Structural Irony in Flannery O'Connor: Instrument of the Writer's Vision

Melinda Keane
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1030

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © Melinda Keane
STRUCTURAL IRONY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR:

INSTRUMENT OF THE WRITER'S VISION

by

Sister Melinda Keane, S.H.C.J.

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

September
1969
LIFE

Sister Melinda Keane was born April 27, 1931, in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She attended schools in Grosse Pointe and was graduated from the School of the Holy Child, Suffern, New York, in 1948. She received the Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Rosemont College, Rosemont, Pa., in June, 1952, and entered the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in September of that year.

After three years of initial training, Sister Melinda taught in grade and high schools in and near Philadelphia, studying at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., in the summers. Her Masters thesis, "Henry of Monmouth: Man and King," studied the design and function of the character of Henry (Prince Hal) in Shakespeare's 1 and 2 Henry IV and Henry V. She received the Master of Arts degree in English from Catholic University in 1962, and went to Rosemont College as an instructor in English that September.

After a summer spent following the extramural course in the seventeenth century conducted at Exeter College, Oxford University, Sister Melinda began studies toward the doctorate at Loyola University in the summer of 1964. She was in residence at Loyola in 1966-67 and 1967-68, under a University Fellowship in the second year.

At Rosemont College, where Sister Melinda is now an assistant professor
of English, she teaches fiction courses and is a coordinator of a special seminar program; she is a member of the faculty affairs committee, and is the senior class moderator, a freshman academic advisor, and moderator of the dramatic club.
This dissertation has a dual purpose. The more obvious is to examine the way in which, in a given story or novel by Flannery O'Connor, irony informs the work through a reversal in plot, character, diction, symbol, tone, etc. The second is to study Miss O'Connor's use of this irony to communicate her vision of life, a vision of a world redeemed though sinful.

To this double end, the dissertation will first consider the importance of the concept and metaphor of vision in Flannery O'Connor's writing (and, briefly, the nature of her vision of life), then move in the second chapter to the matter of irony: its meaning and development, then Miss O'Connor's ironic pattern and the ironic tradition to which she belongs. The third chapter presents a close study of structural irony in the two novels and in eight stories; and the fourth returns to the ideas of both vision and irony, and attempts to show the relationship between the two in Flannery O'Connor's fiction.

I am grateful to my religious superiors and to the administration of Rosemont College for a two-year release from teaching which made possible the completing of this dissertation; and to the Josephine C. Connelly Fund and to Loyola University for grants which assisted my studies. I have been greatly helped in writing this dissertation by the assistance of the staff of the Newberry Library, Chicago, and especially by the continued kindness and concern of my adviser, Dr. Agnes Donohue.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. VISION IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR ........................................... 1

II. IRONY. .................................................................................. 27
    Towards a Definition
    The Ironic Pattern in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction
    Flannery O'Connor and an Ironic Tradition

III. ANALYSIS OF THE IRONIC PATTERN IN FLANNERY
    O'CONNOR'S STORIES ......................................................... 72

    Wise Blood
    "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
    "A Stroke of Good Fortune"
    "A Circle in the Fire"
    "Good Country People"
    The Violent Bear It Away
    "Everything That Rises Must Converge"
    "Revelation"
    "Parker's Back"
    "Judgement Day"

IV and CONCLUSION
    THE RELATION BETWEEN VISION AND STRUCTURAL
    IRONY ............................................................................... 223

    Vision
    Structural Irony
    The Relation Between the Two
    Conclusion

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................ 248
CHAPTER I

VISION IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR

Flannery O’Connor as an author has been called both a "distinctly minor novelist"¹ and "the fiction writer . . . most significant in our time."² Had she lived, she might have been celebrated as a painter as well, though probably with equal disagreement among critics, because of her uncompromising style in both arts.³ As it is, one of the most important characteristics of Miss O’Connor’s fictional theory and technique is their visual orientation. Whether painting led her to conceive the sharp, clear outlines of character and narrative detail, or whether her visual preoccupation sought a dual outlet, the relation between word and sight is paramount in her critical writings and stories. This chapter proposes to study the metaphor of vision in both criticism and fiction, and to draw some conclusions as to Miss O’Connor’s own vision of reality and her method of articulating it.


Flannery O'Connor spoke of the art of fiction in lectures, letters, and a few articles. Her two best known and most representative statements date from 1957, the approximate halfway mark of her career: 4 "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in Granville Hicks' The Living Novel; 5 and "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in America. 6

The metaphor of sight pervades the first of these two essays. The Christian writer will feel moral judgment to be implicit in the "greatest depths of vision" 7 to the extent of being "part of the very act of seeing"; he will not, however, experience Christian dogma as a "set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world." 8 Turning to herself, Flannery O'Connor states her now-famous credo:

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is contained in our redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that ... is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction. 9

The Christian novelist, she continues, may need to use violence to express his "vision" for an audience that does not share it: "To the hard of hearing you shout,

---

4 Miss O'Connor published one story in 1946 and two in 1948; four in 1949, which is therefore here considered, arbitrarily perhaps, the beginning of her career; she died in 1964.


6 XCVI (March 30, 1957), 732-735.


8 Ibid., p. 161. 9 Ibid., p. 162.
and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. "10

The metaphor is even more explicit, though less extensive, in the America essay:

For the Christian writer everything has its testing point in the eye, an organ which eventually involves the whole personality and as much of the world as can be got into it. Msgr. Romano Guardini has written that the roots of the eye are in the heart. In any case, for the Catholic these roots stretch far into those depths of mystery about which the modern world is divided--one part of it trying to eliminate mystery, while another part tries to discover it in disciplines less personally demanding than religion. 11

The second quotation in particular demonstrates that sight is not a mere figure of speech with Flannery O'Connor, but rather a kind of epitome of the perceptions and beliefs, the fundamental orientation, at the core of a given person. To see is to interpret, to grasp reality. In a letter of artistic advice to Sister Mary-Alice, O.P., Miss O'Connor wrote:

I think the first thing you need to realize about fiction is that what a writer does when he writes a story is to try to see an action, or a series of actions, clearly. The key word is see . . . . He wants to see it himself clearly and make the reader see it clearly . . . . This is the way the fiction writer works for God--by making us see God's creation; and not just the beautiful or pretty things. 12

In her lecture "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," Miss

---

10 Ibid., p. 163.


O'Connor spoke of the future direction of some novelists as "toward concentration and the distortion that is necessary to get our vision across," and commented:

The problem of such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying and in order not to destroy he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that will give rank to his work. This descent into himself will at the same time be a descent into his region . . . through the darkness of the familiar into a world where like the blind man cured in the gospels he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision . . . .

That Flannery O'Connor's grasp and communication of reality took the form of a vision rather than a set of "truths" is demonstrated by her critics. Of a random sample, twenty-three writers on her work refer to vision. William Barrett, for example, speaks of her "extraordinary vision of the evil and perversity at work in the heart of fallen mankind," which is nonetheless offset by her humor; Brainard Cheney refers to her "Christian vision"; James P. Degnan to her "brilliant, odd, absolutely original vision"; Michel Gresset to "une vision cernée, dure, implacable"; 


14 "Reader's Choice," The Atlantic, CCXVI (July, 1965), 139.

15 "Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for her Country," 557.

16 Review of Everything That Rises Must Converge, Commonweal, LXXXII (July 9, 1965), 510.

17 "Le petit monde de Flannery O'Connor," Mercure de France, CCCL (janvier 1964), 143.
Edward M. Hood to the "rage of vision" by which she is "possessed."

Louis D. Rubin notes the "searing" nature of her fiction's moral vision, Theodore Solotaroff the "austere strength" of that vision.

If Flannery O'Connor herself apprehended reality in terms of vision, the importance of sight in her fiction is hardly surprising. Vision functions in this epitomizing way most fully and obviously, perhaps, in her first novel, Wise Blood (1952), which tells of a young man's struggle against and final acceptance of Jesus. Experience confronts the central character, Hazel Motes, in strongly visual terms. Fighting to escape a preaching vocation, he "saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into

---

18 "A Prose Altogether Alive," Kenyon Review, XXIII (Winter, 1961), 171. A "rage of vision" was old Tarwater's gift from God in The Violent Bear It Away, which Hood was here reviewing.


21 Here and throughout the dissertation, the stories will be studied in this order: Wise Blood; the stories as they appear in A Good Man Is Hard to Find; The Violent Bear It Away; and the stories, in order, of Everything That Rises Must Converge.

the dark where he was not sure of his footing . . ."23

When Haze leaves Eastrod (Tennessee) for the Army, he takes only his bible and a "pair of silver-rimmed spectacles that had belonged to his mother." He wears the glasses to read the bible, even though "they tired his eyes so that after a short time he was always obliged to stop."24 After he is "converted to nothing,"25 he keeps the bible "because it had come from home," and the spectacles "in case his vision should ever become dim."26 Toward the end of the novel, Haze, packing to go and preach his Church Without Christ to another city, finds the glasses and puts them on. After he throws Enoch Emery's "new jesus" through the fire escape door, he turns around to face Sabbath's tirade:

Drops of rain water were splattered over the front of the glasses and on his red face and here and there they hung sparkling from the brim of his hat. "I don't want nothing but the truth!" he shouted, "and what you see is the truth and I've seen it!"27

After announcing his departure for a new city, Haze coughs and grows faint. "And when were you going?" Sabbath asks. "'After I get some more sleep,' he said, and pulled off his glasses and threw them out the door."28

The glasses are certainly connected with Haze's religious preoccupation, and his discarding them seems to precipitate (it at least precedes) the final actions

24Ibid., p. 17. 25Ibid. 26Ibid., p. 18.
27Ibid., p. 103. 28Ibid.
of the novel. Some uncertainty is inescapable here, as Miss O'Connor does not seem completely in control of this symbolic detail.\(^{29}\) Haze's throwing the glasses away, however, seems to be one more effort at rejecting the conventionally religious point of view.

But the glasses operate on a secondary level in the story; vision provides the major action as well. Haze becomes obsessed by the blind preacher Asa Hawks and his daughter, because they represent the vocation he is fleeing; yet the very sign of Asa's election, his supposed self-inflicted blindness, is a fraud, and both he and Sabbath are thoroughly corrupt. Nevertheless, they are the strongest of reminders to Haze of his real situation. When he finally realizes that, as his grandfather prophesied, "Jesus [will] have him in the end,"\(^{30}\) it is Hawks' uncompleted action that Haze fulfills.

In his blindness Haze, like Oedipus and Gloucester, sees for the first time. Because his creator chose not to state unequivocally what he sees,\(^{31}\) a critic can make

\(^{29}\)This is not to suggest that the glasses should fit into some symbolic equation. They do relate to Haze's mother; but despite Caroline Gordon's reading of her, in "Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," \textit{Critique}, II (Autumn, 1958), 4, the mother is in the actual text too shadowy a figure to give much dimension to the meaning her glasses accumulate in the novel.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{31}\)At least, not until her 1962 introductory note declaring that Haze is a "Christian malgré lui," and that for the author his "integrity lies in his not being able to" get rid of Christ, the "ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (p. 8).
the mistake of placing him with those characters who are "so warped by their disavowal of grace that she cannot conceive of their being saved." But Haze's actual situation is discoverable from his exchanges with and effect on his landlady. When Haze tells her he is going to blind himself, she thinks:

What possible reason could a person have for wanting to destroy his sight? A woman like her, so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind. If she had to be blind she would rather be dead. It occurred to her suddenly that when she was dead she would be blind too.

Later, when Haze tells her "You can't see," the landlady speaks to him about this new worry:

"Do you think, Mr. Motes," she said hoarsely, "that when you're dead, you're blind?"
"I hope so," he said after a minute.
"Why?" she asked, staring at him.
After a while he said, "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more."

Soon, the landlady decides to marry Haze:

If she was going to be blind when she was dead, who better to lead her than a blind man? Who better to lead the blind than the blind, who knew what it was like?

---

32 James F. Farnham, "The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor," America, CV (May 13, 1961), 280. I cannot agree, either, with Farnham's placing young Tarwater in the same category, and think Shiftlet is at least doubtful. Even more dismal than Farnham's description is Webster Schott's blanket statement, in "Flannery O'Connor: Faith's Stepchild," The Nation, CCI (Sept. 13, 1965), 142: "Losers all, her characters act out the Gothic rituals of defeat and destruction in the nightmare American South."

But sickness, exposure, and a thick-skinned policeman combine against her plan.

In the novel's last paragraph the landlady sits with what she does not yet realize is Haze's corpse:

The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything.

In the novel's first scene, Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, Haze's fellow passenger on the train, wanted to get close enough to see what the suit had cost him but she found herself squinting instead at his eyes, trying almost to look into them. They were... set in deep sockets. The outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent.

... His eyes were what held her attention longest. Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere, and she leaned halfway across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them.

This is over-obvious parallel, perhaps--Wise Blood is by no means a perfect novel--but significant differences exist between the two scenes. On the train, Haze is heading for Taulkinham to preach his Church Without Christ. The reader early learns that the only person sufficiently convinced of the existence and power of

36 John Hawkes' description of the policemen, in "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Sewanee Review, LXX (Summer, 1962), 398, not only strains after cuteness (they are "sadistic versions of Tweedledum and Tweedledee") but ignores the fact that their behavior, not sadism but moral indifference, echoes only pallidly Enoch Emery's in dispatching Gonga and Haze's in killing his double, Solace Layfield.

37 Wise Blood, p. 126. 37a Ibid., pp. 9, 10.
Christ to need Hazel Motes' anti-Christ attacks is Haze himself. In the dining car, he talks to a society woman:

"Do you think I believe in Jesus?" he said, leaning toward her and speaking almost as if he were breathless." Well, I wouldn't even if he existed. Even if he was on this train."

"Who said you had to?" she asked in a poisonous Eastern voice. 38

Later, Haze gets caught in the opening of his upper berth:

"I'm sick!" he called. "I can't be closed up in this thing. Let me out!"

The porter stood watching him and didn't move.

"Jesus," Haze said, "Jesus."

The porter didn't move. "Jesus been a long time gone," he said in a sour triumphant voice. 39

By the end of the novel, Haze has realized that, as even the fraud Asa Hawks told him, "You can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact"; 40 and, after the policeman wrecks his car, he stops running. As his knowledge and convictions throughout have been expressed in visual terms, his reaction to this ultimate fruitlessness of his denial of Christ is the symbolically right one. 41 More obviously, Haze is seeing-and-misguided (in the terms of the novel, whether a given reader agrees with its theology or not) at the beginning, and blind-and-righted at the end.

Finally, Mrs. Hitchcock has only a busybody's interest in Haze; Mrs.


41 This is not to deny its fittingness in Haze's unique psychology as well. Though Miss O'Connor's world is not naturalistic, it does operate by the laws of its own nature; as Sr. Mariella Gable says in "But First It Must Rise," The Critic, XXIII (June-July, 1965), 58, Miss O'Connor "abhorred manipulations by the artist to teach a lesson. Nothing but the truth would do."
Flood, the landlady, on the contrary, is his one disciple—and that because of his blindness—whereas all his anti-Christ preaching produced only the fake, Hoover Shoats.  

Vision appears less baldly in the later stories than in Wise Blood, but it continues to be a sign of the characters' inner life. John Wesley and The Misfit, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," both wear glasses, and both spoiled little boy and homicidal maniac have, in different degrees, impaired spiritual vision; Harry-Bevel's dissipated father, in "The River," has eyes "lined with red threads," while Mrs. Connin, the "religious" baby-sitter, looks into the room "with a skeleton's appearance of seeing everything."  

"The Life You Save may be Your Own" polarizes two "visions"—that of Tom Shiftlet, obsessed by his longing for a car, and that of Mrs. Crater, "ravenous for a son-in-law." The night Shiftlet arrives, he tells Mrs. Crater that "a man had to escape to the country to see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do." But all the while "Mr. Shiftlet's eye in the darkness was focused on a part of the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance." The story's opposition of the two visions helps the reader to see that Mrs. Crater

42 Mrs. Flood's final posture is that of a disciple: "She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away. . . ." (p. 126)

43 A Good Man is Hard to Find, in Three, p. 155. Page numbers for the stories in this collection will refer to this edition.

sacrifices Lucynell, the feeble-minded "angel of Gawd," whom she urges Shiftlet to marry in return for her car, no less readily than does Shiftlet himself when he deserts the girl in a roadside eating place.

Occasionally vision clarifies or points up a story's central insight. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the child, hearing the title expression and the spiel of a hermaphrodite at a fair in close succession, reaches an inchoate understanding of grace. This is prefigured, then stated by indirection, in visual terms. On the drive back to her cousins' convent school, the child holds her head out the window:

With her hair blowing over her face she could look directly into the ivory sun which was framed in the middle of the blue afternoon but when she pulled it away from her eyes she had to squint.

They arrive at the convent in time for Benediction:

Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be." 47

The two images are drawn together once more in the story's last paragraph, describing the drive home:

The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees. 48

The sight metaphor performs a similar clarifying function in "Good Country People," where an atheist with a Ph.D. and a wooden leg is shown to be fundamentally

---

naive by the bible salesman she tries to seduce. During the crucial scene in the barn, the young bible salesman takes Joy-Hulga's glasses and puts them in his pocket. A little later,

She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and then down at a black ridge and then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes. She didn't realize he had taken her glasses but this landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.\(^49\)

Here, compressed, is a statement of Joy's real naïveté, despite her doctorate in philosophy and her (vastly mistaken) patronizing attitude toward the bogus bible salesman who has "been believing in nothing ever since I was born,"\(^50\) and steals her leg with no difficulty. The contrast shows Hulga's determined atheism as in reality only a variant of Hazel Motes' inverted belief.

"The Displaced Person," one of the finest stories in A Good Man Is Hard to Find, is also one of the most visually oriented. In it Mrs. Shortley and her employer both realize, or are faced by, their essential "displacement" from their true country through Mr. Guizac, a D.P. whom each finds a disturbing element on the farm. The story has three centers of vision: a peacock, Mrs. Shortley, and Mrs. McIntyre, the farm's owner. The peacock's presence pervades "The Displaced Person" from its second paragraph, where he follows Mrs. Shortley up the road:

The peacock stepped just behind her, his tail--glittering green-gold and blue in the sunlight--lifted just enough so that it would not touch the ground. It flowed out on either side like a floating train and his head on the long blue reed-like neck was drawn back

\(^{49}\)"Good Country People," p. 258.  \(^{50}\)Ibid., p. 261.
as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see. 51

Initially, then, the peacock is presented as a seer. But he is an object of vision only to the old priest, who sees him as a "beauti-ful birdrrrd," 52 and, staring at the peacock's spread tail, says, "'Christ will come like that!' . . . in a loud gay voice." 53 To Mrs. McIntyre, the bird is only "another mouth to feed," 54 to Mrs. Shortley "nothing but a peachicken." 55 When the latter has her first vision, she is completely unaware of the peacock:

Then she stood a while longer, reflecting, her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock's tail. He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second's light and salmon-colored in the next. She might have been looking at a map of the universe but she didn't notice it any more than she did the spots of the sky that cracked the dull green of the tree. 56

The peacock, then, quite clearly functions as a level of reality virtually invisible to Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre. Though an equation is again impossible, his term of reference seems broad--"the way things really are," rather than simply Christ, though the latter identification is tempting. 57

51 "The Displaced Person," p. 262. 52 Ibid., p. 265.

53 Ibid., p. 291. 54 Ibid., p. 265. 55 Ibid., p. 266. 56 Ibid., p. 267.

57 And has been made by a number of critics. See for example Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, N. 54 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 18. Sister M. Joselyn, O.S.B., in "Thematic Centers in 'The Displaced Person,'" SSF, I (Winter, 1964), stops short of simple identification, calling the bird a "Christ figure" which "forms a thematic center for the story, with the major characters ranged around it"; these characters also "range themselves around Mr. Guizac on a descending scale from love to hate . . ." (86).
Mrs. Shortley is more seer than object of vision, though from her first description she might well be the latter:

She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything.\textsuperscript{58}

To Mrs. Shortley, the Guizacs might have come from another planet instead of another continent. Characteristically, her ideas on Europe are expressed in visual terms, in an apocalyptic description central to both plot and meaning:

Mrs. Shortley recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing . . . . If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?\textsuperscript{59}

Periodically, when Mrs. Shortley thinks of the D.P.'s and their backward religion, she again sees the pile of bodies. When she begins to realize that the industrious Mr. Guizac is a threat to her own easygoing husband, and that the Shortleys themselves may become Displaced Persons, she sees the coming struggle as a war of words, "coming at each other, stalking forward, . . . gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and then grappling with each other."\textsuperscript{60} Again Mrs. Shortley sees the piled-up room, filled this time with words, not bodies: "... the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel."\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} "The Displaced Person," p. 262. \textsuperscript{59} ibid., p. 264.

\textsuperscript{60} ibid., p. 275. \textsuperscript{61} ibid., p. 276.
From this time, Mrs. Shortley takes to reading Revelation and the prophets, which strongly color her own excursion into prophecy.\(^62\) Just before her death, Miss O'Connor suggests, she has a real vision, in which she sees the true meaning of the piled-up bodies, and ceases to be herself a Displaced Person:

She was sitting in an erect way . . . , but there was a peculiar lack of light in her icy blue eyes. All the vision in them might have been turned around, looking inside her. She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah May's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself.\(^63\)

\[\text{[Mrs. Shortley], her huge body rolled back still against the seat and her eyes like blue-painted glass, seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country.}\(^64\)

Mrs. McIntyre neither sees visions nor prophesies--she is a practical woman who believes in being "smart and thrifty and energetic"\(^65\)--but she, like Mrs. Shortley, feels threatened, displaced, by the Guizacs. Like Mrs. Shortley's, her anxiety is expressed in visual terms. After her encounter with Mr. Guizac about his young cousin (whom he wants to bring over as wife to one of the field negroes to get her out of a European D.P. camp) she "narrowed her gaze until it closed entirely

\(^62\) As the unnoticed presence of the peacock seems to affect the nature of her vision: "It [the gigantic figure she sees] was the color of the sun in the early afternoon, white-gold. It was of no definite shape but there were fiery wheels with fierce dark eyes in them, spinning rapidly all around it" (ibid.)

\(^63\) Ibid., p. 279. The relationship of this to the piled-up concentration camp bodies (and hence to Mrs. Shortley's realization, at last, of her kinship with the D.P.'s) is perhaps too obvious to need pointing out.

\(^64\) Ibid., p. 280.  
\(^65\) Ibid., p. 289.
around the diminishing figure on the tractor as if she were watching him through a gunsight." When this fails to bring reassurance, she "opened her eyes to include the whole field so that the figure on the tractor was no larger than a grasshopper in her widened view."66

Finally, at the moment of Mr. Guizac's fatal tractor accident:

She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.67

These three centers of vision—the peacock, Mrs. Shortley, and Mrs. McIntyre—revolve around and are defined by the Displaced Person, who himself remains an undefined, largely catalytic figure. Each of the three—even the peacock, sole survivor of "twenty or thirty"68—is a Displaced Person, and each sees (the peacock reveals) an aspect of Displaced Person-hood as focused in Mr. Guizac.69 The result, greater than the mere sum of the three parts, involves a far more complex and ambivalent use of vision than that in Wise Blood.

The Violent Bear It Away (1960) presents an interesting companion piece to Wise Blood with regard to vision: both Hazel Motes and Tarwater are unwilling servants of God who finally face, or are faced by, their vocations. But The Violent Bear

66 Ibid. 67 Ibid., p. 298. 68 Ibid., p. 265.

69 It would be interesting, but outside the scope of this dissertation, to go into the question of the displaced person in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. This is discussed briefly by Drake, Flannery O'Connor, p. 28; Robert Fitzgerald, "The Countryside and the True Country," Sewanee Review, LXX (Summer, 1962), 393-394; and Rubin, "A Note on Literary Fashions," 16-17.
It Away does not use a simple blindness-vision contrast. Instead, its characters demonstrate varying kinds of vision. Old Mason Tarwater, the fiery prophet, has "silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads." 70 Little Bishop, his nephew Rayber's idiot son, "somewhat resembled old Tarwater except for his eyes which were grey like the old man's but clear, as if the other side of them went down and down into two pools of light." 71

Rayber, a desperate materialist dimly related (in his desperation) to Hazel Motes, and strongly so to the intellectuals in Everything That Rises, is another matter. Old Mason threatened Rayber that he would raise young Tarwater into a prophet "to burn your eyes clean." 72 But when Tarwater tries to picture his uncle Rayber, whom he has seen only once,

What he could not picture were the eyes behind the glasses. He had no memory of them and there was every kind of contradiction in the rubble of his great-uncle's descriptions. Sometimes the old man had said the nephew's eyes were black and sometimes brown. [During his ride into town with Meeks] . . . the boy was beginning to see a consistent image for the school-teacher's eyes . . . . He saw them dark grey, shadowed with knowledge . . . . 73

Then Tarwater actually meets his uncle:

The boy found himself scrutinized by two small drill-like eyes set in the depths of twin glass caverns. Already he felt his privacy imperilled. 74

70 The Violent Bear It Away, in Three, p. 309. All page numbers for The Violent will refer to this edition.
71 Ibid., p. 316. 72 Ibid., p. 323.
73 Ibid., p. 336. 74 Ibid., p. 355.
Rayber has tried to replace the Savior given him by old Mason Tarwater; but though the pictures of him "bobbing up and down through the corn" 75 and trailing young Tarwater barefoot through the city are funny, they are never "wonderfully unsympathetic," as John Hawkes claims. 76

Tarwater himself is rendered largely in terms of visions rather than ordinary sight. When he begins to evade his prophetic vocation,

He tried when possible to . . . keep his vision located on an even level, to see no more than was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something . . . that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. 77

After Tarwater, in attempting to deny his destiny, has actually acknowledged it by baptizing Bishop, he hitches a ride home to Powderhead with a truck driver:

The boy sat quietly on his side of the cab. His eyes were open wide without the least look of sleep in them. They seemed not to be able to close but to be open forever on some sight that would never leave them. Presently they closed but his body did not relax. He sat rigidly upright, a still alert expression on his face as if under the closed lids an inner eye were watching, piercing out the truth in the distortion of his dream. 78

---

75 Ibid., p. 307.
76 "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," 397. Though the scope of this chapter does not permit a full examination of this point, Rayber's honest if misguided efforts to understand and help Tarwater, his own anguish over Mason's teaching, and his sudden onslaughts of "outrageous" (p. 372) love for Bishop and the world help to create sympathy for him. See also Chap. III, below.
77 The Violent, pp. 315-316. 78 Ibid., p. 431.
When Tarwater burns his way through the woods, after his violation:

His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again. 79

Finally, Tarwater has his vision of the Bread of Life, and turns back to fulfil his prophetic mission:

His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited them but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping. 80

This is certainly a progression from Wise Blood, where Haze’s change of attitude shows mainly in one-dimensional external action. He preaches the Church Without Christ from the Essex, and haunts the fraud Hawks because of the latter’s supposed total commitment to Christ in his self-blinding. Realizing his error and sinfulness, Haze blinds himself. Here, because of the various facets of vision, its symbolic value in the central characters is richer. Hazel could be described above almost allegorically, as "seeing-and-misguided" and "blind-and-righted"; 81 the treatment of Tarwater with regard to vision is much less simple, as will appear more clearly in Chapter III.

