INFORMATION TO USERS

This was produced from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or “target” for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is “Missing Page(s)”. If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure you of complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark it is an indication that the film inspector noticed either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, or duplicate copy. Unless we meant to delete copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed, you will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed the photographer has followed a definite method in “sectioning” the material. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. For any illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and tipped into your xerographic copy. Requests can be made to our Dissertations Customer Services Department.

5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases we have filmed the best available copy.
BRAHANEY, CAROLYN
THE THEME OF SPIRITUALITY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WORK.

RICE UNIVERSITY, M.A., 1981

COPR. 1981 BRAHANEY, CAROLYN

University Microfilms International
300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

© 1981

CAROLYN BRAHANEY

All Rights Reserved
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE THEME OF SPIRITUALITY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WORK

by

CAROLYN BRAHANEY

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

HOUSTON, TEXAS
MARCH 1981
ABSTRACT

THE THEME OF SPIRITUALITY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WORK
By
Carolyn Brahaney

The theme of spirituality appears in all of the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Her stories can be divided into three categories which correspond to the nature of religious involvement experienced by her characters.

The first group of stories all describe a character's initial experience with spirituality. An unusual and violent event causes the self-centered and superficially religious individual to perceive or confront life with increased spiritual sensitivity. Only this beginning change in their outlook is presented in this category. The story leaves the character to face a grim future or ends with his or her death.

In the second category of stories the involvement with religion is explored in depth. Often the spiritual experiences are destructive. Because of their rigid, fundamentalist up-bringing, some characters allow religion to become an obsession which disrupts and ruins their lives. In a few cases, spirituality has a beneficial effect. To some of the characters, their religious involvement is a healing and enlightening experience. They manage to resolve their conflicts and accept life's injustices.

The last group of stories depicts characters who
reject spiritual involvement. Consequently, their lives remain unhappy and meaningless. These stories reflect the belief that a life without spiritual values fails to bring satisfaction and inner peace.

Flannery O'Connor's works present spirituality as the significant component of life. Her stories are full of violence, pain, and misery. She does not offer religion as the simple remedy to all that is suffered by her characters. Instead, it is through their suffering that they receive the opportunity to expand spiritually, thus attaining peace and fulfillment.
THE THEME OF SPIRITUALITY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WORK

I.

Flannery O'Connor was born in 1925 in Milledgeville, Georgia. In her early twenties, she left to attend graduate school at the State University of Iowa, where she received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1947. Her first published story, "The Geranium," was printed in 1946 when she was twenty-one years old. She lived in New York and Connecticut for the next few years until she became seriously ill in 1950. It was discovered that she had a fatal disease, lupus, which caused her to return and remain at her mother's country home in Georgia. She died in a hospital in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine.

Her major works are two short novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, and two collections of short stories, A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge. She wrote primarily about characters situated in the rural South. Only one story, "Judgement Day," takes place outside the South. It was her final story, published posthumously, and is a revision of her earliest story, "The Geranium."

Most of her characters are uneducated, rural types. Religion is a central issue in her writing, perhaps because
of her Catholic background. Flannery O'Connor was a practicing Catholic all her life and viewed herself as a writer oriented by the principles of Christianity. Her characters can be divided into three categories according to their religious involvement.

In the first category of stories, the main character undergoes an experience that is similar to a religious conversion or revelation. The revelation causes an increased awareness in the character's views about life. They glimpse briefly the pain, sorrow, and injustice of which life is composed. The experience forces them to abandon their former selfish attitudes. They realize that there is a larger meaning to life than there was before. In these stories, only this initial change in their outlook is described. As soon as it is accomplished, the story ends. The character either dies or is left to face a grim and unexpected future. The stories in this category are "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," "The River," "A Circle In The Fire," "Greenleaf," "The Enduring Chill," and "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

In the second category of stories, the main character also experiences an involvement with religion. In these stories, the effect that this involvement has on the character's life is explored more fully than it is in the first group of stories. Usually, its effect is destructive. Religion becomes an obsession to some
characters which warps and destroys their lives. In some cases, the effect of religious involvement is beneficial. A few characters find it a healing and enlightening experience. In this group, Flannery O'Connor wrote two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, and the stories, "A Temple of The Holy Ghost," "The Artificial Nigger," "Revelation," and "Parker's Back."

The third group consists of the stories in which the central characters are not involved with religion at all. These characters confine themselves totally to the secular world. Their lives are unhappy and meaningless. The stories express the idea that a life based entirely upon material values fails to bring satisfaction. All of these characters fail to understand that this is the reason for their suffering. The stories in this group are "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "A Late Encounter With The Enemy," and "Good Country People."

In all three categories of stories, two repeated themes are: the evil that is present in the world and the meaninglessness of modern society. In most of the stories, the characters become involved in intense conflicts during which they struggle with these two problems. A few characters emerge from this struggle more successfully than others by managing to convert some part of the trouble into a meaningful experience. Most of the characters, however, are not able to accomplish this and are forced
to suffer tragic and painful lives.

The statement made by Flannery O'Connor's fiction is that life without religious involvement results in evil and in meaningless misery. Although O'Connor does allow a few of her characters to achieve peace through their religious experiences, she is not saying that religion always provides a favorable outcome for everyone. Some good is attained through religion in her stories, but even this is limited. For example, in the first group of stories, the religious revelation either happens too late to help the character with the rest of his or her life or it functions to reveal to the character that his life will become a painful struggle. In the second group of stories, destructive effects of religion occur more often than any benefits. The third group of stories describes the emptiness of life without religion. Almost all of her characters' lives are meaningless and full of dissatisfaction. However, O'Connor's viewpoint is not simply that religion is the remedy for this. She seems to be saying that life is essentially difficult and filled with suffering, but religion can sometimes add meaning or bring relief to this unhappiness.

II.

One of the characters who is able to derive some
meaning out of the chaos that her life suddenly becomes is the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." The grandmother has all the determination and interest in life that the other characters in the story lack. Her curiosity is responsible for the turn of events which lands them in their predicament at the end of the story. The grandmother is a likeable, but essentially shallow, person. The stress of her situation at the end of the story produces a strange reaction within her. Instead of expressing fear and loathing towards the Misfit, she claims him as "one of my own children."\(^1\) In doing this, she rises above her self-centeredness.

Before her final moments when the grandmother transcends her former superficiality, Flannery O'Connor evokes the kind of world in which the grandmother and her family live. It is a secular world detached from any form of spirituality. This world is characterized by a lack of meaning and by its chaos. The picture that emerges of this family finally shows their real world. For instance, the children's mother contributes little to their lives except to feed them. O'Connor seems to suggest that this is all the mother is capable of doing, for she is described as "a young woman . . . whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief

that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears."\(^2\)

This comparison of her to a cabbage and rabbit is meant to indicate her vacuuousness and inadequacy in the role of a mother. She never says anything and "didn't seem to hear"\(^3\) when the grandmother addresses her. A state of antagonism exists between the grandmother and Bailey, her son. He is the person who provides the most opposition to the grandmother with his silences. However, his opposition fails to restrain her force of character. For example, he doesn't look up from reading the newspaper when the grandmother is talking to him.\(^4\) Still, even though he does not give in to her at the beginning of the story when she wants to go to Tennessee, he weakens later. As the children and the grandmother conspire against him, he is forced to go in search of the old plantation. Like his wife, his participation in the family's interactions is very limited. When the grandmother asks him to dance, "he only glared at her."\(^5\)

The grandmother frequently imposes her desires and thoughts upon this passive family. Nothing seems to deter

\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 117.

\(^{3}\)Ibid., p. 117.

\(^{4}\)Ibid., p. 117.

\(^{5}\)Ibid., p. 121.
her from continual chattering and good spirits. She isn't able to perceive what other people are really thinking. For example, when Bailey glares at her, she thinks to herself that he "didn't have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous." Her mind refuses to penetrate any deeper than the surface of people and events.

This concern with triviality is what O'Connor uses to describe the world of her characters in this story. The grandmother dresses herself carefully for the trip so that "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady." This detail illustrates the old lady's preoccupation with outward appearances. She embodies all the old fashioned, conventional Southern values and takes the approach to life which those values demand. Her conversations with the children are examples of these values. Since the parents are so indifferent, the grandmother is left to fill the children's moral education by trying to pass on her own outdated advice:

"In my time," said the grandmother, "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. . . ."

---

6 Ibid., p. 121.

7 Ibid., p. 118.

8 Ibid., p. 119.
Her responses to the children are more automatic than understanding. This response is also another indication of her concern for outward appearance. The two grandchildren pay no attention to her admonitions. Just as she tries to see only the good side of everything, they see only the bad. When they pass a little Negro child standing in the door of a shack, the grandmother sees a "cute little pickaninny" that she would paint a picture of, if she knew how. The grandchild, June Star, notices that he "didn't have any britches on."9 The grandmother may try to teach the children, but they imitate the disinterest their parents have in the world around them. However, even the grandmother, who has an interest in the world, does not see the world as it is, as indicated by her casual attitude toward the black child's poverty, "'Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do.'"10 The children indifferently return to their comic books. This non-chalance about poverty is another example of how nothing means anything to these people.

Like their parents, the grandchildren are rude and spoiled. June Star tells Red Sam's wife that she wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks.11

---

9Ibid., p. 119.

10Ibid., p. 119.

