5-1-2005

The Freedom of Flexibility: Lessons from the Child Characters in Flannery O'Connor

Kathryn Matheny

Western Kentucky University

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THE FREEDOM OF FLEXIBILITY:
LESSONS FROM THE CHILD CHARACTERS IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Kathryn G. Matheny

May 2005
THE FREEDOM OF FLEXIBILITY:
LESSONS FROM THE CHILD CHARACTERS IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Date Recommended  April 8, 2005

Kelly Beames
Director of Thesis

Elizabeth Oates

Gray  5/3/05
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research  Date
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Flannery O’Connor had a penchant for repetition, often revisiting the same character types, plot devices, and overriding ideas in two or more stories. This repetition always goes hand in hand with reinterpretation. Even when the characters and plots seem suspiciously similar, the differences signal both O’Connor’s fascination with her subject and her persistent attempts to understand it. This thesis will explore O’Connor’s revisions of stories in which child characters play an integral part. The later story in the three pairs I will examine gives a clearer picture of what O’Connor believed were the freedoms of childhood.

O’Connor’s adults rarely arouse much pity because they move decisively toward either redemption or damnation. Her child characters, however, aren’t quite as rigidly written. They do not suffer from O’Connor’s predestination; they can accept or reject the future offered to them in a way the adults cannot. While some of these children seem to serve only as pawns in the adults’ confrontations with grace, others are the focus of their own stories. All, however, control their own fates, even when they are least likely to have that power.

The depiction of childhood in O’Connor’s short stories goes beyond simply seeing the world as it is, reporting the inflexibility of adulthood. O’Connor asks her readers to recognize the benefits of becoming childlike themselves. A simple faith opens
adults’ eyes and allows them to accept both their weaknesses and the strength of God that accompanies awareness of weakness. O’Connor also shows us that if we refuse to become childlike, if we do not let a child’s life influence ours, we may end up influencing theirs. Just as it is important to soften ourselves for our own sakes, it is doubly important that we do so to keep them from learning our bad habits.
One thing that can be said of most of Flannery O'Connor's characters is that they are obstinate. Self-absorbed and self-righteous, they are unaware of the humility that O'Connor's Christianity requires. O'Connor's stories depict a realization of grace, and it often comes with a price. Her adults face threats to their lives and the lives of those around them, or else they are humbled by an experience that leaves them weakened and all too aware of their shortcomings. While the obstinacy of the adults leaves O'Connor no choice but employ these violent tactics to make them see the light, she is not so harsh with her child characters. Too young to have deeply ingrained problems, they readily understand and accept criticism. The adults in their stories as well as the adults who read her fiction discover both the limitations of refusing to yield and the freedoms of flexibility.

O'Connor had an agenda of sorts when she wrote her stories and novels, but she did not believe that it interfered with producing good art. She was careful not to align herself with the didacticism of some Catholic writers whose works she believed were not artistic and therefore not useful: “Poorly written novels—no matter how pious and edifying the behavior of the characters—are not good in themselves and are therefore not really edifying” (Mystery 174). These novelists especially bothered her because they “leave out half or three-fourths of the facts of human existence and are therefore not true either to the mysteries we know by faith or those we perceive simply by observation” (Mystery 175).
Though O'Connor's children escape the predestination that shrouds the adults, their stories are not free from O'Connor's merciless critical eye. O'Connor was prone to using the same types of characters over and over, tweaking them to fit different stories. Like others, this category of characters receives a series of revisions, one story taking the best of another and creating out of it something that is not only clearer but much more human. Though the most obvious similarities exist between particular pairs of stories featuring children, it is clear that O'Connor continued to write about children for the same reason that she wrote about no less than nine different annoying mothers. There was something to understand about children and childhood that required more than perfecting one character. Taken together, the six stories that involve prepubescent characters each provide O'Connor and her reader with a different vision of childhood, a unique part of a much greater puzzle. That these children are so different, and that their plights can be often surprising, points out a largely unrecognized idea in O'Connor criticism: youth may have been the most important yet most difficult subject for O'Connor to understand and come to terms with.

The first time O'Connor delves into the mind of a child is in a story from her master's thesis, "The Turkey," written in 1947. While far from perfect, it gives us a child who is already struggling with his relationship to God. Its back-and-forth nature, neatly embodied in the turkey he is trying to catch, prefigures another child's encounter with God. The girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1954), though somewhat older, has a similarly complicated view of religion and spirituality, and she is spurred on to a

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1 Criticism of the child character in O'Connor is largely relegated to story-by-story examinations. Howard R. Burkle has written an essay-length discussion of the role of children in O'Connor ("The Child in Flannery O'Connor," The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 18 (1989): 59-69). He believes that they represent the properly "God-conscious mind" O'Connor was possessed of and found so necessary (69). While I do not disagree with Burkle, I am working in a different vein.
confrontation with some of her ideas because of a freak show her cousins have seen at the county fair. These child protagonists come to realizations about God and life, but these realizations are neither conclusive nor permanent. Unlike their adult counterparts, the change hasn’t required a destructive grace. They will live to continue changing for better or worse.

“The River” (1954) and “The Lame Shall Enter First” (1963) were published nearly ten years apart, and that much distance allowed O’Connor to make a great many changes to the basic story. The child moves from central character to secondary, the consequences of his neglect playing out in his father’s mind instead of his own. This second story becomes, then, one that illustrates just how ignored this child feels by largely ignoring him as his father does. Despite the changes, both versions of the tale end similarly, making the stories seem, on the surface, to fit the mold of those in which salvation comes through violent death. However, the children do not meet their ends in the way the adults often do, with O’Connor introducing grace brutally and inarguably. Their tragic entrance into heaven comes about because of a choice, a leap of faith. Too young to truly understand what their actions mean for their families, they are thinking only of the new life of the soul they want to lay claim to. Their deaths are then not tragedies but, in O’Connor’s Christian view, triumphs.

The final pair come so close together chronologically that it is hard to imagine why O’Connor would have so soon rewritten the story. Although she boasted that “The Artificial Nigger,” published in A Good Man is Hard to Find (1955), was among her favorite stories, though least understood, its basic structure is undoubtedly the foundation for “A View of the Woods,” published two years later in Everything that Rises Must
*Converge* (1957). In both, a grandfather seeks to control the changing world around him, and he must do this by keeping a firm grip on his grandchild, his spitting image. His pride becomes his greatest obstacle, and he can see the effects of this pride only after an incident in which his own cruelty is destructive. In “The Artificial Nigger,” the old man is allowed the time to realize his sins, and a common racism unites him to his grandson. This young man is the least liberated of O’Connor’s children, but his counterpart in “A View of the Woods” is so autonomous that her confrontation with her grandfather is violent, and he has no time to be sorry. The subsequent deaths of the child and her grandfather mean the most radical change to a pair of stories, a change reflecting the gravity she felt the subject deserved.

In “A View of the Woods,” the narrator shares an insight that might belong to the old man or to O’Connor herself: “With grown people, a road led either to heaven or hell, but with children there were always stops along the way where their attention could be turned with a trifle” (348). Whether this is criticism or praise, it shows O’Connor’s realization that one of the freedoms of youth is the freedom to change your mind. The children in these six stories change dramatically—their perceptions about themselves, their values, and their understanding of the world—and they do so long before O’Connor’s cruel grace enters their lives. Some of these children are able then to avoid the tragedy that befalls the majority of O’Connor’s characters, and it seems to be their youth that saves them. Those children who become victims do so not because they have earned it but because they lack the power to change the adults in their lives, to make them more childlike. Their deaths are the only thing that might do that. O’Connor’s task to of
bringing grace to her adults requires not a softening but a shattering of their control and stubbornness. She reserves the softening for her children.

O’Connor could not be ignorant of Jesus’s views on the subject. He said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18.3, NRSV). By demonstrating the power of salvation afforded to children, O’Connor asks adults—her own characters and her readers—to consider their behavior. She gives examples to follow and warnings to heed. Privileging openness over rigidity, O’Connor asks us to change ourselves. As we are called to become more like them, we are warned that they may become more like us. Our ability to change ourselves could prevent us from enabling a future adulthood of stubborn cynics like ourselves.
Signs of “Something Awful”: Inconclusive Encounters with God
in “The Turkey” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”

The stories that compose O’Connor’s master’s thesis are just what we might expect from such early work: they show only glimpses of the style and purpose that are so evident in her subsequent novels and short story collections. Nevertheless, these early stories are especially useful in tracing the development of O’Connor’s distinct approach to writing and character portrayal. Though the other stories in the thesis show little evidence of O’Connor’s prevalent themes of grace and the human relationship with God, “The Turkey,” her first to feature a child protagonist, ventures into this territory which will become quite familiar to O’Connor. George Monteiro provides a succinct description of the movement of the story’s “simple and direct” plot: “A young boy acquires valuable property, swells up with pride at its acquisition, loses the property, and becomes increasingly panic-stricken” (118). Ruller’s hunt for a turkey reveals his vacillating feelings about God, which provide the real drama in the story. According to Frederick Asals, the story illustrates “a rebellion against what the protagonist takes to be the ways of God” (14), in this case the mysterious give-and-take with the turkey.

This first glimpse into a child character’s mind is an anomaly in the thesis, but it is not so among her collected works. Its themes are echoed in another story focusing on a child: “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” published seven years later in A Good Man is Hard to Find. This story returns us to a child’s negotiation with God in a particularly human form. This time, a sideshow freak at the fair becomes the earthly vision of God, and, because of comparisons with the Holy Eucharist, it also becomes a representation of
Christ. Like the earlier protagonist, the unnamed girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is brought to some realizations about God, but we are left with only the possibility of change. This possibility is what saves both children from the cruel fate of so many adult characters in O’Connor. They are still malleable enough to accept the will of God because they can recognize signs from Him, no matter how strange and counter-intuitive. “The Turkey” illustrates the benefit in noticing God’s presence, but in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O’Connor gives the reader and the central character a sign that points not only to God’s existence but His true nature as well.