Vision takes on no new dimensions or themes in Everything That Rises. Julian’s mother in the title story makes a fitting wordless comment on her son before

79 Ibid., p. 442. 80 Ibid., p. 447.
81 See above, pp. 9-10.
her death, of a stroke: 82 "One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed." 83 Mrs. May, the selfish managerial "heroine" of "Greenleaf," also has a revelation before her death: "... She had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable." 84

"A View of the Woods," like "Good Country People," uses vision as a kind of symbolic summary of the story. Old Mark Fortune, dedicated to progress and to making his son-in-law's family miserable, has found a means toward both ends in selling the lot in front of their house. He runs into a finally tragic obstacle in the unexpected opposition of his grand-daughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. Shaken by her attitude, he goes to bed for the afternoon, but has little rest:

The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. 85

In the other stories in this collection, vision is incidental to an under-

---

82 Not, I think, her insanity, which Sr. Mariella Gable claims ("But First It Must Rise," 60).

83 Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 43. All page numbers for stories from this collection will refer to this edition.

standing of oneself, as in "The Enduring Chill"; an insight into another, as in "The Comforts of Home," "Revelation," and "Judgement Day"; or a transcendent vision of reality, as in "Revelation" and "Parker's Back." In this story, Parker

Where Asbury Fox finally realizes his personal deficiencies as he had his artistic, after he discovers that he is not dying at all, but will have to live with the knowledge of his inadequacy. He looks in a mirror: "The eyes that stared back at him were the same that had returned his gaze every day from that mirror but it seemed to him that they were paler. They looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him... Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes" ("The Enduring Chill," p. 110).

Thomas, the historian whose mother jeopardizes his comfort by taking the nymphomaniac Star Drake into her custody and home, has his first meeting with the girl: "The quality of her look was such that it might have been her hands, resting now on his knees, now on his neck. Her eyes had a mocking glitter and he knew that she was well aware he could not stand the sight of her" ("The Comforts," p. 117).

Mrs. Turpin, comfortable and self-satisfied, becomes the object a crazed girl settles on for her hatred; yet though Mary Grace's singling out of Mrs. Turpin may have a clinical explanation, it has spiritual validity in the story, and is taken seriously by Mrs. Turpin. After the girl's fit: "Mrs. Turpin's head cleared and her power of motion returned. She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way beyond time and place and condition" ("Revelation," p. 178).

The negro who moves in next door to old Tanner's daughter in a New York apartment house takes in and dismisses the old man with his eyes, which "moved from the top of the black hat, down to the collarless blue shirt, neatly buttoned at the neck, down the faded galluses to the grey trousers and the high-top shoes and up again, very slowly..." ("Judgement Day," p. 219).

Where Mrs. Turpin, finally chastened by the realization of her own weakness and contingency, has a vision of souls marching to heaven, respectable people like herself at the end ("Revelation," p. 186).

Where O.E. Parker, no "religious" man, has a Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back; he studies his soul, seeing it as "a spider web of facts and lies that was
is under the power of the eyes of his own Byzantine Christ tattoo:

[His wife's "icepick eyes"] appeared soft and dilatory compared with the eyes in the book, for even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he were as transparent as the wing of a fly. 92

It should be clear by now why, aside from the painter's interest in the visual, Flannery O'Connor employed the metaphor of sight so consistently: her own beliefs and interior configuration are a vision rather than a platform, a process rather than a system. With all the evidence her fiction presents, describing this process should be a fairly simple matter; the added testimony of her critical writings should ensure certainty as to the nature of her vision. The fact is, however, that considerable critical disagreement exists as to the nature of Flannery O'Connor's vision of the world. One critical tactic, no longer easily controvertible since her death, is to say that her theory and practice were at variance. Webster Schott claims that she "talked about free will, the sacramental view, redemption by Christ. But her

not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything" ("Parker's Back," p. 202).

92 Ibid., p. 200.

93 Donald Racky points out that both the writers who criticize Flannery O'Connor for "excessive emphasis on belief" and those who attack her for "lack of emphasis on belief" by their charges "imply disjunction of belief from sensibility and deny Flannery O'Connor's view of the nature of the creative artist and his fiction" ("The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor: Her System of Thought, Her Fictional Techniques, and an Explication of her Thought and Techniques in The Violent Bear It Away." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Loyola University, Chicago, 1968,
characters have no real choice--only faint glimmers of possibilities lost . . ."^94

He states further:

She selected those properties of Christianity that served to justify her black reality. The emerging Catholic theology that implies the visitation of Christ may have regenerated matter and dignified all of life was anti-art and personally intolerable.95

Also denying redemption in her fiction is Robert O. Bowen, in his review of The Violent Bear It Away:

The basic element lacking in the kind of novel that The Violent Bear It Away represents is redemption. Always we find in these horrors that there is no hope because the people

p. 48). Mr. Racky discusses (especially pp. 49-83) how the two sets of critics work against each other--how, in short, "additional arguments against the charge of didacticism can be obtained from her replies to those who criticize her for lack of didacticism" (p. 48). Later in his dissertation, Mr. Racky returns to this point: "Miss O'Connor replies [to her critics of the first type] that Christian dogma does not limit a writer or distract his view of man's real condition. She replies that she may subconsciously be a victim of allowing dogma to dictate her view, but she consciously feels that she is not guilty. Readers who insist a-priori that it must dictate her views are guilty of the very a-priori dogmatism of which they accuse her" (p. 123).

94"Faith's Stepchild," 144.

95Ibid. It would take a much longer and more detailed treatment than the present to handle this statement adequately; but the example Robert Fitzgerald cites, in the introduction to Everything That Rises, is pertinent here: "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and even the meanest of them sparkled" (p. xi; Fitzgerald mistakenly identifies this as from "The Artificial Nigger"; it is from "A Good Man is Hard to Find," p. 130. The inclusion of "even" is also a mistake). This dissertation, while not directed precisely at controverting the view Schott represents, is based on an opposite interpretation of Flannery O'Connor's work, as Chapters III and IV especially should make clear.
in the books are already damned and in torment. 96

Warren Coffey, in his Commentary review of Everything That Rises, is more hopeful, but nonetheless claims that Miss O'Connor "was, of course [as an Irish-American Catholic], a Jansenist . . . . The pride of intellect, the corruption of the heart, the horror of sex—all these appear again and again in her works, and against them, the desperate assertion of faith." 97

Add to these statements Le Clezio's bleak rhapsody on The Violent 98 and John Hawkes' contention that Miss O'Connor is really on the devil's side, 99 and the case becomes blacker still. To be sure, there are those who understand, with Robert Drake, that her "view . . . of both man and nature is thoroughly sacramental"; 100 with Jean Marie Kann that "exploding upwards into God is the action in all Miss

96 Renascence, XIII (Spring, 1961) 152. At the end of The Violent young Tar-water has accepted his prophetic vocation, and realizes through a vision of the Bread of Life that his own hunger is spiritual. For Rayber, too, there is at least a glimmer of hope, in that he has realized his emotional and spiritual deprivation. To say the people are damned and the novel hopeless is to refuse to read it on its own terms.

97 XXXV (November, 1965), 98. These three certainly do appear (though I would dispute the "horror" of sex), but not in their Jansenistic acceptations. Are Truman Capote and James Purdy, for example, crypto-Jansenists? Yet for the corruption of the heart and the horror of sex, they surely outrank Flannery O'Connor. Further, in her works the "assertion of faith" is not a "desperate" shield against the ills of life; rather, through these very ills grace operates, shown in concrete circumstances; faith as a superadded pious tag is absent from her fiction.


100 Flannery O'Connor, pp. 41-42.
O'Connor's stories";\textsuperscript{101} and with Brainard Cheney that "the means is violent, but the end is Christian."\textsuperscript{102} But two at least of these last are committed Christians; does one then have to share an author's theological convictions to understand his work? I think not, and believe Brainard Cheney's stricture on John Hawkes' devil view quite justified:

Throughout, Mr. Hawkes seems to be unable or unwilling to distinguish his own sense of values and that of Miss O'Connor, the only one of the three [Flannery, Hawkes himself, and Nathanael West] who believes in the devil.\textsuperscript{103}

With any fiction writer, and particularly one like Flannery O'Connor, the reader needs not only to distinguish between the author's views and his own--and so see what she is not saying--but also to understand the author's fictional techniques, and so determine what she is affirming. The particular vision of the world which Flannery O'Connor espouses--the "meanest" slice of reality at least potentially illumined by the Redemption--lends itself naturally to her most characteristic technique, structural irony. This dissertation will now examine that technique and its historical context, and return in Chapter IV to the consideration of Miss O'Connor's vision.

\textsuperscript{101} "Everything That Rises Must Converge," \textit{The Catholic World}, CCIV (December, 1966), 158.

\textsuperscript{102} "Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for her Country," 557.

CHAPTER II

IRONY

Towards a Definition

Before discussing structural irony in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, it will be useful to consider literary irony in general. Irony may be a rhetorical, structural, or thematic device; any more precise definition is problematic. For one thing, the concept of irony has undergone a long and complex evolution, assuming new meanings without necessarily losing earlier ones. Further, irony in any one of its manifestations is so bound up with the emotional response of an artist to a created situation, and of his audience both to the situation and to the resulting irony, as to be very difficult to isolate. Finally, the very number of ironic types, due both to the history and to the emotional complexity of irony, is in itself confusing.

Nevertheless, some attempt at description and distinction is necessary, even though success can be only partial. To avoid the confusion of focus mentioned above, this section will glance briefly at the historical evolution of the concept before

\[1\text{Cf. Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), pp. 3-4.}\]
attempting to isolate the major elements of literary irony. 2

The term irony had its origin in the Greek eiron, 3 designating a dissimulator and, by extension (in the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues), an apparently simple person who discomfits his enemies by showing up their folly. With Aristotle, irony, though it does make use of understatement, is primarily a manner of acting, rather than of speaking: the ironist is one who habitually pretends to self-deprecat10n. 4

After Aristotle, until the Romantic period, irony was understood for the most part as verbal: whether Socratic or otherwise, it could be described as irony

2 Except where noted, this section follows the description given by G.G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), pp. 3-27; similar historical treatments appear in Haakon M. Chevalier's article, s.v. irony, Dictionary of World Literature, ed. Joseph T. Shipley, new rev. ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953); Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock, pp. 3-79; and J.A.K. Thomson, Irony: An Historical Introduction (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1926), passim (this last concentrates on the Greek and Roman masters of irony).

3 Until Aristotle, a pejorative term; it antedates eironeia, according to Thomson, Irony, p. 3. Thomson, pp. 10-14, 18-35, and F.M. Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (London: E. Arnold, 1914), esp. pp. 132 ff., and Chevalier, Shipley, p. 233, see an eiron-alazon opposition in Old Comedy which Thompson denies, The Dry Mock, pp. 24-28, though he cites the theory as enshrined in dictionary definitions, p. 4. Though Sedgewick does not directly take sides, he claims that Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics was the first to make "the precise formulation of irony as 'a pretence tending toward the under-side of the truth,'" as opposed to alazonia, "'a pretence tending toward exaggeration'" (Of Irony, p. 7). Sedgewick thus implicitly agrees with Thompson.

4 Thus, as Sedgewick points out: "... Aristotle not only suggested to a far later time the equating of irony and litotes, but he also fixed the general sense of Socratic irony for all time" (Of Irony, pp. 11-12).
"of grammare, by the whyche a man sayth one and gyvyth to understand the contrarye." 5 With the German romantics of the late eighteenth century, like Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel, the concept of irony became less necessarily verbal and underwent further modulations. "Romantic irony" is that Olympian detachment of the artist from his created world which leads him to deliberately destroy illusion in his works; it is "the hand of the manipulator, as Tieck expressed it, thrust into the puppet stage." 6 The romantic writer's introspectiveness, especially in Tieck and Jean Paul, confronted this objectivity with his own subjective presence in his work—hence Selbstpàrodie, or the attitude described by the philosopher Solger:

... Our present and actual nature known and experienced in essential reality is art; and ... in Art everywhere exists that centre wherein essence and actuality coalesce as an immediate present—namely, Irony, the consummate fruit of the artistic mind. 7

Thompson comments on Schlegel's complex concept of irony:

To combine extreme objectivity and immanence, as Shakespeare did, is to resemble God Himself. And this state of godlike self-division and self-consciousness is Romantic irony. 8

From the German romantics on, this note of objectivity and detachment has been virtually inseparable from the idea of irony.

The Germans, for the most part, focused their attention on the creating

5 Ord. Crysten Men, 1502. OED, V. s.v. irony, 1.
6 Thompson; The Dry Mock, p. 59.
7 Quoted by Sedgewick, Of Irony, p. 17. 8 The Dry Mock, p. 64.
mind of the artist. Bishop Connop Thirlwall, whose work shows his familiarity with contemporary German writers (philosophical and theological, as well as literary), was strongly influenced by them in his 1833 essay "On the Irony of Sophocles."

Thirlwall's focus, however, was the created world of the artist, rather than the creator himself. He begins by distinguishing between mere verbal irony ("a figure which enables the speaker to convey his meaning with greater force by means of a contrast between . . . the thought which he evidently designs to express, and that which his words properly signify") and "practical irony" (the contrast between appearance and reality in the events of life). It is soon evident that dramatic irony is ironic only by analogy with the practical:

The dramatic poet is the creator of a little world, in which he rules with absolute sway, and may shape the destinies of the imaginary beings to whom he gives life and breath according to any plan that he may choose. . . . He will, if he understands his art, make his administration conform to the laws by which he conceives the course of mortal life to be really governed.

According to Bishop Thirlwall, then, Sophoclean irony is the repeatedly demonstrated contrast in his works between appearance and reality, without the note given it by

---


10 Ibid., pp. 3-8.

11 Ibid., p. 9.

12 Except in Antigone, where the irony "belongs to that head which we have endeavoured to describe as accompanying the administration of justice human and divine," in which each party "partially succeeds in the struggle, but perishes through the success itself; while their destruction preserves the sanctity of the principles for which they contend" ("Irony of Sophocles," pp. 44-45).
later criticism, the further discrepancy between the audience's perception of that contrast and the protagonist's ignorance of it.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the notion of the artist's objectivity combined with that of the perception of the irony of events to produce the idea of irony as a way of life. According to this concept, the ironic attitude arises from an awareness of incongruity, cross-purposes, and absurdity in life; the ironist is generally a passive person who looks on as the world goes by. He is not indifferent to it, but whenever he has an impulse to act he reflects that reform is hopeless and rebellion perhaps worse ultimately than submission. Futility and vanity are his final terms for human effort.

The note of confusion and absurdity is especially characteristic of modern theories of irony. "Irony comes as a quest for meaning in the universe—a universe pluralistic and inscrutable:

Simple reversals no longer yield a "truer" view of the situation, and, far from comforting the reader with a sense of divine superiority, dislocate the narrow catchwords and easy dogmas which bind our existence to a superficial apprehension of the world's possibilities.

According to one contemporary writer, irony, like comedy and tragedy, "represents


14 Thompson, The Dry Mock, p. 255. See also the descriptions of the ironist in the works listed in n. 13.

15 Wright, "Irony and Fiction," 114. 16 Ibid., 118.
a conventional form of fiction; its principle of imitation is parody."17 Certainly, modern dramatists like Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet bear out this observation; so do grotesque novelists or "black humorists" like West, Purdy, Barth, Heller, and Kesey, and even so apparently unflamboyant and low-keyed a writer as Wright Morris.

The concept of irony, then, has undergone a vast expansion: from a highly specialized mode of speech or behavior to a pervasive attitude. The danger for readers is that in meaning everything irony may come to mean nothing; the concomitant critical hazard is that, as Wayne Booth remarks:

> Once we decide that against their conscious aims authors work their wonders, no critical hypothesis, however far from the writer's provable intentions inside the work or out, can be refuted; this in turn means that nothing can be proved, since no evidence is more relevant than any other.18

Irony is more pervasive in literature today, because of modern man's keen, even agonized awareness of multiple alternatives in almost every situation. Yet, though hyperconsciousness of the ironic mode can blur its precision and devalue its importance, irony is no amorphous quality in modern literature. We can isolate certain traits common to any literary irony, and hence work towards a definition of irony at least moderately adequate. This discussion will deal with the articulated ironic stance as artistic device, eschewing any treatment of a temperamentally ironic attitude in the author.


Every irony rests on a contrast, made available to the reader's inference but not explicit in the work of art, between appearance and reality, in itself or in other modulations: the ideal and the actual, statement and meaning, expectation and outcome. This contrast is not usually a simple reversal, as Gilbert Highet claims; rather, it is a complex and subtle utterance whose meaning emerges "in the intermingling of the positive affirmation contained in [the writer's] words with the negation of that affirmation implied by his tone."  

A further feature of irony is the divided response it evokes; as Alan Reynolds Thompson says,

I irony involves the contrast [of comedy] but not the playfulness; its effect is the emotional discord we feel when something is both funny and painful . . .  

In fact, he continues,

Contrasts which conform exactly to the objective definitions of irony are not ironical at all when they do not rouse these conflicting feelings . . .  


20 Benjamin DeMott, "The New Irony: Sickniks and Others," The American Scholar, XXXI (1962), 110. Andrew Wright goes further, claiming that an appearance-reality discrepancy does not fully explain all irony: " . . . The matter is not so simple: the ironist is not sure what is and what merely seems" ("Irony and Fiction," 113).  

21 The Dry Mock, p. 11.  

22 Ibid., p. 15.
Finally, he clarifies:

We may take sides: in comic irony, . . . on the side of the attack; in tragic and sentimental irony, on that of the victim. But we must feel both sides to feel the irony. 23

Irony always involves a victim. 24 This can conceivably be a character, like Oedipus; or the reader or implied auditor, as in oratory and some modern satire; more frequently, it is a combination of the two, as in most of Swift, and in modern ironists.

Finally, irony necessitates some sort of collusion between author and reader 25—even when the reader himself is the dupe—a "kind of collaboration" in which the reader provides "mature moral judgment," 26 or simply fuller knowledge than the characters possess.

Literary irony, then, is an artistic device based on an implied and multi-leveled contrast between appearance and reality. It is often aimed both at a character and at the reader; hence it evokes a divided response from that reader, and demands

23 Ibid., p. 20. Thompson's description would, I think, be more accurate if he had used a word like perceive or appreciate instead of feel; and so throughout his discussion. It is to avoid speaking of irony as a primarily emotional reaction that I have used the term divided response here, in contradistinction to Thompson's emotional discord and conflicting feelings. Chevalier, in The Ironic Temper, cites more features of this complex response: " . . . Consciousness of superiority by virtue of [the reader's] more complete knowledge, a satisfaction . . . intellectual, aesthetic and moral in the necessary completion of the dramatic pattern . . . " (p. 42).


his cooperation with the writer through the text.

The Ironic Pattern in
Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

Flannery O'Connor's irony has abundantly the characteristics listed above. First, it rests on a contrast, or contrasts. In Wise Blood, Hazel Motes appears to be a confirmed anti-Christian; in reality, as Sabbath says, he "'didn't want nothing but Jesus.'"27 This contrast is heightened by another: his own cross-grained blindness to the situation, coupled with the realization of even the ungodly—the taxi driver, Leora Watts, Asa Hawks and his daughter, Enoch Emery, and Mrs. Flood—that he is obsessed by the Jesus he preaches against. The contrast of expectation and outcome operates as well: Haze expects (and yet does not expect28) to continue preaching his Church Without Christ; at the end of the novel, even before his death in defeat, he "'can't preach any more'"29 because (he claims) of lack of time; and he is seen by the landlady as "going backwards to Bethlehem."30 In "A Late Encounter


28"'Where were you going to run off to?'" Sabbath asks. "'To some other city,' he said in a loud hoarse voice, 'to preach the truth! The Church Without Christ! And I got a car to get there in, I got . . . ' but he was stopped by a cough" (ibid., p. 103). Later, Haze, driving to the "other city," has "the sense that the road was really slipping back under him. He had known all along that there was no more country but he didn't know that there was not another city" (ibid., p. 112).

29Ibid., p. 120. 30Ibid., p. 119.
With the Enemy," the obvious appearance-reality contrast (General Sash's martial mien on the stage, though at the end he is dead) is intensifi ed in poignancy and ultimately in sardonic meaning by a deeper one (his dignified bearing and the glory of the past, as against his utter triviality and the final scene of his dead body waiting in line at the Coke machine). So it is throughout the stories: a character's self-image, or his illusions about life, are rudely jolted or (if he remains ignorant like General Sash) opposed by reality.

Even more strongly than irony's contrasts, Miss O'Connor's fiction exemplifies the divided response the device commands. The image of General Sash's corpse in the Coca-Cola line is in one sense an apt and keenly comic summary of his whole personality; but it is not only humorous. It is grotesque, and at least potentially pathetic; and it reaches beyond the surface dimension in its implicit judgment on the mindset touted in present-day advertising. "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" tells of the brutal self-seeking of two materialists, and the reader cannot be blind to its harsher side as the retarded deafmute, Lucynell Crater, is left stranded at The Hot Spot. At the same time, it is a very funny story, 31 and the ironically told events —

31 Especially in its use of wry understatement ("He seemed to be a young man but he had a look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly," p. 160); sharp characterizing dialogue (Mrs. Crater, trying to persuade Shiftlet to marry her daughter, says: "'You want an innocent woman, don't you? ... You don't want none of this trash.'

'No'm, I don't,' Mr. Shiftlet said.

'One that can't talk,' she continued, 'can't sass you back or use foul language. That's the kind for you to have. Right there,' and she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands," p. 166); and unlikely juxtapositions (Mrs. Crater is "ravenous for a son-in-law," p. 164; and she and Lucynell,
contain both humor and pathos/horror. The same is true of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 32 "Good Country People," 33 "A View of the Woods," 34 "The Comforts of Home": 35 comedy and catastrophe coexist, and intensify each other, through the

on their porch in the evening, rock "violently" in their chairs, Ibid.).

32 Where six people are shot in cold blood, yet even the foreshadowings of disaster are comic: the old lady wears "a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (p. 130).

33 Where, despite the perhaps fatal climax when the bible salesman departs with Joy's leg, leaving her helpless and possibly (with her heart condition) dying, even the terms of the story's situation have a mordant humor: the legless lady Ph.D. who prides herself on her sophistication and her atheism, but is bilked by an apparent salt-of-the-earth young man.

34 Which, though it ends in the violent, mutually caused deaths of Mark Fortune and his grand-daughter, is nevertheless comic in conception and expression. Old Mr. Fortune rationalizes his determination to sell the "lawn," the lot in front of the house, to be a gas station and general store: "Tilman would draw other business. The road would soon be paved. Travelers from all over the country would stop at Tilman's. If his daughter thought she was better than Tilman, it would be well to take her down a little. All men were created free and equal. When this phrase sounded in his head, his patriotic sense triumphed and he realized that it was his duty to sell the lot, that he must insure the future" (pp. 79-80).

35 Which also ends in disaster, as Thomas accidentally shoots his mother; yet even the sheriff's comment on this event is grimly funny ("he was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he had hoped to find them, but this one met his expectations," p. 130), as is Thomas' reaction when Star Drake (Sarah Ham) nicks her wrists in a bid for attention: "His first instant of hope that the girl had cut her throat faded as he realized she could not have done it and continue to scream the way she was doing" (p. 123).
operation of irony.

The most obvious victim of Flannery O'Connor's irony is the main character or characters—a self-deluded fanatic like Hazel Motes or Francis Tarpwater, or one of her many variations on the complacent, self-sufficient egotists: the grandmother, Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre, Julian, Mrs. May, Sheppard. But what intensifies the divided response is that the reader too is in some sense the ironic butt of the stories. The pomposity and pretense which cause these characters' downfall are the same qualities that often go undetected in real life, in the reader himself; hence his attitude to the irony in these stories cannot be wholly unself-conscious.

Moreover, the stories demand the reader's constant collaboration. He must follow them closely on every level, or he may miss, or misinterpret, the ironic point.

The title of this dissertation, and several comments up to this point, have emphasized the structural irony in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. There are, to be sure, many incidental ironies of speech or event. In "Good Country People," Mrs. Hopewell is suddenly disarmed by the simplicity of the young bible salesman she has been trying to get rid of:

"Why!" she cried, "good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go round. That's life!"
"You said a mouthful," he said. 36

The contrast between the quantitative fullness of Mrs. Hopewell's speech and its qualitative inanity makes the bible salesman's rejoinder ironically effective. A further irony is that his answer is in character for his "good country people" role, but can also be intended sarcastically by the really cynical young man. Finally, in an irony appreciated only in retrospect, the type of mindless categorizing her statement represents will be roundly defeated by the salesman's behavior. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury Fox is coming home to die (he thinks). As the car turns in at the driveway of his mother's dairy farm, a "small, walleyed Guernsey" is "watching him steadily as if she sensed some bond between them." 37 What this bond is appears at the end of the story when Asbury's "mortal" disease is revealed as undulant fever.

In both of these examples, as in most of the incidental ironies in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the irony does not stand alone, but belongs to a pattern pervasive in the story. The fact that Asbury, who thinks himself the suffering artist, has only "the same as Bang's in a cow," 38 is ironical; even more so is the fact that a walleyed Guernsey knows his fate, as it were, before he does. But, further, his illness is the indirect result of his delusions of artistic grandeur and his hazy condescending "brotherhood" towards the negroes in the dairy, and ultimately of his childish rebellion against his mother (gathering material for a play which never materialized,

38 ibid., p. 109.
Asbury had been working with the negroes. He insisted, against his mother's orders, on drinking fresh milk with them, though they would not follow his example. His very efforts at a literary career—and at escape from his mother—condemn him to a life at home, dependent on her, at the moment that he realizes his absolute failure.

It is the pervasive pattern of irony which this example illustrates that I have called structural: Flannery O'Connor starts with a situation or status quo, and proceeds systematically through the very framework of the story to reverse or demolish it. Often, as in "The Enduring Chill," this reversal coincides with the destruction of the protagonist's expectations. Sometimes it occurs through their fulfilment. In "The Life You Save," Mrs. Crater is "ravenous for a son-in-law," and Tom Shiftlet equally eager for a car. Both attain their goals (though Mrs. Crater's achievement is short-lived), but at such cost in human value as to render their success illusory. Mrs. McIntyre, in "The Displaced Person," wants to get rid of Mr. Guizac, the D.P., who "'upset the balance around here.'"39 She finally does—through his less than accidental death—and disintegrates physically and mentally.