11Ibid., p. 121.
While the grandmother is pointing out interesting scenery for them, the children are busy reading comic books. They do little else but fight with one another, which suggests the superficiality and emptiness of their lives. There are very few redeeming qualities about them, for they are selfish and don't feel the need to help anyone else. They are meant to represent the secular society that O'Connor condemns for being too selfish and materialistic.

The Misfit's appearance is the unusual plot device which alters the grandmother's point of view. Until this point, the irony attached to the story's title applies only to the shallowness of the family members. The appearance of the Misfit gives a more serious look at the definition of a good man. His manners are those of a good man, while his actions are manifestations of evil. Earlier the grandmother had told Red Sam that he was a good man for letting some men charge their gas, instead of paying for it.\(^{12}\) At this early point she interprets the world according to a fixed and narrow notion of good and evil. Actually, Red Sammy may not be a good man for the little that she knows of him. She also says that Europe was to blame for American problems, showing that her naivety applies beyond her assessment of individuals.

The interchange between the Misfit and the

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 122.
grandmother is made more significant than a simple series of murders. The accident of overturning the car has put them all in a state of shock and terror. They are trapped helplessly in a ditch from which they can see only woods, "tall and dark and deep," as O'Connor describes them, on either side.\textsuperscript{13} To add to this ominous atmosphere gathering about them, they see a car on top of a hill, "coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them." It keeps coming, "moving even slower." It was "a big black battered hearse-like automobile."\textsuperscript{14} The mood becomes even more terrifying when the occupants get out of the car, because none of them speak. They just stare, one of them "with a steady, expressionless gaze," and they are carrying guns.\textsuperscript{15}

Carter Martin, another critic, calls "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" an obvious example of a Gothic story, even though he notes that O'Connor disliked being called a Gothic writer. The story does have the Gothic quality of spiritual insensitivity bound for violent correction. The countryside becomes an aspect of horror, as the family sees graveyards and shacks.\textsuperscript{16} The Gothic portrayal of the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 125.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 125-126.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 126.

sudden intrusion of terror into the story is strongest during the first moments of their meeting with the Misfit. For instance, O'Connor describes the landscape as having suddenly become very hostile. "Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth."\(^{17}\) As Bailey is being taken into the woods he stops at the "dark edge" and supports himself "against a gray naked pine trunk."\(^{18}\) The landscape, once friendly and familiar, has suddenly turned threatening, signalling change that is about to occur in the grandmother's perception of the world.

As her family is marched separately into the forest and executed, the grandmother begins to experience a transformation. When she first sees the Misfit, she has "the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew," and that, "his face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life."\(^{19}\) This familiarity with him may be partially due to her recognition of him from the newspapers. Later, it becomes a more allegorical kind of recognition. The grandmother's conversation with the Misfit is the most important incident of the story. It is intended to add


\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 128.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 126.
another dimension of meaning to the murder. Their conversation reveals that the Misfit is a more complex character than one would expect. His polite manners and honesty transform him into a dignified, ambiguous figure. He does not represent absolute evil because he is concerned about whether or not Jesus really existed. The correct interpretation of his character is that he is an alienated agnostic cut off from spiritual reality.  

At the ending of the story, he does not move out of this state of alienation. However, through her encounters with him, the grandmother does change. She becomes a more caring person.

Before the moment of her death, the grandmother is confused by the Misfit's deceptive outward appearance. She tries to fit him into her stereotyped concept of a "good man" by appealing to him in the artificial way that she is accustomed to addressing people:

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

She is still clinging to her former standards of being a lady, in hopes of preventing the catastrophe.

---


Several times, she tries to persuade the Misfit and herself that he is a good man. Her remarks reveal the underlying lack of understanding in her concept of goodness:

I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood.
I know you must come from nice people!22

The idea that goodness is linked to social origins is a popular Southern belief. Another example of her lack of perception is revealed when she says to him:

You shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell.23

Characteristically, she thinks that goodness is visible in a person's physical appearance. This is due to her lifelong attention to external qualities and neglect of the internal ones.

However, the facade of superficiality through which she regards life is breaking down. As they are getting ready to take Bailey into the woods, she reaches up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him, but it comes off in her hand. She stares at it and then lets it fall to the ground.24 This action symbolically represents her relinquishment of her old

22Ibid., p. 127.
23Ibid., p. 128.
24Ibid., p. 128.
values. Martha Stephens points out that her disarray when she recognizes the Misfit is meant to show the futility of these values.\textsuperscript{25} Her values are useless because they fail to provide a satisfactory explanation for this event. She must and does evolve a new perspective. The third time she attempts to call the Misfit a good man because he's not a "bit common," he tells her he is not a good man. Then he adds, after considering her words carefully, "'but I ain't the worst in the world neither.'\textsuperscript{26}"

A more perceptive and thoughtful view then begins to replace the grandmother's former superficiality. First, she begins to express care and concern for the Misfit. She offers him one of Bailey's shirts, notices how thin his shoulder blades were, and asks him if he ever prays.\textsuperscript{27} He tells her his life story and she keeps urging him to pray. She is searching for a source of comfort and an answer that would make sense out of the chaos that suddenly surrounds her. She tells the Misfit, "'If you would pray ... Jesus would help you.'\textsuperscript{28}"

However, a few minutes later, when she is left alone with the Misfit,


\textsuperscript{26}Flannery O'Connor, \textit{The Complete Stories}, p. 128.

\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p. 129.

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., p. 130.
she loses her voice. O'Connor says that the grandmother wants to tell the Misfit that he must pray. The grandmother finds herself saying Jesus, "but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing."\(^{29}\) At this point, neither prayer nor Jesus supply the answer she is seeking.

The Misfit puts on the dead Bailey's shirt, accomplishing for a moment the odd illusion that he has replaced her son. In her confusion, the grandmother almost believes this. Distinct identities of people are vanishing. The idea that the Misfit could, in a sense, be her son is further advanced by the Misfit's own account of his life. He has been almost everything: a gospel singer, a soldier, an undertaker, a railroad worker, etc.\(^{30}\) Then the Misfit's snarling denunciation of Jesus bewilders the grandmother so much that she collapses in a ditch.\(^{31}\) Her attempts to pray and appeal to Jesus had already failed to comfort her. This is the point at which her former moral guidelines break down entirely. As Dorothy McFarland says, the Misfit's actions are felt not only as an intrusion of violence which temporarily destroys order, but as an intrusion of meaninglessness, which

\(^{29}\)Ibid., p. 131.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 129.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., p. 132.
questions the existence of any foundations on which order can be built. Yet at the same time he does this, he also arouses a benevolent instinct within the grandmother. When the Misfit comes closest to expressing repentance, his emotions surface and his vulnerability is apparent:

Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now."33 His voice seemed about to crack ...

When she hears this and sees he is about to cry, the grandmother's head clears. She calls him one of her own children and touches him.34 This recognition of her bond with him and her gesture disclose the new outlook that she has achieved. It means she no longer connects goodness to "good blood," since she admits kinship to a murderer. The last vestiges of her old personality disappeared with her last entreaties to him not "to shoot a lady." She experiences a conversion from selfishness into charity briefly, for it is an offer of love that she gives to him. Her relationship to spirituality at the beginning of the story was little more than perfunctory. Through her conflict with the Misfit, this relationship deepens.

This same type of encounter that broadens the


34 Ibid., p. 132.
character's scope beyond total concern with himself is echoed in "The River." The meaningless secular world appears again in "The River." However, this story presents another world which is more attractive and meaningful. Religion gives this new world the significance and beauty that the secular world lacked. Harry Ashfield's eventual choice to return to this world of religion is a sign that his former self-indulgence has been replaced by a desire to seek a more fulfilling life.

The difference between the two worlds is established at the beginning of the story as Mrs. Connin arrives to pick up the boy. The story begins in the secular atmosphere of the Ashfield's apartment. Harry's forlorn condition and Mrs. Connin's critical comments disclose the shortcomings of this world. Harry is described as "glum and limp" and later as "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out." Neglect has made a helpless victim out of him in this world. Mrs. Connin notices this and other discordant aspects of the Ashfield's life style. She comments on the unpleasant smell of the "dead cigarette butts" and dislikes the bizarre watercolor painting hanging in the hall. This short scene creates

35 Ibid., pp. 157-158.
36 Ibid., p. 157.
a picture of the lonely ignored kind of existence Harry has led. As he and Mrs. Connin leave, the morning is as "gray" as the surroundings. They pass "unlit empty buildings."\textsuperscript{37} The landscape and atmosphere reflect the bleak emptiness of his life.

At Mrs. Connin's house and in the country, Harry's encounters rouse him out of this state of numbness. His character becomes more fully developed until he reaches a point at which he can make a conscious decision of his own. The first sign of his awakening is his reaction to Mrs. Connin. She becomes a substitute mother figure to him, expressing concern for him by wiping his nose with her handkerchief. His response is to tell her his name is Bevel, thus eliciting further attention from her.\textsuperscript{38} He lies to her about his name because he wants her to like and admire him as she does the preacher, Bevel. It is also the first signal of his preference for her world of religion over that of his parents. Although he becomes increasingly more animated, he does not appear to be entirely kind. For instance, he tries to jump on Mrs. Connin's dog which moves out of the way in time. He also steals her flowered handkerchief. His experience with the pigs terrifies him.

When Mrs. Connin tells him that Mr. Paradise resembles one

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 158.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 159.
of the pigs, Bevel says he doesn't want to see him. This foreshadows his later flight from Mr. Paradise at the end of the story.

