into their attentive faces and visualized the pain, resentment, dismay had they known the truth about the beloved idol addressing them so listlessly.

*Tom Merton, their bulwark.*

Therefore instead of speaking the truth he had once again given them what they wanted to hear, but in a half-hearted, almost guilty fashion, so that the effect told on them perceptibly.

On himself as well. The strain. The pressure mounting. The sense of being deadlocked ... checkmated.

No wonder his color was flushed, unhealthy, suggesting something *wrong*. And the *tiredness* all the time, which no sleep could seem to eliminate. And the pinched, tight sense of stricture, of something occluded, in his chest.

Had it not been for India he might have been able to go on for years with the masquerade. India had put an end to it—or soon would. Like the presence of a saint, it had *magnetized* the truth out in spite of himself.

Where untruth had fed him, the truth was killing him.

Could India regenerate him into what he had never known—into unity, integration, wholeness?

He sat down breathlessly, as though waiting for something. He felt an impulse to pray, but was unable to.

Afraid not to.