In Flannery O'Connor's fiction, then, the irony is created by the total structure. Plot, character, diction, symbols, tone—the reversal operates on every level of the story. It was when she discovered the great peripeteia of Oedipus Rex,

while working on Wise Blood, \(^{40}\) that Miss O'Connor developed her technique of structural irony. It was the stylistic instrument most suited to her; \(^{41}\) she used it for the rest of her career.

**Flannery O'Connor and An Ironic Tradition**

Critics insist upon Flannery O'Connor's originality, \(^{42}\) her independence, despite appearances, of such real or imaginary schools as "Southern Gothic" or "grotesque." \(^{43}\) And it is true that just as her work seems to fit into one side of a categorical box, it escapes at the other. But no critic could or would claim that Miss

\(^{40}\) Robert Fitzgerald, introduction to Everything That Rises, p. xiii, says that Miss O'Connor first read the Oedipus plays in the summer of 1950, when she had reached an impasse in Wise Blood. Her subsequent reworking of the novel is instructive (see Chapter III, below).

\(^{41}\) See Chapter IV below, pp. 212-215.


O'Connor sprang full-fledged into the literary scene. Although she is not a
derivative writer, one can find influences and analogues for her work, particularly
with regard to her use of irony.

Flannery O'Connor herself spoke of her indebtedness to Hawthorne. He
may be called the beginning of the ironic tradition to which she belongs; after Haw-
thorne, the three most important are Nathanael West, Ring Lardner, and William
Faulkner. Irony is sophisticated and philosophical in Hawthorne and West; in
Lardner and Faulkner it apparently stems from a folk-humor tradition, though the
two streams are not so disparate as they seem. Though all four writers are im-
portant to any study of Flannery O'Connor, her irony is less similar to that of the
first two than appearances and critical claims would indicate. In fact, the influence
of all these men comes not from their overall use of irony, but from some particular
facet of the work of each which contributed to her own characteristic irony.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Flannery O'Connor's statement of relatedness to Hawthorne, as quoted by
Hawkes, is couched in general terms: "I think I would admit to writing what Haw-
thorne called 'romances.' . . . I feel more of a kinship with Hawthorne than with
any other American writer . . . ." 45

45 Ibid.; Hawkes' ellipses. See also her similar statements in a letter of
"What Hawthorne called romances" were works for which their author claimed "a certain latitude, both as to [their] fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel.\textsuperscript{46}

The romance,

while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the author's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture . . . . \textsuperscript{47}

It is significant that the point of similarity Flannery O'Connor sees between herself and Hawthorne should be the use, not of irony, but of romance. Not that Hawthorne does not employ irony extensively, irony of both statement and event; but far more important for Miss O'Connor was his reliance on romance, in his sense. A passage in her lecture "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature" recalls the statement of Hawthorne quoted above:

\begin{quote}
... The writer who writes within what might be called the modern
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
romance tradition may not be writing novels which in all respects partake of a novelistic orthodoxy, but as long as these works have vitality, as long as they present something that is alive, however eccentric its life may seem to the general reader, then they have to be dealt with, and they have to be dealt with on their own terms.

Nevertheless, Hawthorne's irony, both verbal and situational, is by no means unrelated to his use of romance; it adds to the moral dimension of his stories. The irony of statement often operates with the force of direct didactic comment; the irony of events, on the other hand, frequently intensifies a story's ambivalence. An example of the former case is the end of "The Gentle Boy," where Catharine, the child's mother, is described as

a being on whom the otherwise superfluous sympathies of all might be bestowed. Every one spoke of her with that degree of pity which it is pleasant to experience; ... and when at last she died, a long train of her once bitter persecutors followed her, with decent sadness and tears that were not painful ... Subtler, but no less uncompromising, is a passage in "Rappacini's Daughter."

Baglioni, the sometime confidant of Giovanni Guasconti, is not hindered in his zeal for "truth" by his envy of Rappacini. He brings a powerful antidote to Giovanni:

"We will thwart Rappacini yet," thought he, chuckling to himself, as he descended the stairs; "but, let us confess the truth of him, he is a wonderful man--a wonderful man indeed; a vile empiric, however, in his practice, and therefore not to be tolerated by those who respect the good old rules of the medical profession."

---


50 Ibid., p. 227.
(The antidote does "thwart" Rappacini, by killing his daughter Beatrice.) The politician in "The Great Stone Face" returns to his home territory during his presidential campaign:

Of course, he had no other object than to shake hands with his fellow citizens, and neither thought nor cared about any effect which his progress through the country might have upon the election.51

For the most part, Hawthorne's verbal irony, as in these three examples, is incidental and extrinsic to the stories. Not so with irony of events, which deepens and perplexes the meaning of the stories in which it occurs. Hawthorne uses irony of events most memorably in The Scarlet Letter, whose intensity, as R.H. Fogle notes, "comes in part from a sustained and rigorous dramatic irony, or irony of situation...[arising] naturally from the theme of 'secret sin,' or concealment..."52 Irony emerges not only from this concealment, from the enacted lies of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale which Fogle mentions, but also--perhaps especially--from the situation of Hester Prynne.

Maxwell Geismar can call Hester "the first authentic American heroine" in "a literature branded by the mark of the misogynist," and speak of "the brooding note of pity with which Hawthorne viewed those heroic women who were sacrificed...on the altar of masculine intentions."53 The fact is, however, that Hawthorne's

51 Ibid., p. 368.
description of Hester's development is not unequivocally favorable. He tells the reader that, without Pearl, Hester "might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect." This juxtaposition is no compliment. In his biographical sketch of Anne Hutchinson, Hawthorne describes her as "a woman of extraordinary talent and strong imagination, whom the latter quality, following the general direction taken by the enthusiasm of the times, prompted to stand forth as a reformer in religion."

In the American colonies, she soon began to promulgate strange and dangerous opinions, tending, in the peculiar situation of the colony, and from the principles which were its basis, to eat into its very existence.

At her trial, she stands loftily before her judge with a determined brow; and, unknown to herself, there is a flash of carnal pride half hidden in her eye, as she surveys the many learned and famous men whom her doctrines have put in fear.

The link with Anne Hutchinson is not Hawthorne's only criticism of Hester. When he indicates that Hester might have been like Mrs. Hutchinson had Pearl not been born, he continues: "But, in the education of her child, the mother's enthusiasm of thought had something to wreak itself upon."

Enthusiasm is usually a pejorative

54 Scarlet Letter, p. 171. She has already appeared at the end of Chapter 1, where Hawthorne conjectures that the rosebush outside the jail door, among other possible origins, may have "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door . . ." (Ibid., p. 48).


56 Ibid., pp. 179-180. 57 Ibid., p. 185. 58 Scarlet Letter, loc. cit.
term with Hawthorne, as it is in the first quotation from "Mrs. Hutchinson," above; the word would at any rate be rendered unfavorable by the verb phrase which ends the sentence.

Further, Hester's heart has lost out to her intellect as a result of her punishment: "The scarlet letter has not done its office." Yet even her intellect is not a reliable guide:

For years past she looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislature have established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church . . . . Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers, -- stern and wild ones, -- and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

Hence the praise of Hester as counselor and even as prophetess has an ironic double edge.

The climactic revelation by Dimmesdale is likewise shot through with irony, on several levels. Most obviously, the minister has reached the apex of his life:

an epoch of life more brilliant and full of triumph than any previous

59 See also, for example, the use of enthusiasm and enthusiast in "The Gentle Boy," Short Stories, pp. 34, 47 (on p. 47, in a contrast between Dorothy and Ibrahim's mother, the former is evidently "blameless"; but "the enthusiast, in her robe of sackcloth and girdle of knotted cord, had as evidently violated the duties of the present life and the future, by fixing her attention wholly on the latter"); and in "The Christmas Banquet," where the feast's effect is "either to sink the revellers in a deeper melancholy or elevate their spirits to an enthusiasm of wretchedness" (p. 288).


62 Ibid., p. 275. 63 Ibid., p. 276.
one, or than any which could thereafter be. He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts of intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of the whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days . . . .

At this summit of prosperity, Arthur Dimmesdale is a most miserable man, and is about to relinquish even his apparent well-being by openly confessing his sin. The irony of this contrast is heightened by the paragraph's last sentence: "Meanwhile [while Dimmesdale is preaching his magnificent Election sermon] Hester Prynne was standing by the scaffold of the pillory, with the scarlet letter still burning on her breast!".

Even Dimmesdale's confession itself is not free from irony. Instead of by humility, he is impelled by a kind of pride, as he proclaims himself the "one sinner of the world," and maintains that Hester's scarlet letter "is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart!". He seems almost to have lost sight of Hester, and his glorification of God sounds perilously like self-glorification:

"God knows; and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost forever! Praised by His name! His will be done! Farewell!"

---

64 Ibid., p. 261. 65 Ibid., p. 263. 66 Ibid., p. 267.
67 Ibid., p. 268. 68 Ibid., p. 269.
Hawthorne's later romances are less pervasively ironic than The Scarlet Letter. In The House of the Seven Gables, irony is evident chiefly in the treatment of Judge Pyncheon, especially in the strong though heavy-handed chapter about his death. The names in The Blithedale Romance are ironical, as Hyatt Waggoner notes. So is the fact that Hollingsworth, the would-be reformer of criminals, is at last the sole object of his own zeal; but Hawthorne de-emphasizes the irony here.

Irony could be the keynote in The Marble Faun, with its sharp contrasts of character (especially Hilda and Miriam, and the pre- and post-sin Donatello) and its inquiry as to the possibility of a felix culpa, but Hawthorne did not choose so to handle the story. In the tales, Hawthorne often let the irony of situation speak for itself, without unequivocal tonal reinforcement. This is the case with "The Ambitious Guest," "Young Goodman Brown," "Rappacini's Daughter," and Dr. Heidegger's Experiment, and with many others. Hence Martin Green seems to


70 Where the ambitious young man and the family who sheltered him are buried under an avalanche whose path they could easily have avoided, right after they have all listened to the young man's hopes for the future.

71 Whose central character is embittered for life by a witches' sabbath to which he goes (which may even have been a dream), attended by the most pious and reverend citizens of his town, and even by his young wife, Faith.

72 Where Giovanni, by his overly cautious and self-regarding attitude in his relationship with Beatrice, loses her permanently in death, as does the father who used her for experimentation.

73 Whose old people, briefly rejuvenated by Dr. Heidegger's elixir,
have a strong case against the irony in his depreciation of Hawthorne:

It is indeed obvious that it was Hawthorne's general policy to avoid committing himself on every issue, and to take up more than one attitude on it. But whether in any particular case this deserves the name of irony, must depend on whether there is any point made by the equivocation, and any evidence that the writer took responsibility finally for one of the alternatives. 74

Mr. Green's article has a certain sweeping authoritativness which is hard to oppose. However, his categorical statements show that his opposition to Hawthorne is perhaps more temperamental than literary: Hawthorne's perception of multiple possibilities becomes a "policy to avoid committing himself on every issue," and his equivocations lack "point." 75 Further, some of Mr. Green's examples work only removed from context, as he gives them. 76 It is true, however, that one cannot always tell, reenact all the youthful follies they might be supposed to have reconsidered.


75 Mr. Green uses an inapt example of what he considers pointless and careless equivocation: the scarlet letter in the sky. Hawthorne presents each alternative with apparently equal authority, so to Green he is inconsistent or mistaken. From Hawthorne's practice elsewhere, however, he may also be read as deliberately ironical in his assertion that the minister's vision of the "A" must be imputed "solely to the disease in his own eye and heart." (p. 30). If so, the equivocation, and the novel as a whole, gains greatly in "point."

76 Notably his quotation of the children of Boston: "Behold, verily . . . mud at them" (29). But what precedes this passage (omitted by Mr. Green) makes the mocking tone fairly evident: " . . . The children of the Puritans looked up gravely from their play—or what passed for play with these sombre little urchins,—and spake gravely one to another:—'Behold, verily, . . . '" _(Scarlet Letter_, p. 103).
particularly in the tales, when Hawthorne means his readers to take him ironically.

From the above description, Hawthorne's use of irony may well seem very different from Flannery O'Connor's. What then is the connection between the two? The fact that in Hawthorne--especially in *The Scarlet Letter*, where he achieves the closest union between form and meaning--irony is not merely a stylistic trait, as it is even in Fielding, or a temperament's approach to life, as in Sterne or Anatole France. Partaking of both of these, it is preeminently a form for an intense moral perception. The "romance" gives latitude for this moral preoccupation, operating through irony or through allegory. Hawthorne, as his career advanced, turned more and more to allegory; Flannery O'Connor, who "hope[d] she had "less reliance on allegory" 77 than Hawthorne, leaned progressively more in her stories upon irony.

Nathanael West

That some sort of affinity exists between Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West is a fairly common critical assumption. 78 One support of this attitude is Miss O'Connor's known admiration of West, whose *Miss Lonelyhearts* she recommended to her friends. Another is the fact that both use the violent and grotesque in their


work, as well as a humor which is at root intensely serious.\textsuperscript{79} In both writers, this comedy is often at the service of a deep and mordant irony. But similar techniques do not necessarily imply similar meanings; and the radically divergent philosophical positions of West and Miss O'Connor so color the total effect of the irony in each that to speak unqualifiedly of his influence on her can be misleading.

Ihab Hassan speaks of modern fiction in terms that indicate the ground of Flannery O'Connor's similarity to Nathanael West:

... Modern fiction is neither wholly tragic nor truly comic. Its affinity, rather, is with the grotesque which is pathetic and absurd and terrifying: its affinity is with nightmare ... Now the grotesque, I would submit, is a product of the ironic mode.\textsuperscript{80}

Hassan's next sentence, however, deals with an area where the two writers differ:

As there is a traditional tragic, and perhaps also a comic, catharsis, I would claim that there is a distinct ironic catharsis. The ironic catharsis consists of this: the recognition not only of irreconcilable conflicts but actually of absurdity.\textsuperscript{81}

Absurdity, or something very like it, may be the "kind of recognition that resides

\textsuperscript{79}Benjamin DeMott, in "The New Irony," speaks of the realization of many writers that "there is a significant relation between humor and a developed sense of the meaning of tragic suffering," and cites Reinhold Niebuhr's contention in "Humor and Faith" that "when issues beyond the immediate incongruities of life are raised, humor must 'move toward faith or sink into despair'" (117). Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West seem apt illustrations of Niebuhr's polarity.


\textsuperscript{81}Ibid.
at the center" of West's, though Hassan does not mention West among his illustrations. It is not a hallmark of Flannery O'Connor's work, despite Hassan's citation of Wise Blood as an example of the ironic catharsis.

Irony is demonstrably related to the grotesque as Hassan claims, in modern fiction at least. Further, because of the simultaneous presence in irony of contradictory elements, it is strongly bound to—and sometimes coextensive with—paradox. Thus a given irony may contain at least two impulses: one destructive, one regenerative. This is most obvious when the irony resides in the structure of events, as in Oedipus Rex, whose hero is unseeing until the tragic revelation which leads to his self-blinding; The Scarlet Letter and some of Hawthorne's shorter tales; Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, where irony-paradox is complex and multi-leveled, and most of Flannery O'Connor's stories, as will be discussed in Chapter III.

But West's ironies are not really paradoxes; their flow is one way, toward destruction. Miss Lonelyhearts finally embraces humanity in the person of Peter

---

82 Ibid. W. H. Auden, in his essay "Interlude: West's Disease," describes something blacker than absurdity, asserting that West came close to believing, with the Marquis de Sade, "that the creation is essentially evil and that goodness is contrary to its laws." The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 244.

83 As Chapter I has begun to indicate, and Chapter IV will contend.


85 Too much so to pinpoint here; the novel will be discussed in the section on Faulkner, below.

86 As Auden says, West "seems to believe that the only alternative to despair is to become a crook." "West's Disease," p. 243.
Doyle, but the embrace (at least its prolongation) is caused by his death at Doyle's hands. Tod Hackett's projected painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," is grimly and finally realized in the final actions of The Day of the Locust, especially in the apocalyptic riot scene with which the book ends. In A Cool Million, the long-suffering Lemuel Pitkin is apotheosized at last, but even his apparent victory after death is a further irony. The inaccurate and fatuous Lemuel Pitkin Song shows up, in context, both Pitkin's simple-mindedness and the corresponding disingenuousness of Shagpoke Whipple and his fascist supporters (and not only of the communists and "International Capitalists" he combats):

"Who dares?"--this was L. Pitkin's cry,  
As striding on the Bijou stage he came--  
"Surge out with me in Shagpoke's name,  
For him to live, for him to die!"  
A million hands flung up reply,  
A million voices answered, "I!"  

The book's last passage, Whipple's speech and the crowd's reaction, reveals definitively the perniciousness of Whipple's cause and the utter futility--and worse--of Pitkin's sufferings:

"But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph the country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American."

"Hail the martyrdom in the Bijou Theater!" roar Shagpoke's youthful hearers when he is finished.

"Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!"
"All hail, the American Boy!" 88

Although West's irony ultimately differs so profoundly from that of Flannery O'Connor, his ironic image-making has echoes in her fiction. Miss Lonelyhearts waits for Fay Doyle to undress:

She made sea sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call for him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her, she heaved, tidal, moon-driven.

Some fifteen minutes later, he crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf . . . 89

Leora Watts, who looks like Mrs. Doyle in size and shape, leaves Hazel Motes feeling "like something washed ashore on her." 90 Writing of the dreadful party Tod Hackett attends at the beginning of The Day of the Locust, West describes the sky: "Through a slit in the blue serge sky poked a grained moon that looked like an enormous bone button." 91 As Tarwater digs his great-uncle's grave, the sun "was like a furious white blister in the sky"; 92 and when Hazel Motes goes downtown to buy a car, the sky "was like a thin piece of polished silver with a dark sour-looking sun in one corner of it." 93

88 Ibid., p. 255.
89 Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, in Complete Works, p. 101.
The above examples illustrate also the propensity of both writers to describe the human as non-human, the animate as inanimate, and thus to intensify the comic and/or ironic effect of their images. Even in his earliest work, West writes of Balso: "Through the wood of his brain there buzzed the saw of desire." Shrike, whose very name is that of a predatory bird, buries "his triangular face like the blade of a hatchet" in his mistress' neck. Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike's employee, feels "as though his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion . . ."; and towards the end of the book, he feels in his hysteria that he has become "an ancient rock," steady and emotionless. Homer Simpson, in *The Day of the Locust*, gets out of bed "in sections, like a poorly made automaton," and thrusts his hands into the sink, where they lie "quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals." In his catatonic state near the end of the novel, Homer is "like a steel spring which has been freed of its function in a machine and allowed to use all its strength centripetally." Minor characters carry the same dehumanized images: to Tod Hackett, the dying Harry Greener's "worn, dry

---

94 Though the metaphor sometimes goes the other way, as with the tumescent obelisk in *Miss Lonelyhearts* (p. 89); the bull-as-lover in "Greenleaf" (pp. 45-46, 65); and the "guffawing peal of thunder" at the end of "The Life You Save" (p. 170).

95 *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, in *Complete Works*, p. 31.

96 *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 74. 97 Ibid., p. 82.

98 Ibid., p. 132; see also pp. 132-138.

99 Complete Works, p. 289. 100 Ibid., p. 403.
skin" looks "like eroded ground"; 101 after Harry's death, funeral arrangements are taken over by the officious janitress, Mrs. Johnson, who has a face "like a baked apple." 102

Flannery O'Connor's images look like West's. She writes of Mrs. Crater, "about the size of a cedar fence post," 103 and of Mrs. Shortley, who looks like a mountain. 104 She shows Julian's mother, in "Everything That Rises," "off on that topic"--the race question: "She rolled onto it every few days like a train on an open track." 105 Julian himself spends "most of his time" in the "inner compartment of his mind," 106 a "high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture." 107 But West's images have no regenerative element, and are neither amused nor amusing as Miss O'Connor's frequently are. They help to reinforce the pervasive tone of his work, a tone of violence and destruction muted only into desolation:

They went for a walk in the woods. It was very sad under the trees. Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death--rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush. 108

101 Ibid., p. 338. 102 Ibid., p. 341.
103 The Life You Save," p. 160. 104 See above, p. 15.
105 "Everything That Rises," p. 32.
106 Ibid., p. 35. 107 Ibid., p. 37.
108 Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 114. This is during the "restorative" trip to the country on which Betty takes Miss Lonelyhearts.
Although the only critical sanction for linking Flannery O'Connor and Ring Lardner is Robert Fitzgerald's inclusion of Lardner among those who were "close to her heart as a writer," the two writers do share a common ironic tradition. Whether or not their similarities can be traced to Miss O'Connor's direct and conscious reliance on Lardner, he is at least an indirect source. This is most strikingly apparent in both writers' ironic use of the vernacular to delineate character and situation. In both cases, the irony and dialect not only caricature, but also—and more radically—delimit a character's moral potential. In Lardner, the character so defined may be centrally the narrator, as in "I Can't Breathe," or the stories of You Know Me Al and Gullible's Travels, Etc.; or he may be a character the narrator describes, as in "My Roomy," "Hurry Kane," and "Haircut."
a combination of the two, as in "Mr. Frisbie" and "A Caddy's Diary." Where the vernacular is confined to the dialogue, as in "Champion," "The Maysville Minstrel," and "There Are Smiles," the story frequently bogs down in melodramatic didacticism or in sentimentality. Though Flannery O'Connor does not use a dialect narrator, her authorial voice often adopts the tone and style of the characters.

Despite this basic likeness, Lardner's stories are a personal statement in the manner of West, in a way that Flannery O'Connor's are not. No more hopeful than West, Lardner is less cataclysmic, more apparently trivial, in his subject matter. His horror is more low-keyed, and shown more in personal relations, than West's--though little less horrendous in final effect, in his best stories. But Lardner's stories have much more detachment than West's works, in which hysteria

120 Ibid., pp. 3-11. 121 Ibid., pp. 271-281.
122 Like "I Can't Breathe," or "The Love Nest" (Round Up, pp. 199-210), for example. "I Can't Breathe" unfolds as the diary of an 18-year-old "engaged" to three men at the same time (a fourth turns up at the end). The comic tone borders on farce, and thus prevents the reader from taking the girl too seriously as she plays each man for the emotional thrill he can give her but cannot tell any one of them the truth. A degree less of the farcical and, in her self-centeredness and complete lack of real concern for others, she would be monstrous. "The Love Nest" is unrelieved by farce as young Bartlett, a journalist at the home of the great Lou Gregg to gain material for a magazine piece on the movie magnate, discovers the truth about the "love nest" as Gregg's wife drunkenly reveals her real misery. The diurnal quality of Lardner's subject matter, as opposed to West's violent situations, intensifies the muted horror of the former's stories.
lies very close to the surface; and Flannery O'Connor is like Lardner in this trait as well.

A further point Lardner and Flannery O'Connor have in common is the early widespread critical opinion of their blackness and universal hatred. Clifton Fadiman started this trend in Lardner criticism with his 1933 *Nation* article about Lardner's misanthropy;\(^{123}\) his most notable supporter in fairly recent years has been Maxwell Geismar, who claims that Lardner "saw no way to help his characters; he could only despise them,"\(^{124}\) and that, "in a sort of compulsive design," he "created indestructible characters whom he vainly attempts to destroy."\(^{125}\)

As has happened with Flannery O'Connor, Lardner's later critics have been able to understand his irony as something quite different from a blanket hatred of society. Donald Elder, noting Lardner's disagreement with his "hatred" critics, adds, "As far as his stories are concerned it does not matter whether he hated people or their follies . . . ."\(^{126}\) Josephine Herbst maintains that Lardner never indulged in stinging diatribes against the human race. What he hated was the shoddy and pretentious. He did not sweep away

---

\(^{123}\) "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," CXXXVI (March 22), 315.


\(^{125}\) Ibid., p. 30.

\(^{126}\) As far as it goes, I can subscribe to this statement, but not to the second half of Elder's sentence: " . . . any more than it matters whether satire is motivated by indignation, ill temper, or sheer delight" (p. 318).
the solid as trivial or play around with mere verbal violence. 127

Walton R. Patrick claims that Lardner was "neither a 'mere humorist' nor a misanthrope," but "an acutely sensitive idealist disturbed by the deviations of the real world . . . from a better or more ideal world that might be possible if human beings were less prone . . . to self-delusion, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy", 128 and Howard W. Webb, Jr., urges: "We should dismiss the charges of misanthropy which have long been lodged against Lardner." 129

The ultimate difference between the irony of these two writers is Lardner's lack of the redemptive paradox. In "Now and Then," Irma, whose letters to "Dearest Esther" constitute the story, cannot solve her problem--the death of her husband's love for her--because she cannot or will not see that the problem exists. In "A Day With Conrad Green," the title character, a famous theatrical entrepreneur, shows himself to be bad-tempered, stingy, dishonest, and totally self-regarding, in a story which reveals the ironic contrast between Green's shoddy reality and the glamorous appearance. Yet there is no question of his realizing or suffering the consequences of his own meanness, as he would in a Flannery O'Connor story; he is merely presented.

127 Introduction, Gullible's Travels, Etc., p. xiii.


In many of the stories Lardner’s irony is exercised on the daily boredoms and irritations of married couples. "Anniversary" shows Mrs. Taylor and her husband on their ninth anniversary (for three years the day has been to Louis "just November the twelfth"\(^{130}\)). Louis is bored by cards; their radio is ailing and the piano has two broken keys; the local library has few recent books; and Louis will not go to movies or let his wife go out alone at night. "So Mrs. Taylor shuffled her cards [solitaire] and tried to listen when Louis read aloud from the Milton Daily Star or the Milton Weekly Democrat, or recounted stories she had heard six times before and would hear six times again."\(^{131}\) This sentence could be an apt summary of this story, as, with variations, of others: "Reunion," which is complicated by the presence of two couples from vastly different backgrounds (though Bob Mason and Rita Johnston are a long-separated borther and sister) who bore each other agonizingly until Bob and his wife invent a pretext for ending their visit; "Liberty Hall" and "Mr. and Mrs. Fix-It," each, on a different social level, the story of the petty tyranny of one couple over another, and "Who Dealt," the rattling monologue of a stupid young wife. Other stories, like "Some Like Them Cold," "Hurry Kane," and "My Roomy," chronicle the same pettiness and over-estimation of self; and some, like "Champion," about a vicious little prizefighter, downright rottenness. The same could be said about Miss O’Connor’s stories, but there are important differences between the two. One is that her characters move against a larger context: that of

\(^{130}\)Round Up, p. 283. \(^{131}\)Ibid.
man's place in the world, his relation to God and to other men. Lardner's characters move in relation only to other men, in and for this story, as their frequent anecdotal construction can attest. Another difference between the two is that, whatever their nastiness, the characters of a Flannery O'Connor story finally face it, as in "Revelation," where Mrs. Turpin is told by the crazed girl that she is "a wart hog. From hell, and comes to understand her essential poverty, or "Everything That Rises," at whose conclusion Julian knows he is the at least indirect cause of his mother's stroke. This realization or confrontation with violence reveals to the characters or to the reader the dimension of God's action. No realization, no larger dimension, no regeneration mark Lardner's stories. Though they are not utterly without affirmation, his only solution to human meanness is man's unsupported ability, occasionally realized, to see clearly and solve his own problem. In Lardner, such success is rare, for any regeneration must be self-accomplished.