The imagery used to describe the countryside suggests that the presence of God is embodied in the landscape. Bevel begins to become sensitive to this presence, but his own imperfections prevent a total merging with it. The desire to merge with it is very strong within him, though. As they all leave to go to the healing, O'Connor says they look like "the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway." This image is used to convey the idea that they are embarking upon a journey. The fact that they travel slowly and solemnly indicated the importance of the journey. They are followed by "the white Sunday sun," which seems to want to overtake them. In the country, the sun shines, whereas in the city, the skies were always gray and overcast. During this walk, the sun rolls ahead of them as if it were leading them toward the meeting. The boy makes "wild leaps" and pulls forward "as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the sun."

---

39 Ibid., p. 162.
40 Ibid., p. 162.
41 Ibid., pp. 163-164.
This action stems from the same impulse, which later compels him to return to the river.

The clearing where the healing is taking place is a place of magnificent beauty. It is beautiful because it is a place in which the existence of God is admitted and sought after. This beauty stands in sharp contrast to the stark ugliness of the city. The scene at the prayer grounds resembles a vision of heavenly perfection:

At the bottom of the hill, the woods opened suddenly onto a pasture dotted here and there with black cows and sloping down, tier after tier, to a broad orange stream where the reflection of the sun was set like a diamond. 42

The peacefulness and purity of the country is subtly juxtaposed against the repulsiveness of the city:

Across the river there was a low red and gold grove of sassafrass with hills of dark blue trees behind it and an occasional pine jutting over the skyline. Behind, in the distance, the city rose like a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain. 43

The countryside allows the presence of God to fill it and becomes more beautiful. The grotesquely distorted image of the city as a cluster of warts is used to show that the city grows uglier because it is a place where God is ignored. The people are standing on the banks singing with the preacher who is standing in the river. The whole

42 Ibid., p. 164.
43 Ibid., p. 165.
atmosphere is pervaded with solemnity and expectancy, creating the effect that something of great importance is about to take place. The rhythm of alternating loud and soft tones of voice with which the preacher delivers his sermon give his words an added significance and puts the crowd into a trance.

The important event that takes place for Bevel is his baptism. At first, he does not realize its meaning because his mind is still under the influence of his former environment. When the attention is turned towards him, he reacts by acting comically. The stern manner of the preacher makes him realize his mistake:

Where he lived everything was a joke. 
From the preacher's face, he knew immediately that nothing the preacher said or did was a joke.44

The boy continues to deceive by telling the preacher that his mother named him Bevel. However, the desire to escape his former life is still present. When the preacher asks him if he wants to be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ, he says yes and thinks to himself: "... I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river."45 The shock of the baptism frees him from his former attitude

44 Ibid., p. 167.
of not taking anything seriously. Its effect is to change him so much that he cannot resume his previous way of life.

The small changes which have been wrought in Harry culminate in his decision to return to the river in order to reach the Kingdom of Christ. John May, a critic, explains Harry's decision as being shaped by a desire to be important permanently as he never was in the urban apartment of his parents.\textsuperscript{46} This desire is part of his motivation, for when his mother questions him about what the preacher said, he answers, "'...I'm not the same now," ... "I count."\textsuperscript{47} Responding in this manner, Harry indicates that his experience in the country has made a difference in his life. He believes the Kingdom of Christ is an alternative to the lonely dull life he leads with his parents. That atmosphere can no longer sustain him. His failure to find the food that he wants when he awakens in the morning is symbolic of this. For awhile he tries to fit himself back into this world, but concludes that "there was very little to do at any time but eat. ..."\textsuperscript{48} He empties some of the ashtrays on the floor as if this


\textsuperscript{47} Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories, p. 171.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 172.
were something he usually did.\textsuperscript{49} This action suggests the futility and destructiveness which characterize this life. He decides to go back to the river in order to escape this emptiness. Before his baptism the preacher tells Harry that if he is baptized he can go to the Kingdom of Christ.\textsuperscript{50} This is the meaning the baptism has for Harry. He thinks of it as a way to reach this place. When Harry enters the river the next day his intention is "not to fool with preachers anymore, but to Baptize himself and keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ."\textsuperscript{51} Harry drowns himself in the river. Seeking acceptance and love, he commits suicide.

Harry's interpretation of religion does result in violence. However, some more of the good aspects of religion are seen in this story. At the beginning, Harry is solely concerned with himself. After the baptism he returns to his home and sees the selfishness which governs his parents. In that secular society he did not matter to anyone. So he returns to find the Kingdom of Christ because it offers a situation in which he will be considered an important member.

"The River" ends with an individual entering the

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 172.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 168.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 173.
Kingdom of Christ where everyone is equal. In contrast to this, O'Connor begins the next story, "A Circle in the Fire," with a character who deems herself and her daughter superior to all other people. In "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Cope has barricaded herself and her home against any intrusion. In doing this, she has separated herself from the rest of humanity, feeling that she is superior to them. The conflict with the boys that she undergoes challenges this assumption and forces down her barriers. The conflict, then, re-establishes her as just another of the human race, sharing the common bond of suffering.

The line of trees that circles her farm functions symbolically as a fortress image in this story. 52 As the story begins the woods are described as "a solid gray-blue wall" and "the gray-blue sentinel line of trees." 53 This same image is repeated again later in the story: "The fortress line of trees was a hard granite blue . . ." 54 The line of trees are the walls behind which Mrs. Cope is sheltered. This is why she fears fire breaking out in them. 55 The sun and the sky symbolize a supernatural


54 Ibid., p. 190.

55 Ibid., p. 176.
force that is trying to break through these walls to reach Mrs. Cope. At first the sky is described as "lucid glaring white."\(^{56}\) It seems to be a force gathering strength:

The child thought the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through.\(^{57}\)

This introduces the theme of the coming invasion of this farm by external forces.

Mrs. Cope regards her farm as her property and protects it as though it were an extension of herself. She is very sensitive to anything that threatens to harm it. She battles against all these things steadily. At the beginning of the story, she is pulling the weeds and nut grass out of her border beds "as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place."\(^{58}\) She views the Negroes that work for her in the same manner: "Her Negroes were as destructive and impersonal as the nut grass."\(^{59}\) Mrs. Cope has been constantly haunted by a fear of being overtaken by an unknown force:

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 175.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 176.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 175.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 177.
. . . when the seasons changed she seemed almost frightened at her good fortune in escaping whatever it was that pursued her. What she is frightened of and trying to avert is that a terrible disaster might befall her. She wants to avoid the suffering that other people have had to bear.

Although the farm is very valuable to her, it has become a wearying responsibility. She is always reminding herself of her blessing but at the same time feels weighted down:

. . . she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back.61

Mrs. Pritchard's attitude forms a contrast to this. Mrs. Pritchard is obsessed with seeking out misfortune, whereas Mrs. Cope shuns it. Mrs. Pritchard likes to dwell on the details of suffering which annoys Mrs. Cope. Mrs. Cope tries to maintain an attitude of optimism, refusing to think any more deeply about suffering.

The three boys bring about the destruction that Mrs. Cope has secretly feared for so long. They represent a challenge to her attitude of superiority and proud assumption that she owns the land and woods. Her mistake

60 Ibid., p. 190.

61 Ibid., p. 177.
is that she has no humility. They resent her orders and commands, so they retaliate by setting fire to the woods, an event which has been hinted at all during the story. It is foreshadowed at one point when Mrs. Cope is watching the sun going down:

    It [the sun] was swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods.\(^{62}\)

The sun is described again in terms of fire:

    The sun burned so fast that it seemed to be trying to set everything in sight on fire.\(^{63}\)

Mrs. Cope used her ownership of the farm as a mark of her superiority to the rest of the world. The fire destroys the walls she had constructed on the basis of this assumption. The fire turns her into a different person. After the fire, her face reflects the change that has occurred:

    It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself.\(^{64}\)

These people are the people whom Mrs. Cope did not want to be like. Now, through her misery, a link between

\(^{62}\)Ibid., p. 184.

\(^{63}\)Ibid., p. 184.

\(^{64}\)Ibid., p. 193.
her and the other impoverished members of society is formed. She has undergone this initiation through suffering so that now she can be saved. Like Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," she realizes that she is not superior to other people because of her position in society. The new misery inflicted upon her unites her with others. This union comes about through violence at the hands of people she regarded as beneath her. Through this experience she discovers truth which is that material possessions do not insure one's supremacy. Her fate is the reversal of Harry's. Their search for recognition caused both of them to suffer. However, Harry's pain ended as he is offered an escape through death. Mrs. Cope's fate is to live and endure more misery.