Child protagonists are not common in O’Connor’s short fiction. Though children play a pivotal role in many of her stories, only three serve as the focus for the narration. (Harry Ashfield in “The River” is the third.) As O’Connor works to highlight the childishness of her characters, the tone of the stories in which they are central begin to reflect their immaturity and ignorance. For ten-year-old Ruller in “The Turkey” and the twelve-year-old girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” immaturity manifests itself in their ability to create fantasies that help them interpret and cope with real life. The interplay between the actual and the possible becomes an important part of their negotiations with God.

Imagination is such a fundamental aspect of Ruller’s personality that he cannot engage with the world without it. The opening of “The Turkey” shows Ruller absorbed in a shoot-out with an imaginary foe named Mason: “‘You varmit,’ he muttered, drawing his rope tight around the captured man’s ankles, ‘this is the last rustlin’ you’ll do’” (42). When he sees a turkey, he incorporates it into his fantasy world and goes on a chase with
an imaginary comrade (44). Though the chase for the turkey soon takes over his afternoon, he often returns to using his imagination to help him frame his situation or to look into a possible future. Almost immediately after he decides he must catch the turkey, he thinks about bringing it home, about the excitement it will create (43). He hopes this excitement might even stop his father from worrying about him for “playing by himself” too much (44).

Eventually, Ruller incorporates God into his fantasy as well, through the bird. When Ruller finally gets close to the bird, he runs into a tree and it gets away from him. As his initial exclamations of pain start with “nuts” (46) and grow progressively more vulgar, he concludes that it cannot make any difference to God whether he uses those words or even lies about what happened to him. At this point, as his thoughts turn to the possibility of being bad, of going against God, the quest for the turkey takes on the same significance. The turkey has been re-imagined as a communication from God. He sees the turkey as proof that God was tempting him to be bad. When the chase is not successful, it is proof of God’s interference: “God could go around sticking things in your face and making you chase them all afternoon for nothing” (48). Despite his blasphemy, Ruller finds that God soon rewards him, letting him catch the turkey, in an attempt to make him good again: “Maybe that was why the turkey was there[...]Maybe it was to keep him from going bad. Maybe God wanted to keep him from that” (49). As he comes upon the turkey, bleeding and still, he thinks of how “unusual” he would be if he brought turkey home (48-49). He is desperate to be unusual, special, and this is enough to translate his interpretation of the turkey from a curse to a blessing. Now he feels that God might have a higher calling for him: “Maybe finding the turkey was a
sign. Maybe God wanted him to be a preacher” (49). Ruller continues to construe the
turkey and the events of the afternoon as divine communications until the turkey is taken
away by some teenage boys, leaving him with no imaginative frame for interpretation.
He is left only with a “Something Awful” that he doesn’t understand and that the reader
can’t completely interpret (53).

The girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” also has a habit of fantasizing. She
thinks about the various ways in which she could be martyred, gruesome deaths that
would leave her at heaven’s gate, although she can never imagine going further (242).
When her mother asks her how she knows the Cory brothers, who will be coming over to
entertain her older cousins, she plays through a dialogue in her head that easily could
have come from the movies or a cheap paperback:

I know them all right, she said to someone. We fought in the world war
together. They were under me and I saved them five times from Japanese
suicide divers and Wendell said I am going to marry that kid and the other
said oh no you ain’t I am and neither one of you is because I will court
marshall you all before you can bat an eye. (240)

This retreat into fantasy seems out of place, especially with its war imagery, but it
demonstrates the kind of imagination that will permit her to come to the most serious
conclusions depicted in the story. Her cousins return from the fair with a story about a
freak that was both a man and woman at the same time. After exhausting her only
possible explanation—that it must have two heads—the girl is forced to understand it a
different way. When she begins focusing on the hermaphrodite’s reported statement—
“this is the way [God] wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way”—she conjures up a
scene of this figure in church. Her ease with fantasy enables her to connect the freak with the need for accepting her faults. The literal hermaphrodite is re-imagined as a symbol of God’s mercy, pointing her to accepting that mercy in a way that she hadn’t been able before. The penchant for the imaginary that both children have sets them apart from their adult counterparts, especially because it aids them in being more open. If not for their facility with fantasy, neither child would have recognized God’s message.

Having children as protagonists shapes the stories also in terms of tone. While the narration is always third person, it follows the main character’s thoughts so closely that this changes the narrator’s tone at times. As the story focuses on the world of a child, it takes on a child’s propensity for extremes. While “The River” becomes rather melodramatic, “The Turkey” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” lean toward comedy. Critics often attach the term comic to O’Connor’s work because of her biting satire, but we walk a fine line between laughing with the characters, laughing at the characters, and laughing only bitterly, if at all. This pair of stories, however, features children who at the very least are amused with themselves and situations that are funny, often irreverently so.

More often than not, the humor in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” involves something that the protagonist, in her self-absorption and intellectual superiority, finds hilarious even when no one else does. Uncharacteristic for almost any O’Connor character, she is regularly depicted laughing: at one point, the narrator says that she “threw herself backward in her chair, fell out of it, rolled on the floor and lay there heaving” (237). The title “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” comes in part from something the girl does not find funny, only perplexing, although it amuses everyone else, including the reader. The girl’s silly 14-year-old cousins have come from their Catholic school to
stay for the weekend, regaling the family with tales of the out-of-touch advice of the nuns:

   Sister Perpetua had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should...“behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile.” Sister Perpetua said they were to say, “Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!” and that would put an end to it. (238)

The girl is not particularly amused because she is too young to understand the sexual nature of the joke, but the story that elicits “gales of giggles” (238) from the cousins eventually comes to figure prominently in the girl’s emerging consciousness of God. She will learn to see herself and others as imperfect beings that are still able to carry God’s spirit, as the title and the joke suggest. Indeed, the joining of the human and the divine—specifically in one human, Christ—that is so comically presented here becomes a focus of the serious issues in the story.

   The girl’s humor often reflects her sense of superiority, intellectual and physical. The family’s 18-year-old occasional chauffer, 250 pounds and perpetually sweating through his yellow nylon shirt, is offered up as potential company for the cousins, amid protest from them and laughter from the girl. Soon, the girl proposes that the bumpkin Cory brothers be their dates, adding that they are “going to be Church of God preachers because you don’t have to know nothing to be one” (239). Such irreverence is not new to O’Connor’s work. In “The Turkey,” Ruller works his way up through a litany of curse words, culminating in one I would not have believed a good Southern Christian lady capable of or willing to write. Upon discovering that he will not be struck down for cussing, Ruller sets himself on a tirade of expletive phrases that can only come from a
child in the country: “God dammit to hell, good lord from Jerusalem”...“Good Father, good God, sweep the chickens out the yard”...“Our Father Who art in heaven, shoot 'em six and roll 'em seven” (46). Ruller laughs until his side aches and he must lay on the ground and regain his strength and composure. For whatever reason, these characters are too young to be too serious, but the humor is always illustrative of the particular flaws in faith which they must overcome—reverence and blasphemy for Ruller, pride and weakness for the girl. The humor in these stories, along with the survival of the protagonists, would make the tales seem lighthearted; however, O'Connor uses it to bring the same serious revelations about grace to both her characters and her audience.

Indeed, this focus on grace is another way these stories distinguish themselves. While some, even O'Connor, might say her stories are always about religion, rarely are they explicitly so. An adult character’s salvation generally is depicted without a mention of God, much less organized religion. Her characters need only own up to their weakness or depravity as they meet with their predestined tragic salvation. However, the same rule does not seem to apply to children, for two of the three pairs of stories in this study deal overtly with salvation and connection to God. I will later focus on the two stories which feature backwoods protestant prophets, but “The Turkey” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” deal with a mode of Christianity more familiar to O’Connor. The former does not align itself with any particular dogma, but the main thrust of the latter is wholly dependent upon the patently Catholic concept of transubstantiation, Christ as physically present in the Host at communion. “The Turkey” is not too foreign from this examination of God present on earth, as Ruller views the turkey as something like a
messenger from God, a creature whose presence reveals God’s involvement or lack thereof in his life.

Consciously or not, O’Connor was reworking some of the ideas from “The Turkey” in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” which makes differences between the two inevitable. The most obvious difference between the central characters is sex, both gender and sexuality. The protagonist in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is female, and her story, unlike Ruller’s, deals explicitly with sexuality. However, Louise Westling says that even though the story focuses on courtship and sexuality, there is no real exploration of the girl’s femininity in the story and she actually learns nothing about sexuality (140, 142). O’Connor has been a source of confusion for some feminist critics, partly because she does not seem to recognize that gender matters for her characters. Katherine Hemple Prown is confused with O’Connor’s insistence on a female main character and an uncharacteristic focus on sexuality that mean nothing to the story. In some ways, the girl acts no differently from Ruller, so the change is perhaps not a change at all.

Both Westling and Prown settle on a biographical explanation for O’Connor’s use of young female characters that are not particularly feminine. Prown claims that O’Connor was both uncomfortable with being a woman writer and desirous of fitting into the male-dominated world of Southern letters (2-3), which means that her only interest could be in preventing gender from becoming an issue, leaving the sexuality of her female characters unexplored. Westling finds the problem to be much more personal: O’Connor saw herself as somewhat asexual, so she had no template for dealing with
particularly feminine issues (142). Replying to unpublished comments from correspondent “A,” O’Connor acknowledged, “I’ve always believed there were two [sexes] but generally acted as if there were only one” (Fitzgerald 136). But she clearly did differentiate between the genders in her fiction. Her women in particular, though not traditionally feminine, behave differently from her men. Consistently, they are meddlesome and self-righteous—stereotypical busybody housewives. The gender difference seems to be largely one that delineates the social conditioning that makes adult women annoying to O’Connor. Without that conditioning, her young women escape her biting criticism “by rejecting the trappings of adult femininity” (Prown 154). In this way, according to Prown, the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” “might actually attain the genderless state of grace that no lady can ever possible know” (154).