132 "Haircut" is a barber's story to his current customer about the recently dead town joker; "Hurry Kane" and "Alibi Ike" are stories about a baseball player, told by a fellow team member; "Horseshoes" and "Harmony," baseball stories as told to the team's reporter; and "Liberty Hall" about a couple's visit to the Thayers', as told by the wife. "Reunion" begins, "This is one about a brother and sister and the sister's husband and the brother's wife" (Round Up, p. 293); "Rhythm," "This story is slightly immoral, but so, I guess, are all stories based on truth" (Ibid., p. 347); and "Sun Cured," "It seems there were two New Yorkers . . ." (Ibid., p. 437).

Because of Faulkner's stature and creative longevity, no young Southern writer can escape comparison with the older man. For the same reason, few young American novelists of whatever region are completely untouched by Faulkner's influence, even if the response takes the form of a revolt. Flannery O'Connor is no exception to Faulkner's sway. His ironic mode of perception was congenial to her, and she was certainly conscious of his importance and his power:

When there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more than ever careful that he isn't just doing badly what has already been done to completion. The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.

The above passage shows that Flannery O'Connor was determined to avoid imitation; yet, though there is radical dissimilarity even in the likenesses, certain common concerns and techniques produce some unmistakable Faulknerian echoes in her fiction. Though Miss O'Connor was demonstrably impressed by much of Faulkner,  

134 Noted by Richard Chase, who says that to write The Sound and the Fury a writer needed a sense of the past, but also "a modern mind--... a divided, realistic, ironic mind with a sense of the tragedy of history" (The American Novel and its Tradition [London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd. (1957)], p. 220); and John Edward Hardy, who describes Faulkner, with Robert Penn Warren and F. Scott Fitzgerald, as giving the "American Dream" a treatment "consistently ironic, with the emphasis on 'dream'..." (Man in the Modern Novel [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964], p. 214).

the work which her own most strikingly recalls is the trenchantly ironic *As I Lay Dying*. 136

The most obvious reminiscence in Flannery O'Connor's work of *As I Lay Dying* is the presence of what might be called coffin jokes, with the same serio-comic-ironic treatment of death and burial as that of the funeral quest in the Faulkner novel. 137 Underlying this handling of death is a mingling of comedy and terror characteristic of both Faulkner and Miss O'Connor—indeed, of the ironic mode in general138—and a feeling for the experience of dying as a kind of paradigm of the experience of living. Further, the farcical element and ultimate failure or futility present in the Bundren family's journey to Jefferson and in Flannery O'Connor's stories shows the working of the ironic pattern in both writers. But with a difference:

---

136 Vintage Books (New York: Random House, n.d.). See Fitzgerald's statement, introduction, p. xii, that this work and Miss Lonelyhearts were the only two she ever "urged" on him; also Melvin J. Friedman's discussion of the parallels, and his citing of the critics who handle them, in his introduction to *The Added Dimension*, pp. 27-28.

137 For example: Hazel Motes' comic recollections of his grandfather, father, and two little brothers (*Wise Blood*, p. 15), and later of his mother (*ibid.*, p. 19), in their coffins; his reminiscence about the side-show woman in the coffin (*ibid.*, pp. 37-38); the interchange between Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save," after she has asked whether he will mind sleeping in the car:

"'Why listen, lady,' he said with a grin of delight, 'the monks of old slept in their coffins!'

'They wasn't as advanced as we are,' the old woman said" (p. 164); the passage about Mason Tarwater's coffin in *The Violent*, pp. 311-312; and Tanner's fantasies about having himself shipped home, in "Judgement Day," pp. 221, 223.

As I Lay Dying is concerned, not primarily to reverse or destroy a situation, but to reveal how different it is, in both process and outcome, from appearance and expectation.

The novel details the Bundrens' odyssey, their bringing Addie Bundren's body to Jefferson for burial in fulfilment of Anse's promise to her. They meet many obstacles: Cash's leg is broken and their mule team drowned when they try to ford a flood-swollen river; the no-account Anse sells Jewel's horse to pay for another team and thus almost loses Jewel; with the heat and the delay, the corpse's presence becomes daily more obvious; finally, the coffin narrowly escapes being consumed in an "accidental" barn fire, the night before the family's arrival in Jefferson.

They do arrive at last, and bury Addie (though the actual burial, the ostensible focal point of the plot, is passed over). Darl, the second son, the "one folks talks about," 139 is arrested for setting the fire and taken to the state asylum at Jackson. Anse Bundren buys some store teeth and finds a new wife, and the family prepares to return home.

But this bare plot outline is not the novel. The story emerges through fifty-nine short sections, the monologues of fifteen speakers. It accumulates slowly, piecemeal, and on many levels, in the same way as consciousness. Gradually, the reader realizes that almost every member of the family has an ulterior reason for

139 As I Lay Dying, p. 107.
going to Jefferson: Anse, to get his false teeth; Cash, to "buy that talking machine" and demonstrate his craftsmanship; Dewey Dell, to have an abortion; and Vardaman, to buy a toy train he once saw in a shop window. The only one with real, disinterested feeling for Addie Bundren is Jewel, who rages at the novel's beginning because the rest of the family is "burning hell" to have his mother dead and to Jefferson; but Jewel is seen almost exclusively from the outside, except for his one short section at the outset. Darl sees everyone with penetrating insight, but he is troubled by the problem of his own being:

I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not . . . . Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am_is.

Further, keen-sighted as he is, Darl cannot mourn for his mother, whom he habitually calls Addie Bundren: "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother." Darl, whose second sight is well documented, visualizes Anse immediately after Addie's death: "Pa breathes with a quiet, rasping sound, mouthing the snuff against his gums. 'God's will be done,' he says. 'Now I can get them teeth.'" (p. 51). Later, Anse himself: "But now I can get them teeth. That will be a comfort. It will" (p. 105).


144 Ibid., p. 76; see also pp. 135, 156, 196-197.

145 Ibid., pp. 4, 39, 48, 102, 123, 137, 138, 142, 172, 212.

146 Ibid., p. 89. Addie herself verifies Darl's statement; Darl is one of the "three children that are his [Anse's] and not mine" (p. 168).
Not all of the initial situations are reversed: Anse Bundren does get his new teeth and new wife (the two belong, as Faulkner has created Anse's character, in virtually the same category), and Cash, if only vicariously, has his "graphophone." But Darl is finally a prisoner of his schizophrenia; Jewel loses his horse, a kind of surrogate for his mother; Dewey Dell more than fails to get help for her "female trouble"; and Vardaman cannot even go to see whether his train is still in the store window. Still, at the end of the novel, whether in resignation or despair, all the remaining children except Jewel are able to settle for a bagful of bananas.

Darl in his hysteria sees or senses them:

There is about it [the wagon] that unmistakable air of definite and imminent departure that trains have, perhaps due to the fact that Dewey Dell and Vardaman on the seat and Cash on a pallet in the wagon bed are eating bananas from a paper bag. "Is that why you are laughing, Darl?"

Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams.

"Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes..."

147 "Jewel's mother is a horse," Darl says (p. 89), and, "Your mother was a horse, but who was your father, Jewel?" (p. 202).

148 Ibid., pp. 190, 133.

149 Early in the novel, Vardaman quotes and rejects Dewey Dell's offer of bananas instead of the toy train (p. 63). At the end, he looks forward to eating the bananas (p. 240), and is described as doing so by Cash (p. 249) as well as by Darl. Tull, before the disastrous ford crossing, says of the Bundrens: "Just going to town. Bent on it. They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas" (p. 133).

150 Ibid., p. 244.
There is more absurdity for Darl to laugh at, if he knew all the facts. He has guessed that Jewel is not Anse's son, but has not realized that Jewel's father is Whitfield, the preacher. Even more ironically, Whitfield is, unbeknownst to Addie, the very kind of person she despises, "to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too."\textsuperscript{151} In addition, Jewel, the one in the family whom others malign as an unnatural son, unloving to his mother,\textsuperscript{152} is the very one who fulfills Addie's prophecy to Cora:

He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me.\textsuperscript{153}

The novel's ultimate irony is that the entire grueling trip is unnecessary; it flows from an act of cupidity on Anse's part (and, to a lesser degree, Cash's and Vardaman's as well), of desperation on Dewey Dell's part, and of "revenge" on Addie's.\textsuperscript{154} This irony, on which the structure depends, is akin to Flannery O'Connor's, as is that which operates through the self-portrayal of the speakers.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 168. The truth about Whitfield appears in his section, pp. 169-171, which immediately follows Addie's words quoted above.

\textsuperscript{152} Cora, pp. 20, 23, 159; Dewey Dell, p. 24; Anse, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 160.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., pp. 164-165.

\textsuperscript{155} Through dialogue especially; not through such passages of Faulknerese as Darl's "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dead dolls" (Ibid., pp. 96-97).
But Faulkner, though he has "[his] roots in the Southern Fundamentalist tradition of heaven and hell, God and the Devil, sin and salvation," separates artistry from faith in a way that Flannery O'Connor cannot. His irony is not paradoxical in any Christian sense—despite the dead woman who "lay dying," and the "insane" son who is the sanest one of the group—because redemption, or regeneration, is not operative in his work; man is an ultimate. This is not a criticism of Faulkner, any more than it was of Lardner or West; the difference is a matter of philosophy and temperament, as much as of technique.

Conclusion

This chapter first attempted to trace the evolution of irony in literature, and the term's accretion of meanings until at present it signifies an artistic device based on an implied and multi-leveled contrast between appearance and reality, which is often aimed both at a character and at the reader, and hence evokes a divided response from the reader and demands his co-operation with the writer through the text. The chapter then moved to a brief discussion of the ironic pattern in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, whereby she starts with a situation or status quo, and proceeds systematically through the very framework of the story to reverse or demolish it. Finally, the chapter turned to a consideration of the ironic tradition to which Miss

O'Connor belongs, and to the writers--Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nathanael West, Ring Lardner, and William Faulkner--each of whom, in some particular facet of his work, has contributed to Miss O'Connor's characteristic irony. The next chapter will study the operation of this irony in Flannery O'Connor's two novels and in some of her short stories. The chapter will confine itself to analysis, leaving conclusions about the irony's relationship to Miss O'Connor's vision of life for Chapter IV.
In Chapter II, Flannery O'Connor's characteristic structural irony was described as the destruction or reversal of a situation on many levels of a story--plot, character, diction, symbol, tone. The business of this chapter will be to analyze the operation of this irony in Miss O'Connor's two novels and in some of her short stories: "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "A Circle in the Fire," and "Good Country People," from her first collection; and "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Revelation," "Parker's Back," and "Judgement Day," from her second.  

Wise Blood

The ironic pattern of Wise Blood emerges partly in the plot. The original

---

1 The principle governing the selection of these stories has been their representativeness, not their reinforcement of this dissertation's claims. For example: the first five stories in Everything That Rises deal with parent- (or grandparent-) child tensions. "The Enduring Chill" has already been discussed to some extent in the first two chapters (see above, pp. 20, 34-35); of the remaining four stories, "Everything That Rises," the briefest by five pages and the most obvious perhaps in its structure and symbolism, illustrates the same tendencies as the
situation there reversed is that of a young man, a professed truth-seeker, attempting to escape from the truth. Unconsciously acknowledging and serving Christ, he tries to deny that Jesus is redeemer, in a desperate effort to assert and preserve his own freedom. Hazel Motes, who has early possessed a "deep black wordless conviction" that "the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin," manages to do neither. He becomes "member and preacher" of the Church Without Christ, yet is obsessed by the apparently dedicated servant of God, Asa Hawks. He kills the hired Prophet of a rival church because he "ain't true," but his own disbelief is no more authentic. Realizing almost immediately the futility of this act and of his preaching, Haze blinds himself, thus dramatizing his admission of the truth of his grandfather's prophecy:

That boy had been redeemed, and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed. What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end!

But the irony comes through in much more than plot outline. A comparison others. Each of the other three stories chosen from this second collection exemplifies at least one characteristic which the others do not; and a similar analysis could be made of the stories chosen from A Good Man.

See Wise Blood, pp. 34, 60, 68, 69, 78, 79, 81, 84, 85, 90, 103, 110, 111.

Ibid., p. 16. Ibid., p. 60. Ibid., p. 110.

"He had the sense that the road was really slipping back under him. He had known all along that there was no more country but he didn't know that there was not another city" (Ibid., p. 112).

Ibid., p. 16.
of early published versions of three chapters of *Wise Blood* with the chapters in their final form shows the kinds of changes—in character definition, diction, symbol, and tone—which Miss O'Connor made after the ironic reversal had taken shape in her mind.

The earliest published section, Chapter 1 of *Wise Blood*, appeared in the April, 1948 issue of the *Sewanee Review* as "Train." The difference between this story and the final version is immense. "Train" begins:

Thinking about the porter, he had almost forgotten the berth. He had an upper one. The man in the station had said he could give him a lower and Haze had asked didn’t he have any upper ones; the man said sure if that was what he wanted, and gave him an upper one. Leaning back on the seat, Haze had seen how the ceiling was rounded over him. It was in there. They pulled the ceiling down and it was in there, and you climbed up to it on a ladder.

Hazel Wickers, the story's protagonist, is here revealed as a naive, timid country youth. He hesitates to talk to the porter; when his seat partner, Mrs. Wallace Ben Hosen, asks whether he is going home, "'Oh!' Haze said, startled--I get off at, I get off at Chattanooga." When Mrs. Hosen's curiosity extends further:

"I don't rightly know, I was there but . . . this is just--this is just the third time I been at Chattanooga," he said quickly-- . . . "I ain't been since I went there when we were little . . . . Once I seen a circus there but not . . . ." . . . "I got to see the porter a minute," he said and escaped down the aisle. He didn't know what he'd say to the porter.

Hazel's timidity increases during his conversation with Mrs. Hosen and his trip to

---

8 *LVI*, 261-271.  
the diner, both of which are largely reported rather than dramatized. No hint appears of a sardonic disposition, or of his opinions on Jesus, or plans for the future; nor is any reference made to his eyes. He has a somnolecent dream about his mother in her coffin, but about no other member of the family.

In the final version, Chapter 1 of *Wise Blood*, the author remains outside her characters, revealing them through style, tone, and the details she selects, rather than through interior monologue. The opening paragraph contrasts sharply with that of "Train":

Hazel Motes sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car. The train was racing through the tree tops that fell away at intervals and showed the sun standing, very red, on the edge of the farthest woods. Nearer, the plowed fields curved and faded and the few hogs nosing in the furrows looked like large spotted stones.  

About this protagonist, Hazel Motes, there is no timidity. He ignores the probing of his seat partner, Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, whose attention is arrested by his eyes as much as by the price tag on his new suit. When she finally asks outright, "Are you going home?"

He looked at her sourly and gripped the black hat by the brim. "No, I ain't," he said in a sharp high nasal Tennessee voice.

"Going to Taulkinham," he said and ground himself into the seat and looked at the window. "Don't know nobody there, but I'm going to do some things. "I'm going to do some things I never have done before," he

---

said and gave her a sidelong glance and curled his mouth slightly.

Mrs. Hitchcock said she knew a man who lived in Chi.

"You might as well go one place as another," he said. "That's all I know." 13

Both with Mrs. Hitchcock and with the women in the diner, Haze's concern with redemption, and something of the unorthodox nature of his preoccupation, make their appearance; his past history is given as a flashback while Haze is lying in his upper berth. This flashback twice mentions the bible and the glasses which recall his mother and his suppressed faith, 14 and gives the details of his conversion to nothing (at least, as he would like to think). After Haze's army acquaintances tell him he "didn't have any soul,"

He took a long time to believe them because he wanted to believe them. All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it once for all . . . . He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there. When he was thoroughly convinced, he saw that this was something that he had always known. The misery he had was a longing for home; it had nothing to do with Jesus. 15

This passage establishes the self-deceptive nature of Haze's faithlessness as a kind of measuring rod for interpreting subsequent events, 16 and thus sets up the irony of his preaching and of his final failure. The chapter as a whole presents a Hazel who can believably preach the Church Without Christ and, when all other


16 One of the earliest so to be given ironic point is Haze's reaction, quoted above (p. 9) when after his coffin dreams Haze feels "closed up" in his upper berth, and hangs in the opening saying "Jesus, Jesus" (Wise Blood, p.19).
avenues are closed to him, blind-himself. The style and tone, too, are now adapted to irony; in place of the subjective emphasis on consciousness and feeling conveyed by "Train," Chapter 1, objective, focuses attention on action and appearance. This stress on the objects of perception helps to introduce and define the symbol of vision discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. 17

Chapter 3 of Wise Blood originally appeared in the Partisan Review for December, 1949, as "The Peeler." This chapter is not a complete recasting of the original, like Chapter 1, but an emended version; it is like the original, word for word, in a number of passages; whose similarity in other respects makes the alterations stand out all the more clearly. These changes are of several kinds. Some are the type one makes in a second draft: a phrase tightened, a formerly vague or general passage made concrete, 18 or a distractingly specific one made general. 19

17 Above; pp. 9-10 refer to Chapter 1 of Wise Blood. In addition to the points discussed above, the first three paragraphs of Wise Blood increasingly emphasize eyes. Hazel Motes looks at the window and down the aisle. He looks at Mrs. Hitchcock, then stares along the car again. He "didn't answer her or move his eyes from whatever he was looking at," and finally Mrs. Hitchcock becomes fascinated by Haze's eyes (p. 9).

18 In "The Peeler," the author merely says that the blind man, there Asa Shrike, has "a peculiar boiled looking red face" (1191); in Wise Blood, "His cheeks were streaked with lines that looked as if they had been painted on and had faded. They gave him the expression of a grinning mandrill" (p. 25).

19 The demonstrator in "The Peeler" has set up his table in front of a Lerner's Dress Shop; in Wise Blood, he is in front of "a department store"(p. 24).
A second group of changes is directed at intensifying meaning. A third group prepares structure and tone for the novel's ironic reversal, as a look at some of the alterations will show.

One such change is the introduction of the blind man's scars. They appear at first to be lines on his face; when the blind man comes close to Hazel, Haze "leaned forward and saw that the lines on his face were not painted on; they were scars." A further small alteration occurs later, after Haze and Enoch Emery have followed Hawks and Sabbath. The blind man and Hazel argue about whether or not Haze is called by Jesus. The argument ends with a play on blindness and vision. In the original story:

"I can see more than you!" the blind man shouted. "You got eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but Jesus'll make you see!"

20 Wise Blood adds a passage to the first paragraph of the original story: "The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky" (p. 24). In "The Peeler," the blind man and his child are both handing out "Jesus Calls You" leaflets and doing nothing else (1190-1191). In Wise Blood only Sabbath distributes the leaflets; her father, tin cup in hand, "was moving forward slowly, saying in a kind of garbled mutter, 'Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Help a blind unemployed preacher. Wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach?'" (p. 26). The first passage sets the action in a philosophical framework and at the same time parodies existentialist postures; the second, besides its sharp satire, gives clarity and intensity to the picture of Hawks.

21 See n. 17, above, p. 68


In the final version:

"I can see more than you!" the blind man yelled, laughing. "You got eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but you'll have to see some time." 24

Actions such as Hawks' laughing, and his saying a moment earlier, "'Jesus loves you,' in a flat mocking voice, 'Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you... '" 25 contribute to his position in the novel as ironic conscience and alter ego to Haze (both despite and because of his fraudulence). The words, "'You'll have to see some time,'" while not drastically different in meaning from "'Jesus'll make you see,'" emphasize the inevitability of a reversal.

The most important change is the addition of Haze's speech, which both inaugurates his preaching and church-founding career and presages his ultimate defeat. In the original story, Haze, with a stack of "Jesus Calls You" pamphlets to distribute, waits at the top of the steps of an auditorium as the crowd surges out. Overcome, Haze says only "'Sweet Jesus Christ Crucified,'" and runs down the steps and across the street. 26 In the final version, Haze stands in the departing crowd:

"Sweet Jesus Christ Crucified," he said, "I want to tell you people something. Maybe you think you're not clean because you don't believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you that. ... Listenhere, I'm a preacher myself and I preach the truth. ... Don't I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man? Listenhere," he called, "I'm going to preach a new church--the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified. It won't cost you nothing to join my church. It's not started yet but it's going to be." 27

24 Wise Blood, p. 33. 25 Ibid. This is also a change; rather, an insertion.

26 "The Peeler," 1200-1201. 27 Wise Blood, p. 34.
Chapter 5 of Wise Blood also appeared first in the 1949 Partisan Review--in February, as opposed to December for "The Peeler"--where its title was "The Heart of the Park." The alterations in the final version are very few and slight compared with those in the chapters already considered. Only one change, or set of changes, is of any significance; it is a curious one. In "The Heart of the Park," the waitress at the FROSTY BOTTLE repeatedly calls Haze "clean," as opposed to "that son of a bitch," Enoch Emery. At the end of her tirade, Hazel Weaver leans "on his hands over the counter until his face was just a foot from hers." "I ain't clean," he says to her twice, and repeats "I ain't clean" to an owl in the zoo. The corresponding section of Wise Blood's Chapter 5 follows the same sequence, except for Hazel Motes' words: "I AM clean." To the waitress he adds, in a sentence not in the earlier version, "If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean." At the end of the novel, Haze's landlady discovers his penitential practices--glass and stones in his shoes, barbed wire around his chest. "'What do you do it for?'" she asks. "'I'm not clean,'" Haze answers.

"I know it," she said after a minute, "you got blood on that night shirt and on the bed. You ought to get you a washwoman...."

"That's not the kind of clean," he said.

"There's only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes," she muttered.

---

28 "Heart of the Park," 145; seven times.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 146.
32 Ibid., 148.
33 Wise Blood, pp. 53, 55; emphasis Miss O'Connor's.
34 Ibid., p. 53. Italics mine.
The landlady draws the conclusion warranted by Haze's actions (and, in the "clean" sequence, by a comparison of this passage with the FROSTY BOTTLE one): "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things."36

These three chapters show how Flannery O'Connor reshaped her material, in accordance with a conception increasingly ironic after she had read the Oedipus plays. This kind of evidence is not available for the rest of the novel, but the ironic pattern is discernible and eminently worth examination. The seeds of ironic reversal are already present in Chapter 1, especially in Haze's encounter with the women on the train and the flashback to his conversion, where his obsession with Jesus and his self-deception emerge most clearly. In Chapter 2, the contretemps with the taxi driver provides an early example of others' recognition that Haze "didn't want nothing but Jesus": despite Haze's repeated denials, the driver is unshaken in his certainty that the boy is a preacher.

The turning point, the ironic reversal, is Hazel Motes' realization (or admission), after he kills Layfield, of what even obtuse observers like the taxi driver had seen all along. But the murder is not the only catalyst; from the time when, before the novel's action begins, Haze studies his soul and persuades himself--almost--that it does not exist, all his actions move toward the reversal. At the end of Chapter 1 Haze goes to Leora Watts' house. After only two nights with Mrs. Watts, Haze leaves her bed abruptly to buy his car. Stanley Edgar Hyman says:

36 Ibid. See also Hazel's first speech, quoted above, p. 76.
The Essex is Haze's religious mystery: It is Woman (the salesman asks him "would you like to get under and look up it"), Ordination (Haze preaches No Jesus from its hood, as his grandfather had preached Jesus from the hood of his car in Haze's childhood), and Redemption ("Nobody with a good car needs to be justified," Haze tells Sabbath Lily ... ).

The observation is interesting, but it ignores the connection between Leora Watts and the car: each successively is his attempt to replace, and so escape, Jesus. As he later extols the all-sufficingness of a "good car," so he boasts, in Chapter 3, "What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts." Yet his experience with Leora Watts, together with his meeting with Asa Hawks, leaves him with a sense of sin which he tries fruitlessly to exorcise with his repeated "I AM clean." The Essex is in the last stages of decrepitude, but Haze insists, "This is a good car . . . . I knew when I first saw it that it was the car for me, and since I've had it, I've had a place to be that I can always get away in." 

Leora Watts was not sufficient, and despite Hazel's protests, the car is no more adequate. Enoch Emery hears him preach one night:

What you need is something to take the place of Jesus . . . .
The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new jesus! It needs one that's all man, without blood to waste, and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll

37 Flannery O'Connor, p. 10.
38 Wise Blood, p. 64.
39 Ibid., p. 34.
40 Ibid., p. 65. The contrast, or contradiction, between the static nature of a "place to be" and the unconscious eagerness to escape implied in the rest of Haze's sentence, emphasizes his self-deception and foreshadows the reversal.
look at him. Give me such a jesus, you people. Give me such a new jesus and you'll see how far the Church Without Christ can go!41

This search for a new jesus, though Haze insists it is only a metaphor, 42 has become an obsession. But his situation is rapidly decaying. Hoover Shoats invades his territory with the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ ("'It don't make any difference how many Christs you add to the name if you don't add none to the meaning, friend'"").

The same night, Haze discovers that Asa Hawks is no more "true" than Shoats. The next day, he sees Solace Layfield, whom he himself recognizes as a kind of conscience.44 When he returns home, Haze finally succumbs to Sabbath because she says:

"That innocent look don't hide a thing, [you're] just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and [you] don't. Yes sir!" she said. "I like being that way, and I can teach you how to like it. Don't you want to learn how to like it?"45

Haze does, 46 but this attempt is no more successful than the others.

41Ibid., p. 78.  
42Ibid., p. 87.  
43Ibid., pp. 86-87.

44Before seeing Layfield, Haze had been preaching: "'Your conscience is a trick, it don't even exist, even though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you'" (Ibid., pp. 90-91). After Layfield appears a woman asks, "'Him and you twins?'" Haze answers: "'If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you . . .'" (p. 91).


46Irving Malin's statement that "the narcissistic children set up housekeeping" (New American Gothic, p. 65) is as inaccurate as his contention that Sabbath is a "woman who poses as a child" (Ibid., p. 64). The former term is much too formal for their situation; if the latter were true, Sabbath would hardly have submitted to being sent to a "detention home" (Wise Blood, p. 117).
During the two days he accepts her, he is given--and rejects--Enoch Emery's new jesus. The next day he kills Layfield and, after spending the night in his car, sets out on his last abortive journey. He realizes that there is no more running away, and, so realizing, blinds himself. This is fitting symbolically, and compatible with Haze's earlier behavior; it may be the sign, and is at least the accompaniment, of the action of grace. Hence Robert Detweiler is beside the point in saying that Haze's moment of grace comes when, back at the boarding house, sick, helpless, and trying madly to exorcise his guilt through self-torture, he receives an offer from Mrs. Flood, his landlady, to marry him and care for him. That final gesture of mercy is lost upon him.