Julian's experiences in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" parallel those of Mrs. Cope. As the story ends, Julian is left to face a life of agony. In this story, Julian has also constructed walls around himself. These walls are brought down by the pain inflicted upon him at his mother's death. Angered and depressed by the circumstances in which he is forced to live, Julian copes by retreating into his own private world:

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was
safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows.\textsuperscript{65}

He is convinced of the superiority of his own intellect. This conviction causes him to reject other people as unworthy and take pleasure out of doing so:

It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles.\textsuperscript{66}

His mother is the person who receives his strongest contempt. To be separated from her is very important to him:

\ldots he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother.\textsuperscript{67}

The futility of all of his efforts is exposed by the story. His mother refuses to acknowledge his attempts to convince her that the world has changed and that their formal social position no longer has any validity. All of his attempts to befriend Negroes are thwarted. And, against his will, he desires their ancestral plantation home:

It appeared in his dreams regularly \ldots

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 411.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 412.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 412.
It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it . . . and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him . . . 68

His anger and evil urge to break his mother's spirit stem from his feeling that he has been cheated out of what he deserved. For instance, after his mother has been knocked down by the black woman, he tells her that the old world is gone, but inside he is thinking bitterly of the house that had been lost for him.69 The incident between the black woman and his mother demonstrates the final failure of the way Julian lives. He hopes to use it to teach his mother a lesson and finally make her realize how wrong her attitudes are. This hope is dashed because she gets up from the pavement unable to even recognize him as her son. Instead of being enlightened about her mistake, she reverts to her childhood and then dies.70 Julian's barriers are finally penetrated. Like Mrs. Cope, his mother's face has changed. The shock of this causes him to feel remorse, the first emotion besides anger that he has exhibited in the story. The ending lines suggest that he has fallen into a state of helplessness:

68 Ibid., pp. 408-409.
69 Ibid., p. 419.
70 Ibid., pp. 419-420.
Help, help!" he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.\(^71\)

His former assurance has vanished as well as his illusions. He has been confronted with harsh reality of the truth about the relationship between the two races. Some critics believe that this ending permits the hope of redemption for Julian.\(^72\) This may be true because the story implies that Julian has changed and will be re-entering with an altered point of view, feeling now the "guilt and sorrow" instead of contempt. However, the despair that overtakes him is what is emphasized in these last lines rather than an optimistic expectancy of what the future will hold for him.

"The Enduring Chill" is another example of a story in which the protagonist is suddenly plunged into a different world. Like Julian, Asbury tries to force life experiences to conform into a certain mold. As Miles Orvell says, the story is the ironic deflation of these

\(^{71}\)Ibid., p. 420.

There is a reversal of O'Connor's usual pattern in that Asbury wants death, but is denied it. The story contains several comic scenes. For instance, Asbury's interactions with his sister, Father Finn, and the two Negro farm hands. In each episode, he fails to make the experience yield what he wants it to.

The advent of a transformation is alluded to throughout the story. As Asbury arrives at the station at the beginning of the story, the sun looks to him like "some strange potentate from the east."74 The atmosphere is charged with intensity: He "felt that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets of some exotic temple for a god he didn't know."75 This scene sets the stage for the conversion which later takes place. The shape of the bird outlined on the ceiling of his bedroom disturbs Asbury continually without his realizing its significance. He has the illusion that it is about to descend on him, foreshadowing the moment when it actually does this. While he is waiting for the priest,  


75 Ibid., p. 357.
Asbury notices the bird seems to be "poised and waiting too." The priest tells him that the Holy Ghost will enter his soul, establishing an association between the bird and the Holy Ghost. After this conversation, Asbury begins to think about his shortcomings just as the priest had told him to do: "... he was tormented now thinking of his useless life." Asbury also feels that an unusual event is about to take place, but doesn't know what it means:

He felt as if he were a shell that had to be filled with something but he did not know what... He even looked at the fierce bird with the icicle in its beak and felt that it was there for some purpose that he could not divine.

When the conversion takes place, it is a shock that completely overwhelms him. He is entering a new world which will not allow him to continue his pretensions of being a great artist:

Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind. ... He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror.

76 Ibid., p. 374.
77 Ibid., p. 377.
78 Ibid., p. 377.
79 Ibid., p. 378.
80 Ibid., p. 382.
The bird's descent may imply that Asbury's salvation is assured.\textsuperscript{81} However, it is not an attractive happy fate that is assigned to him. He foresees that his future will be a terrible, inevitable struggle that he must endure. It is terrifying because he has to face the truth, that he cannot force his life to conform to a certain standard. The stripping away of his romantic illusions about the life of an artist brings him face to face with the uncertainty that composes life.

In "Greenleaf," a supernatural force again pursues the protagonist. Mrs. May is too concerned with the material world. A divine force, in the form of the runaway Greenleaf bull, intervenes to free her from this pre-occupation. At the beginning of the story the bull is associated with divinity for it is described as a "patient god come down to woo her."\textsuperscript{82} Mrs. May, like Mrs. Cope, struggles alone to oversee a farm. Both women are haunted by a fear that some catastrophe might destroy their land and way of life. Mrs. May's efforts to force others to conform to her rules are defeated. Neither of her sons will take any interest in overseeing the farm as she had hoped they would. Her secret fear is that they will marry beneath themselves. She also fails to

\textsuperscript{81}Carter Martin, \textit{The True Country}, p. 139.

\textsuperscript{82}Flannery O'Connor, \textit{The Complete Stories}, p. 311.
control the Greenleaf family and their rise to affluence is an aggravation to her. Mrs. May's interests are confined to the literal world. Her attitude toward religion is limited:

She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true.\(^{83}\)

Another of her limitations is her obsession with her farm, which she sees as an extension of herself:

When she looked out any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character.\(^{84}\)

The bull gradually begins to consume all her attention. As she becomes more and more obsessed with destroying the bull, the world she has constructed so carefully begins to fall apart. The Greenleaf twins cannot be located and her two sons quarrel with each other. She is unable to restore her life to its former order. The bull's assault on her is as great a shock to her as the descent of the bird was to Asbury. Like him, she finds the insight it brings almost intolerable:

\[... \text{she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.}\] \(^{85}\)

\(^{83}\)Ibid., p. 316.

\(^{84}\)Ibid., p. 321.

\(^{85}\)Ibid., p. 333.
As John May points out, there is not enough evidence in these last lines to indicate that Mrs. May has gained knowledge. All that is clear is that she has at least received a message. The ending depicts her separation from her enclosed world. Through this death she is liberated from the confining bonds of materialistic preoccupations. The tree line which had been a wall protecting her from intrusion is now a "dark wound," signifying the final elimination of her defenses.

II.

In all the preceding stories the spiritual experience is fairly brief and dramatic. It is a startling, unexpected event which plunges the characters into either death or more distress. Their faults and the limitations of their secular existence are clearly exposed. Most of them then usually must move away from their former self-interest and cope with new emotions. The intrusion of violence forces them to see their past as meaningless and futile. These stories do not describe how the characters will handle this difficult change. The next

---


group of stories shows characters trying to meet this challenge. In these stories the characters already feel that life is full of injustice and is un.rewarding. They are more directly involved in religion than the characters of the previous group. Again, the result of this involvement is growth. Sometimes, they progress towards really achieving peace and satisfaction, but other characters move in the opposite direction, thereby perpetuating their own suffering and that of others.

Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger" is one of the characters whose religious experience with God is a positive one. He reaches a state of tranquility and understanding. The standpoint of most critics is that the story demonstrates the reconciliation that God's mercy can bring about. Dorothy Walters calls the story a study of the humbling of pride and forgiveness through divine mercy.88 Throughout most of the story the relationship between Mr. Head and Nelson is one which lacks harmony. Mr. Head assumes the role of instructor to Nelson, which Nelson challenges. The trip to the city is Mr. Head's attempt to expose Nelson's ignorance. Mr. Head is confident of his capability to handle this, but the story proves his

lack of understanding. The theme of becoming lost is repeated throughout the story. Nelson fears losing his grandfather: "He would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever lost from his grandfather." Mr. Head fears getting lost in the city:

Mr. Head was determined not to go into any city store because on his first trip here, he had got lost in a large one and had found his way out only after many people had insulted him.

Eventually this fear is realized as they do become lost in the Negro part of town where all the houses look exactly alike. Mr. Head arrives at the solution of following the railroad tracks and they reach the white part of town again. These feelings of loss are magnified when Mr. Head denies that Nelson belongs to him. Mr. Head becomes enveloped in despair and their relationship seems to have totally disintegrated. As Miles Orvell says, the dissolution of their relationship amounts to the dissolution of their entire world. The following moments plunge them into a dark world of agony and suffering. Mr. Head's mood is one of abject misery, while Nelson is frozen


90 Ibid., p. 258.

91 Miles Orvell, The Invisible Parade, p. 156.
with anger and hate. Mr. Head gives up all hope and then
loses control. Admitting that he is lost to a stranger,
he asks for help. This act is one he had disdained
performing before. At this point, they encounter the
faded statue, which miraculously re-unites the two.
Somehow, it allows Mr. Head to regain his position of
authority:

He looked at Nelson and understood that
he must say something to the child to
show that he was still wise . . . \(^{92}\)

The experience deepens Mr. Head's understanding of himself
and his life:

He stood appalled, judging himself with
the thoroughness of God . . . He had never
thought himself a great sinner before but he
saw now that his true depravity had been hidden
from him lest it cause him despair.\(^ {93}\)

His former pride has been replaced by an attitude of
humility. "The Artificial Nigger" is the best example of
the good side of religion in all of Flannery O'Connor's
stories. Mr. Head differs from most of her characters
because he is able to comprehend accurately the teachings
of Christianity. He admits that he is a sinner and then
realizes that God both loves and forgives him. Therefore,


\(^ {93}\)Ibid., pp. 269-270.
his spiritual encounters leaves him with a feeling of peace instead of terror.