While the young women are too young to have grown to be like the overbearing mother figure, they do, like most women in O’Connor’s fiction, avoid the pitfalls of traditional femininity. Prown finds that the girl’s success in the story comes partly from the fact that she is not as silly as her cousins (154). The girl does not wear makeup or care about boys. O’Connor writes to “A” that as a child, she did not want to grow up, especially because she found teenagers “repulsive” (Fitzgerald 136-137). Clearly, O’Connor found the asexuality of childhood preferable to the sexuality of teenagers and adults (which might explain why neither the children nor most of the adults deal with sexual issues in her stories). The asexual nature of the girl coupled with the fact that she is not a grown woman yet brings about her survival and possibility for change, but it is no significant difference from “The Turkey.” In fact, it puts her in the same position as
Ruller: blissfully asexual, free from the stupidities that sexuality and adult femininity cause in other characters.

If the girl must be aligned with asexuality or at least an indefinite gender, the hermaphrodite perfectly embodies this lack of definition as well as the central paradox of the tale, that of God’s spirit living in sinful man. She must accept her weaknesses as the hermaphrodite has (he says, “I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it” (245)), and allow that she is also a hybrid of sorts, sinful but God’s temple anyway. Ruller’s symbol of God, on the other hand, does not teach him how to see himself. This change makes the growth of the main character possible because her sign is an explicit illustration of what she should do. This new angle, however better it works, is not without its detractors. The turkey is not so much grotesque as silly. A sideshow hermaphrodite, on the other hand, is a rather odd choice. It is “the most bizarre symbol in her fiction,” according to A. R. Coulthard (57).

O’Connor relates, “I got a real ugly letter from a Boston lady about that story…She said she was a Catholic and so she couldn’t understand how anybody could even HAVE such thoughts” (Fitzgerald 82). Presumably, the outrage stemmed from the hermaphrodite’s function in the story as a messenger of God. But even more outrageous is that it is also a symbol of God. As the girl begins to confess her sins in her mind at the end of mass, she thinks about the Eucharist then the freak from the fair. Though she focuses more on accepting her own freakishness, an astute reader with any knowledge of Catholicism will see another way in which the hermaphrodite connects with the Eucharist. The Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, which explains that the bread and wine literally become
Christ’s body during communion, has been one of the main barriers between Catholicism and Protestantism since the Reformation. To Protestants, it seems nonsensical, but for Catholics it perfectly illustrates the paradox essential to Christianity: Christ as God in spirit and man in flesh. Just as the girl has no way of understanding how the freak can be both man and woman, so she also has no understanding of how Christ can be God yet present physically in the Eucharist. For both, she can and does simply believe that they must be true.

O’Connor’s theories about fiction are built upon this paradox that occasions transaction between the literal and spiritual. In Brian Abel Ragen’s introduction to his book *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus*, he provides a concise and helpful way of understanding this interplay: “If the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the material world, even at its humblest or most sordid, can be a sign of divine life” (1). O’Connor often uses the ordinary life of the South, especially at its most grotesque, to illustrate something greater. This symbolism is why most of her stories aren’t explicitly but remain distinctly Christian. A freakish character or odd figure can easily come to represent God in O’Connor’s world. Perhaps, then, it does not matter if God really did not send the turkey to Ruller. For us, and for Ruller, the turkey was a means of understanding his actions and thoughts. Without the literal turkey, Ruller might not have had any spiritual dialogue with God. He would not curse as he hit the tree, have ideas of being bad to spite his parents and God, believe that God does, after all, value him, and behave as though he is valued. Similarly, the figure of the hermaphrodite in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” leads the girl to new views of God. John R. May notes the girl’s obsession with the deformities of others (May 74), as does Anthony Di Renzo, who sees
this as the child’s displacement of her own ugliness (82, 84). In the end, however, as Di Renzo points out, her reaction to the sweaty, overweight chauffer is no longer one of disgust (84). Through the hermaphrodite she learns that her obsession with the physical irregularities of others is foolish; everyone has irregularities, physical and mental, that are disgusting, yet God calls people to accept them through his grace. Similarly, O’Connor allows the most common and sometimes grotesque characters—by their humble lives or by their outrageous revelations—to remind us of how essential our weakness is to gaining God’s strength.

The girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” seems to come to real conclusions about her experience with God, probably because she correctly interprets the sign she received. Ruller, on the other hand, misapprehends the turkey at every turn. He believes that the turkey actually speaks for God, which changes his behavior, but the turkey only illuminates the complicated ideas about God that he already had. It is a messenger of God because it draws him into a dialogue with Him. When the turkey is gone, Ruller is left with unanswered questions that manifest themselves in that ill-defined “Something Awful” that makes him run home at the end (53). We see no organized religion in his life, so he has no framework with which to truly contemplate God. Because the story leads up to the comparison between the Eucharist and the hermaphrodite. The explicit Catholicism gives both the reader and the girl a framework within which to work. Even though the girl is not present at the fair to see the freak, she has a way to encounter it. Using her imagination, she places the little she knows about the freak into the context of
her religion. Where Ruller feeds on his ignorance of God, the girl feeds on what she already knows, and she is much less confused in the end.

Despite their differences, both stories do end in an acknowledgment of weakness. When the older boys take Ruller’s turkey, he runs breathlessly home, suddenly fearful of something he cannot articulate. Perhaps he is too young to understand that the whole afternoon of gaining and losing God’s turkey was just an afternoon of battling his own feelings and his faith. Whether he will remain good or begin to rebel, we do not know. As “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” shows the girl partaking of the Host and connecting it with the hermaphrodite, the story ends with its protagonist contemplative on the drive home, watching the sun, “a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood” (248). The song that precedes the Eucharist is “Tantum Ergo,” a hymn which first makes its appearance in a comic scene earlier in the story. Though in the story the text is in Latin (as most of the mass would have been before the changes made at the Vatican II council), a translation renders two of the lines, “Faith for all defects supplying/ Where the feeble senses fail” (Hardon). The girl has both realized her defects and found comfort in the ability of God’s grace to cover her weaknesses. This leads her to repent.

However, the authenticity of this repentance is unclear. While Di Renzo is encouraged by the girl’s ability to notice the odd ears of the driver without professing disgust (84), A. R. Coulthard claims that noticing his ears at all “casts some final doubt on whether the young protagonist’s conversion has really taken” (58). Joanne Halleran McMullen’s close study of the language in O’Connor brings to light the preponderance of negatives at the end of the story, which shows how the girl is emptying herself to receive
God’s grace (103-106). However, that emptying is counteracted by qualifiers. When she repents, she says, “Hep me not be so mean...Hep me not give her so much sass” (247). According to McMullen, she’s not really interested in being good, only less bad (105). Ruller’s possible conversion is even less clear, mainly because we see so little of him after his turkey has been taken away. We have no way of knowing if he comprehends that the turkey wasn’t really God’s messenger; even if he did know, that information has only left a void in his understanding that we do not see filled with anything.

Even if these two child protagonists only “achieve a sort of humility” (McMullen 103), if they look at the possibility of salvation without having the ability to settle on it, that isn’t a condemnation from O’Connor but a mercy. O’Connor’s adult characters go through much worse. Because they are so set in their ways, they must be violently acquainted with their weaknesses. Some, like Mrs. May in “Greenleaf,” reach salvation through death, and others, like Julian in “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” are brought to realizations about themselves when they cause someone else’s death. Of course, many O’Connor adults are left alive to deal with the consciousness of their sins, although they must surrender to pains and humiliations to get there. The girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is a future snobbish intellectual, so she might have suffered a fate like other intellectuals had she been an older character. Asbury Fox in “The Enduring Chill” spends the entire story believing he’s dying; as it turns out, he simply had a rather bad bacterial infection from drinking unpasteurized milk. What endures is the chill of facing death and God. Hulga Hopewell in “Good Country People,” the epitome of intellectual snobbery and disdain, is seduced by a man pretending to sell Bibles. He makes her vulnerable by getting her to show her feelings, by making her trust
him, and ultimately by stealing her wooden leg. Though being left in a hayloft without an artificial appendage is a more comic comeuppance than Asbury’s near-death experience, both characters must go through physical and/or emotional pain to shatter their will so that they can see their errors. For Ruller there is only a momentary anger, and both he and the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” suffer from confusion; neither, however, seem haunted and pained. It isn’t necessary for them to meet with something tragic or painful to have a change in understanding.

The adult characters, of course, can change, too. On being accused of being too bleak in her outlook, O’Connor once said that “people without hope do not write novels” (Mystery 77). However, despite this hope, O’Connor lacks patience; she does not wait for the adults’ realizations to come. Upon them she visits an abrupt reminder of weakness and vulnerability. The children, however, have an advantage. They are not set in their ways yet, so they may develop into people who do not need to be violently confronted with weakness. They are also pliable enough to recognize less obvious signs of grace, seeing God even in a turkey and a sideshow freak. Though O’Connor leaves their futures in doubt, I believe it is because they aren’t settled into their final forms yet. They see “Something Awful” (“Turkey” 53) in the distance, and that something can still change them daily into the kinds of people O’Connor thought they could be.
In January of 1963, the year after O'Connor first published “The Lame Shall Enter First,” she wrote to Dr. T. R. Spivey, complaining about it. This attitude was nothing new, as she complained on several occasions that the story wasn’t what she wanted it to be. In fact, in this particular letter, she claimed that she hadn’t read the story since its publication (Fitzgerald 506). After calling the story a “failure,” she said, “The theme is a lot bigger than my powers to deal with it at this point, but I’ll probably keep trying; people will say I don’t have anything else to write about. Which is okay” (Fitzgerald 506). Despite her dissatisfaction, O'Connor could not and would not let go of the essence of story. Though she died later the next year and never returned to the subject matter, “The Lame Shall Enter First” was in some ways already a return. “The River,” published nine years earlier in A Good Man in Hard to Find, represents the starting point for several ideas that are reworked in “The Lame Shall Enter First.” When O’Connor wrote in January of 1962 that she had been working for half a year on the story and she could not “get it to suit [her],” the angst she felt might have come from the fact that the ideas had been stewing for ten years (Fitzgerald 460).