The gesture of divine mercy here operates from Hazel Motes to Mrs. Flood in what seems finally to be her conversion, not in the opposite direction. Although Mrs. Flood's motives undergo some purification, they hardly spring from mercy:

He didn't use tobacco or drink whisky; there was nothing for him to do with all that money but lose it, since there was only himself.

Her first plan had been to marry him and have him committed to the state institution for the insane, but gradually her plan had become to marry him and keep him. Watching his face had become a habit

---

47 After his blindness he only tolerates her, and would "pay her to stay away" (Ibid.).

48 As has been noted in Chapter I above, pp. 9-10.


50 Wise Blood, p. 119.
with her; she wanted to penetrate the darkness behind it and see for herself what was there. 51

The mercy, in the end, has worked upon her:

"I knew you'd come back," she said [to the dead Motes]. And I've been waiting for you. And you needn't to pay any more rent but have it free here, any way you like, upstairs or down. Just however you want it and with me to wait on you, or if you want to go on somewhere, we'll both go."52

"A Good Man is Hard to Find"

This story has not one but a number of ironic reversals. A family of six starts from Atlanta to Florida on a vacation; before the end of that day, the end of the vacation has come in death at the hands of an escaped homicidal maniac and his henchmen. This is the most obvious of the reversals, but the others are equally important. Some of these operate chiefly on the story level; they reinforce the most basic reversals, which cut beneath plot to the central action and meaning.

A second reversal, apparently trivial, involves the deceptive fulfilment of wishes. The grandmother wants to go to East Tennessee; in one sense the family

51 Ibid., p. 123.

52 Ibid., p. 126. In the long run then, it is oversimplification to say, as Jonathan Baumbach does, that Mrs. Flood is "evil and voracious like most of the characters in Miss O'Connor's world" ("Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor," in The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary Novel [New York: New York University Press (1965)], p. 97). She is not outstandingly "good" or "evil"; but she is at the end the single witness (and, perhaps, companion?) of Hazel Motes' redemption.
arrives there, because, as the grandmother remembers with disastrous effect, the house she has set Bailey looking for is "not in Georgia but in Tennessee." This fact is connected to a further reversal. The grandmother wants to stay out of Florida because "this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida," and yet the family's fatal encounter with The Misfit is owing to her (all the more so because her solicitude to avoid The Misfit is really the desire to go to East Tennessee). Further, the grandmother is, or thinks she is, a "good woman"--as, with reservations, does The Misfit--and yet she, egotistic and small-minded, is responsible for the catastrophe. On the other hand, The Misfit, homicidal maniac though he is, is nevertheless God's "agent in the secular world"; he brings about the grandmother's moment of grace, her realization that The Misfit is "one of [her] own children."

---


55 As Irving Malin says somewhat oversimplifiedly: "... Ironically, the flight from trouble leads to it" (New American Gothic, p. 121). Oversimplifiedly, because the grandmother's plea to avoid Florida is not a flight from trouble except in pretext; the real irony involves the moral dimensions of selfishness and self-deception.

56 The story begins: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in East Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind" (Ibid.).

57 "She would of been a good woman,' The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life'" ("A Good Man," p. 143).

A deeper reversal occurs, in the terms of the story's title. The grandmother, the "good woman," is initially uncommitted to anything but gentility and the nice-old-lady image she maintains while being comfortably selfish. The Misfit is committed, and radically, to the results of his choice of unbelief:

"If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." 60

The old lady finally becomes committed, though only at the instant before her murder; her moment of grace, and the response she makes, are the immediate causes of her death.

The most far-reaching reversal of all is that of the "good man" concept itself. The term is used most frequently by the grandmother (five times out of eight). Red Sammy is cheated by two men he allowed to charge gas. The grandmother says this has happened to him because he is "'a good man." 61 Red Sammy agrees, adding that "'a good man is hard to find, '" and "'everything is getting terrible." 62 Later, the grandmother, immediately after recognizing The Misfit, cries; "'Listen, ... I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!" 63 Aside from her understandable panic, the grandmother's judgment of his "goodness" may be based on The Misfit's politeness and his

60 Ibid., p. 142.  
61 Ibid., p. 133.  
62 Ibid., p. 134.  
63 Ibid., p. 138.
embarrassment at Bailey's bad language. Shortly afterwards, the old lady says she knows their captor is "a good man at heart"; 64 after his two followers take Bailey and John Wesley to the woods, "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!" 65

"'Nome, I ain't a good man,'" The Misfit answers, "'but I ain't the worst in the world neither.'" 66 Noteworthy here is the fact that the criminal seems to be using the term in its moral sense, whereas the grandmother links it with the social niceties: he comes from "nice" people and is not "common." Even when her terror is most extreme the old lady's idea of "good" seems nearer to "genteel":

"Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady." 67

Only at the last does the grandmother forget her preoccupation with gentility in that recognition of their common humanity which leads to her death.

The Misfit himself does match the grandmother's earlier definition of a "good man": he is unfailingly soft spoken, embarrassed at not having a shirt "'before you ladies," 68 and chivalrous in telling Hiram to help the children's mother (although the occasion is her going into the woods with two of her children, to be shot 69). Yet

64 Ibid., p. 138. 65 Ibid., p. 139. 66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., p. 142. The occasions of the grandmother's protestations of The Misfit's "goodness" suggests another irony: that all her talk about "goodness" is just a ploy to get herself freed, and "goodness" itself hence less meaningful to her than to The Misfit.

68 Ibid., p. 139. 69 Ibid., p. 141.
he is a conscienceless murderer. Yet again, he is following his principles, inverted though they are; and it is only when the grandmother can rise above etiquette and stereotyped "religious" behavior that she becomes a "good" woman. Herein lies the most essential reversal.

The reversals are prepared for throughout the story. Diction and tone too reverse, in a sense. The story is full of foreshadowings until the actual meeting with The Misfit, when the style becomes flattened, matter-of-fact. The grandmother writes down the mileage when they leave home "because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back"; she has smuggled the cat--the indirect cause of their calamity--into the car on the slimmest of self-deceiving pretexts ("She didn't intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself"). Comparing her lady-like clothes with her daughter-in-law's slacks and kerchief, the grandmother thinks of herself: "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." This last is at once ironic plot foreshadowing and an early articulation of the theme of spurious gentility.

70 Aside from his statement of alternatives, quoted above on p. 82, "'If you would pray,' the old lady said, 'Jesus would help you.' 'That's right,' The Misfit said. 'Well then, why don't you pray?' she asked trembling with delight suddenly. 'I don't want no hep,' he said. 'I'm doing all right by myself'" (Ibid.)

71 Ibid., p. 130. 72 Ibid. 73 Ibid.
As the story advances, the foreshadowings become more ominous. The family passes "a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it"; they hear from Red Sammy that "these days you don't know who to trust," and from his wife that she "wouldn't be none surprised" to see The Misfit attack their place. The old lady, dozing, wakes "outside of Toomsboro" with the memory of the house she wants to visit. After she cozens the two appalling older children into wanting to go there, Bailey says, in a grimly comic line:

"All right, but get this: this is the only time we're going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time."78

After their accident, June Star says, "with disappointment," "But nobody's killed." Soon, the three convicts come in a "hearse-like" black car. As The Misfit directs the family to sit together by the side of the ditch, a detail of scenery gives a last ominous foreshadowing: "Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth." From this point the story turns almost exclusively to dialogue and to a narration much like stage directions. For example:

"Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it. "Yes'm, somebody is always after you," he murmured.

The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him.

74 Ibid., p. 131. 75 Ibid., p. 133. 76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p. 134. 78 Ibid., p. 135. 79 Ibid., p. 136.
80 Ibid., p. 137. 81 Ibid., p. 138.
"Do you ever pray?" she asked.

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. "Nome," he said.82

A single notable exception to the objective style of the last part of the story occurs closely after this interchange. Two shots from the woods indicate that Bailey and John Wesley have been killed:

The old lady’s head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath.83

A further reversal with possible symbolic overtones is the family’s sudden and unexpected deprivation of their car,84 counterpointed by the imprisonment of Pitty Sing and its disastrous termination when the old lady, embarrassed at her mistake about the house, upsets the cat’s hiding place. The cat’s liberation carries a final note in The Misfit’s order over the grandmother’s dead body: "'Take her off and thow her where you thown the others,' he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg."85

After examining the structure of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," one finds puzzling Hyman’s dismissal of the story as "a melodrama about a family casually wiped out by an escaped criminal called The Misfit, [which] in spots . . . is cruelly funny,"86 and Walter Elder’s statement that the family has

82 Ibid., p. 140. 83 Ibid. 84 And hence their freedom; though the point cannot be pushed too far, Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save" says, " '. . . The spirit, lady is like a automobile; always on the move . . .' " (p. 166).

no luck; they are undone by grandmother's cat, Pitty Sing. No stronger agent is need; fortuitousness is their best hope; their gratuitous slaughter is hardly an outrage. 87

Though the events of the story could be called melodramatic, their handling is anything but; and the fortuitous element is only apparent. The family is undone, not ultimately by Pitty Sing, but by the grandmother, whose cross-grained whims put the cat into the car and the car onto a dirt road in search of a non-existent house. But for all that, the story centers, not on the family as a whole or even on The Misfit, but on the grandmother. She is the one character whom the story anatomizes; and she is the one character whose moment of illumination is most fully shown, though the other two adults in the family seem also to achieve some moral stature. 88 She is, finally, the one character in whom all the reversals converge, in that all center about or stem from her.

"A Stroke of Good Fortune"

This was one of the earliest of Flannery O'Connor's short stories to be


88 Bailey turns at the edge of the woods as he and John Wesley are being led to their death; "Supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, 'I'll be back in a minute, Mama, wait on me!" (p. 139). The children's mother, when The Misfit asks, '"Would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and join your husband?'" answers, albeit "faintly," '"Yes, thank you"' (p. 141). June Star's bravado on the same occasion may be courage, but is more probably her invariable obnoxiousness.
published—indeed, the first of those later included in her collections. It appeared a whole year before the summer of 1950 when, according to Robert Fitzgerald, Miss O'Connor first read the Oedipus plays and began perfecting the technique of structural irony. This story shows her tendency towards the ironic reversal; but is also shows that the tendency had not yet completely found its appropriate form.

The first scene of "A Stroke of Good Fortune" shows Ruby Hill entering her apartment building with a bag of groceries, which she leaves for her husband to carry up the four flights to their apartment. Her appearance is not prepossessing:

Standing up straight, she was a short woman, shaped nearly like a funeral urn. She had mulberry-colored hair stacked in sausage rolls around her head but some of these had come loose with the heat and the long walk from the grocery store and pointed frantically in various directions.

Ruby's thoughts are preoccupied with her "baby brother," Rufus, who has just come back "from the European Theater" to live with Ruby and her husband Bill, "because Pitman where they were raised was not there any more." He is a great disappointment to her, Ruby thinks (his hopelessness is signified by his choice of collard greens for a special dish); "She had expected Rufus to have turned out into somebody with some get in him. Well, he had about as much get as a floor mop."  

89 Originally titled "The Woman on the Stairs," the story first appeared in Tomorrow, VIII (August, 1949), 40. Under its present title, it was republished in Shenandoah, IV (Spring, 1953), 7-18. Only "The Geranium," "The Capture," "Train," and "The Heart of the Park" appeared before this story's first publication; the two first-named are still uncollected, and the last are now incorporated into Wise Blood.

90 See above, p. 41, n. 40.


92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
After her initial musings about Rufus, Ruby braces herself for the climb up the four flights of stairs; her journey occupies the remainder of the story. The steps are very steep, and Ruby is "in no condition to go up anything." She, a woman of thirty-four who has avoided the doctor since "they carried me once when I was ten," is sick. She feels unwell, and her suspicion has been confirmed by Madam Zoleeda, the "palmist on Highway 87":

She had said, "A long illness," but she had added, whispering, with a very I-already-know-but-I-won't-tell look, "It will bring you a stroke of good fortune!" and then had sat back grinning . . . . Ruby didn't need to be told. She had already figured out the good fortune. Moving. For two months she had had a distinct feeling that they were going to move.

If the reader has not already figured out that the "long illness" is not the cancer Ruby secretly fears it may be, he does not long remain in uncertainty. As Ruby pulls herself up the steps, she compares "herself at thirty-four with her mother at that age." She is "warm and fat and beautiful," and her mother had been "like a puckered-up old apple, sour, she had always looked sour . . . ." The reason for the difference is her mother's eight children, conceived "because she hadn't known any better." Ruby thinks of her mother's screams at Rufus' birth, screams Ruby

---

94 Ibid., p. 172.

95 Ibid., p. 179. "She had done all right doctoring herself all these years-no bad sick spells, no teeth out, no children, all that by herself" (p. 174).

96 Ibid., p. 172. 97 Ibid., pp. 176, 180. 98 Ibid., p. 173.

99 Ibid., p. 174. 100 Ibid., p. 173. 101 Ibid.
had tried fruitlessly to avoid hearing, and concludes:

All that misery for Rufus! And him turned out to have no more charge than a dish rag. She saw him waiting out nowhere before he was born, just waiting, waiting to make his mother, only thirty-four, into an old woman.  

Out of breath, Ruby sits down in the middle of the first flight--squarely on the toy pistol of Hartley Gilfeet, a six-year-old who lives with his mother on the fifth floor. Ruby thinks disgustedly of how Hartley's mother calls him "Little Mister Good Fortune":

His daddy had said on his death bed, "There's nothing but him I ever given you," and she had said, "Rodman, you given me a fortune!" and so she called him Little Mister Good Fortune.  

The reader may not connect Hartley's nickname with the "stroke of good fortune" predicted by Madam Zoleeda, but with all the clues to date, he can hardly miss the point when Ruby decides that she is not too fat because Bill Hill liked her that way. She had gained some weight but he hadn't noticed except that he was maybe more happy lately and didn't know why.

Ruby Hill, then, is pregnant; but she does not realize her condition. Her obtuseness is accentuated when her friend Laverne Watts, whom she visits on her journey upstairs, immediately recognizes Ruby's pregnancy. This obtuseness becomes unbelievable after Ruby finally understands Laverne's hints:

---

102 Ibid.  
103 Ibid., p. 174.  
104 Ibid.  
105 "Laverne stood looking at her and after a second she folded her arms and very pointedly stuck her stomach out and began to sway back and forth (Ibid., p. 177).
"Not me!" Ruby shouted. "Oh no not me! Bill Hill takes care of that. Bill Hill takes care of that! Bill Hill's been taking care of that for five years! That ain't going to happen to me!"

"Well old Bill Hill just slipped up about four or five months ago, my friend," Laverne said. Just slipped up . . . ."106

That Ruby, who has been presented as not overly bright, but certainly not stupid, could go through four or five months of pregnancy without suspecting her condition, is a strong test of the reader's credulity (or, perhaps, his inattention to detail). The remainder of the story tells of Ruby's struggle against accepting the truth and her final surrender to it when Hartley Gilfeet, "Little Mister Good Fortune," charges past her on the stairs:

She opened her eyes and gazed down into the dark hold [the stairwell], down to the very bottom where she had started up so long ago. "Good Fortune," she said in a hollow voice that echoed along all the levels of the cavern, "Baby."

"Good Fortune, Baby," the three echoes leered.107

This story is certainly not one of Flannery O'Connor's best. As regards ironic reversal, one of sorts does occur. It is diffuse, however, because operating through two referents (Rufus and Hartley Gilfeet), neither of whom has a clear and necessary function in the story. Its beginning presages a reversal specifically in terms of Rufus. Such a reversal does not occur; Rufus is to be merely an example of Ruby's ideas on the deadening effects of childbearing, and his own lack of personality, though noted in the story, is irrelevant. Hartley Gilfeet, with his convenient nickname, is little more than a gimmick. The reversal which finally does occur, Ruby's

106 Ibid., p. 179. 107 Ibid., pp. 181-182.
devastated realization of her pregnancy, is carried by her own thoughts during her trip upstairs, and does not need the structural bolstering of Rufus at the beginning and Hartley at the end. \textsuperscript{108} As it is, the story depends excessively upon these two characters as supports for the plot structure.

This is not to say that "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is worthless. Stanley Edgar Hyman's dismissal of the story as a "leaden tract against complacency and contraception"\textsuperscript{109} is inaccurate as well as harsh. Unbelievable as Ruby's non-recognition is, the character has its good points. She is presented as genuinely terrified of pregnancy, which made her mother an old woman so early. One of the story's best features is the youth-death motif which embodies Ruby's anxiety. The theme is foretold in the description of Ruby as shaped "like a funeral urn,"\textsuperscript{110} and first enunciated in Ruby's comparison of herself and her mother at thirty-four:

Her mother's hair had been gray--hers wouldn't be gray now even if she hadn't touched it up. All those children were what did her mother in--eight of them: two born dead, one died the first year, one crushed under a mowing machine. Her mother had got deader with every one of them.\textsuperscript{111}

On the second floor, Ruby meets Mr. Jerger, a former school teacher, who

\textsuperscript{108}That is, as basic structural supports to the story--as providing the beginning and the end--though some reference to them as examples is necessary.

\textsuperscript{109}\textit{Flannery O'Connor}, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{110}She is later shown as thinking of children as making one deader; and she herself is the repository of a child, though she does not yet suspect the fact.

\textsuperscript{111}"A Stroke," p. 173.
talks to her of Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Youth. Ruby visualizes the unborn Rufus "out nowhere" waiting to make his mother an old woman. Later, when Laverne Watts, her friend, talks about Rufus, Ruby again sees him waiting, with plenty of time, out nowhere before he was born, just waiting to make his mother that much deader.

On her return to the stairs after Laverne's announcement of her condition, Ruby thinks:

No. No. It couldn't be any baby. She was not going to have something waiting in her to make her deader, she was not. Bill Hill couldn't have slipped up . . . . She felt her face drawn puckered: two born dead one died the first year and one run under like a dried yellow apple no she was only thirty-four years old, she was old.

Finally, Ruby feels for the third time during her climb upstairs the pain "that frightened her most":

Then she recognized the feeling again, a little roll. It was as if it were not in her stomach. It was as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting and waiting, with plenty of time.

This motif carries the real ironic reversal of the story, Ruby's realization, and renders secondary the functions of Rufus and Hartley. It also provides evidence of the source of Ruby's terror, and hence takes some of the sting out of Hyman's

---

112 Ibid., pp. 175-176. 113 Ibid., p. 178. 114 Ibid., p. 181.

115 The first time, she had thought: "It was a pain like a piece of something pushing something else" (p. 176). After the stop at Laverne's, the pain comes back when she begins climbing the stairs again: "It was just a little feeling, just a little feeling like a piece of her inside rolling over but it made the breath tighten in her throat" (p. 180).

116 Ibid., p. 182.
criticism. Miss O'Connor is here depicting not so much "evasion of responsibility" as the kind of selfishness that can result from a crippling fear. She shows Ruby's fear and its cause with such sympathy that the story's tone is, not "disapproval," as Rubin claims, but amused compassion. The beneficial effects of this youth-death motif save "A Stroke of Good Fortune" from total failure, but they are not sufficient to counteract its structural weakness.

"A Circle in the Fire"

At first glance, "A Circle in the Fire" is much like another Flannery O'Connor story, also first published in the Kenyon Review: "Greenleaf."

Both stories tell of women who have singlehandedly made a success of their farms, and try desperately to persuade themselves that their material prosperity is synonymous with total security. Both women are selfish, but both are sympathetic characters insofar as they feel threatened and humanly afraid--Mrs. Cope of the earlier story of some potential damage to her property (especially by fire), and Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" of any challenge to her personal self-sufficiency. Thus it is not accurate to say of either character, as Annie Louise Blackwell says of Mrs. Cope, that she is "evil and doomed"


118XVIII (Summer, 1956), 384-410; "A Circle in the Fire" had appeared in XVI (Spring, 1954), 169-190.
to be punished for her self-righteousness." Flannery O'Connor's characters are not "punished," as by some outside agency; their sins, especially self-righteousness, carry their own defeat. This defeat comes naturally, because the "self-righteous" characters like Mrs. Cope, Mrs. May, Mrs. McIntyre ("The Displaced Person"), and Mark Fortune ("A View of the Woods"), hope unrealistically to establish or maintain a perfect and secure situation. Thus, their "self-righteousness" is at bottom not self-satisfaction, but fear and insecurity.

Because of the futility of their positions, the reversals accorded Mrs. Cope and Mrs. May—the disasters built into their unrealistic outlook—are likewise similar. Mrs. Cope finally witnesses the firing of her woods, which she has feared all along, and Mrs. May is gored by the bull she has sought to expel from her farm—a bull owned by the Greenleafs, who represent all she despises and fears.

But there are dissimilarities between the two stories as well. "Greenleaf" is told from Mrs. May's point of view. The focal point of the story is Mrs. May's personal conflict: with the bull, her sons, and the Greenleaf family most obviously; with the encroaching outside (whether persons with demands on her—her sons—, successful outsiders—the Greenleaf boys—, God), at a deeper level. Mrs. May has a revelation at the moment when the bull buries "his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover." Mrs. May has battled the bull since, in the story's first paragraph,

120 "Greenleaf," p. 65.
he stood outside her window and ate the shrubbery, looking "like some patient god come down to woo her." 121 In the last sentence she has succumbed—both literally, in death, and figuratively, to his courtship as a result of her sudden perception of reality—and seems "to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear." 122 In "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Cope is seen from the outside. 123 The story is told largely from the point of view of Mrs. Cope's twelve-year-old daughter. 124 It is she who has the revelation in the end, and so the story has a kind of double action: the events, as they occur to Mrs. Cope, and their significance and effects, as these impinge on and alter the child's vision of life. Aside from this dual movement, the story is further removed from concentration on Mrs. Cope by the fact that, unlike Mrs. May, she has two at least partial allies in the child and Mrs. Pritchard (the hired man's wife), both of whom are also threatened by the boys' takeover of the farm.

The story's initial situation presents these three characters—Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Pritchard, and the child—and defines their roles: Mrs. Cope's as the self-

121 Ibid., p. 45. 122 Ibid., p. 66.

123 With two possible exceptions, the reader is told nothing about Mrs. Cope which the child could not have learned from observation. Twice there is a momentary switch to Mrs. Cope's angle of vision: when she begins to look pained "as she realized that these children were hungry. They were staring because they were hungry!" ("A Circle," p. 220), and when she sees the boys the next day: "They had the same look of hardened hunger that had pained her yesterday but today she felt faintly provoked" (p. 224).

124 Sister M. Bernetta Quinn is not correct in saying this daughter is "unnamed" ("Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances," The Added Dimension, p. 173), because Mrs. Cope refers to her once as "Sally Virginia" (p. 220); but she is indeed called only "the child" with that one exception.
regarding capable woman, Mrs. Pritchard's as the pseudo-omniscient higher employee frequent in Miss O'Connor's stories, and Sally Virginia as a more or less objective observer. It is significant that the trees appear even before these three characters, significant not principally because of the foreshadowing of their eventual burning by the boys, but because of their symbolic function. On the first page, the child observes the wall of trees:

125 Sr. M. Bernetta claims that her name "connotes religion in an ironic fashion" (Ibid.); but more pertinently and more ironically, it suggests her ultimate finitude, her inability to handle every situation.


127 The story presents the child's qualifications for near-objectivity. She is at root on her mother's side in the conflict against the boys: she makes a face at them, and would like to "'beat the daylight out of'" the big boy for saying of her, "'Jesus, ... another woman!'" (p. 224); she proposes to "'go tell them they got five minutes to leave here in'" (p. 226); when the boys are throwing rocks at the mailbox, she has "a furious outraged look on her face" (p. 227); and she finally has a fantasy hunt for them ("she went off to the woods as if she were stalking out an enemy, her head thrust forward and each hand gripped on a gun" [p. 229]) which culminates in her actually discovering them. On the other hand, she is no wholehearted partisan of her mother's: she taunts her that the woods may be on fire (p. 216); when Mrs. Cope tells the boys to sleep in the field, the child says, "'under her breath,' "'Where she can keep her eye on you'" (p. 222); when Mrs. Cope says she does not like the boys' attitude, "'You never like nobody's attitude, ' the child said" (p. 226; immediately, however, she announces that she will tell them to go); and when her mother objects to her overalls and two guns, "'Leave me be,' the child said in a high irritated voice. 'Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you'" (p. 229; though, again, the child sets off at once on her hunt).

128 The story's first sentence reads: "Sometimes the last line of trees was a solid gray-blue wall a little darker than the sky but this afternoon it was almost black and behind it the sky was a livid glaring white" (p. 215).
The child thought the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through.\textsuperscript{129} This is an apt image of what happens in the story. To represent the sky as the weaker element and the trees as the stronger (strong enough to keep out the sky) is ridiculous. To think that Mrs. Cope or anyone else could ever be calamity-proof—belonging to a breed above ordinary humans—is no less ridiculous. Hence, immediately after the image quoted above, we read the first foreshadowing of the final catastrophe:

The trees across the near field were a patchwork of gray and yellow greens. Mrs. Cope was always worrying about fire in her woods.\textsuperscript{130}

Mrs. Cope's vulnerability and feelings of insecurity, and the final ironic reversal of her fortunes, find an apt foreshadowing in the counterpointing of information about the farm, Mrs. Cope's protestations of thanksgiving for her bounty, and Mrs. Pritchard's remarks about "that woman that had that baby in that iron lung":\textsuperscript{131}

Mrs. Cope was bent over, digging furiously at the nut grass again. "We have a lot to be thankful for," she said. "Every day you should say a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you do that?"

"Yes'm," Mrs. Pritchard said. "See she was in it four months before she even got thataway. Look like to me if I was in one of them I would leave off... how you reckon they...?"

"Every day I say a prayer of thanksgiving," Mrs. Cope said.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid. A later, more vivid foreshadowing almost literally images the catastrophe. The setting sun "was going down in front of them, almost on top of the tree line. It was swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods" (p. 223).

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
"Think of all we have. Look," she said and sighed, "we have
everything," and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills
heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a
burden she was trying to shake off her back. 132

This meditation on her possessions leads Mrs. Cope to greater and greater
rhymodies of thanksgiving until finally she reveals the object of her gratitude, herself:

"I have the best kept place in the county and do you know why?
Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to
keep it . . . . I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not
always looking for trouble. I take it as it comes." 133

Her greatest vulnerability is her self-sufficience; this passage is the hinge of the re-
versal. Mrs. Pritchard answers, "'If it' all come at oncet sometime, '" and Mrs. Cope
says, "sharply," "'It doesn't all come at once." 134 Immediately a pick-up truck
stops at the gate, and the three boys--who assume that a place so fondly remembered
by Powell as heaven-like must be in the public domain--come into Mrs. Cope's life.
They soon justify Mrs. Pritchard's prediction that if trouble ever did "all come at
once," "'it wouldn't be nothing you could do but fling up your hands." 135

Mrs. Cope is thoroughly unsuccessful in her attempt to handle the boys.
She patronizes them, refuses to let them ride the horses on the pretext that the
animals are unshod and dangerous (in reality, she "was always afraid someone would
get hurt on her place and sue her for everything she had") 136.