In "A Temple of The Holy Ghost," the religious experience is also accompanied by a feeling of peace and the overall effect is a positive one. The idea presented in the story is that spirituality on earth is not always reflected in images of perfection. The main character of the story, a young girl, hears about the strange hermaphrodite exhibited at the carnival from her two older cousins. They also relate to her the surprising explanation it offers about itself:

    God made me thisaway... This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way.94

Before hearing this, the girl's attitude towards other people's odd and physical appearances was derisive. After puzzling over the freak's statement, her attitude becomes more tolerant. Dorothy McFarland sees the story as upholding O'Connor's belief that despite the suffering and ugliness of the world, Christ is sacramentally present in it.95 The girl realizes that the freak as well as other

94 Ibid., p. 245.

95 Dorothy McFarland, Flannery O'Connor, p. 28.
more normal human beings are creations of God. Therefore, everyone deserves the same respect. Ironically, the freak's message is rejected by the very people who should have agreed with it. The preachers from the town arrange to have the carnival closed down by the police. However, the freak's plea for compassion is comprehended by the girl. As the story ends, she sees the freak's suffering as a reflection of Christ's earlier suffering. Both advocate acceptance of God's will and both are eventually punished.

In "Revelation" a visionary experience teaches the main character, Mrs. Turpin, that her interpretation of God's will is wrong.

The tone of "A Temple of The Holy Ghost" is fairly serious. "Revelation" also deals with the matter of understanding and accepting God's will but with a more humorous attitude. The first scene takes place in a doctor's waiting room. The main character, Mrs. Turpin, is certain that her social position establishes her superiority on earth and eventually in heaven. Resenting Mrs. Turpin's condescension, another waiting patient throws a book at Mrs. Turpin's head and then attempts to strangle her. At her home later, Mrs. Turpin puzzles over this shocking incident. During her reflections she has a vision of people marching toward heaven. The surprising part of this vision is that she and her husband are not at the proper place in the procession. Instead of leading
it, their place is at the end of it behind two Negroes and the "white trash." The vision scene undermines her former complacent assumption that God will reward her as she thinks she deserves.

O'Connor develops the impression of an inexorable God even more fully in the next story. Like Mrs. Turpin, O. E. Parker learns that the road to God is extremely difficult, yet inescapable.

"Parker's Back," *Wise Blood*, and *The Violent Bear It Away* all depict a man's attempt to establish meaning in his life, by exploring his particular contact with religion. In all three cases, religion has a destructive effect upon their quest.

In "Parker's Back," Parker feels compelled to keep performing actions that are self-destructive. The story emphasizes the necessity of having to carry out this search for meaning but at the same time demonstrates the futility of achieving happiness or satisfaction through the search, at least in this life.

In "Parker's Back" the characters are from lower social classes and uneducated, similar to those in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." O. E. Parker wanders about from place to place like Mr. Shiftlet. Unlike Mr. Shiftlet, he is not in control of his life. Instead of trying to consciously force life to fit into a certain pattern as Asbury, Julian, and other characters do, Parker's
life is shaped by external forces that influence his actions:

Throughout his life . . . Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him-in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth.\textsuperscript{96}

Parker is an example of a character who lets life happen. There is the sense also that a non-human power is at work determining the events of his life. When he is first introduced to tattoos, the effect of the experience is described so as to suggest this:

\begin{quote}
It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

The tattoos are, for him, one of the most important parts of his existence. At first they appeal to his emotions and arouse him out of the unthinking state of mind he existed in. O'Connor says he had never thought there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed until he saw the man with the tattoo at the fair. Even then it did not occur to him that he was extraordinary,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{96}Flannery O'Connor, \textit{The Complete Stories}, p. 527.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., p. 513.
\end{quote}
but a peculiar feeling of unease was awakened in him. 98 This is the first occurrence of the dissatisfaction which plagues him for the rest of his life. Carter Martin says that the tattoos symbolize his vanity and commitment to secular experiences which have no sustaining significance. 99 Dorothy Walters says that the tattoos reflect his yearning to be other than he is. 100 They do function as something that connects him to a secular life for, at one point, O'Connor says that the only reason he worked at all was to earn money to pay for more tattoos. 101 He also learns that they are attractive to women. 102 The tattoos are also the only method he has evolved for coping with his problem of feeling dissatisfied. Each time this feeling comes over him, he goes out to get another tattoo. 103 As Martin points out though, there is no sustaining significance in doing this because his feeling of dissatisfaction keeps returning. There is a lack in his life which he is trying to fill by having each empty space on his body covered with a tattoo. His eyes reflect this

98 Ibid., p. 513.


100 Dorothy Walters, Flannery O'Connor, p. 113.


102 Ibid., p. 513.

103 Ibid., p. 514.
emptiness. While in the navy, he almost becomes completely absorbed by this type of life:

He stayed in the navy five years and seemed a natural part of the grey mechanical ship, except for his eyes, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him.\textsuperscript{104}

Another step he takes in order to cope with this feeling of hollowness is to have tattoos of animals and people done as if this might import more of a sense of well-being than pictures of objects would.\textsuperscript{105} This does not succeed, however. The ideal that Parker has been trying to imitate of the "arabesque of men and beasts and flowers" that the man at the fair possessed is not achieved. Instead, Parker's overall look has the effect of "something haphazard and botched."\textsuperscript{106} This implies the futility of his attempts to get rid of the feelings of incompleteness and establish meaning in his life.

At a point when his dissatisfaction has reached an intolerably painful level, Parker deserts the navy. His next venture, marriage, serves as a substitute for getting tattoos for awhile. During his marriage to Sarah Ruth, he

\textsuperscript{104}Ibid., p. 514.
\textsuperscript{105}Ibid., p. 514.
\textsuperscript{106}Ibid., p. 514.
doesn't get any tattoos until his dissatisfaction again becomes unbearable. His marriage provides another instance in which he seems to be compelled to do things against his own will, as if a supernatural power were directing his life instead of himself. He is unable to do what would be in his best interests. It is also an example of his tendency toward self-destructiveness because Sarah Ruth is a woman who gives him nothing and continually treats him with contempt. Both of them are repelled by certain characteristics in the other. Parker thinks she is ugly and unpleasant, while she despises his tattoos because she thinks they are sinful. Their marriage is not based on love or devotion but takes place because it is the expected and appropriate thing to do. The description of the marriage ceremony suggests the mechanical quality that their marriage takes on. It takes place in an office full of dust and filing cabinets. The woman who marries them stands behind an iron grill and finishes the process by charging them three dollars and fifty cents. The marriage doesn't change Sarah Ruth's hostility or alleviate Parker's dissatisfaction. Eventually his dissatisfaction increases enough so that he reverts to his former method of coping with it. His hope is to return with a tattoo

107 Ibid., p. 518.
that will make his wife accept and approve of him.

A supernatural force again intervenes in Parker's life. The flaming tree is interpreted by Dorothy McFarland to be a manifestation of a divine presence as the burning bush was in the story of Moses. Parker knows that it has launched him into an unknown territory. He senses that it will be worse than what he had experienced before and that he cannot escape from it. The picture of the Byzantine Christ also represents a manifestation of divinity. Its message to Parker is to go back to Sarah Ruth and he knows he must obey. The tattoo has a profound meaning to Parker, though he cannot explain it to anyone else. He merely tells the artist it is to appease his wife. His conversation with the artist indicates that he believes in the myth that men should always rely solely on themselves. O'Connor says these words seemed to leave his mouth like "wraiths" and evaporate at once, suggesting the falsity of this belief. The artist and the men at the pool hall fail to grasp the significance of what the experience means to Parker, assuming that his gesture lacks seriousness. They fail to perceive the tattoo as a sign of change in Parker. Parker is unable

---


110 Ibid., p. 525.
to communicate its significance to them. During his reflections, after being thrown out of the pool hall, he realizes that he has always been obligated to do the things he did and is now more than ever under an obligation:

Parker sat . . . examining his soul.
He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed.\textsuperscript{111}

Parker has been changed by the experience. His dissatisfaction has disappeared. He fails to make Sarah Ruth understand or appreciate this. Instead of pleasing her, the tattoo enrages her. To her, it is just as idolatrous as any of his other ones. The story ends unhappily with her beating of him, while he is too stunned to resist. There is a sense of hopelessness because she won't recognize his devotion towards her after all he has been through. In the story, his tattoos are something he must pursue. Through them, he goes through a final transformation that rids him of his dissatisfaction. He finds a God that he can relate to and that meaningfully changes his life, but it doesn't leave him any better off. It isolates him because other people don't understand him and it causes more suffering to be inflicted upon him.

\textsuperscript{111}Ibid., p. 527.
Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* is also trying to establish meaning in his life like Parker. The connection that religion has to his search and the destruction that is brought about by it are developed more fully in this longer work. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel is tormented by his stern religious upbringing. It had instilled in him a fear of corruption and had warped him so much that he could never lead a productive, fulfilling life. All it had given him was increased confusion. His reaction is to try to counteract these earlier voices in several different ways in order to establish a new meaning in his life. All these attempts fail, increase his anger, and lead him to destroy others and himself. Religion functions like a blight on his life, never allowing anything positive to develop.

Hazel is not a character who inspires sympathy. His brutality to others, which eventually turns toward himself, grows more and more violent throughout the story. At first, he is aggressive towards people only in conversation. He insults the women in the dining car, telling one of them that if she has been redeemed he doesn’t want to be. He insists that the porter is from Eastrod, which the porter denies.112 This is an example

of his tendency to be violently rude to people.