When O’Connor mentions her discomfort with “The Lame Shall Enter First,” it seems to stem from its focus on the big picture, the ideas about good and evil she was trying to express through the story. In fact, the story depicts a battle that is quite serious, one for the mind and soul of the child character. On one side is Sheppard, a widower with an ironic name: he counsels troubled children and teens, but his egotism and over-
reliance on his own intellect make him a poor role model and parent to his ten-year-old, son, Norton. Norton disappoints him at every turn: “All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely” (“The Lame” 445). The child Sheppard really wants is one like Rufus Johnson, a poor and criminally inclined teenager he meets through his counseling job. Rufus is intelligent, which gives Sheppard great hope for him; even greater is Sheppard’s need to shake a very stubborn fundamentalist Christianity out of Rufus. Stuck in the middle is Norton, so starved for attention that he latches on to Rufus’s talk of heaven and kills himself so that he can go there to be with his mother. The battle for Norton’s soul is the focus, but the child himself is not.

In “The River,” in contrast to the later story, the child character is the protagonist, and his story of finding a place to belong is central. Like Norton, Harry is neglected by his parents and he is introduced to the idea of salvation and heaven through a backwoods protestant figure. When Harry goes out in the woods with his babysitter to hear Bevel Summers, a preacher and healer, he learns that one dip in the river—a “river of suffering” and “a river of life” at the same time—will make him “count” (“River” 168). He takes that dip at the end of the story, and he never comes back up.

Sarah Gordon has noted the “marked similarity” between the two boys (228): both have a desperate need for attention, and that desperation leads them to seek paradise through suicide. Unlike the children in “The Turkey” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” who face trials much less severe than O’Connor’s adult characters, Harry and Norton meet a typical O’Connor ending: death. If they were adults, impending death would be the catalyst for their salvation by confronting them with their sins and weaknesses. Adult deaths often follow indictments in O’Connor, as characters realize their iniquities because
their lives are threatened. The threat is often followed through. For example, at the end of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the Grandmother has a revelation about the nature of sin and her connection, through sin, to the Misfit. It is this realization that saves her soul but causes the nervous Misfit to kill her. He remarks, “‘She would have been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life’” (133).

But Harry and Norton do not need the threat and follow through of death to make them better. They are just children, not yet condemned to a life of sin; they do not require the heavy hand of O’Connor’s tragic grace to keep them in line. However, they still die, but it is not a judgment on them. Just as Ruller and the girl from “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” are free to choose their fates, Harry and Norton choose a faith that will lead them to a better place. If the deaths haunt anyone’s souls, it is those of their parents. While “The River” features the child’s story, all but bypassing how his death affects others, “The Lame Shall Enter First,” with the father as main character, highlights the impact of the child’s death on the adult. Working within Sheppard’s inner world rather than Norton’s allows O’Connor to show the audience a perfect example of the self-absorption and self-righteousness that is so detrimental to the children and that might have plagued them had they not taken an early exit to heaven.

Harry, like the children in “The Turkey” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” is the focus “The River,” which details only two days in his life: the first when he goes with his babysitter, Mrs. Connin, to see preacher Bevel Summers, the second, when he decides to return to the river to wash himself in it. While the adults around him stay relatively the same, he undergoes a change. However, unlike the other child protagonists,
Harry is pushed from action to action. His character is completely bound up in his circumstances, so that, even though he is the focus and has the freedom of a protagonist, he is a sad, manipulated figure without much of a character of his own. In fact, once he learns that the preacher’s name is Bevel, he tells his babysitter that his name is Bevel, too. From that point on, the narrator refers to him as Bevel. Though this name change signals the change in the boy, prefiguring how important his encounter with Bevel will be, it also shows how he lacks a sense of personal identity so much that he is willing and eager to relinquish it.

There is an aimlessness to Harry, and it stems from the treatment he gets from his parents. Their neglect allows him to grow attached to Mrs. Connin and her faith healer. At the outset of the story, Mrs. Connin picks up the boy for the day. His parents are still in their bathrobes when they turn Harry over to her. Mrs. Connin observes a crowded ashtray, and Harry’s mother calls weakly for an ice pack. Later in the story, when Harry asks Bevel to help heal his mother, he reveals that she has a hangover. Apparently, his parents are more interested in their late night parties than taking care of their son. The morning after he has been at the river, Harry wanders into the living room hungry; he finds anchovy paste and crackers, washing those leftovers down with the remnants of some ginger ale left in a bottle. The contents of the refrigerator are even more telling, revealing little but “shriveled vegetables,” old oranges and cheese, and “something fishy in a paper bag” (171). Harry’s parents ignore his physical well-being as well as his mental development. They seem unconcerned with the fact that Mrs. Connin is taking their son to a faith healing. When he returns and reports that he’s been baptized, his mother appears indignant, perhaps because she is an atheist, and her pride is further
wounded when Mrs. Connin reports that they have prayed for her healing: she says, “Healed of what for Christ’s sake?” (169). The parents’ curiosity leads them to find a book Harry has stolen from Mrs. Connin, though they cease to be angry or even care about Harry’s day when one of their friends claims that the book is old enough to be valuable.

Throughout the story, Harry’s need for attention is evident in his behavior. During this first time he meets Mrs. Connin, when she asks his name, the narrator writes, “His name was Harry Ashfield and he had never thought at any time before of changing it. ‘Bevel,’ he said” (159). Evidently he does not even know why he lies, but he obviously wanted the attention the “coincident” would give him (159). He has suddenly gained Mrs. Connin’s admiration. Harry steals two things from her—a handkerchief and a Bible story book—and, according to John R. May, both articles show Mrs. Connin’s concern for his physical and spiritual welfare (65). These articles remind him of Mrs. Connin, and they will also gain him notice from her if she were to catch him. Children often act out to get attention, and Harry is no exception. As he surveys the living room, he thinks of his own room, littered with broken toys: “he found the way to get new ones was to tear up the ones he had” (172). He decides to dump a couple of ashtrays onto the floor—“If he only emptied a few, she would think they had fallen” (172)—and he carefully rubs the ashes into the carpet. Harry takes out his anger and frustration by destroying things, at the same time hoping that this destruction will earn him some attention.

A child this neglected is likely to latch onto anyone or anything that makes him feel important. Even the obnoxious Mrs. Connin is preferable to his parents. Bevel
Summers, with his pointed talk of a God who cares about him, is even better. Though he begins the experience believing that it is all a big joke, because “where he lived everything was a joke” (167), he soon learns that Bevel’s words are very real. Bevel promises big things, a place to lay down pain and suffering, a cleansing. When Bevel offers to baptize him, he says,

“If I Baptize you...you’ll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You’ll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you’ll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?”

“Yes,” the child said, and thought, I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river. (168)

Harry might not understand that Bevel is speaking metaphorically. All he knows is what Bevel tells him after his baptism: “You count now...You didn’t even count before” (168). He perceives that Bevel understands his loneliness and wants to relieve it.

Following Bevel’s advice literally, he goes to wash in the river and drowns.

The immediate question that any reader has regards Bevel Summers: he is the catalyst for Harry’s salvation, but just what kind of figure is he? At times, Bevel appears scary and less than sincere. The imagery that surrounds him casts him as a frightening figure, almost satanic: “Bevel’s eyes were dark and dilated” (168), “The red drained out of his face and the sky appeared to darken in his eyes” (168), “His bony face was rigid and his narrow gray eyes reflected the almost colorless sky” (167). The ferocity with which he talks of pain and suffering and dunks Harry under the water belie the narrator’s earlier, more positive comments. He appears innocuous, just an unassuming young country boy of nineteen, “singing in a high twangy voice...his hands behind him and his
head tilted back” (164). His “soft and musical” voice calls people to relief, and he openly rejects the idea that he is there to heal physical infirmities: “You might as well go home if that’s what you come for” (165). Ralph C. Wood, in his particularly Christian interpretation of O’Connor’s works, sees Bevel unequivocally as a true preacher (170-171). The reader, too, wants to see Bevel as a good character, though an odd one, but the entrance of the cynical Mr. Paradise casts doubt on Bevel’s sincerity. Given a different view of the man as a manipulative phony allows us to see Bevel a different way, the way his name suggests. Another word for ‘bevel’ is ‘slant,’ and this Bevel may very well be slanting Christianity for his benefit. Are we to believe that he is after Harry’s good, or is he simply putting on a good show? Mr. Paradise believes that he is out for only money, but Bevel never asks for any. Whatever Bevel’s real motivations for his show, his words and actions provide Harry with the knowledge of a place to belong. Mr. Paradise, on the other hand, is there when Harry goes into the river, and it is he, the symbol of skepticism in the story, that scares the boy into going under.

Sinner or saint, Bevel Summers is definitely a protestant of the fundamentalist sort. Characters such as these crop up in O’Connor’s fiction from time to time, and they are not opposed to her Catholicism. Instead, they echo O’Connor’s world, where one is much more likely to run into relatively ignorant but faithful protestants than the kinds of Catholic characters that O’Connor’s Catholic detractors felt should be in her stories. In an essay “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” O’Connor wrote, “The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him” (Mystery 206). O’Connor talks of the South as a “Christ-haunted” place still steeped in the Bible (Mystery 44, 202). The South is still
a place where a reader will recognize God in a story, and because the most common
vision of God is Protestant and not Catholic, it is with these kinds of characters she
populates her world. In “Greenleaf,” Mrs. Greenleaf practices “prayer healing”; she cuts
out the news stories of murders, accidents, and rapes and buries them in the ground,
throwing herself into hysterics over them. She cries out to Jesus, “Stab me in the heart!”
(317). We might view her as ridiculous, but her purpose in the story is to illuminate the
stubborn individualism of its main character, Mrs. May. Mrs. May had “a large respect
for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (316). On the other
hand, despite the wackiness of Mrs. Greenleaf’s actions, she is not criticized by the
narrator. Though she is extreme in her Christianity, she is possessed of a humility that
makes Mrs. May’s pride look all the more ridiculous. The two fundamentalist protestants
in “The River” and “The Lame Shall Enter First” provide the same critique of the pride
that comes from atheism. Even when their ideas are misguided or outrageous, the
protestant prophet figures represent a strong faith that prevails over a self-deluded
character who must recognize that self-delusion.