---

132 Ibid., p. 217; ellipses Miss O'Connor's.
133 Ibid., pp. 217-218.
134 Ibid., p. 218.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., p. 219.
privileges in the barn\textsuperscript{137} and in the woods,\textsuperscript{138} and urges her own brand of religion on them.\textsuperscript{139} The boys seem to make her uncomfortable because she knows that they are at least partially right:

They stood there, each looking in a different direction, as if they were waiting for her to leave. "After all," she said in a suddenly high voice, "this is my place."

The big boy made some ambiguous noise and they turned and walked off toward the barn, leaving her there with a shocked look as if she had had a searchlight thrown on her ... .\textsuperscript{140}

"In a little while," Mrs. Pritchard comes to report a conversation between her husband and the boys:

"... That big one ast if it wasn't some place they could wash at and Hollis said no it wasn't and that you don't want no boys dropping cigarette butts in your woods and he said "She don't own them woods," and Hollis said, 'She does too,' and that there little one he said, 'Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too ... .'"\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{137} "The barn's full of hay and I'm afraid of fire from your cigarettes.' 'We won't smoke,' he said. 'I'm afraid you can't spend the night in there just the same,' she repeated as if she were talking to a gangster" (Ibid., p. 222).

\textsuperscript{138} "In the woods!' she said. 'Oh no! The woods are very dry now, I can't have people smoking in my woods. You'll have to camp out in the field ... .' 'Her woods,' the large boy muttered and got out of the hammock." (Ibid.).

\textsuperscript{139} Watching the sun set over her woods, Mrs. Cope says, "We have so much to be thankful for ... . Do you boys thank God every night for all he's done for you? Do you thank him for everything? [Dead silence from the boys] 'Do you?' she persisted [Still, silence].

"Well, I know I do," she said at length and turned and went back to the house and the child watched their shoulders drop. The large one stretched his legs out as if he were releasing himself from a trap" (p. 223).

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., pp. 224-225.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., p. 225. In the biblical sense, then, the boys are prophets; they
To all this, Mrs. Cope says only, "'I'm going out there and tell those boys they can get a ride away from here on the milk truck.'" But the boys do not go away, and Mrs. Cope has met her downfall. Her reversal, it should be emphasized, comes not so much in the actual fire in the woods as in the forcible acknowledgement of her vulnerability, the realization of which had flooded her like a harshly revealing light.

The second reversal occurs on the level of the child, the observer of events. This reversal has two facets: what the child realizes and what the realization does to her. As the second aspect is more apparent in the story, it may be well to examine it first.

At the beginning of the story, the child acts and reacts childishly. For no particular reason, she suddenly stuck her head far out the window and said "Ugggghrrhh"

assert the primacy of God and the contingency of man. Hence perhaps Caroline Gordon's objection that "the transition from the natural world" in the story seems "too abrupt" because we cannot visualize Powell as "either Meshach, Shadrach or Abednego" is not so valid as it seems to her ("An American Girl," The Added Dimension, p. 129).

142 Ibid. 143 See above, p. 105.

144 The child performs little positive action on a realistic level, except at the end of the story when she runs to tell her mother of the fire Mrs. Cope has already seen (her 'raid' into the woods was intended to be only on a fantasy plane; she discovered the boys by accident). Instead of acting, she is described as "looking down from" a window on her mother and Mrs. Pritchard, at the beginning (p. 215); being the first to see the boys arrive in the pickup truck (p. 218); "kneeling down by the window so that only her eyes and forehead showed over the sill" to see and hear the boys, "red in the face with excitement" (p. 220); moving, from then on, to the best observation point at each moment (pp. 220-229); and finally standing "partly hidden behind a pine trunk, the side of her face pressed into the bark" (p. 230), as she watches the boys bathing and setting the fire.
in a loud voice, crossing her eyes and hanging her tongue out as far as possible as if she were going to vomit.\textsuperscript{145}

Her response to the big boy's remark on this occasion is immature (wanting to beat him up), as is her plan when she tells Mrs. Pritchard she "could handle them quicker than that":

"Yeah?" Mrs. Pritchard murmured, giving her a long leering look. "How'd you handle them?"

The child gripped both hands together and made a contorted face as if she were strangling someone.\textsuperscript{146}

But when the child sees the boys set the fire (after a period of watching them when she seems to realize for the first time that they are people and not enemy objects), her response is no longer simplistic. She tries to run,

but her legs were too heavy and she stood there, weighted down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before.\textsuperscript{147}

What she repeats of the boys' conversation ("Mama, Mama, they're going to build a parking lot here!"\textsuperscript{148}) shows that she understands the essential import of the incursion: not the damage to the woods, but the fragility and impermanence of her family's material security. Finally, she sees her mother's expression and recognizes it as "the face of the new misery she felt . . . ."\textsuperscript{149} She now has a complexity and a depth of perception that rise above the old childish responses.

\textsuperscript{145}Ibid., p. 225.

\textsuperscript{146}Ibid., pp. 225-226. Her childishness lies essentially in her belief that there is a simple answer for a problem; yet her simplistic attitude is but an exaggerated reflection of her mother's.

\textsuperscript{147}Ibid., p. 231. \textsuperscript{148}Ibid. \textsuperscript{149}Ibid., p. 232.
The nature of the child’s realization is less obvious than its effects on her. Annie Louise Blackwell says that she "realized that her mother was a stranger."  

Stanley Edgar Hyman, of the same mind, sees this as a flaw. "A Circle in the Fire," he claims,

has one moment of magnificent empathy, when the young girl sees the naked boys bathing in the woods, and thinks, not of how they look, but of how they see . . . . It is just this empathy that is lacking at the end, when she looks at her mother's face and sees it "as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself."  

The child’s perception here, far from being a lack of empathy, expresses the essence of her realization in the terms already established by the story. At its beginning, during her chant of thanksgiving, Mrs. Cope exclaims:

"Why, think of all those poor Europeans . . . that they but in boxcars like cattle and rode them to Siberia. Lord," she said, we ought to spend half our time on our knees."  

The evening of the day she threatened the boys with the sheriff if they would not leave, Mrs. Cope thinks they have at last obeyed.

"They've gone," Mrs. Cope said, "poor things," and she began to tell the child how much they had to be thankful for, for she said they might have had to live in a development themselves or they might have been Negroes or they might have been in iron lungs or they might have been Europeans ridden in boxcars like cattle . . . .  

Thus when the child sees the "face of the new misery" on her mother at the end of the story, her feeling that it "looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to

---


anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself.154 is an intense realization of her unity with the rest of humanity, and her susceptibility to human suffering and insecurity like everyone else. This is the illumination proper to Mrs. Cope herself. By articulating it in the child, Miss O'Connor gains both a greater atmosphere of human solidarity and the relative objectivity the child is able to bring to her insight.

The irony in this story inheres not so much in the nature of the reversal itself (the essential one, that is, of the sudden and drastic enlightenment of the mother and child as to their contingency; the more superficial reversal of the firing of Mrs. Cope's most anxiously guarded possession is ironic) as in the manner of its accomplishment. The burning of the woods just mentioned; the fact that the instruments of enlightenment are at the same time both little hoodlums and beings comparable to the "prophets ... dancing in the fiery furnace";155 and the relationships among the central characters,156 sharpen the irony and intensify the significance of the reversal.

"Good Country People"

This story has more than one structural dimension. It is in one way a conventional short story, with plot, characters, and setting; in the mystery surrounding Hulga's wooden leg, it has elements of the folk tale; and, most interesting, it contains

---

154 Ibid., p. 232.  
155 Ibid.  
156 Mrs. Cope to Mrs. Pritchard; Mrs. Cope to the child; Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Pritchard, and the child to the three boys.
a fabliau, a traveling salesman joke. Like most jokes and folk stories, "Good Country People" has a stylized, formal structure that limits realism. A reader would as soon concern himself with what happens to the bible salesman or Hulga after the events of the story as with the "hero" or victim of a joke, and for the same reason: the nature of the sequel does not encourage contemplation. 157

But "Good Country People" is not merely a folk tale or fabliau. Most critics who handle this story discuss the actions of Hulga and the bible salesman as if they constituted the whole. In fact, the story takes up almost six pages, before introducing the bible salesman, in describing Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga's mother; Mrs. Freeman, the tenant farmer's wife; and Glynese and Carramae, Mrs. Freeman's daughters; and the last two paragraphs return to Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman. Hyman considers this last passage "superfluous irony," saying, "Unfortunately, the story does not end where it should, with the symbolic defloration of the theft of the leg and the bible salesman's reproof . . . ." 158

Whether the irony of the last paragraphs is "superfluous" will be discussed below; but if the passage itself, short as it is, is superfluous, what can be said for

157 Some of the questions the story leaves unanswered: what kind of history does the bible salesman have? With her serious heart condition and her state at the end of the story, what happens to Joy-Hulga? Even presuming she lives, how does she get down from the loft? What effect does the discovery of the theft have on Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell? The answers to these are as unwanted as the answers to similar questions in a joke would be, and for similar reasons: they are really irrelevant, and most of the answers would be none too pleasant.

158 Flannery O'Connor, p. 17.
the story's first six pages? "Good Country People" is composed of the frame and the joke; Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, Glynese and Carramae, are as essential in their way as Joy-Hulga and the bible salesman. In the first place, the frame removes the Hulga-salesman episode from mere joke status and situates them in the "real world," with consequences and implications, unthinkable though these be. More importantly, the story has two initial situations--two story lines--to be reversed: Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman and their platitudinous approach to life, and Hulga, the sophisticate and atheist (whose approach is just as deeply, though less obviously, platitudinous). On this second level, the reversal consists, through the action of the story, in revealing the reality behind the appearance--the bible salesman to Hulga, and Hulga to the reader. The first level contains no apparent reversal in the action. However, it shows Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman to be absolutely wrong in their assessment of the bible salesman, and the whole concept of "good country people"--and cliche living in general--to be meaningless.

The Hulga-salesman thread, though the second one to appear, is the first in obvious story importance. Joy is introduced early in the story in occasional references: first as Mrs. Hopewell's daughter, a "large blonde girl who had an artificial leg. Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated," and slightly later as "the large hulking Joy," goaded by her mother's platitudinous stupidity into "constant outrage" which has "obliterated
every expression from her face." Gradually the reader learns more facts about Joy: her resistance to her mother; the reason for her artificial leg, a hunting accident twenty-two years earlier; her changing of her name from Joy to Hulga; her breakfast ritual vis-à-vis her mother and Mrs. Freeman; her Ph.D. in philosophy; 

160 Ibid., p. 244.

161 Given as symptomatic is her attitude towards accompanying her mother around the farm: "... When Joy had to be impressed for these services, her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all,' to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am--LIKE I AM!'" (Ibid., p. 245).

162 "... The leg had been literally blasted off, ... she had never lost consciousness" (Ibid., p. 247).

163 "Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. Then she had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother till after she had done it. Joy-Hulga herself considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it purely on the basis of its ugly sound, and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her" (Ibid., p. 246).

164 "When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning ... she glanced at them and did not speak. Mrs. Hopewell would be in her red kimono with her hair tied around her head in rags. She would be sitting at the table, finishing her breakfast and Mrs. Freeman would be hanging by her elbow outward from the refrigerator, looking down at the table. Hulga always put her eggs on the stove to boil and then stood over them with her arms folded ..." (Ibid., p. 247).

165 "... This left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a school teacher,' or even, 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher'" (Ibid., p. 248).
her heart condition; and her rejection of religious belief.

The bible salesman's first appearance in the story is through Mrs. Hopewell's retrospective view one morning during breakfast, as she wonders, while Joy stalls to keep Mrs. Freeman talking, what her daughter could have said to the young man the day before. The reader is given Mrs. Hopewell's reconstruction of the entire scene, from the salesman's arrival, through her inviting him to dinner when she discovered that "he and Joy had the same condition," to his departure and conversation with Joy several hours later. Then, with Mrs. Freeman's statement that "I seen him walk up . . . and then later--I seen him walk off" (and Hulga's consequent embarrassment) as a transition, the reader receives the girl's version of the bible

166 The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (Ibid., p. 247).

167 The bible salesman observes, "'I see you have no family Bible in your parlor, I see that is the one lack you got!' "Mrs. Hopewell could not say, 'My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor.' She said, stiffening slightly, 'I keep my Bible by my bedside'" (Ibid., p. 249).

168 Ibid., p. 251. He has just said, "'I got this heart condition. I may not live long'" (p. 250).

169 "Joy had walked all the way to the gate with him and Mrs. Hopewell could not imagine what they had said to each other, and she had not yet dared to ask" (Ibid., p. 252).

170 "... and Hulga could feel the slight shift in her voice, the slight insinuation, that he had not walked off alone, had he?" (Ibid., p. 253).
salesman's conversation. It began with inanities, the reader learns ("'You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?'"), continued with the questions of Hulga's age, her artificial leg, and her name, and concluded with an agreement to meet at ten o'clock on the following morning for a picnic. Hulga has imagined this picnic repeatedly during the night. Its chief incident is to be, not a meal, but her seduction of the bible salesman, after which she will "[take] his remorse in hand and [change] it into a deeper understanding of life."

With these two flashbacks the scene-setting is completed, and the actual incident of Hulga's confrontation with the bible salesman begins. The last few sentences of Hulga's own ruminations have claimed her superiority to the bible salesman, whose shame after his fall she imagines herself taking away and turning "into

---

171 Ibid., p. 254.

172 "'How old are you?' he asked softly.
"She waited some time before she answered. Then in a flat voice she said, 'Seventeen!"' (Ibid.)

173 "'I see you got a wooden leg,' he said. 'I think you're real brave. I think you're real sweet. . . . Walk to the gate with me,' he said. "You're a brave sweet little thing and I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door"' (Ibid.)

174 "' Couldn't we go on a pic-nic tomorrow? Say yes, Hulga,' he said and gave her a dying look as if he felt his insides about to drop out of him" (Ibid., p. 255).

175 Indeed, when she leaves to meet the salesman she "didn't take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic" (Ibid.)

176 Ibid.

177 "True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind" (Ibid.).
something useful."\textsuperscript{178} The first paragraph about her experience shows a naiveté that Hulga has not admitted to, in her forgetting that food is taken on a picnic and putting Vapox on the collar of her dirty white shirt "since she did not own any perfume."\textsuperscript{179} The unfolding of her brief relationship with the bible salesman shows Hulga as progressively more self-confident with progressively less reason until the moment when, verbally conceding her love for the young man, she thinks she has won him:

"I just want to know if you love me or don'tcher?" and he caught her to him and wildly planted her face with kisses until she said, "Yes, yes."

"Okay then, he said, letting her go. "Prove it."
She smiled, looking dreamily out on the shifty landscape. She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try. "How?" she asked, feeling that he should be delayed a little.
He leaned forward and put his lips to her ear, "Show me where your wooden leg joins on," he whispered\textsuperscript{180}

The scenes up to this point present Hulga as invariably sophisticated and knowing, and the boy as countrified and naive; yet the style and tone repeatedly undercut her authority and reinforce his. At their rendezvous, the bible salesman emerges from a hiding place saying, "'I knew you'd come"; Hulga, who had shown her eagerness the day before by lying outrageously about her age, "wondered acidly how he had known this."\textsuperscript{181} The bible salesman's control is further shown, in the light of the story's outcome, by his bringing the valise; its contents will later demonstrate that it is he, not Hulga, who has the day planned. Even at the moment of his appearance

\textsuperscript{178}ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{179}ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{180}ibid., pp. 258-259.

\textsuperscript{181}ibid., p. 256.
at the meeting place, Miss O'Connor gives a detail about the valise which should strike the reader, both for its intrinsic noteworthiness and for the fact that Hulga does not question it:

The boy walked lightly by her side, bouncing on his toes. The valise did not seem to be heavy today; he even swung it.182

Further, the salesman exclaims at her atheism "as if he were too astonished to say anything else,"183 and as they walk along he watches her "out of the corner of his eye."184

Even Hulga's moments of what she considers her utmost clarity underline her essential inexperience and naiveté at the same moment that they outwardly proclaim her cool rationality. At the bible salesman's first kiss,

... The power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear, detached, and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity.

Impressive so far, but:

She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control.185

---

182 Ibid. Cf. his first appearance "carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the door facing" (p. 248).

183 Ibid.; italics mine.

184 Ibid. This is intensified towards the end of the story when, openly in control now, the boy, "his eyes like two steel spikes," looks behind him "every now and then" to where he has placed Hulga's leg (p. 260).

185 Ibid.
When the boy insists that "'You got to say you love me,'" Hulga is judicious:

"In a sense," she began, "if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing."186

Again, interesting, but this passage immediately follows a sentence referred to above:

She didn't realize he had taken her glasses but this [blurred] landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.187

Further, at her most woman-of-the-world moment Hulga enunciates her non-creed to the bible salesman:

"We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation."

Immediately afterwards she concedes that she does love him "in a sense," and continues:

"But I must tell you something. There mustn't be anything dishonest between us." She lifted his head and looked him in the eye. "I am thirty years old," she said. "I have a number of degrees."188

She is thirty-two. Her clinging to this trivial deception at a moment of apparent clarity and honesty comments eloquently on her essential weakness and insecurity, as her self-assurance above does on her lack of self-knowledge.

Even thus far, the story fails to bear out Irving Malin's observation:

186Ibid. 187Ibid., p. 258. See also above, pp. 11-12. 188"Good Country People," p. 258.
The bible salesman Miss O'Connor introduces is frightening to Hulga: he seems so happy, believing in all the things she cannot. Hulga decides to hurt him, to regain her cruel certainty; she plans to seduce him.\(^{189}\)

Moreover, in reading of the salesman's subsequent actions, an attentive reader can hardly concur with such descriptions of the story as Walter Elder's:

A bumpkin bible salesman is led to believe that a female doctor of philosophy with an artificial leg can offer what his own belief is sustained by--fetish worship of the wooden limb and also sex as he treasures it, with safety, pictorial pornography, and alcohol.\(^{190}\)

Most obviously, the bible salesman is not "led to believe" anything at all by Hulga’s subterfuges. More, the tone in which his actions are described as he sets out his stereotypically "evil" wares and then sweeps them and her leg into his valise\(^{191}\) gives the passage the brittle, "prepared" surface of a joke, in which no alternative actions are conceivable.

\(^{189}\) *New American Gothic*, p. 37. Cf. her reasons for seducing him given in the text of the story, pp. 255 and 259, and referred to above on pp. 102 and 103.

\(^{190}\) "That Region," 666.

\(^{191}\) "He laid these out in front of her one at a time in an evenly-spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess. He put the blue box in her hand. THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE, she read, and dropped it. The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask. He stopped and pointed, with a smile, to the deck of cards. It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card. 'Take a swig,' he said, offering her the bottle first (p. 260). . . . He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box back into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg and then she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends" (p. 261).
But before the salesman is unequivocally unmasked at the end of the story, Hulga's own real self is disclosed in all its myopic vulnerability. She is shocked by the young man's question about her leg because she "was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about its tail . . . . She took care of it as someone else would his soul . . . ." 192 When the salesman recognizes that the leg is "what makes you different," she feels "as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence." 193 Immediately she entrusts her leg to him in a parody of both sexual and religious surrender: "It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his." 194 She fantasizes about their running away together, when he will take the leg off each night and restore it each morning 195 (in other words, simultaneously serve and master her). Without her leg, however, her former specious acuteness and independence vanish: "Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at." 196 When the young man finally displays the contents of the valise, she is shocked; and her naiveté and his cynicism appear clearly in the ensuing dialogue:

Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. "Aren't you," she murmured, "aren't you just good country people?"

The boy cocked his head. He looked as if he were just beginning to understand that she might be trying to insult him. "Yeah," he said, curling his lip slightly, "but it ain't held me back none, I'm as good as you any day in the week."

192 Ibid., p. 259.  
193 Ibid.  
194 Ibid.  
195 Ibid., pp. 259-260.  
196 Ibid., p. 260.
"Give me my leg!" she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily.

"What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl."

Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . . ." 197

The salesman's answer is a masterly exhibit of the cliche on his part and of writing on Miss O'Connor's; not only does it ably illustrate his underlying vulgarity and cynicism, and hence deny Hulga's and her mother's conception of him as "good country people," but at the same time it affirms the fellowship of all the characters in the same simplistic, unthinking categorizing of life:

"I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" 198

The punch line, as it were, of the story in its fabliau aspect occurs at the moment of the young man's disappearance down the hayloft ladder:

"I've gotten a lot of interesting things," he said. "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga," he said, using the name as if he didn't think much of it, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" . . . 199

Not only does this speech complete the ironic destruction of Hulga's smugness and

197 Ibid., pp. 260-261
198 Ibid., p. 261.
199 Ibid.
the revelation of her actual simplicity; it intensifies the reversal on the Hulga-salesman level by showing that the young man, for all the goodness or badness of the expectations he may arouse, is just a small-time con man. The fact that Hulga is said to see him "struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" makes the last word on her re-emphasize her physical (and hence spiritual) shortsightedness.

But as Hyman laments, the story does not end here. In the last two paragraphs, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman see the salesman walking to the highway, and pronounce a final ironic comment on him. Mrs. Hopewell erroneously thinks he has been selling bibles to the backroads Negroes. "'He was so simple,' " she says, "'but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple.'" Mrs. Freeman, as always, has to have the last word: "'Some can't be that simple,' she said. 'I know I never could.'" 201

The reader knows that the young man is not "that simple"; moreover, the women's placidity and unawareness in the face of Joy-Hulga's desperate condition is a further irony. A final ironic touch is that, as the salesman's speech to Hulga ("I know which end is up," etc.) linked all the characters in Mrs. Hopewell's cliché approach to life, so the women's last comment implicates them all in the boy's spurious simplicity.

---

200 Ibid.
201 Ibid.
In some ways, Miss O'Connor's second novel is much like her first. Both concern a young man who attempts to escape, but finally accepts, Christ and his vocation; both involve the influence of fanatical relatives, an influence which the hero thinks he has definitively eradicated; and both draw heavily (though by no means exclusively) on the metaphor of vision. Nevertheless, the two novels handle their similar materials quite differently, so much so that any attempt at detailed comparison would afford but little illumination and unnecessarily complicate the treatment of both novels.

Considered in itself, then, The Violent Bear It Away is a novel about young Tarwater's flight from a prophetic vocation because he is afraid of the all-demanding-ness of Christ; when he thinks he has escaped at last, he congratulates himself:

He had saved himself forever from the fate he had envisioned when, standing in the schoolteacher's hall and looking into the eyes of the dim-witted child, he had seen himself trudging off into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, lost forever to his own inclinations.202

Another feature of his prophetic career which Tarwater rejects is the task which his great-uncle has told him will inaugurate it, baptizing his feebleminded cousin, Bishop:

The boy doubted very much that his first mission would be to baptize a dim-witted child. "Oh no it won't be," he said. "He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things

202 The Violent Bear It Away, in Three, pp. 434-435. Yet, as Racky points out: "Though Tarwater may think he has escaped his vocation, his glimpse of Powderhead reveals otherwise .... Flannery O'Connor has woven an organic texture for
in mind for me." And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit.

"It's no part of your job to think for the Lord," his great-uncle said. "Judgment may rack your bones." 203

Although Tarwater fights hard throughout the novel to "do NO" as well as "say NO" 204 to his vocation and its demands, he finally understands and accepts them. The plot reversal follows the lines of both parts of old Tarwater's statement at the end of the passage quoted above: that is, it shows the boy the foolishness of a prophet's thinking "for the Lord"; and it occurs through a "judgment" 205 that racks not only his "bones"--as for example through his agonizing physical hunger and the rape--but his spirit as well; both hunger and rape have their true existence and meaning on a metaphysical plane, as will later appear.

The overall outline of the reversal, then, works itself out through young Tarwater's vocation to commit himself totally to Christ as a prophet, and through which her climax is a logical outcome" ("The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," p. 344).

203 Ibid., pp. 308-309. Stuart L. Burns, in "Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away: Apotheosis in Failure," Sewanee Review, LXXVI (Spring, 1968), says that Tarwater "has visions of himself as a heroic and fiery prophet, and he resents the old man's assumption that he will be called to commonplace duties" (321). What Tarwater seems fundamentally to resent is giving up his autonomy. Near the end of the novel, he tells the truck driver: "'I had to prove I wasn't no prophet and I've proved it . . . . Now all I have to do is mind my own bidnis till I die. I don't have to baptize or prophesy.'" (p. 428).

204 Ibid., p. 397; see also pp. 405, 418, 427, 431, 433, 435.

205 At one point Tarwater recalls the figure of little Bishop: "His mouth hung in a lopsided smile but there was a judging sternness about his forehead" (Ibid., p. 398).
his first mission, the baptizing of Bishop. This larger reversal is pointed up directly by three pervasive motifs related to the theme of prophecy: vision, hunger, and fire; and indirectly by two characters: Tarwater’s "friend" and the boy’s uncle Rayber. Though these elements intermingle, they will be separated in the discussion which follows, for greater clarity.

The theme of prophecy is first enunciated early in the novel: old Tarwater, the boy’s newly-dead great-uncle,

who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord’s call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it.  

Immediately, the reader is told two things: that prophecy is not an unmixed joy, and that young Tarwater is not the most tractable of candidates:

[Old Tarwater] had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean; for he himself had been burned clean and burned clean again . . . . Having learned much by his own mistakes, he was in a position to instruct Tarwater—when the boy chose to listen—in the hard facts of serving the Lord. The boy, who had ideas of his own, listened with an impatient conviction that he would not make any mistakes himself when the time came and the Lord called him.  

This double idea is quickly reinforced. On the occasions when his great-uncle looks like a fiery, vision-struck Old Testament prophet, Tarwater "knew that when he was called, he would say, 'Here I am, Lord, ready!'" But when the visions fade, when the

206 Ibid., p. 306.  
207 Ibid.
old man speaks "of being born again to die, and of spending eternity eating the bread
of life,"208 the boy loses interest. He is afraid, listening to his great-uncle's
frenzies, "as if . . . the old man's words had been dropping one by one into him and
now, silent, hidden in his bloodstream, were moving secretly toward some goal of
their own."209 Of his two conceptions of the prophetic calling, as glorious charism
and as demanding intrusion, the less glamorous soon dominates. As young Tarwater
contemplates the property which, technically, his uncle Rayber now owns, he thinks:

If any schoolteacher comes to claim the property, I'll kill him.
The Lord may send you off, he thought. There was a complete
stillness over everything and the boy felt his heart begin to swell.
He held his breath as if he were about to hear a voice from on
high. After a few minutes he heard a hen scratching beneath him
under the porch. He ran his arm fiercely under his nose and
gradually his face paled again.210

Increasingly, young Tarwater realizes that prophecy is not just an impressive divine
visitation, but a "rage of vision" that demands his response. He tries to hold his eyes
at the surfaces of things:

It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant
longer than was needed to place something . . . the thing would
suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that
he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it.
He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation.
When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of
a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty . . . .

The boy is attracted by burning bushes,212 but not by the "sweat and stink of the

210Ibid., p. 310.  211Ibid., p. 316.
212"Often when he walked in the woods and came upon some bush a little
cross,"213 or by the hollowness he experiences, on arriving at the schoolteacher's, "as if he had been lifted like Habakkuk by the hair of his head, borne swiftly through the night and set down in the place of his mission."214 When Bishop appears, Tarwater knows that he must baptize the child and begin his prophet's life. He knows that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf.215

From this revelation until close to the end of the novel, Tarwater struggles more and more desperately against his vocation, and manages more and more successfully to persuade himself that he can "pull it up by the roots, once and for all,"216 and even, near the end, that he has made the ultimate refusal, and is returning to Powderhead "with all the old man's madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him."217 Ironically, Tarwater has this last thought after he has in fact succumbed to the "madness," fulfilling his first mission in the baptism-drowning of Bishop.218

removed from the rest, his breath would catch in his throat and he would stop and wait for the bush to burst into flame. It had not done it yet" (Ibid., p. 327).

213 Ibid., p. 308.

214 Ibid., p. 354. At this moment he "feels a sudden foreboding that he was about to step into a trap laid for him by the old man," and "half-turned to run" (Ibid.)


218 The madness and/or grotesqueness of the characters in this work, as in others by Flannery O'Connor, is an obstacle to some critics. Donald Davidson, in his review, "A Prophet Went Forth," NYTBR (Feb. 28, 1960), p. 4, attributes the
When the boy finally receives his unmistakable call from God, it comes, ironically enough, with nearly all the trappings he had dreamed of, though it is the all-consuming demand he had fought from the start. He sees a vision, feels his vocation as one of a long line of prophets, and from the heart of a tree of flame

"muddled" meaning of the novel to "the fact that the three main characters are "so isolated from the general human context"; we view the characters as "irresponsible creatures belonging to some arbitrary world of fantasy." Granville Hicks, in "Southern Gothic With a Vengeance," Saturday Review, XLIII (Feb. 27, 1960), 18, describes the old man as "warped by fanaticism, ... ugly, intemperate, unloving," yet concedes that Miss O'Connor writes about him and the other characters "with great compassion." Malin, in New American Gothic, asks: "... In this novel of distorted vision, who is to say that Tarwater really sees the Light or the darkness of his own mind?" (p. 151). Orville Prescott, writing in the New York Times (Feb. 24, 1960), p. 35, calls both the old man and his grand-nephew "mad," and says: "One can pity Miss O'Connor's doomed characters as caricatured types of human misery; but one can't believe them, or care about them." Finally, J. Oates Smith (Joyce Carol Oates), in "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," Thought, XLI (Winter, 1966), wishes Miss O'Connor had not claimed to be "on the old man's side because Christ is the center of his life ... For Old Tarwater, though a man of God, is at the same time responsible for the child's perversion; unless religious feeling must be absolutely linked with insanity, it is difficult to believe that the old uncle is a positive character. Rather, it would seem that he is responsible as much as Rayber for the violence of Tarwater's initiation into his 'destiny'" (555). This preoccupation with the psychological aspects of the Tarwater madness seems beside the point, in the face of such descriptions of the madness as the boy's, who recognizes that "the heart of his great-uncle's madness" is his hunger for the bread of life (The Violent, p. 315), and Rayber's, who feels the religious orientation which even he must still fight as "an undertow in his blood dragging him backwards to what he knew to be madness," which he considers "an affliction ... in the family ... flowing from some ancient source, some desert prophet or polesitter ..." (p. 372). As Stuart L. Burns says in "Flannery O'Connor's The Violent," "In a world in which the eminently plausible and sweet voice of reason turns out to be the dragon of perverted seduction and betrayal, madness (if one wishes so to call the prophetic vision) is a necessary adjunct to salvation. Miss O'Connor herself, in the section editorially titled "On Her Own Work," says: "Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be apparent" (p. 109).
receives the divine command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY." 219

The theme of prophecy carries the shape of the reversal, but, in itself, not its intensest irony. The handling of Tarwater's baptizing mission injects the basic ironic note. The very mission to baptize an idiot is ironic, especially in relation to young Tarwater's preconceptions of the prophetic role. After the revelation of his mission (quoted above on p. 118), the boy's reflections, themselves ironic because of their reverse accuracy in the terms of the novel, insist on the irony of the situation:

The Lord out of dust had created him, had made him blood and nerve and mind, had made him to bleed and weep and think, and set him in a world of loss and fire all to baptize one idiot child that He need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish. 220

That he is indeed called to baptize Bishop Tarwater cannot simply deny. He has been schooled for the task by his great-uncle, as already mentioned. When he remembers his first visit to the city, made with the old man two or three years before the events of the novel, he recalls also his knowledge "by some obscure

219 Ibid., p. 447. Though the boy hears the message, it comes, not as "the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty," as he had envisioned, but in a far more awesome way: "The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood" (Ibid.) The old man's words, which Tarwater feared, have borne fruit at last.

220 Ibid., p. 357.
instinct," when they went to his uncle Rayber's house,

that the door was going to open and reveal his destiny. In his
mind's eye, he saw the schoolteacher about to appear in it, lean
and evil, waiting to engage whom the Lord would send to conquer
him . . . . The door opened.

A small pink-faced boy stood in it with his mouth hung in a
silly smile. 221

When Tarwater fully realizes his mission, in all its futility and insignificance and
necessary God-committedness, his reaction is a mounting refusal. On recognizing
the child when he returns to Rayber's house, he "tried to shout, 'No!' but it was like
trying to shout in his sleep. The sound was saturated in silence, lost." 222 When
Rayber, misunderstanding the boy's horror, says "'You'll get used to him'":

"No!" the boy shouted.

It was like a shout that had been waiting, straining to burst
out. "I won't get used to him! I won't have anything to do with
him!" He clenched his fist and lifted it. "I won't have anything
to do with him!" he shouted and the words were clear and positive
and defiant like a challenge hurled in the face of his silent
adversary. 223

Brave though this challenge sounds, Tarwater is thenceforth mortally
afraid of Bishop. Although he answers his uncle's accusation that he is afraid to look
at the child with a scornful denial, 224 he admits to himself that he "never looked

221 Ibid., pp. 322-323.
222 Ibid., p. 358.
223 Ibid., pp. 358-359.
224 "I nurse an idiot that you're afraid to look at,' Rayber said. 'Look
him in the eye.'

"Tarwater shot a glance at the top of Bishop's head and left it there an
instant like a finger on a candle flame. 'I'd as soon be afraid to look at a dog,' he said . . . ." (Ibid., p. 389).
lower than the top of [Bishop's] head except by accident . . . "225 Once Tarwater, in a near-trance, almost baptizes the little boy (who "recognized" him because "the old man himself had primed him from on high that here was the forced servant of God come to see that he was born again" 226) in a fountain in the park; he is "saved" from committing his "enormous indignity" 227 by his uncle Rayber, who snatches Bishop from the water just in time. The reader learns later that Tarwater, looking at his own reflection in the pool, has denied that he meant to baptize Bishop, "flinging the silent words at the silent face. I'd drown him first." This is the first formulation of Tarwater's particular manner of "doing NO"; "Drown him then, the face seemed to say." 228 Though Tarwater is at first shocked by the idea, 229 then torn by temptation upon their arrival at the Cherokee Lodge, 230 he is finally goaded into resoluteness by his uncle Rayber's perfectly ill-chosen words: "'Every day . . . you remind me more of the old man. You're just like him. You have his future before you. . . ." 231 Rayber is sure that he has "touched a nerve" 232 with his remark, because the boy jumps from the boat in which the two are fishing and swims back to the lodge; but he is unprepared for Tarwater's appearance upon his own return to their room:

There was a strange suppressed excitement about the boy's whole figure, as if he had settled on an inevitable course of action. He did not get up, . . . but he acknowledged his uncle's presence by shifting the glint in his eyes slightly, on him and

228 Ibid., p. 401. 229 Ibid. 230 Ibid., p. 402.
231 Ibid., p. 407. 232 Ibid.
then away. The schoolteacher might have been just enough present to be ignored. Then he looked back at Bishop, triumphantly, boldly, into the very center of his eyes.233

Later, though Tarwater is shocked by Rayber's understanding of his "compulsion to baptize Bishop,"234 he is moved neither by his uncle's downgrading of baptism

("Baptism is only an empty act," the schoolteacher said. "If there's any way to be born again, it's a way that you accomplish yourself, an understanding about yourself that you reach after a long time, perhaps a long effort. It's nothing you get from above by spilling a little water and a few words."235)

nor by his explanation of the "other way," alternative to baptism, open to the boy:

"The other way is simply to face it and fight it, to cut down the weed every time you see it appear . . . . The way we have to fight it is the same."

"It ain't the same," Tarwater said . . . . "I can do something. I ain't like you. All you can do is think what you would have done if you had done it. Not me. I can do it. I can act."236

Yet Tarwater, with all his bravado and insistence on his own autonomy, cannot readily admit even after the baptism-drowning what his uncle Rayber sees immediately:

What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle.

He stared out over the empty still pond to the dark wood that surrounded it. The boy would be moving off through it to meet his appalling destiny. He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he had drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for, that he moved off now through the black forest toward a violent.

233 Ibid., p. 408. 234 Ibid., p. 417.
235 Ibid., p. 418. 236 Ibid.
encounter with his fate. 237

But Tarwater himself insists that the "words just come out of themselves but it don't mean nothing. You can't be born again," 238 and that the baptism

was an accident and nothing more. He considered only that the boy had drowned and that he had done it, and that in the order of things, a drowning was a more important act than a few words spilled in the water . . . . Even if by some chance it had not been an accident, what was of no consequence in the first place was of no consequence in the second; and he had succeeded in drowning the child. 239

The act of Bishop's baptism is in one sense the reversal, and hence the focal point, of the novel. It is by that fact one of its most difficult features to interpret—or would seem so, from critics' remarks about it. Some are downright inaccurate or misleading. According to John J. Clarke, young Tarwater "baptizes Bishop, and, in an appalling touch of irony, drowns the child in the process." 240 Hyman says the boy has his great-uncle's command to baptize Bishop, "and when he sees the opportunity, he compulsively baptizes and drowns him"; 241 Malin claims he "decides to baptize the idiot son of Rayber and drowns him accidentally." 242

Stuart

237 Ibid., p. 423. 238 Ibid., p. 428.

239 Ibid., p. 435.


241 Flannery O'Connor, p. 20.

242 New American Gothic, p. 99. From what has been said about the baptism so far, it should be obvious that these statements cannot be supported by the text.
L. Burns and Ruth M. Vande Kieft refer to the baptism-drowning as a "scene" to be interpreted. In fact, what is most remarkable about the event is that, despite a long build-up, it is never presented as a scene at all. It is sensed as having happened by Rayber, and announced and remembered several times by Tarwater; but the closest Miss O'Connor comes to describing it is the boy's dream in the cab of the truck. The last direct glimpse of the scene the reader receives from the dream is Bishop's standing in the boat and climbing onto Tarwater's back: "He clung there like a large crab to a twig and the startled boy felt himself sinking backwards into the water as if the whole bank were pulling him down." Immediately the focus becomes present and external, switching to the cab of the truck with its two sleeping passengers. The younger of the two, as the sun rises, suddenly calls out the baptismal formula "in a high raw voice" and awakens.

The effect of this handling of the baptism-drowning is to heighten the importance of the baptism's meaning because that is the element which is repeatedly

243 "Flannery O'Connor's The Violent," 330. Burns uses the word scene at least three times in speaking of the baptism of Bishop.

244 "Judgment in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Sewanee Review, LXXVI (Spring, 1968), 357 (two times).

245 The Violent, p. 432. Notable about this is the fact that Miss O'Connor never makes clear whether the dream is an exact recall, or merely a dream-like distortion, of the incident.

246 Ibid. Because of the ambiguity noted in n. 245, it is not clear either whether the "sibilant oaths of his friend fading away on the darkness" are remembered actuality, part of the dream, or present reality.
insisted on, and, because we never see the gestures themselves, to play down their significance, particularly in their murderous aspect. Ruth Vande Kieft finds "morally shocking" the fact that "murder should almost appear to become the means of the sacrament," but, not knowing precisely what happened, the reader cannot make any such judgment; further, it would be difficult to prove from the text that Tarwater has an "obsession . . . to kill" as well as "to baptize" Bishop. But equally oversimplified is Edward M. Hood's statement:

The problem Miss O'Connor poses is Dostoevskian: what should be done with an idiot child? should he be put out of his (and others') misery or baptized for the good of his soul?

The baptism's significance lies in its relationship to Tarwater rather than to Bishop. As the references above make clear, the baptism emphasizes Tarwater's prophetic vocation and its unremarkable nature, rather than the child's need for the sacrament.

Miss O'Connor herself said: "If I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I know that for the larger percentage of my readers baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to arrange the action so that this baptism carries enough awe and terror to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. I have to make him feel, viscerally if no other way, that something is going on here that counts." Quoted by C. Ross Mullins, "Flannery O'Connor: An Interview," Jubilee, XI (June, 1963), 34. For similar statements, see also Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in Mystery and Manners, p. 162, and Joel Wells, "Off the Cuff," The Critic, XXI (August-September, 1962), 72.


Ibid. His obsession is rather to say and do NO, as shown above, than to murder.

The question of vision in *The Violent* has already been handled in some detail in Chapter I, and in incidental references in the present chapter. Nevertheless, some mention of the link between vision and prophecy in this novel is in order here. On the second page of the novel, the Lord's revelation to old Tarwater that he must rescue his infant grand-nephew from the schoolteacher is twice called a "rage of vision." The old man is described as occasionally spending days in the woods "while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord," and looking on his return as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe.

Almost immediately after old Tarwater's death, his grand-nephew begins trying to repudiate the old man's influence and his own prophetic calling. With Miss O'Connor's attention to imagery, the suggestion of blindness can hardly be accidental as young Tarwater, barely sobered from his visit to the still, heads across the yard to fire the house where (he thinks) the dead old man still sits: "His eyes glittered like open pits of light..." After the house begins to burn:

... He... saw that the pink moon had dropped through the roof of the shack and was bursting and he began to run, forced on through the woods by two bulging silver eyes that grew in immense astonishment in the center of the fire behind him.

After Tarwater tries to call the schoolteacher and then actually goes to his

---

251 *The Violent*, p. 306.  
252 Ibid., pp. 307-308.  
253 Ibid., p. 332.  
254 Ibid.
house, he hears "a faint familiar sound of heavy breathing" which is closer to him than the beating of his own heart. His eyes widened and an inner door in them opened in preparation for some inevitable vision.

Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for.

From this point until near the end of the novel, young Tarwater's vision is more and more profoundly affected by the mission he is attempting to deny. He is shown through Rayber's eyes when Bishop jumps into the fountain in the park:

The boy stood arrested in the middle of a step. His eyes were on the child in the pool but they burned as if he beheld some terrible compelling vision. He seemed to be drawn toward the child in the water but to be pulling back, exerting an almost equal pressure away from what attracted him.

and through the eyes of the woman at the Cherokee Lodge, right after they check in:

He looked back at the afflicted child and the woman was startled by the expression on his face. He seemed to see the little boy and nothing else, no air around him, no room, no nothing, as if his gaze had slipped and fallen into the center of the child's eyes and was still falling down and down and down. The little boy turned and skipped off toward the steps and the country boy followed, so directly that he might have been attached to him by a tow-line.

---

255 Ibid., p. 357. When he tried to reach Rayber on the telephone, he had first heard this breathing: "It was a kind of bubbling noise, the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe in water" (Ibid., p. 352)—another foreshadowing of the baptism.

256 Ibid., p. 357. 257 Ibid., p. 390. 258 Ibid., p. 396.
After he has fulfilled his mission, Tarwater's eyes seem to be "open forever on some sight that would never leave them." When he tries to cool himself with a bucket of well water, Tarwater suddenly looks "down into a gray clear pool, down and down to where two silent serene eyes were gazing at him"; it takes him "more than a mile to realize he had not seen" the vision.

In the last chapter, after his violation, Tarwater returns to Powderhead and sees, as he has always longed to see, a vision—of what he had dreaded, the bread of life, and what he had hoped for, a burning bush. But his final "vision" is not of this extraordinary nature:

His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.

Tarwater's road "literally comes full circle," as Clinton W. Trowbridge says, but not because the novel "ends in Powderhead where it began." The boy's journeying is one demonstration of the novel's structural irony: he wishes to have his own kind of vision and escape the kind his great-uncle followed, so he leaves Powderhead for the city. His flight leads him to the very fate he tried to avoid, the

---

259 Ibid., p. 431; see also above, p. 16.
260 Ibid., p. 436.
261 Ibid., p. 446.
262 Ibid., p. 447.
263 Ibid.
265 But emphatically not to "carry the prophecy of his great-uncle to the big
baptizing of Bishop and a "rage of vision." Still trying to deny what is now an accomplished fact, he returns to Powderhead to stay for good. Just before his arrival, the rape that should confirm him forever in his choice of self (or the devil\textsuperscript{266}) frees him finally to accept God's call and sends him back to the city, clear of vision at last, on such a defeat-bound, unexceptional mission as he would never have accepted at the novel's outset.

Another motif which in \textit{The Violent} relates to prophecy is that of food and/or hunger. As Trowbridge claims, Miss O'Connor "takes the idea of man's spiritual hunger literally":\textsuperscript{267} Tarwater's hunger, though he tries desperately to deny the fact, city in an attempt to convert his remaining relatives," as Melvin J. Friedman contends in "Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction," \textit{English Journal}, LI (April, 1962), 236. During the entire first chapter Tarwater reiterates his determination to stay on "his" property (see \textit{The Violent}, pp. 310, 316, 323) until he suddenly appears on the highway, city-bound (\textit{Ibid.}, p. 332), and during his stay with Rayber (with whom he had determined to have nothing to do) his purpose is anything but the conversion of his relatives. As Carter Williams Martin sums up the boy's history, Tarwater's "negative qualities are implicitly reproved, his protest fails, and he assumes a singularly positive Christian role at the end of the novel" (\textit{The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor} [n.p.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969], pp. 236-237).

\textsuperscript{266}"You can do one thing or you can do the opposite. Jesus or the devil, the boy said.

No no no, the stranger said, there ain't no such thing as a devil 

\ldots It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or \textit{you}" (\textit{Ibid.}, p. 326).

\textsuperscript{267}"The Symbolic Vision of Flannery O'Connor," 298; I cannot agree, however, that the "controlling image" is as narrowed as "the parable of the loaves and fishes" (\textit{Ibid.}). Though loaves and (especially) fish do figure in the larger food/hunger motif, the fish is as much a symbol for Christ and vocation ("Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"--Matt. 4. 19, RSV) as for either material or spiritual food. Trowbridge's statement that even the fire and water (baptism) motifs belong to this controlling image, "for the loaves are baked and fish swim" (\textit{Ibid.}) is to me a
is ultimately for the bread of life. The motif is at first simply enunciated. One of the topics of his great-uncle's conversation which most bores and frightens young Tarwater is that of "spending eternity eating the bread of life." The thought that after his death the schoolteacher may "tend to you" horrifies the old man, because Rayber "don't believe in the bread of life . . ." Tarwater, though he does believe, would like not to:

In the darkest, most private part of his soul, hanging upside down like a sleeping bat, was the certain, undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life. Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus? The old man said that as soon as he died, he would hasten to the banks of the Lake of Galilee to eat the loaves and fishes that the Lord had multiplied.

"Forever?" the horrified boy asked.
"Forever," the old man said.

It is at this point that Tarwater realizes that hunger for the bread of life is "the heart of his great-uncle's madness," and secretly fears that it "might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it particularly objectionable example of overinterpretation.

268 The Violent, p. 308.
269 Ibid., p. 312. The old man refuses to be cremated by the schoolteacher because "I been leavened by the yeast he don't believe in" (Ibid., p. 317).
270 Ibid., p. 315. Later, the reader learns of the boy's "hideous vision of himself sitting forever with his uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and a multiplied loaf" (p. 340).
but the bread of life." 271 This statement is the center of the hunger theme's reversal; later, Tarwater recalls his great-uncle's prediction of a day "when a pit opens up inside you and you know some things you never known before," 272 and at the very end of the novel, he "stood there and felt a crater opening inside him . . . ." 273 He sees a vision of the feeding of the multitude, his great-uncle among the crowd:

The boy ... leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth could fill him . . . . He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. 274

Between the pivot and this final reversal of the hunger theme, Tarwater's hunger receives a number of statements and variations. Rayber is "drained" by something "starved" in the boy's look which "seemed to feed on him"; 275 when he trails Tarwater, he finds that the boy's expression "like the face of someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach laid out before him" 276 is caused by a leftover load of bread in a bakery window. Later, Tarwater recalls that "since the breakfast he had finished sitting in the presence of his uncle's corpse"--that is, since he had begun

271 Ibid.  
272 Ibid., p. 343.  
273 Ibid., p. 445.  
274 Ibid., p. 446.  
275 Ibid., p. 373. Tarwater himself observes a "look of starvation" in his reflection in the fountain, when Rayber "saves" him from baptizing Bishop (Ibid., p. 401).  
276 Ibid., p. 377. Rayber's secularist condition is epitomized by his reaction to the loaf: "If he had eaten his dinner, he wouldn't be hungry" (Ibid., p. 378).
attempting to escape his call---"he had not been satisfied by food."\textsuperscript{277} At the Cherokee Lodge, "with an expression of intense concentration, he ate six buns filled with barbeque and drank three cans of beer\textsuperscript{278}; but the meal "appeared to be sinking like a leader column inside him and to be pushed back at the same time by the hunger it had intruded upon."\textsuperscript{279} When he finally vomits into the lake, a "ravenous emptiness raged in his stomach as if it had reestablished its rightful tenure."\textsuperscript{280} But despite his increasing hunger, Tarwater is unable, after repeated tries, to eat his hamburger\textsuperscript{281} or the sandwich the truck driver gives him.\textsuperscript{282} Walking to Powderhead, he is racked by a cross-shaped pain of hunger and thirst.\textsuperscript{283}

Though the drugged whiskey the homosexual gives him has "a deep barely concealed bitterness that he had not expected," and though it "burned his throat savagely and his thirst raged anew so that he was obliged to take another and fuller swallow," Tarwater exults, "'It's better than the Bread of Life!'"\textsuperscript{284} This, as often in Flannery O'Connor, comes soon before the violence that makes possible his final

\textsuperscript{277}Ibid., p. 399.
\textsuperscript{278}Ibid., p. 402. In addition to demonstrating his hunger, this action serves to announce that Tarwater may be "preparing himself for a long journey or for some action that would take all his strength" (Ibid.).
\textsuperscript{279}Ibid., p. 405. \textsuperscript{280}Ibid., p. 406. \textsuperscript{281}Ibid., p. 416.
\textsuperscript{282}Ibid., pp. 429, 434. "'When I come to eat, I ain't hungry,'" Tarwater tells the driver. "'It's like being hungry is a thing in my stomach and it don't allow nothing else to come down in there'" (Ibid., p. 429).
\textsuperscript{283}Ibid., p. 435. \textsuperscript{284}Ibid., p. 440.
illumination. Miss O'Connor herself stated that "Violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace";\textsuperscript{285} further, the moment of her characters' greatest mistakenness often precedes the moment of their final unmasking or realization.\textsuperscript{286} When Tarwater finally reaches the clearing, "his hunger constricted him anew. It appeared to be outside him, surrounding him almost as if it were visible before him, something he could reach out for and not quite touch."\textsuperscript{287} Then the boy has his vision; following the vision, and even more important, he experiences the true meaning of his hunger:

> He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. He felt it building from the blood of Abel to his own, rising and engulfing him.\textsuperscript{288}

This motif, then, shows that Tarwater's longing for Christ and commitment to him as a prophet are as inseparable from the boy, as undeniable, as physical hunger. Clearly, an attempt to repudiate one's hunger without satisfying it carries its own built-in reversal. The boy's hunger for Christ is further emphasized by

\textsuperscript{285}"On Her Own Work," in \textit{Mystery and Manners}, p. 113. The fact that her claim is borne out in the stories should reassure readers who are troubled by the prevalence of that violence; it frequently fails to do so because the readers miss the effect of the violence.

\textsuperscript{286}For example, Hazel Motes; the grandmother in "A Good Man"; Mrs. May in "Greenleaf"; Asbury in "The Enduring Chill"; Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter"; and, eminently, Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation."

\textsuperscript{287}\textit{The Violent}, p. 445. \textsuperscript{288}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 446-447.
parody. One example of this parody is Tarwater's boast that the whiskey is "better than the Bread of Life," moments before he passes out. Two other notable ones occur. Rayber, who was offered the bread of life at the age of seven when old Tarwater kidnapped him, can regard it now only with hostility and anguish. When he hears little Lucette Carmody preach, Rayber thinks of her as "locked tight" in the "degradation" of her believing, and feels "the taste of his own childhood pain laid again on his tongue like a bitter wafer." During Tarwater's dream of the baptism-drowning, he looks into the eyes of his friend and is "startled to see that in the peculiar darkness, they were violet-colored, very close and intense, and fixed on him with a peculiar look of hunger and attraction." 

Miss O'Connor offsets the true spiritual reality with its parody even more pervasively with the motif of fire. The true fire is almost invariably an agent of purification, divine or at least godly. Old Tarwater has instructed his grand-nephew in the evils the Lord sends to "burn the prophet clean," because he himself, from much experience, "had learned by fire." At the outset of his prophetic career, he had proclaimed unremittingly that the godless world would "see the sun burst in blood and fire," but the Lord had failed to cooperate.

Then one morning he saw to his joy a finger of fire coming out of it and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him and the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body... That was not the

---

last time the Lord had corrected the old man with fire ... 292

In the midst of his tirade against Rayber's article in the "schoolteacher magazine" about his supposedly self-induced call, the old man impresses upon his grand-nephew that "even the mercy of the Lord burns." 293

The prophet, too, can be an instrument of this purgative burning. In the course of young Tarwater's reminiscence of his first sight of Rayber, he recalls the schoolteacher's saying, "'Where's the boy you were going to raise into a prophet to burn my eyes clean?' ..." 294 This question grows in meaning as it accumulates background and variations. When the old man, shattered by Rayber's coldblooded secularist article, escaped with the infant Tarwater, he left behind in the child's crib the psychological journal with, on its cover, the scrawled message: "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN." 295 Rayber recalls the incident and the words immediately after he has prevented Bishop's baptism in the fountain, and "The sentence was like a challenge renewed." 296 He has managed to forget, however, similar words from Lucette Carmody's sermon:

Her eyes still fixed on [Rayber], she cried, "I've seen the Lord in a tree of fire! The Word of God is a burning Word to burn you clean ... . Be saved in the Lord's fire or perish in your own!" 297

---

292 Ibid.
293 Ibid., p. 314.
294 Ibid., p. 323.
295 Ibid., p. 348. In one of his rage-driven frenzies, witnessed by the boy, the old man shouts, "'The Lord is preparing a prophet with fire in his hand and eye.'" (Ibid., p. 339).
296 Ibid., p. 392.
297 Ibid., pp. 384-385.
At the end of the novel, Tarwater takes on himself the office of purifying by fire. After he comes to and realizes he has been raped, he fires the leaves and bushes at the clearing "until the fire was eating greedily at the evil ground, burning every spot the stranger could have touched." When his "friend" makes a sinister reappearance at Powderhead, Tarwater again fires the woods "until he had made a rising wall of fire between him and the grinning presence." This same fire becomes part of his final vision, as it turns into the burning bush he has always awaited:

The boy's breath went out to meet it. He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him. Once again the boy leaves the clearing he has set afire and heads for the city. This time, however, the fire behind him indicates his acceptance, rather than attempted rejection, of God; this time, too, he goes to "warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy," not just to "wait and see what happens," as before.