Hazel's childhood is sketched briefly in the first chapter. The deaths of his grandfather, brother, father, and mother are mentioned. Hazel feels no grief at their deaths. His main feeling seems to be one of disillusionment. He had hoped his grandfather would rise up out of the coffin and triumph over death but this didn't happen. When his brother dies, Hazel selfishly thinks of himself instead of his brother, wondering what it would have been like to be in the coffin. His father and mother don't rise up out of their coffin either. This proves to Hazel that they are just like anyone else because they have to give in to death. The description of their deaths also hints that death has no effect because his mother's face looks to him as if she wasn't anymore satisfied dead than alive.\footnote{Ibid., p. 19.} New fears emerge too in these scenes. He fears death and the associations of being enclosed. The berth in the train reminds him of a coffin and he calls for the porter to come release him from it.\footnote{Ibid., p. 19.} A fear of Jesus and a fear of corruption also take form. After hearing his grandfather's sermons, he wants to avoid Jesus. He thinks the way to do
this is to avoid sin, until he learns from the other army men that there might be another possibility. They tell him that he has no soul. 115 This is the beginning point of his effort to convince himself and others that Jesus doesn't exist. He twists this belief to advantage to fit his own particular needs.

All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it for once and for all, and he saw the opportunity here to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil. 116

The damage that his fundamentalist background has done to his life is revealed here. The fear of corruption, evil and death totally run his life. He is so preoccupied with averting these problems that he forfeits any kind of a normal life. Religion imprisons him and he is never able to transcend these limits.

The example of his grandfather being a preacher implants in Hazel the desire to be a preacher, perhaps because he envies the power that his grandfather could exert over people. Because of his particular feelings, he becomes a different kind of preacher than his grandfather. When he arrives in Talkingham, everyone mistakes him for one because he is dressed that way. He denies that he is

115 Ibid., p. 17.
116 Ibid., p. 17.
a preacher at this point. After his meeting with Asa Hawks and his daughter, he begins to preach. His sermon starts in response to Hawks's mockery. He tells the crowd that Jesus doesn't exist, but no one pays any attention to him:

The crowd was moving fast. It was like a large spread raveling and the separate threads disappeared down the dark streets.117

Hazel's behavior becomes even more violent because no one pays any attention to his sermons. He provokes everyone into anger. He realizes that religion constitutes a manipulation of people. For instance, while driving on the highway, he notices a sign that says:

   ... Woe To The Blasphemer And Whoremonger! Will Hell Swallow You Up?118

His response to this is to say to another driver that Jesus is a trick on niggers.119 His sermons are an attempt to liberate people from what he perceives as a deception, but not out of a sense of benevolence. Instead, his motivation is selfish. He wants to establish his own cleanliness. For example, when he and Enoch are at a

---

117 Ibid., p. 34.
118 Ibid., p. 44.
119 Ibid., p. 45.
restaurant, their waitress makes a remark about a clean boy, not even intended for Hazel. Hazel, however, takes it as a personal affront, shouting over and over that he is clean. He provokes the waitress, who is left in a state of extreme anger.

In the next part of the story, the characters try to use each other to accomplish their personal desires, but in each case their schemes fail. Enoch tries to get Hazel to take part in his mysterious attraction to the shrunken mummy, but Hazel is unmoved by it. Hazel decides to ruin Hawks by seducing his daughter, but it fails to happen this way. She instead becomes the pursuer. Hazel's hopes for the Church of Christ fail to materialize. No one joins the church. When he does get a disciple it is Onnie Jay Holy, whose lies infuriate Hazel. Instead of becoming a team, they become competitors. All this culminates in disaster and destruction. Hazel destroys the mummy after Enoch has given it to Sabbath. Enoch merges with the gorilla and is left in isolation. Hazel runs over Solace, the false prophet who was one of his competitors. A policeman destroys Hazel's car, and Hazel returns to his boarding house and blinds himself. In the last chapter he continues to destroy and punish himself. His landlady's plan to marry him fails.

\[120\] Ibid., p. 53.
When he hears about her plan, he leaves home and causes his own death. Most critics interpret the way he tortures himself as being an example of his penance and that the look on his face at his death indicates that he had reached a higher level of spiritual reality.121 His final actions are more like giving up. The harsh treatment of himself is what his grandfather's religion would have prescribed for him. He still continues to be rude as he rejects all the advances of his landlady. His landlady is the only character in the book who shows genuine concern for another person, even though her concern for him is partially based on the help she thinks he can give her. She thinks he, being blind, will know more about death and be able to instruct her. His death is different from his family's deaths. His face changes to become stern and tranquil while theirs remain the same. He leaves behind him a pinpoint of light whereas the members of his family are completely enveloped in darkness. These are the only optimistic notes in the ending. Otherwise, the book stresses brutality, confusion, and ignorance. Religion cripples Hazel emotionally and prevents him from living in the here and now.

In *The Violent Bear It Away* Francis Tarwater's upbringing is similar to that of Hazel Motes. His uncle, Mason Tarwater, is a figure like Hazel's grandfather in that both are fervently devoted to serving the Lord. Mason Tarwater's concept of religion is extremely narrow and oldfashioned. He considers himself a prophet and raises his nephew to become one also. His rigid viewpoint allows no deviations. People must devote their lives to God and if they abandon him, they are condemned. He imposes these harsh judgements upon members of his family, who rebel. He tries to run their lives with his distorted view of religion. Instead of helping them to find spirituality though, his influence condemns them to lead lives that are a constant struggle. The need to assert themselves and evolve their own kind of life is constantly threatened by their susceptibility to his teachings.

Neither Rayber or Tarwater, the two main characters in whom this battle is most explicitly examined, is able to establish a successful independence from him. Rayber establishes an independent existence but one that is totally sterile and unfulfilling:

> Those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it ... He [Rayber], at the cost of a full life, staved it off. 122

Rayber sees the old man's devotion as a weakness that
could easily take control of Rayber's life. He understands
that in order to protect himself from succumbing to this
way of life, he has to prevent himself from participating
emotionally in anything else in life.

Tarwater at first resists his uncle's plans for
him. While his uncle is still alive, Tarwater enjoys
hearing how Rayber deserted the old man. After his uncle's
death, Tarwater's objections are allowed full expression
for the first time:

Only every now and then it sounded
like a stranger's voice to him. He
began to feel that he was only just
now meeting himself, as if as long as
his uncle had lived, he had been 123
deprived of his own acquaintance.

The stranger expresses the doubts that Tarwater had
subconsciously felt about his uncle's convictions. He
tempts the boy with freedom, telling him that not following
Jesus is not wrong. 124 Finally, he encourages Tarwater
to carry out the action that is the supreme expression of
his anger for and denial of his uncle. Instead of burying
his uncle according to his uncle's wishes, Tarwater burns
the house, thinking his uncle's dead body is still inside.

123 Ibid., p. 324.

124 Ibid., p. 326.
The uncle's influence still remains powerfully alive even after his death. When Tarwater goes to Rayber's house, he responds in the way that his uncle would have wished. He can only see Rayber and the idiot son with the vision of his uncle:

He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for.

Rayber represents modern rational society. He believes he can rehabilitate the boy through education. He wants to give Tarwater a new life but the old man's influence lives on in Tarwater, preventing this from happening. Rayber tries to reach him by involving him in education and tests. Preferring to remain ignorant like the old man, Tarwater refuses to take any test. Tarwater reacts to Rayber's reverence for books in the same manner as his uncle did. The memory of old Tarwater is a barrier that keeps the two younger men apart. The boy can never become close to Rayber because his uncle has instilled in him too much contempt and suspicion of Rayber and his methods.

The simultaneous drowning and baptism of Bishop

\[125\] Ibid., p. 357.
is an example of the intensity of the struggle in which Tarwater is entangled. One part of him seeks to fulfill the destiny his uncle had outlined for him by uttering the words of baptism. The other part tries to avoid the mission by drowning the boy. After this incident he returns home thinking he has attained freedom:

He returned tried in the fire of his refusal, with all the old man's fancies burnt out of him, with all the old man's madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him. 126

This is a false sense of freedom because he is still haunted by the fact that he did baptize the child and by the ghost of his former self who had been destined for prophecy. 127 The rape by the sinister stranger in the car makes him realize that his destiny is still not settled. He is being forced on to a "final revelation." 128 The discovery that his uncle had been buried after all shocks him into realizing that he must carry out his uncle's intentions. The vision of eating the multiple loaves and fishes, which had always sickened him before suddenly becomes attractive. He finally experiences the

126 Ibid., p. 434.
127 Ibid., p. 435.
128 Ibid., p. 442.
vision he had anticipated which convinces him that he really belongs to the traditional line of prophets. At the end of the book he is returning to the town to spread the word of God to sinful townspeople. However, he tends to translate the word of God in ways that torment and destroy people. They try to savagely dispose of anyone who attempts to interfere with their plans. For example, old Tarwater shot his own nephew Rayber when Rayber tried to rescue young Tarwater. The two prophets let anger rule their behavior instead of rationality. They create chaos and more suffering. Their actions indicate that they hold an obsessive, distorted view of religion which promotes destruction. The purpose of religion, promotion of good throughout the world, is defeated by their violence.

III.

The last group of stories depicts the misery of the human condition. These stories follow a pattern which involves the betrayal of a character’s innermost expectations about what life should yield. There is no indication that the characters realize that they have been deluding themselves in this third group of stories. The endings
of the stories leave the characters in an unenlightened state from which they look forward to a gloomy fate or are destroyed. In these stories, the characters have no spiritual life and make no attempt to form one. No transformation or revelation takes place that would enable them to transcend their limitations. Therefore, their lives are little more than a series of meaningless, joyless experiences.