In “The River,” good and evil are ambiguous until the end gives us a way to read
the characters. Even if Bevel is a shyster and Mr. Paradise is a caring man who does not
want to see anyone hoodwinked, the conclusion—Harry taking Bevel’s advice and
running from Mr. Paradise—gives us the framework for interpreting right and wrong in
the story. Bevel’s faith trumps Mr. Paradise’s cynicism. When O’Connor wrote “The
Lame Shall Enter First,” she made the struggle between good and evil more obvious
while further blurring the lines between them. Both Rufus and Sheppard are aware that
Norton can easily be swayed, and they make overt attempts to influence his views. When Rufus begins to talk to Norton about God and the devil, heaven and hell, he does so to win the boy's influence, in turn angering Sheppard. Sheppard also has a vested interest in Norton's views: if he can convince the boy that his atheism is the right path, he feels he will have an easier time convincing Rufus of that fact.

Though he argues for the existence of God, Rufus Johnson is the Satan figure in the story, "saving" Norton only to anger Sheppard. He tries to convince the boy of the spiritual stakes in life, but just because he believes in God does not mean he follows him. After all, Jesus said that even Satan could quote scripture to suit his purposes. Sheppard appears to be the good guy, trying to improve Rufus and prevent him from converting Norton to Christianity. There is obviously a battle of wills between Rufus and Sheppard where control of Norton proves their rightness, but O'Connor draws into question which character is really on the right side. Sheppard fights on the side of atheism and intellectualism, but "Rufus, with his unsophisticated fundamentalism, consistently gains the upper hand" (Edmonson 94). Because Sheppard is the central character in the story, it is a story of his humbling. Rufus might not be the world's best Christian—he even says he's going to hell—but his certainty about the afterlife is, in the end, stronger than Sheppard's belief in his own power to improve Rufus.

The battle for Norton's soul in "The Lame Shall Enter First" is much clearer than that of "The River." Harry is easily won over, and Mr. Paradise's efforts to save him are presented as feeble at best. The fact that Mr. Paradise is cynical works mostly symbolically to depict the tension between pure faith and disbelief rooted in the intellect. It is through no real fault of Mr. Paradise's that the boy falls under the spell of Bevel
Summers or that he dies because he is scared when he confounds Mr. Paradise with Mrs. Connin’s pig, which reminds him of the pigs that Jesus had cast demons into. If there is a war between good and evil in “The River,” it is ill-defined. Bevel seeks to influence everyone, while Mr. Paradise half-heartedly opposes him. Neither Bevel nor Mr. Paradise seem to exert any conscious control over Harry’s destiny. The fight between Sheppard and Rufus, on the other hand, is quite conscious, but the two aren’t playing on the same field. According to Henry T. Edmonson, Rufus succeeds because he recognizes that the playing field is one of good and evil (98). Though he stands on the evil side more than the good, he acknowledges both, and Sheppard’s refusal to see either dooms his son to fall prey to that evil. St. Thomas Aquinas, building on St. Augustine, defines evil as the absence of good (Edmonson 100). Sheppard might see the absence of his good—intellectualism—as evil, but this is the kind of relativism O’Connor was trying to combat. For O’Connor, there is another plane, the spiritual, where there is an ultimate good. A lack of belief in God becomes a lack of the ultimate good. Whatever comes in to replace that good (Sheppard’s intellectualism) or deny it (Rufus’s rejection of good Christian behavior) can be only evil.

Rufus Johnson is an unlikely savior. He educated Norton about heaven and hell simply to anger Sheppard. While Bevel Summers and other unhinged protestant figures retain an ambiguity, functioning as good characters because of their opposition to the selfish know-it-all characters around them, Rufus is unmistakably evil. We, like Sheppard, continue to wait for signs of humanity in him, but there are none. But the influence of his ideas, rather than his intentions, makes him fall on the side of “good” in
the story because he offers the truth as O'Connor sees it. She admits in a letter to John
Hawkes that “The Devil’s voice is [her] own” (Fitzgerald 464).

If Rufus is an unlikely source of salvation, an odd vehicle for O’Connor’s views
in the story, Sheppard is an atypical villain. He is the protagonist of the story, and we
want to take his plans for Rufus at face value. He wants to rescue the boy from poverty,
helping to train his formidable mind for good ends. But he too much resembles most
other O’Connor protagonists: self-absorbed, convinced of their rightness, blind to their
deficiencies. Tony Magistrale says that the “true grotesques” in O’Connor’s stories are
not the Rufus Johnsons but the Sheppards: “‘well-adjusted’ landowners and college-
educated humanists for whom God is either an unapprehended reality or an easily
dismissed theoretical abstraction” (“Alien” 94). In Robert H. Brinkmeyer’s estimation,
Sheppard’s is “one of O’Connor’s fiercest stories, particularly in its attacks on modern
life and liberal intellectualism” (68). As a protagonist, Sheppard is just as imprudent as
O’Connor’s other adults.

Sheppard should be a sympathetic figure. He suffers his wife’s absence the same
way Norton does. This hunger on Norton’s part shows itself in the initial scene of the
story, as he prepares his breakfast of chocolate cake with peanut butter and ketchup.
According to Tony Magistrale, “Norton’s unwholesome breakfast is a reflection of the
absence of maternal influence in his life” (“O’Connor’s ‘The Lame’” 59). Magistrale
also points out that Sheppard ignores this disgusting breakfast just as he ignores Norton’s
pain (“O’Connor’s ‘The Lame’” 59). Sarah Gordon says that Sheppard cannot deal with
Norton’s pain because he hasn’t dealt with his own (234). His atheism will not allow him
any resolution of his wife’s death; she does not live on, so they cannot remember her.
This refusal to remember his mother is what upsets Norton the most. After Sheppard tells him he should be glad he has a good life and his mother isn’t in the state penitentiary like Rufus’s mother, Norton begins to cry: “If she was in the penitentiary... I could go seeeeeee her” (447). At this point he vomits up his ghastly breakfast, which Magistrale believes is as much a reaction to his pain as it is to Sheppard’s denial of his mourning (“O’Connor’s ‘The Lame’” 59).

According to Edmonson, Shepard’s denial is precisely why Norton falls under Rufus’s spell: Rufus gives him a way to deal with the emotions and thoughts he has about his mother which Sheppard has denied him (94). Norton’s desire to be with his mother drives him to commit suicide, and he is spurred on by Sheppard’s focus on the intellectual in two ways. Sheppard’s denial of the spirituality of humanity leaves a hole in Norton, and that hole is filled by Rufus’s talk of heaven. Norton also has no desire to stay in this world, where his father ignores him because he isn’t smart. Sheppard cannot see potential in his own son or recognize that his problems—selfishness, greed, and immaturity—are just the problems of youth. In fact, according to Brinkmeyer, they’re also Sheppard’s problems: “Sheppard’s finding selfishness in Norton is exactly what he does not see in himself” (97).

Norton’s death is the only thing that might bring Sheppard to his senses. Like Julian in “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” Sheppard is confronted with his sins because they make him complicit in the death of someone he loves. Though he has some good intentions, his is not the voice of reason in the story. Curiously, that voice belongs to a willful problem child that, in representing the worst of humanity, makes clear that there such things as good and evil. Brinkmeyer claims that Rufus’s fundamentalism
causes him to see the world in either-or’s (92). Sheppard has no absolutes, and, as O’Connor says, “Those who have no absolute values cannot let the relative remain merely relative; they are always raising it to the level of the absolute” (*Mystery* 178).

Putting too much faith in the relative—viewing Rufus’s intelligence as proof of his potential to achieve some sort of amoral perfection without recognizing how that intelligence could be put to use for the bad—makes Sheppard unprepared to fight the absolute that leads to his son’s death.

Gordon describes a class of O’Connor’s stories in which “a child’s death serves as the catalyst for the salvation of the central character” (243). This change is the most notable one from “The River” to “The Lame Shall Enter First”: the focus is not on the death of the child but on what the death of the child means to the adult. Sheppard is suddenly made aware of how he has ignored his son long before he finds his lifeless body, but it takes the reality of the boy’s death to make him understand the price of his neglect and self-assurance. Before he finds Norton, John R. May argues that he really hasn’t changed; he is still concerned with being a savior (110). Rufus remarks that Sheppard “thinks he’s God” (480), and Edmonson concurs: “O’Connor further suggested that Sheppard, having rejected the possibility of a deity, can only look to himself as a replacement” (101). Sheppard must be in control. His attempt to change Rufus is an attempt to “fill his own spiritual emptiness” (Edmonson 103). But he cannot control Rufus any more than Rufus can fill the void in his life. Only Norton, his own son and partner in grief, can do that. When he realizes that he’s neglected Norton, Sheppard comes as close to repentance and self-examination as he could get. The narrator reports, “His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for
breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton” (481). But this unselfishness soon reverts back to his typical self-centered belief in his own skills. He must transfer his desperate need for controlling/saving someone, now that he has been unsuccessful with Rufus. However sincere his protestations that he will “never fail [Norton] again” (482), Sheppard still hasn’t learned his lesson. He believes that he has the power to make things right, that Rufus’s influence, and along with it his Christianity, will simply disappear. O’Connor gives him a rude awakening as he finds his son hanging from the rafters beside the telescope he was using to see the heaven he now believed in, where he would go to join his mother. It is too late for Sheppard’s self-deluded repentance.