In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," the past functions as an inhibiting force again. Ruby's memories of her childhood prevent her from achieving fulfillment in the present, just as Hazel's and Julian's past also stifles their present lives. Ruby saw her mother grow prematurely old because of the number of children she had:

Her mother's hair had been gray . . . All those children were what did her mother in--eight of them: two born dead, one died the first year, one crushed under a mowing machine. Her mother had got deader with every one of them. 129

After witnessing this, Ruby associates childbearing with aging, which she desperately wants to avoid. In the story, she is thirty-four years old and at a point in her life where she feels old age encroaching upon her.

The way to avert the aging process, she feels is to not have any children. Another way in which the past oppresses her is with its reminders of poverty and isolation. She had been raised in Pitman, a tiny rural community which has now disappeared.

Ruby's past is a burden from which she is always trying to escape. It is the reason she is so dissatisfied with her present life. At the beginning of the story, she is disgusted with her brother, Rufus, because he clings to the past: "If Pitman had still been there, Rufus would have been in Pitman." This passivity makes him seem worthless in Ruby's opinion. Her secret ambition is to move even farther away from her undesirable origins by moving to the suburbs. The move would complete her rise from the lower class in which she was born to the middle class. Her aspirations arouse discontent in her with her present situation.

As it was now, living downtown, she had to walk eight blocks to the main business streets and farther than that to get to a supermarket. She hadn't made any complaints five years much but now with her health at stake as young as she was what did he think she was going to do, kill herself?  

---

130 Ibid., p. 96.

131 Ibid., p. 97.
She is disappointed with her life and family. Her fears of hospitals and doctors mask the underlying fear she has that she will end up like her mother and sisters, who never escaped the trap of poverty and rearing numerous children. Ruby's dissatisfaction with her life extends into dissatisfaction with all the people she knows. Everyone irritates her. There is a slight thread of resentment towards her husband, Bill Hill, running through her thoughts. She unconsciously thinks of him at times as holding her back. He doesn't co-operate with her desire to move to the subdivision. He is not the man she thought he was. Evidently, he is content to stay in their present location and wants to raise children, which Ruby doesn't realize:

She had gained some weight but he [Bill] hadn't noticed except that he was maybe more happy lately and didn't know why.

Later, she tells Laverne that pregnancy is impossible because Bill Hill had taken care of that. It seems that her husband is more in agreement with the premises that had shaped Ruby's upbringing than he is with her newer viewpoint. Similarly, Ruby is at odds with the rest of

\[132\] Ibid., P. 99.
the people in her world. The thought of her neighbor's little boy, Hartley Gilfeet, angers her because his mother refuses to discipline him. The spoiled child is a living example that bears out Ruby's foregone conviction that children are an unwanted nuisance. She is impatient with the peculiarity of old Mr. Jerger, who lives on the second floor of the apartment building. He tells her that it is the birthday of Ponce de Leon, who failed to discover a real fountain of youth. This is, in effect, what Ruby is also searching for and fails to find. Mr. Jerger tells her he has found the fountain of youth in his heart, implying that Ruby is searching in the wrong place for answers. Ruby politely ignores the man.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 100-101.} The most discordant conflict in the story is between Ruby and Laverne, her younger friend who lives on the third floor. Ruby may subconsciously resent Laverne because she is only thirty years old, not married, and therefore in no danger of having any children. Laverne's personality is another reason for the discordant notes in their encounter. Laverne won't take anything seriously. Ruby's appearance at her door with the little boy's toy gun is hilarious to Laverne. Laverne diagnoses Ruby's pregnancy immediately and treats the whole thing as a joke.
She expresses interest in Rufus. Ruby is very much opposed to this, perhaps because she is jealous. Everything Laverne does upsets Ruby, most importantly when Laverne confirms the pregnancy. Ruby then becomes violently agitated. This is the first time anyone has directly confronted her with the fact that she is pregnant. There has been no other opportunity for anyone to do so because she won't go to any doctors. The scene between the two women is the turning point of the story. All of the other events begin to make more sense. Bill Hill has been happier lately because he knows Ruby may be getting pregnant. Ruby has felt heavier, and been nauseated often because she is pregnant.

Ruby now understands that what has been happening to her body has not been the spread of cancer which she feared. She still clings forlornly to the hope that Madam Zoleeda's words did not mean that kind of "good fortune." In spite of herself, she keeps recalling her mother's experiences and feeling that her future will follow the same pattern. She cannot envision motherhood as anything but an invitation of old age and death, after having watched this happen to her mother:

No. No. It couldn't be any baby. She was not going to have something waiting in her to make her deader, she was not . . . it could not be that, it could not. She shuddered and held her hand tightly over her mouth. She felt her face drawn
puckered: two born dead one died the first year . . . no she was only thirty-four years old, she was old. 134

The idea of pregnancy is very painful for her because she equates it with suffering and deterioration. All through the story she has been struggling to maintain an image of herself as young and alive. She reinforces this by comparing herself with other people:

Seeing that her mother or father, neither had been much to look at, she had done very well. They had been the dried up type, dried up and Pitman dried into them, them and Pitman shrunk down into something all dried and puckered up. And she had come out of that! A somebody as alive as her! . . . She was warm and fat and beautiful . . . She felt the wholeness of herself, a whole thing climbing the stairs. 135

So she tries to preserve a sense of vitality within herself, frightened of drying up and dying like her family did. Her death and everyone else's is inevitable, though she does not want to admit it. O'Connor suggests that Ruby is already travelling down the road towards death by describing her at the beginning of the story as a woman shaped nearly like a funeral urn. 136 Ruby never fully realizes this. At the opening of the story, Ruby

134 Ibid., p. 106.
135 Ibid., p. 99.
136 Ibid., p. 95.
doesn't recognize her reflection in the mirror. \footnote{137} By the end of the story, she still has not really gained any self-knowledge. All she experiences is a feeling of doom about to envelop her. Death is pre-eminent even in this story, which is not overtly concerned with death. In one of the passages quoted above, Ruby thinks she won't put up with having something waiting inside of her to make her deader. However, she is destined to do exactly that. She hears the neighbor's little boy that she hates crashing through the building, a premonition of what is in store for her. Then she recognizes the feeling in her stomach:

It was as if it were not in her stomach. It was as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting and waiting, with plenty of time. \footnote{138}

It is what she had feared, something that is waiting to make her "deader." Instead of getting to move away, she is trapped into a life of bearing children she doesn't want. The stairwell becomes a dark cavern from which she cannot escape just as she cannot escape the process of aging and eventually, death. Her life has no spiritual dimensions, since she never explores.

\footnote{137}{Ibid., p. 95.}

\footnote{138}{Ibid., p. 107.}
In "A Late Encounter With The Enemy" the characters are caught up in a life in which there is again very little satisfaction or harmony. This story explores the lack of meaning that lies behind presentations. These public ceremonies supposedly celebrate meaningful events but the story demonstrates the disparity between this intention and the real attitude of at least two participants. The characters in this story are slightly more bizarre than other O'Connor characters. They are almost exaggerated caricatures, but their intense emotions make them believable as humans. Sally Poker Sash is sixty-two and lives with her grandfather, who is one hundred and four years old. The past again intrudes into the story to disturb the present. Sally is a teacher who has also been going to school in the summers for the past twenty years. She prays every night that her grandfather would live until her graduation so that he could sit on the stage in his uniform during the program.\textsuperscript{139} This is so important for her because her own identity is tied more closely to the past and her grandfather is an emblem of that past. To have him sit on the stage while she graduates would be a triumph for her pride in her family and in the past traditions. At the same time that she yearns for this idealistic desire to be realized, Sally also vaguely

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., p. 134.
realizes what a fragile dream it really is. In thinking about it, O'Connor says that Sally often "had the sense that she might be cheated out of her triumph because she so often was." 140 Once during a dream about the ceremony, she turns to find him sitting on the stage behind her with nothing on except a hat. 141 These two incidents can be attributed to the part of her which doubts that anything so idealistic can really happen.

The idealistic theme is expanded further in the rest of the story. Public ceremonies and parades which are the main events in the story, tend to idealize the past. They dwell on the glory that probably was not really part of it, O'Connor is suggesting. Sally's grandfather is thought of as a war hero from the Civil War and others. This happens because he has the right age and appearance for the part. An announcer at the premiere that was the grandfather's favorite experience presented the old man to the audience as General Tennessee Flintrock Sash even though Sally had told him the name was George Poker Sash and he was only a major. 142 People want to view the past in this glorified manner and so create a role which the grandfather and Sally willingly accept. The truth, which

140 Ibid., p. 134.

141 Ibid., p. 135.

142 Ibid., p. 137.
is unacceptable and disregarded, is that the old man cannot remember the wars at all and was probably only a foot soldier.¹⁴³

The two relatives use the parades and ceremonies for their own purposes. They regard these public events as being extremely important. All their energy and emotions are directed towards these opportunities for public exposure. For the grandfather, each time is another chance to reinforce his vanity:

He liked to sit on any stage. He considered that he was still a very handsome man.¹⁴⁴

He feels that his contribution is unequaled. His attitude toward life is distorted so that parades and premieres are the most significant and satisfactory events in his life. He is unable to remember anything except them. In Sally's case, her graduation is a chance to display her impressive family, forcing everyone to admire and envy her:

. . . she thought that if anyone considered this academic procession something impressive to behold, they need only wait until they saw that old General in his courageous gray and that clean young Boy Scout stoutly wheeling his chair across the stage . . .

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 135.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 135.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 140.
Her excitement and anticipation form a contrast to the grandfather's and nephew's indifference. The grandfather could not care less about the whole thing, O'Connor says at the beginning of the story.\textsuperscript{146} The nephew stops at the Coca-Cola machine when he should be wheeling the old man to the stage.\textsuperscript{147}

There is an element of sadness in the story. Sally and her grandfather attach so much significance to these ceremonies because there is nothing else in which to be involved. The grandfather is too old to do much else. Sally has no other close family relationships or children with which to occupy herself. Thus, the things that she does have, her grandfather and her graduation, become almost excessively important to her. Her viewpoint is distorted and these two things become a consuming obsession. Their lives are very empty. O'Connor says that after the Hollywood premiere, the grandfather's life had not been very interesting. He is displayed in the museums and on holidays in his uniform like a relic.\textsuperscript{148} Ironically, he is always associated with the past, but has no use for history, which he thinks is a waste of time:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[146] Ibid., p. 134.
\item[147] Ibid., p. 141.
\item[148] Ibid., p. 139.
\end{footnotes}
He didn't know what procession this was, but there was something familiar about it . . . It must be something connected with history like they were always having. He had no use for any of it. What happened then wasn't anything to a man living now and he was living now.

He dies during the speeches, not knowing what is going on around him. As he is dying, he goes back into the past remembering faces and battles he never could before. The words of the speech seem like musket fire to him and open up his memory of the past. He tries to see "what comes after the past," but dies without being able to do so. 150

Sally graduates with dignity and without knowing her grandfather is dead. In fact, no one realizes that he has died and the last lines of the story are slightly gruesome telling how the nephew wheels the corpse back to the Coca-Cola machine. The grandfather has died alone, without being able to share his last moments or memories with anyone. No revelation accompanies his death for he dies without understanding anything. Sally's future is bleak because she is left completely alone without her grandfather and with her graduation finished. O'Connor seems to be suggesting in this story that Sally and her grandfather never acted on what was the truth and became

149 Ibid., pp. 141-142.

150 Ibid., pp. 142-144.
inordinately attached to false ideals and conceptions about life or themselves. This made their lives empty and meaningless and left Sally to face a bereavement alone at an old age.

"Good Country People" is another story which leaves its heroine to face a formidable loss. Hulga not only loses her wooden leg, but loses her entire identity. When she allows Manley Pointer to see where the artificial limb fastens, the experience bares her vulnerability:

... it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.\(^\text{151}\)

Again, it is the past intruding into the present, for, if it were not for the hunting accident that caused Hulga to lose her leg in her childhood, she would not have been caught in this predicament at all. There is the sense in the story that this early accident warped her personality and caused her to create an unusual, protective identity. She may have also chosen this particular identity in order to annoy her mother. It is obvious that her mother had and still has certain expectations for Hulga. Hulga does all she can to become the opposite of what her mother wants

\(^{151}\text{Ibid., p. 289.}\)
her to be. She rejects the name Joy that her mother gave her, choosing to call herself Hulga. She is always sullen and refuses to participate in any kind of normal life, as her mother wishes her to do. The intellectual facade which she constructs allows her to express her disgust with the rest of the world and her own feelings of superiority. However it obstructs her vision, though she thinks that she alone perceives the truth. While she thinks that her intellect frees her to "see through to nothing" as she tells Pointer, it actually functions more as a defense behind which she can hide herself.\footnote{152} Under the shelter of intellectual superiority she can attack and ridicule the world's hypocrisy. The truth is that it does not protect her at all. Hulga is actually very vulnerable. Even though the girl had made it plain that if it had not been for her condition, she would be far away from the farm life, lecturing in a university, Hulga is dependent on her mother for care and a place to live.\footnote{153} She is vulnerable because Mrs. Freeman's unwholesome interest disturbs her. Mrs. Freeman, the hired man's wife, calls her Hulga and whenever this happens Hulga would "scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon."\footnote{154}

\footnote{152}Ibid., p. 287.

\footnote{153}Ibid., p. 276.

\footnote{154}Ibid., p. 275.
Mrs. Freeman is morbidly fascinated by Hulga's artificial leg.\textsuperscript{155} This foreshadows Manley Pointer's interest in her for the same reason.

This story contains similarities to other O'Connor stories. The situation between Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga's mother, and Mrs. Freeman, who works for her, resembles the situation between Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard in "A Circle In the Fire." In both cases, the hired woman antagonizes her employer, but Mrs. Hopewell has learned to deal with this more effectively than Mrs. Cope. She staunchly maintains that the Freemans are "good country people." She refuses to admit her true feelings are of dislike for Mrs. Freeman because she needs them to work on the farm. She has learned how to handle them and unlike Mrs. Cope, her superficiality remains undisturbed. The hostile-dependent relationship between Hulga and her mother is like the relationship between Julian and his mother or Asbury and his mother in that the parent is regarded by the child with contempt. At the ending of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian experiences love for this mother. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury also experiences a revelation about his life at the end of the story, but it is not indicated at the end of "Good Country

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 275.
People" that Hulga has learned anything. The false sense of power that her intellectualism gave her is certainly stripped away. Early in the story Hulga is described as a person "whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face," and as having "the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it."\(^{156}\) That she has achieved blindness is evident. She meets Manley the next day intending to use the encounter to change his simplicity. In her imagination, she will bring about a transformation in him:

\[\text{... she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life.}^{157}\]

She views it as an opportunity to convert someone to her philosophy of thinking, a chance she has been denied previously because she abandoned pursuing a Ph.D. and a teaching career. It is the only attempt she makes to communicate with anyone in a long time and it ends disastrously for her. The intellectual stance she

\(^{156}\text{Ibid., p. 273.}\)

\(^{157}\text{Ibid., p. 284.}\)
developed has given her a false sense of reality. When the boy tells her she is not like anybody else because of her artificial leg, she interprets this as an indication of his innocence.\textsuperscript{158} The intimacy between them causes her to fall in love for a short time with him:

\begin{quote}
She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

Here she is responding in the normal way that her mother had wished for, but unfortunately to someone who is not a "nice young man," as her mother would say. She thought he was expressing tenderness and care, but her assessment of his feelings was mistaken. Instead she encounters an unfamiliar, frightening force that pierces through her facade and renders it useless:

\begin{quote}
Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at.\textsuperscript{160}
\end{quote}

Her frozen manner and expressionless face disappear as different expressions race back and forth over her face.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p. 289.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., p. 289.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., p. 289.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., p. 289.
Finally her pleading question to him, "Aren't you just good country people?" reveals her own tendency, like that of her mother, to stereotype people. Neither her own intellectual preconceptions nor her mother's trite assumptions provides the right explanation to fit the situation. Manley's behavior is a manifestation of evil that shocks Hulga with its unexpectedness. She finds that she has been cruelly deceived and robbed in the same manner as several other women. The story leaves her at this point, reduced and numbed, to confront her loss of her identity. Some critics are optimistic about the ending of "Good Country People." Kathleen Feeley says that Hulga's plea to the salesman about "good country people" is when the mystery of grace comes close to the surface in the story. Hulga may be saved because she may realize her predicament at the end of the story is ridiculous. Dorothy Walters says that it is to be hoped that Hulga, having mastered the fundamentals of the fact of evil, is now prepared for additional instruction in spiritual reality. This optimism

---

162 Ibid., p. 290.

163 Ibid., p. 291.


165 Dorothy Walters, Flannery O'Connor, p. 67.
glosses over the pain that Hulga must be feeling after such a deception. She had reacted to the earlier loss of her leg through the hunting accident by constructing barriers between herself and the rest of the world. After this incident, she will probably retreat even more.

IV.

In all of Flannery O'Connor's stories, the characters are subjected to painful and degrading experiences as Hulga is in "Good Country People." Hulga is similar to many other O'Connor characters because she is so concerned with herself and retreats from the rest of the world. In her story, she does not escape her unhappy isolation. Flannery O'Connor uses the three different types of characters to illustrate this same picture of people being trapped within a miserable, limited existence. Some of her characters, like Hulga, are never able to transcend these barriers. For others, an unusual encounter shocks them out of their former selfishness and forces them to become more aware of the rest of the world. The characters who have a considerable involvement with religion are often defeated by the experience, but a few do reach a state of harmony and understanding.
Flannery O'Connor's fiction does not put forth the viewpoint that religion is the simple and easy solution to life's miseries because so few of her characters achieve any happiness through it. Instead, in her fiction, attaining contentment through religion appears to be extremely hard and almost impossible to do in this life. Her stories all reinforce the idea that life is difficult and full of suffering. All the cruelty, injustice, and hardships of life are presented in the various stories. Religion can only alleviate these ordeals sometimes. The rest of the time they must be endured.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of Flannery O'Connor's work is the extent to which it is filled with misery. Most of her characters lead dull, joyless lives and then experience a violent death or catastrophe. The point of her insistence upon the theme of suffering is to show that misery is not completely bad. Because she endured an illness in her own life, perhaps Flannery O'Connor chose to emphasize misery and suffering in her fiction. Her background in religion caused her to believe that spirituality can be found through misery. In every tragedy, her characters have the opportunity to expand spiritually or to remain embittered and withdrawn. Each character chooses one or the other of these two fates.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