When the examination of faith in “The River” resurfaced in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” the integral change was in the child character. Like Ruller in “The Turkey” and the unnamed girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” Harry is central character. Though manipulated by every force around him, Harry manages to escape. We care about his life and his death, but they do not have much of an impact. He is moving on to something better, and since the ultimate impact of his death is on him, we are happy for his escape from this world. However, Norton is only the pawn in an adult’s story, as will be Nelson in “The Artificial Nigger” and Mary Fortune in “A View of the Woods.” Norton’s death is not really his fault, which makes it somewhat tragic. And its ultimate effect is to bring about a change in Sheppard. While Harry’s death is simply an early exit from a life we know to be unhappy, Norton’s early exit, situated as it is to highlight Sheppard’s weaknesses, feels especially tragic because of Sheppard’s reaction.
Norton has no power to change Sheppard. In relegating her child character to secondary status, O’Connor makes clear that a child, however possessed of the right to choose, is always under the influence of someone else. Norton cannot change his father, rendering him the kind of parent that will help him heal from his mother’s death. His only real effect is in sacrifice, so that Sheppard might understand why he has failed. Though this seems harsh for Norton, it isn’t. His death is a release. Though they have committed suicide, both Harry and Norton aren’t condemned by the narrator, and we can assume they are not condemned by O’Connor either. They are too young to be held accountable for actions committed so innocently. Rather than desiring death and intentionally sinning, both boys are simply claiming their salvation, moving on to a place were they will not be neglected. Norton will reunite with his mother, while Harry will finally “count.” Their childlike faith earns them the Kingdom of Heaven.

While these stories of dead children appear tragic, they are not. Yes, Norton is just a means to O’Connor’s end in “The Lame Shall Enter First.” He dies because there is no other way to make Sheppard see how harmful his attitudes are. Harry, just as ignored as Norton, does not live to work out his newfound faith, as Ruller and the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” do. But as these deaths are escapes, as they lead to salvation, they cannot be negative. They are also not born of the child’s own sins. When O’Connor uses the death of another adult in the story to provoke a change in the central character, the secondary character is not without blame. For example, in “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” the possible death of Julian’s mother is a reproach for Julian, but it is also one for herself, as she has been painted as close-minded and nearly as bad as he is. Norton, however, does not deserve his fate, and his death is not a punishment from
God through O’Connor. These two children represent the only two suicides in all of O’Connor’s collected short stories. O’Connor gave them the power to choose their own destinies. They may die, but they do so by a conscious choice to move on to something better. That O’Connor allowed them to do that makes them remarkable and highlights her belief in the freedom inherent in childhood.
"The Artificial Nigger" was Flannery O'Connor's favorite among her short stories. She once called it "the best thing I'll ever write" (Fitzgerald 209). While it has received more than its fair share of critical attention, critics are not always quick to agree with O'Connor's assessment. They focus on the problematic conversion scene at the end, as it calls into doubt the story's resolution. This botched ending taints the entire story and blurs what should have been the focus: the grandfather's need to maintain control in the changing world around him. There are no such problems with "A View of the Woods," written a few years later. In both stories, a grandfather struggles to maintain power in a more modern south, and that fight is chiefly manifested in the control he exerts on his grandchild. While the awkward and unconvincing resolution makes for a mixed message in "The Artificial Nigger," the later story reveals a much clearer picture of the dangers of power and control.

Few critics take issue with the set-up of the story. Mr. Head, a man who believes he is old enough to have "that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" ("Artificial" 249), takes his grandson Nelson to the city in order to demonstrate the evils of the urban setting. Nelson has never been to the city nor has he ever seen the city's most baffling 'evil'—its African-American citizens—but his grandfather ensures that he will confront it all in such a way as to make him cling to country life and country ways. As the two get lost in the city, Nelson finally tires from
walking and goes to sleep. Mr. Head sneaks away so that the boy will awaken alone. His plan is to frighten Nelson into being dependent on him, but it backfires when Nelson awakes and runs away, barreling into an old woman. A crowd gathers and demands that someone take responsibility for the boy’s actions. When Mr. Head denies knowing Nelson, it shocks both Nelson and the reader, but not nearly so much as does the figure that reunites the two in the end: an old lawn jockey painted to resemble a small black boy. While the two reconcile over this “monument to another’s victory that brought them together in a common defeat” (“Artificial” 269), critics also stare at this grotesque figure, transfixed and perplexed, and it drives them further apart.

Some critics justify the presence of the statue as requisite of O’Connor’s desire to portray a conversion typical of O’Connor. The “artificial nigger,” then, surely precipitates that conversion. Edward Strickland points to the old man and boy’s postures in front of the statue as those of prayer, likening the statue to Christ (456). Henry T. Edmonson, Jr. makes that connection clearer: the statue, in representing the downtrodden African-American race, also represents Christ, reminding the Heads of both the limitations of humanity and limitless salvation of God (151-152). Louis D. Rubin, Jr., rejects this emblematic reading. As he refutes the once-common practice of reading O’Connor only in the context of her Catholicism, Rubin claims that this type of reading would cause one to miss the realism that grounds her stories. If we allow the statue to represent grace or salvation or Christ, we are “asking too much of a lawn ornament in Atlanta, Georgia” (Rubin 81). To read the statue symbolically goes against O’Connor’s own ideas about her art, specifically about how to create Christian art. She said that a “Catholic Novel” “represents reality adequately” (Mystery 172). While that is not all a
Christian writer should strive for—writing is not mere naturalism—O’Connor said that the Christian writer “believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn’t mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater” (Mystery 175). The statue might make Mr. Head see the light, but it is precisely because it is real and that reality points back to the spiritual (Ragen 1).

Despite the statue’s dubious use as a symbol, critics persist in seeing it that way, some transferring the role of that one statue to the whole black race and passing up religious readings. George Cheatham believes that the ‘artificial nigger’ gives the Heads a way to connect to the African-American citizens of Atlanta: “Through the statue, which mirrors them physically, they recognize themselves as ‘niggers’ in a non-racial, symbolic sense” (478). Even if this were possible, it does not seem as though Mr. Head learns this lesson well enough to sympathize with blacks. No matter its status as a symbol or its exact effect on the Heads, Jeanne Perreault attacks the viability of using a figure that O’Connor herself said “screamed out the tragedy of the South” (Fitzgerald 101) to bring about salvation. The statue only serves to uphold Mr. Head’s racism (Perreault 392-393). That his grandson is drawn to him through this figure only points to the real tragedy of the story: Nelson’s inculcation of racism is the only thing that allows the Heads to retain an illusory control of the changing world around them.

The real problem with the statue is the shift in tone it occasions. After Mr. Head sees the statue, he says, “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” (269). This comes from the same character whom critics see as redeemed and about whom the narrator claims in dramatic prose, “He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave,
he felt ready at that instant to enter paradise” (270). A. R. Coulthard finds the shift from “delightful comedy to ponderous melodrama” destructive enough to make any conversion on Mr. Head’s part unbelievable (60). Cheatham, however, insists that often jokes cover O’Connor’s serious points; “…the context suggests that Mr. Head’s statement be read as a part of the mystery of salvation through mercy, that the statement be read as a genuine ‘lofty statement’ and not as a bigot’s shallow joke” (476). Anthony Di Renzo, too, excuses the tone, finding the seemingly discordant elements typical of O’Connor, simply another example of grotesque that, while nearly absurd, is necessary (9). Rubin views the tonal contrast similarly, as a southern device: the narration fits her distanced narrative style, so it need not match Mr. Head’s comic observations (48, 66).

The critical obsession with the imbalance of tone and use of a figure that can only inadequately or inappropriately serve as the objective correlative for the weakness of the human condition overshadows the heart of the story. The story’s kernel—an old man’s confusion and attendant loss of control in the face of change—reappears in a revised form just two years later in “A View of the Woods.” Mr. Fortune, like Mr. Head, struggles to maintain power in his family; what begins as control of land eventually becomes control of his favorite granddaughter, Mary Fortune. He hates his son-in-law Pitts—because Pitts is so unlike him and because he beats Mary Fortune—and nearly any decision he makes is predicated upon whether it will annoy Pitts. As Mr. Fortune begins to sell off his land, he is all too aware of how angry it will make Pitts; what he does not expect is Mary Fortune’s strong negative reaction. Confronted with her hatred and defiance, he attempts to control her by whipping her. Ultimately, the whipping turns tragic as he cracks her skull on the ground and works himself into a heart attack. “A View of the
Woods” explores the same control dynamics of “The Artificial Nigger,” but without the problems of race and tone. This new concentration in the later story highlights the impossibility of a reconciliation and brings into sharp relief the infelicities that make the earlier tale ring hollow.

Initially the relationships at the heart of the stories are eerily similar. Mr. Head and Nelson “looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age” (251). Comparably, Mary Fortune Pitts gains her grandfather’s favor by looking like him. Although the twin-like imagery surrounding Mr. Head and Nelson serves mainly to remind the reader of their similar dispositions, it has a stronger function in the second story. The similarity between the Fortunes does not end with the physical; the narrator also finds that “the spiritual distance between them was slight” (336). Frederick Asals sees Mary Fortune as Mr. Fortune’s doppelganger, or, more correctly, she seems to be and Mr. Fortune is willing to believe she is. She is as stubborn as he is, so her acceptance through denial of her father’s beatings confuses and angers Mr. Fortune. This “fissure” only widens when she opposes the sale of the front yard (Asals 100).

The palpable conflict between the two characters represents a major change from the earlier story. While Nelson does have his own ideas and reactions to the world, ultimately his behavior shows his tendency simply to ape his grandfather. O’Connor allows him only the mildest of rebellions, and even those are easily snuffed out by Mr. Head’s pride. Upon not recognizing an African-American when he sees one on the train, Nelson’s excuse is logical: “You said they were black…You never said they were tan” (255). His grandfather’s reply that the boy is simply ignorant is enough to silence
Nelson. Mr. Head berates his grandson for displaying the ignorance that he fears most in himself. In turn, Nelson develops a stubborn pride that makes him similarly fearful of ignorance and change, rendering him just as prideful as his grandfather. After the black man passes him on the train, he reflects, “the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him”; he now understands why his grandfather hates black people (255-256).

Nelson learns to resist the new, contrary ideas that come into his mind during his trip, banishing them by indoctrinating himself with the old man’s pride. On the other hand, Mary Fortune proves to be truly independent. While she does share her grandfather’s temperament, Mr. Fortune deludes himself that she shares his ideology as well. It is especially tempting for Mr. Fortune to do this; if Mary Fortune is more Fortune-like, that gives him at least a psychological advantage over Pitts, if not a physical one. When Mary Fortune balks at the sale of the front yard, Mr. Fortune discovers he never really had any power over her, and it becomes all the more important that he attempt to restore the level of control he thought he had.

O’Connor’s situation of the power conflict also has undergone revisions from “The Artificial Nigger” to “A View of the Woods.” Mr. Head’s issues might be called general; he is focused on preserving his way of life, so he depicts anything new as inherently immoral. But early on as Mr. Head works to convince the boy that he will hate the city, his first and only concrete proof is that there will be black people in it (252). This sets the tone for the rest of the story. All the bewildering encounters the two have are with the African-American citizens of Atlanta: the man passing on the train, the patrons and workers in the dining car, and most notably the woman from whom they ask
directions. Confronted with this woman, Nelson’s reaction—“He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her” (262)—is different from his grandfather’s, and, predictably, he immediately regrets his thoughts and behavior. All the episodes leading up to the meditation over the lawn jockey provide the reader with a template for Nelson’s actions: despite any initial reaction to the contrary, he will follow his grandfather’s lead in mocking what he does not understand, allying himself with his grandfather’s fear of blacks and progress in the south in general.

When O’Connor revisits this study in control in “A View of the Woods,” the issue is not race relations but instead a very different southern obsession: owning land. Strangely, Mr. Fortune is the proponent of progress this time. The narrator says, “He was not one of these old people who fight improvement, who object to everything new and cringe at every change” (337). As a “man of advanced vision” (338), Mr. Fortune appears to be very different from Mr. Head, but the motivations for his attitudes show him to be just as petty. As Mr. Fortune imagines his rural area developing, he believes that “the credit for it could go largely to him” (343), and they might even name the new town after him (338). Mr. Fortune’s interest in progress has even more to do with his need to anger his son-in-law: “Nothing infuriated Pitts more than to see him sell off a piece of the property to an outsider, because Pitts wanted to buy it himself” (337). Believing that control of land is tantamount to power, Mr. Fortune should be zealous to keep it, but the effect its sale has on Pitts is incentive enough for him to turn his back on the traditions that make him value his land in the first place.

As O’Connor moves the site of the problems away from race and toward land, the change in the dispositions and actions of the child in the story is palpable. Nelson has
had no experience with blacks or with the new environment he’s placed in; therefore, he can only continue to lean on his grandfather and soak up his views. Mary Fortune has had ample time to learn her Grandfather’s old southern values, among them the importance of land that is in question in the story. O’Connor claims that Mary Fortune actually understands those ideals better than he does; in a letter, she says that unlike Mr. Fortune, “Pitts and Mary Fortune realize the value of the woods, and the woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol” (Fitzgerald 189-190). Whether O’Connor’s intention to make the woods a “Christ symbol” is successful, Mr. Fortune does recognize an “uncomfortable mystery” in the woods as he stares into them (358). This, however, is not sufficient to stop him from selling the land that provides that view. He is still thinking of the sale’s effect on Pitts, which would be permanent as opposed to what he assumes is Mary Fortune’s temporary disappointment (348). It is probable that Mr. Fortune is resolved to sell the field in part to prove that he can deal with his granddaughter’s disapproval. If nothing else, her disapproval and subsequent bad behavior are occasion enough for him to conclude that he had erred in not beating her. The narrator explains his justification scantily, probably because there is only scant justification: “She respected Pitts because, even with no just cause he beat her; and if he [Mr. Fortune]—with his just cause—did not beat her now, he would have nobody to blame but himself if she turned out a hellion” (353). Mary Fortune’s acquiescence at his ideas was enough to protect her before; when Mr. Fortune realizes that he was wrong, he must regain the control he once seemed to have. Where Nelson grows more and more like Mr. Head—easier and easier to control—Mary Fortune is revealed to be less and less like Mr. Fortune. The two are truly at an impasse.
Mr. Fortune’s sudden change has earned its share of critical interest, mainly from those interested in gender. Mary Fortune’s status as a female is important, especially because it signals a change from “The Artificial Nigger.” Katherine Hemple Prown compares Mary Fortune to other young female characters in O’Connor1, including the protagonist from “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”: “Not yet bound by the dictates of ladyhood, these young women enjoy a freedom that few of O’Connor’s female characters manage” (152). Despite this freedom O’Connor gives her young female characters—a freedom that comes from the fact that society has not turned them into sexualized and socialized adults—Prown believes Mary Fortune is a victim nonetheless, based on what she construes as rape imagery in the final scene, which makes Mary Fortune a “victim of male treachery and of a drive for power and dominance that is characterized as a part of a masculinist value system” (52, 155). Richard Giannone likewise views the beating as an act of male dominance over the female (82). According to Prown, Mary Fortune is just another piece of property (156). In this feminist reading, Mary Fortune is misused by her father and grandfather in a war of masculine power where she is, as Giannone calls her, a “vulnerable female child” (82).

The view of Mary Fortune as vulnerable does not ring true with the text, nor does it match Prown’s own estimation of the girl’s character. Prown admires her stoicism in the face of the abuse; unlike Mr. Fortune, “her pride...remains justified” (Prown 155). Mary Fortune might be the only admirable character in “A View of the Woods,” so it is hard to imagine her as strictly a victim. She is used in the war between the men, but she is not a willing victim nor is her role in that war occasioned by her gender. We know that

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1 Prown also includes 12-year-old Sally Virginia Cope from “A Circle in the Fire” among this group of pre-pubescent women, 113, 152.
Mary Fortune is the only child Pitts beats, and it is simply because she is Mr. Fortune’s favorite. Her beating in the end is similarly caused not by her “vulnerable” femininity but by her courage in the face of her grandfather’s bad decision. Though feminist critics have a misguided view of Mary Fortune, they are right that her gender does make a difference in the text. If Prown is correct in assuming O’Connor gave special providence to young female characters, perhaps these young women represent a particularly stubborn and independent class of characters in O’Connor, not unlike the old men. The switch to this type of character provides an interpersonal conflict that is missing in “The Artificial Nigger.”

It becomes clear long before the end that Mary Fortune and Mr. Fortune are too different to allow for a reconciliation. That they are meeting on a level playing field. Mr. Fortune has encouraged her to have the stubbornness to hold fast to her principles. When those principals clash with his own, as they do with regard to the front yard, it prevents an easy truce like Mr. Head and Nelson find. If the second story makes reconciliation impossible, it is at least a partial indictment of the ending of “The Artificial Nigger” that so many critics find questionable. The resolution and the racial politics that permit and inform that resolution were jettisoned, but the reasons are far from clear. We have O’Connor’s own testimony that she considered the story her highest achievement, and there are certainly enough critics to uphold that idea. Asals, in his study of the extraordinary contrasts in O’Connor, finds that “her protagonists are incapable of the flexibility of development, and the climaxes of the stories confront them with the startling image of all they have denied,” often in dramatic fashion (95). Mr. Head unquestionably
fits the bill. Di Renzo claims that the figures and occasions O’Connor uses for these confrontations are like the gargoyles that decorated medieval churches. Gargoyles literally provided drainage to the building, but they also provided a figurative draining of the fears and superstitions of which the people still struggled to let go (Di Renzo 5). O’Connor’s gargoyles, like the ‘artificial nigger,’ allow for the shock Asals calls for, and they give characters the means of releasing their filthiest problems. Whether O’Connor’s use of the African-American race to provide this outlet for Mr. Head is conscionable can be debated. But that this was the statue’s use in the story is difficult to dispute.

If the statue is at the most a symbol of Christ offering salvation and at the least a psychic dumping ground for Mr. Head’s antiquated ideas, it could make the story work. We might excuse the presence of this particular gargoyle as merely a bad joke born of a racist era in southern history. In fact, however, the statue is only a symptom of a more pervasive problem. O’Connor’s focus throughout the story on Mr. Head’s paranoia and hatred of blacks makes it nearly impossible for his comments to be taken as anything other than an affirmation of the racism he has been displaying all along. Perreault argues this very point, writing that “Mr. Head’s witty phrasing and Nelson’s exact repetition—‘An artificial nigger’—secures Mr. Head and Nelson in their knowledge of place and identity, isolated from the rest of the world in poverty of mind, body, and spirit” (410). According to Perreault, “the ‘action of mercy’ may well affirm their undivided connection with each other in their white male world, but that is no salvation” (410). A “common defeat” (269) unites them, and this bolstered racism precludes any real conversion.
There is a problem in the ending of “The Artificial Nigger,” and I am not suggesting it is simply a matter of O’Connor’s own dated views on race. The problem really is in the disparity between the narrator’s tone and the grotesquery of both the statue and Mr. Head’s response to it. If we excuse the contrasting tone as irony, the story is not one of conversion but a weak jab at racism. If the shift in tone is exempt because it reflects O’Connor’s detached style, as Rubin claims (66), it is so poorly carried out as to be confusing. Neither of these readings call O’Connor’s prejudices into account, and they do not need to. The ending of the story fails on artistic merits. However, the focus on race does matter, as it induces the artistic failure. The gap between O’Connor’s comic protagonist and her resolution in salvation exists because her prejudice leads her to use a pervasive southern prejudice turned gaudy stereotype to effect change and bring about a relatively happy resolution. The Heads are united in the racism that progress was attempting to expel. Therefore, their regained sense of control on this front is actually a willful denial that progress exists. They are not actually engaged with the thing they are attempting to keep in check; their control, then, is just an illusion.

In “A View of the Woods” there is no easy resolution. The main characters do not slap their knees and laugh off their conflict as the narrator discloses their profound transformation. In fact, the old man’s plight for control is not the least bit funny and there is no transformation. Mr. Fortune’s killing of Mary Fortune provides a complicated commentary on self-delusion, one that, unlike Mr. Head, he has to face. After Mary Fortune beats him into submission, she gives him the worst insult he could imagine: “‘You’ve been whipped by me...and I’m PURE Pitts’” (355). After that, he cracks her head on a rock and proclaims that there is “not an ounce of Pitts” in him (355). Here, the
division between Pitts and Fortune is actually at its most confusing. According to Asals, Mary Fortune, in beating her grandfather, is more Fortune-like than ever, even when she proclaims that she is PURE Pitts (102). Earlier in the story, as Mary Fortune begins to claim her dual heritage as Pitts and Fortune, she makes a face at her grandfather: “What he saw was the Pitts look, pure and simple, and he felt personally stained by it, as if it had been found on his own face” (351). Mary Fortune’s Pitts side leaves room for his own, and that is something he cannot accept (Asals 102). The very fact that he is doing what he once abhorred and ascribed to Pitts—beating Mary Fortune—signals that the line between the two is so slight as to be nonexistent. Mary Fortune’s death makes it impossible for him to ignore how wrong he has been. Mr. Fortune ends the story reaching out for help, but the only thing he sees is the “huge yellow monster” (356), the machinery he had invited onto his property. His forcing of progress, symbolized by the machinery, has precluded him from finding any saving grace.

Eliminating the theme of racial progress prevents “A View of the Woods” from losing its focus on the destruction that comes from retaining control at all costs. Though the two stories approach different kinds of progress from opposite angles—as necessary and as potentially destructive—their view of power should be the same: anything done simply for the sake of control can be destructive. The lesson in the Fortune’s story is clear: placing progress over tradition is dangerous—as indeed anything is—when the motive is power. Mary Fortune’s fate is an explicit message to both Mr. Fortune and to readers.
The Heads’ story in “The Artificial Nigger” is not so clear. We see that you can
easily and safely hold fast to your traditions, even bad ones, for the sake of power, even if
the power will only be an illusion. The atypical behavior of the story’s child character
brings about this mixed message, as Nelson is not stubborn enough to serve as
O’Connor’s sign of humbling and grace for his grandfather. His function should have
been much the same as Norton’s in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” and it is insomuch that
his grandfather’s actions toward him bring an epiphany for the old man. However,
Nelson’s rebellion is so halfhearted that he can only somewhat change Mr. Head. The
incomplete change should have meant that, like Norton, Nelson would have death as a
reward. He has not, however, earned it, so he and his grandfather go home, half-changed.
The story’s ending, muddied up with the ‘artificial nigger,’ provides nonetheless a new
perspective on adult-child relations. Nelson’s weakness, though perhaps a flaw in
O’Connor’s portrayal, is not a detriment to her examination of childhood. Nelson’s
mirroring of his grandfather’s partial conversion demonstrates something that “A View of
the Woods” and “The Lame Shall Enter First” also show but in a different way: an
adult’s sins can do irreparable harm to a child. Mary Fortune and Norton die because of
an adult’s shortcomings, but Nelson must live on with his grandfather’s attitudes.
Ostensibly, he is free to choose his course like Ruller and the girl in “A Temple of the
Holy Ghost,” but O’Connor’s portrayal leaves in doubt any future other than him
growing up just like his grandfather. Mr. Head may bypass blame in the story, but, in
O’Connor’s view, he will surely someday face the same judgment that falls on Sheppard
and Mr. Fortune.
Conclusion

In O’Connor’s fictional world, adults and children often face the same obstacles and are in need of the same grace. Her characters confront their pride and learn to accept the weakness inherent in the human condition. What separates the lives of the children from those of their adult counterparts is not the lessons they learn but how they learn them and, at times, the consequences of the lesson. Adults represent the failure of humanity, the blindness to sin that prevents growth. Children by their very nature are still growing, and O’Connor uses them to show the possibilities humanity has if we are willing to see ourselves as works in progress, still growing and changing.

Children are privileged in O’Connor’s fiction, given more room to fail and more possibility to grow. Adults must face their demons in one of two ways: through a tragic or humiliating situation that violently confronts them with the need to change, or through a death that signals their inability to live a changed life. In the stories that feature children, we see a different set of standards at work that reach the same end. Ruller, Nelson, and the protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” show the opportunities that abound for an easier grace. They do not need tragedy or humiliation because they can still see smaller signs of God, and, more importantly, are willing to read them. Where adults cannot be trusted to accept this grace, children—still growing and changing—are given the freedom to decide. Children sometimes die in O’Connor, but she does not use their death as she does an adult’s, to somehow punish them for their sins. A child’s death is an opportunity to escape from a world that ignores and mistreats them. Harry, Norton, and Mary Fortune reach a level of spiritual understanding that the adults in their stories
have not: their faith earns them a ticket to a better place, and their deaths are not condemnations but blessings.

A clear picture begins to emerge of O’Connor’s view of childhood. Children are not set in their ways, a trait that permits Harry and Norton to accept the word of God, achieving a faith by which they willingly face death. This pliability makes unnecessary the kind of big gestures with which O’Connor plagues her adults, for children are still looking for what they should be. As they grow, they are ripe for accepting smaller signs of God’s will, especially the kind that an adult might miss, like a wild turkey or a sideshow freak. They are building their personalities, and they are eager to learn from others. They take in lessons readily, even from poor teachers like Mr. Head and Mr. Fortune. Children in O’Connor are presented at a time in their lives when they have infinite potential to sin or to repent. They are the pre-lapsarian: not yet doomed, free to succeed or fail. Adults are the fallen reality that O’Connor sees everyday: while they still have freedom to succeed or fail, they have fixed themselves on a path of sin.

O’Connor’s fiction is driven by her desire to protect humanity from its own evil devices. Her stories are warnings, morality plays that shock us into seeing the world through her eyes, as a flawed place in need of God. Her adults face trials that might easily be our own, and through them we confront the blindness, self-absorption, and stubbornness in our own hearts. If the adults’ stories tell us what we are, the children’s stories tell us what we have failed to be. Ruller and the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” give us a template for opening our eyes to the ways in which God might reach us. Seeing the world through their point of view, suddenly the smallest things remind us, at the same time, of our frailty as humans and of God’s ability to use that frailty to save us.
When an obstinate adult is presented along side a flexible child, the difference is especially clear. Norton, the dull, selfish boy in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” goes to heaven while his intelligent, philanthropic father mourns his loss. Despite the views society might have of these two characters, the result of their story demonstrates that Norton’s willingness to change and accept a new view of life—a Christian view—trumps Sheppard’s certainty of his rightness so grounded in intellect. Just as we hope Sheppard learns from his son’s death the lessons his son already knew, O’Connor must hope that we—Sheppard’s kin in solipsism—can grow and change. These children’s stories do not just tell us where we have failed; they tell us how we might succeed.

If children have a special place in the world, reminding us how to be, O’Connor’s fiction also teaches us to be careful of how our own sins might affect them. Children learn by watching us, and the very things that doom us we pass down to them. We can be a positive influence on a child’s life, and the inverse is true. The damage O’Connor’s adults do is incalculable. Norton is unloved and ignored, Nelson is indoctrinated with racism and suspicion, and Mary Fortune has her very belief system challenged. Jesus said, “If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18.6, NRSV). Appropriately, O’Connor does fasten a millstone to every offending neck. Sheppard and Mr. Fortune lose those children they claim to love. Norton and Mary Fortune earn salvation because of their resolute faith. The damage that the adults did to their lives to make them unlivable makes their deaths a necessary reward for the children and an inevitable condemnation of their guardians. Mr. Head’s encounter with the statue, despite
O’Connor’s somewhat flawed portrayal, works in the same way to remind him that there is a price to warping a child’s mind. Nelson may grow up to be just like Mr. Head. Hopefully, Mr. Head’s millstone—his humbling at the “artificial nigger”—serves to awaken his guilt and repentance so that Nelson can learn a better lesson from his grandfather.

O’Connor’s fictional children show us the rewards of being open—to seeing the truth and to changing to meet it. That they appear alongside adults gives us the means to understand how we fall short and a pattern for once again becoming more like them. The freedom O’Connor gives to her child characters is not unattainable. If O’Connor sees hope in writing fiction, a specifically Christian hope, her stories do not simply show us the world as it is and the problems of humanity on earth. They also show us the world as it once was before the fall and how it will be when we reach heaven. Accordingly, such characters as Harry, Norton, and Mary Fortune demonstrate that true purity of faith cannot survive on this earth; they must die and go to heaven. Like Ruller, the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and Nelson, we must work on a better way of living until we get there ourselves.
Works Cited


Though O'Connor was focused on creating good, realistic art, she was no less swayed by her very Catholic view of the world, and it manifests itself in her characters and their situations. The people in her fiction are not pious and their stories are not neatly told tales of sainthood. They are people who do not understand grace, and O'Connor ensures that they will be forced to meet it head on. While the stories often lead to some moment of grace, the very fact that it takes the most grotesque of episodes—the likes of prosthetic leg snatchings and deaths by bull goring—to awaken something in these people highlights the single-mindedness and blindness of her characters—characters whose personality and behavior remain fairly constant. In fact, that constancy is what makes them suitable for O’Connor’s purpose and makes a dramatic confrontation necessary. O’Connor wrote, “... I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (Mystery 112). This same tactic is necessary for her readers, both Christians and non-Christians: “[the writer] may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience” (Mystery 185).

The one group that does not suffer from a ridiculous constancy of purpose is O’Connor’s child characters, and they often escape O’Connor’s condemning eye and violent grace. They are young enough to be less than consistent, which provides them equal opportunity to succeed where they should not or fail where they did not have to. Though some of these children are mainly pawns in an adult’s story while others are their story’s focus, they all behave in a way so human that they are often among the most realistic and sympathetic in O’Connor’s fiction.