So much for the true fire. The false, parodic fire is a sign of refusal of God by the choice of self. Tarwater, envisioning the kind of prophet he wants to be, dreams of the day when "he would set the city astir, he would return with fire in his

---

298Ibid., pp. 441-442. 299Ibid., p. 444.

300Ibid., p. 447. True, the boy has set the fire himself; but throughout the novel (as also in Wise Blood, and in stories like "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Life You Save,") Miss O'Connor shows God operating in the terms of evangelical faith, through secondary causes used as special providences.

301Ibid. 302Ibid., p. 351.
Ironically, he does do just that, as also he finally does see a burning bush; but in both instances the actual event is vastly different from his imagination of it. Tarwater's first drink of home-made whiskey after his great-uncle's death, an assertion of his independence as much as anything, is described as a "burning arm" which "slid down Tarwater's throat as if the devil were already reaching inside him to finger his soul." Also a gesture of independence is his burning of the house with, as he thinks, his great-uncle inside; yet, as he runs from the fire, he can "hear it moving up through the night like a whirling chariot." Further, the end of the chapter presages the novel's reversal; Tarwater in Meeks' car sees the glow of the city's lights in the sky, and protests: "We're going back where we came from. There's the fire again. There's the fire we left!" When Meeks tells him what the glow is, "You're turned around,' the child said, 'it's the same fire." If the city suggests the world that denies or tries to ignore God--both old and young Tarwaters

---

303 Ibid., p. 319.

304 See the description of his "scorched eyes" on p. 442 (quoted above, p. 16), and the mention of his "singed" eyes on p. 447 (see above, p. 123). By that time, he almost literally has fire in his eye.

305 Ibid., pp. 329-330.

306 Ibid., p. 322; see also above, p. 135.

307 Ibid., That is, even in denying his prophetic vocation, he is reminded of it; the old man had "likened their situation to that of Elijah and Elisha" (p. 327) and Rayber later muses that the boy "wore his isolation like a mantle ... " (p. 370). This, then, is the fiery ascension of the old Elijah.

308 Ibid., p. 333.
are sent there to prophesy, and the boy on his first visit there "saw in a burst of light that these people were hastening away from the Lord God Almighty. It was to the city that the prophets came..."—then it is old Tarwater who is right, not Meeks, who says:

"I've never been turned around in my life... And I didn't come from any fire. I come from Mobile. And I know where I'm going."311

The same paradox and foreshadowing of the ironic reversal appear in the boy's thoughts when he comes back to Powderhead:

He returned tried in the fire of his refusal, with all the old man's fancies burnt out of him, with all the old man's madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him.312

Aside from the face that the reader knows by now that Tarwater's "refusal" is illusory because he has in fact baptized Bishop, he may notice the submerged fire metaphor in the "smothered" madness that will never "break out" in Tarwater. Thus on the rhetorical plane, the true fire of prophecy combats the false of unwarranted self-choice, already defeated on the level of events.

As well as by these pervasive motifs, the novel's reversal is emphasized by Tarwater's "friend" and by Rayber. The friend is not a character properly

---

309 Ibid., pp. 306, 447. 310 Ibid., pp. 318-319. 311 Ibid., p. 333. 312 Ibid., p. 434; see also above, p. 121.
Speaking: at one extreme of literalness, he is the devil; at the other, he is a repressed aspect of Tarwater's personality, struggling now for supremacy. At this point, it may be better not to push for either extreme—or for any intermediate position, for that matter—but merely to describe the "friend" as he develops throughout the novel.

The friend changes rapidly from a mere voice, loud, disagreeable, and belonging to a stranger though emanating from Tarwater, to a voice—still disemb-
bodied—which Tarwater softens "so that he could stand it," then to a "stranger
digging the grave along with him now," whose face Tarwater knows is "sharp and
friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat that obscured
the color of his eyes." Tarwater begins "to feel that he was only just now meeting
himself, as if as long as his uncle lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaint-
ance." The next time the stranger speaks, he is called Tarwater's "new
friend"; he alternates between "stranger" and "friend" until the scene at the still,
when as Tarwater gets drunk his adviser is called his "kind friend." He is
"stranger" no longer.

But the "friend's" early stages chronicle not only his development, but also
the influences which he represents, at work on Tarwater. The first effect of these is
a softening of the boy's attitude toward his uncle Rayber. The position inculcated by
his great-uncle had been anything but soft. Preparing the boy to bury him as a
Christian when he should die, he says:

"I taken you and raised you and saved you from that ass in

at that part of the discussion.

315 The Violent, p. 317. 316 Ibid., p. 323.

317 Ibid., p. 324. By now Tarwater has "lost his dislike for the thought of
the voice. Only every now and then it sounded like a stranger's voice to him" (Ibid.)

318 Ibid. 319 Ibid.

320 Ibid., p. 330. This change is "rapid," as claimed above, because
pp. 311-317 and 318-323 are taken up with flashback. Hence the development from
"stranger" to "friend" occupies only a few pages.
town and now all I'm asking in return is when I die to get me in the ground where the dead belong and set up a cross over me to show I'm there.\textsuperscript{321}

When the boy replies that he will notify the schoolteacher and "'He'll tend to you,'"\textsuperscript{322}

and further baits his great-uncle by toying verbally with the idea of going to "'the only blood connection with good sense I'll have ...; now,'" the old man is first horrified

"I saved you to be free, your own self!" he had shouted, "and not a piece of information inside his head!"\textsuperscript{323}

and then contemptuous:

Go to him and be damned, his uncle had said. I've saved you from him this far and if you go to him the minute I'm in the ground there's nothing I can do about it.\textsuperscript{324}

Tarwater's own first thoughts about the schoolteacher are uncomplimentary, but the stranger works at denigrating the old man and building up Rayber:

[Old Tarwater] favored a lot of foolishness, the stranger said. The truth is he was childish. Why, that schoolteacher never did him any harm. You take, all he did was to watch him and write down what he seen and heard and put it in a paper for schoolteachers to read ... And the old fool acted like he had been killed in his very soul.\textsuperscript{325}

The focus in the stranger's argument, and an additional point of his influence on Tarwater, is the old man's burial. Tarwater is digging the grave, which his great-uncle wants ten feet deep,\textsuperscript{326} yet which "did not appear to get any deeper though he con-

\textsuperscript{321}Ibid., p. 311.  
\textsuperscript{322}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{323}Ibid., pp. 312-313.  
\textsuperscript{324}Ibid., p. 316.  
\textsuperscript{325}Ibid., pp. 317-318.  
\textsuperscript{326}"... Not just eight, ten" (Ibid., 311).
continued to dig,"  

under a sun "like a furious white blister in the sky." And while he digs, his "friend" casts doubt on Tarwater's prophetic vocation, on the reliability of the education given him by the old man, and, most importantly at this moment, on the superiority of his burial methods over Rayber's:

The dead are a heap more trouble than the living, the stranger said. That schoolteacher wouldn't consider for a minute that on the last day all the bodies marked by crosses will be gathered. In the rest of the world, they do things different than what you been taught.

327 Ibid., p. 325.  
328 Ibid., p. 327.  
329 "... Just lemme ast you this: where is the voice of the Lord? I haven't heard it. Who's called you this morning? Or any morning? Have you been told what to do? ... The trouble with you, I see, he concluded, is that you ain't got but just enough sense to believe every word he told you" (Ibid., pp. 327-328).

330 "... How do you know the education he give you is true to the facts? Maybe he taught you a system of figures nobody else uses? How do you know that two added to two makes four? ... How do you know if there was an Adam or if Jesus eased your situation any when He redeemed you? Or how do you know if He actually done it?" (Ibid., p. 330).

331 Ibid., p. 318. See also his speech on p. 324 on the reasonableness of cremation (the schoolteacher's method) and the folly of insisting on burial; the argument which follows it, though apparently inconclusive, shows how much Tarwater is swayed by his friend:

"If I burnt him, Tarwater said, it wouldn't be natural, it would be deliberate. "Oh I see, the stranger said. It ain't the Day of Judgment for him you're worried about. It's the Day of Judgment for you. "That's my bidnis, Tarwater said. "I ain't buttin into your bidnis, the stranger said. It don't mean a thing to me. You're left by yourself in this empty place. Forever by yourself in this empty place with just as much light as that swarf sun want to let in. You don't mean a thing to a soul as far as I can see. "'Redeemed,' Tarwater muttered" (Ibid., p. 324).
In the end, the boy follows (or thinks he follows—the black man Buford has buried old Tarwater with ""the sign of his Saviour . . . over his head"" while the boy lay drunk) what they do in the rest of the world, cremating the old man inside the house. He is therefore at the same time going against his great-uncle's wishes and becoming more favorably disposed, hence more vulnerable, to his uncle Rayber.

The friend's influence as traced so far is characterized by, and stems at least partly from, its denial of the categories by which Tarwater has been brought up. Especially denied is the category which Miss O'Connor would call mystery—the "Mystery of our position on earth," "ultimate mystery as we find it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience." The friend reduces to a joke the old desire for a Christian burial ("... Lemme ast you this: What's God going to do with sailors drowned at sea that the fish have et and the fish that et them et by other fish and they et by yet others?"), ridicules Rayber's short-lived belief in the old man's teaching about Christ and redemption ("Well that's all the sense a seven-year-old boy's got, the stranger said .... He learned better as soon as he got back to town; his daddy told him the old man was crazy and not to believe a word of what all

332 Ibid., p. 446.
333 Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature," in Mystery and Manners, p. 124. On the same page Miss O'Connor states: "It is the business of fiction to embody mystery though manners." This term (and the accompanying idea about fiction) occurs frequently in the essays and lectures in this book, sixty-six times in all. Miss O'Connor does not define it precisely, but seems to mean by it that which cannot be fully explained in only rational or sensible terms.
334 Ibid., p. 125.
335 The Violent, p. 324.
he had learnt him\(^{336}\), and refuses to see more than the surface meaning in the "sign" of Bishop's hastening to his baptism in the fountain pool, after the "friend" has "suggested he demand an unmistakable sign";\(^{337}\)

Well, that's your sign, his friend said--the sun coming out from under a cloud and falling on the head of a dimwit. Something that could happen fifty times a day without no one being the wiser.\(^{338}\)

Most important in the "friend's" denial of mystery is his speech about the devil. When Tarwater expresses the choice of opposites as "'Jesus or the devil,'" the friend insists that "There ain't no such thing as a devil. I can tell you that from my own self-experience. I know that for a fact."\(^{339}\) The very emphasis here, besides pointing up the supernatural by its insistence on the natural, encourages the reader to think of the stranger's diabolic aspect.\(^{340}\)

Tarwater's friend does not appear in Chapters 2 or 3; the emphasis is on what happens rather than on Tarwater's thoughts, and the rationalist, secularist position is there represented by Meeks and Rayber, respectively. The friend is absent from Chapters 4 through 7 as well where the center of consciousness is Rayber (and, at the very end of 7, the woman at the Cherokee Lodge). When Tarwater's consciousness returns in Chapter 8, the reader learns of Tarwater's many

\(^{336}\)Ibid., p. 326. \(^{337}\)Ibid., p. 400. \(^{338}\)Ibid., p. 401.

\(^{339}\)Ibid., p. 326. See also above, p. 138, n. 266.

\(^{340}\)Pertinent here is Miss O'Connor's statement, in the section "On Her Own Work": "To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit . . ." (Mystery and Manners, p. 117).
temptations to baptize Bishop, and of the fact that the boy "would have fallen but for the wise voice that sustained him--the stranger who had kept him company while he dug his uncle's grave."\footnote{The Violent, pp. 398-399.}

Reversal is implicit in more than the friend's denial of mystery. He or various suggestions of him become more and more overtly unpleasant as the novel progresses. After the thwarting of Bishop's baptism in the pool, Tarwater, torn by conflict, sits on a bench already occupied by a man of "a generally gray appearance," who first scrutinizes and then addresses the boy:

"Be like me, young fellow," the stranger said, "don't let no jackasses tell you what to do." He was grinning wisely and his voice held a malevolent promise of unwanted friendship. His voice sounded familiar but his presence was as unpleasant as a stain.\footnote{Ibid., p. 402.}

This man's relation to the "friend" is emphasized by the latter's immediate observation: "An interesting coincident . . . that he should say the same thing as I've been saying."\footnote{Ibid.} In his dream about the baptism-drowning, Tarwater is "unsettled" by the "peculiar look of hunger and attraction"\footnote{Ibid., p. 431; see also above, p. 128.} in his friend's eyes. The meaning of this look becomes clear in the incident with the homosexual. Tarwater gets into the man's car without looking at him, but is jarred when he does:

Then he turned and looked at the man and an unpleasant sensation that he could not place came over him. The person who had picked him up was a pale, lean, old-looking young man . . .

\footnote{Ibid.}
he could not place where he had seen him before. 345

When Tarwater regains consciousness after the rape, a significant detail cements the identification of the homosexual: "[Tarwater's] hands were loosely tied with a lavender handkerchief which his friend had thought of as an exchange for the hat." 346

Though two critics at least refer to Tarwater's rape as a "brutal assault," 347 the reader in fact is told even less about this event, as scene, than about Bishop's baptism. There is no presented material for either shock or titillation; the narration stops at the point where the man carries Tarwater into the woods, and resumes "in about an hour," when the stranger emerges alone, gets "quickly into his car and [speeds] away." 348 Anyone who has read more than two or three of Miss O'Connor's stories will realize that she thinks of life, especially life seen in a religious dimension, as a violent business. However, as with the baptism, Miss O'Connor's silence here about the action itself places the stress on significance rather than on event. Indeed, the attraction of auto- or homo-erotism is an apt image for temptation, 349 but the resulting behavior would, especially in this tightly knit

345 Ibid., pp. 438, 439. 346 Ibid., p. 441; italics mine.

347 Sumner J. Ferris, "The Outside and the Inside: Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away," Critique, III (Winter-Spring, 1960), 18, and Orville Prescott, review of The Violent. The latter further characterizes the event as a "monstrous misfortune which serves no purpose except to demonstrate Miss O'Connor's determination to pile horror upon horror."

348 The Violent, p. 441.

349 Auto-, if the temptation is thought of as a possibility for choice of self over God; homo-, if its diabolic aspect is considered. Miss O'Connor is working it both ways.
novel, be distracting and beside the point. Here, the fact that Tarwater's friend, internalized at the novel's beginning and end, is nevertheless embodied as separate from and lustful for the boy, shows that Miss O'Connor's concern is theological as well as psychological; Tarwater's seducer is not only his own "rational self that has counseled him during his flight from destiny," as Stuart L. Burns claims, but the devil, who has identified himself with that rational self temporarily, and seeks to do so forever. As Miss O'Connor says:

In my stories a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective. Tarwater's final vision could not have been brought

---

350 At the beginning as discussed above, especially on pp. 137-142; at the end when he tries to assert his possession of Tarwater, urging him to take over the clearing, "just you and me. You're not ever going to be alone again" (The Violent, p. 444). The identification of the friend with the homosexual here is made clear by Tarwater's reaction and by the imagery used of the friend's presence, "as pervasive as an odor, a warm sweet body of air encircling him [like the air in the man's car], a violet shadow hanging around his shoulders" (Ibid.; cf. the description of the homosexual's car, p. 439; see also above, p. 132, n. 313), as well as the details mentioned above which lead the reader to identify the two.

351 "Flannery O'Connor's The Violent," 333. Any doubt as to the real significance of the homosexual is dispelled by a minor foreshadowing and its fulfilment. The old man has warned his grand-nephew that, "with the devil having such a heavy role in his beginning" (his illegitimate birth), he will keep watch over the boy: "You are the kind of boy . . . that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride . . . . You had better mind how you take up with strangers" (Ibid., pp. 338-339). The alacrity with which Tarwater "takes up with" the first stranger foreshadows the success of the last; also, as Tarwater struggles with the cork on the whiskey bottle, "simultaneously there came into his head all his great-uncle's warnings about poisonous liquor, all his idiot restrictions about riding with strangers" (Ibid., p. 440), and he opens the bottle with his corkscrew.
off if he hadn't met the man in the lavender and cream-colored car.

I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. Tarwater's violation, then, is good, is even a means of the "action of grace," in that it reveals to him unmistakably his "friend's" identity and real feelings toward him.

At their last encounter, the "friend," whom he drives away with a wall of fire, is called his "adversary"; the suggestion of the Adversary, Satan, is probably intentional.

Crucial to an understanding of Rayber, Tarwater's schoolteacher uncle, is a knowledge of what he is doing in the novel. Is he, as Arthur Mizener says,

352 "On Her Own Work," pp. 117, 118. Sister M. Joselyn remarks that "The Displaced Person" is "one of the few O'Connor stories without a demoniac" ("Thematic Centers," 86). Martin notes the similarity of the devil's role in "The Violent" to "that of the bad angel in a medieval morality play, appearing throughout the novel to offer evil counsel to Tarwater in hopes of claiming his soul" (The True Country, p. 77). Tarwater's closeness to being won by the devil appears especially in two incidents. The first is his near-identification with his "friend" and near-estrangement from his own former self as he contemplates his return to Powderhead: "He envisioned the calm and detached person ... who would clear out the rubble ... . Beyond the glare, he was aware of another figure, a gaunt stranger, the ghost who had been born in the wreck and who had fancied himself destined at that moment to the torture of prophecy. It was apparent to the boy that this person, who paid him no attention, was mad" (The Violent, p. 435). The second incident occurs when the boy, attempting to answer the woman at the general store with some profound self-vindication, consults his "mentor" at his soul's "most profound depths": "He opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair" (Ibid., p. 437).

353 Ibid., p. 444.
Tarwater's "merely rational self," as opposed to the boy's great-uncle, his "divinely inspired self," and thus, according to Trowbridge's similar interpretation, one of the two "opposed moral forces" of the novel, between which Tarwater has to choose? Is he an allegorical figure, "secular education, who, with "welfare concepts" (the social worker), has produced a "dim-witted offspring," thus enacting what Coleman Rosenberger calls a "fairly explicit parable of the twentieth century"? Is he what Sumner Ferris describes, a kind of quintessential rationalist, living in "the condition of the Pharisee," devoting his life "to maintaining his rational equilibrium and rejecting grace, which is God's love," or a "monk of Satan" as Hyman maintains, "controlling the family curse of violence and madness in his blood... by rationality and good works," a "mad fanatic preaching secular salvation."

Several of these positions can be at least partially justified. Rayber recalls that when he first opened the door to Tarwater, "he had remained for an instant frozen before what might have been a mirror thrust toward him in a nightmare." As Rayber comes to know the boy a little, he analyzes: "The eyes were the eyes of

357 "The Outside and the Inside," 15-16.
the crazy student father ["singed with guilt"361], the personality was the old man's and somewhere between the two, Rayber's own image was struggling to survive and he was not able to reach it."362 Rayber has preserved himself from the family's fanaticism and madness by "what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline"; in a line rich with comic ambivalence, he thinks: "The boy would go either his way or old Tarwater's and he was determined to save him for the better course."363 The schoolteacher is a determined rationalist who tries, as the two Tarwaters think, to get things "inside his head."364 His hearing aid images (besides his deafness "to the Lord's word"365) his effort to control himself by intellectualizing: Tarwater asks, "Do you think in the box, ... or do you think in your head?"366 But if Rayber is identified with young Tarwater, it is with the self-deluded part of the boy that thinks he wants to deny his vocation.367 As Tarwater, fleeing from the clearing, nears

____________________________
361 Ibid.
362 Ibid., p. 373.
363 Ibid. The boy is indeed saved "for the better course," largely through Rayber's unwitting instrumentality. Even Tarwater realizes that the schoolteacher is only "a piece of bait" in the huge "trap that he felt set all about him" (Ibid., p. 398) to launch him into his vocation. But Rayber thinks he knows the "better course": "'God boy,' he says later, 'you need help. You need to be saved right here and now from the old man and everything he stands for. And I'm the one who can save you'" (Ibid., p. 406).
364 Ibid., p. 313; see also pp. 314, 315, 323, 348, 371.
365 Ibid., p. 385.
366 Ibid., p. 367.
367 The boy recognizes the truth about his uncle as the latter does about his nephew: "'It's you the seed fell in,' [Tarwater] said. 'It ain't a thing you can do about it. It fell in bad ground but it fell deep'" (Ibid., p. 416).
Rayber's house, he is "beginning to see a consistent image for the schoolteacher's eyes . . . . He saw them dark gray, shadowed with knowledge . . . ."\(^{368}\) Just after he sees the vision of Bishop's eyes in the bucket, Tarwater, "to take his mind off it," takes out the combination corkscrew and bottle opener Rayber had given him. He "began to realize that he had not adequately appreciated the schoolteacher while he had the opportunity . . . . He began to see again the eyes shadowed with knowledge that he had imagined before he went to the city."\(^{369}\) But, when he is actively struggling against the "trap" of his mission to baptize Bishop, Tarwater remembers that on "his first night in the city . . . he had seen once and for all that the schoolteacher was of no significance--nothing but a piece of bait . . . ."\(^{370}\)

Though Rayber does answer partly to some of the critical descriptions at the beginning of this section, he does not answer wholly to any one of them, or even to all of them combined. He is not a parabolic or allegorical figure,\(^{371}\) nor a one-dimensional caricature; he is a character like Tarwater, with a conflict not unlike

\(^{368}\)Ibid., p. 336. \(^{369}\)Ibid., p. 436. \(^{370}\)Ibid., p. 398.

\(^{371}\)One of the striking things about Flannery O'Connor's fiction is the frequency with which it invites--or at least receives--allegorical interpretation (see for example Algene Ballif's review of The Violent, "A Southern Allegory," and Thomas M. Lorch's article, "Flannery O'Connor: Christian Allegorist," Critique, X, ii [1968], 69-80; Burns' description, in "Flannery O'Connor's The Violent," of Tarwater's rape: " . . . One could say that Perverted Reason has destroyed Manhood, leaving Tarwater bereft of self-possession, but still possessed" (333); Coleman Rosenberger’s reading of the novel, mentioned above on p. 158; Caroline Gordon’s seeing in Mrs. Hopewell, of "Good Country People," and the dead judge of "The Displaced Person," figures of the "Old" South, and in Hulga a figure of the "New" ("With a Glitter of Evil," NYTBR [June 12, 1955], p. 5) and the constancy of its resistance to such interpretation.
the boy's own. He is called to be, not a prophet, but a Christian, through the old man's influence. Like Tarwater, he thinks he has escaped his vocation; unlike the boy, he has a final perception of failure. Rayber's reversal parodies Tarwater's, but his situation does not parallel the boy's as closely as one might think on a first reading. In fact, Miss O'Connor depicts him with a mixture of satirical detachment and compassion; but so little does she sentimentalize that a reader might miss the mitigating features of the schoolteacher's background. An examination of Rayber's development and reversal may make this clear.

Rayber is first presented as young Tarwater's "only other connection" besides the old prophet, a "schoolteacher who had no child of his own at the time and wanted this one of his dead sister's to raise according to his own ideas." Immediately afterwards, the reader learns how Rayber had received old Tarwater into his house "under the name of charity," but "had at the same time been creeping into his soul by the back door, asking him questions that meant more than one thing, ... and finally coming up with a written study of him for a schoolteacher magazine." After this unpromising first impression, Miss O'Connor presents old Tarwater's account of Rayber's ineffectual attempt (made with Bernice Bishop, 372

"He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window, and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed" (The Violent, p. 423).

373 Ibid., p. 305. 374 Ibid.
the "welfare-woman" he later married) to rescue the baby. 375 It is during this account that the first extenuating factor about Rayber appears. After shooting his nephew in the leg, the old man had shot a wedge out of his right ear:

The second shot flushed the righteousness off his face and left it blank and white, revealing that there was nothing underneath it, revealing, the old man sometimes admitted, his own failure as well, for he had tried and failed, long ago, to rescue the nephew. 376

From here on, the details of Rayber’s brief acquaintance with belief accumulate slowly. He had been seven when the old man kidnapped him; he was allowed to remain at Powderhead only a few days, 377 until his father, an insurance salesman, came to get him. A week later the child tried to find his way back to the clearing, "Because!" young Tarwater insists, "there was less bad than there." 378 Though his great-uncle claims Rayber came back "to hear more about God his Father, more about Jesus Christ Who had died to redeem him and more of the Truth I could tell him," 379 Tarwater’s version has its points. Rayber’s father "wore a straw hat on the side of his head and smoked a cigar and when you told him his soul was in danger, he offered to sell you a policy against any contingency." 380 When he came to old Tarwater’s to bring the child back to the city, Rayber’s father said, "His mother wants him back, Mason. I don’t know why. For my part you could have him but you

379 Ibid. 380 Ibid., p. 338.
know how she is." 381 "How she is" includes the fact that his mother "sat in her nightgown all day drinking whiskey out of a medicine bottle," 382 and did not even miss the kidnapped boy for three days. 383

But the sordidness of his home is not the sum of Rayber's childhood misery. Old Tarwater "had taken him to the backwoods and baptized him and instructed him in the facts of his Redemption", 384--but all that in four days, after which his father claimed him:

"Back to the real world, boy," he was saying, "back to the real world. And that's me and not him, see. Me and not him," and he heard himself screaming, "It's him! Him! Him and not you! And I've been born again and there's not a thing you can do about it!"

"Christ in hell," his father said, "believe it if you want to. Who cares? You'll find out soon enough." 385

Small wonder that "the instruction lasted only for a few years" and that "in time the child had set himself a different course." Small wonder, too, that the old man is sometimes troubled by "the thought that he might have helped the nephew on to his new course himself..." 386 The old man's summary of what he taught the child gives even more reason for his occasional stirrings of conscience:

He made him understand that his true father was the Lord and not the simpleton in town and that he would have to live a secret life in Jesus until the day came when he would be able to bring the rest of his family around to repentance. 387


384 Ibid., p. 307. "All these facts were new to the schoolteacher, for his parents had never taught him anything, old Tarwater said, except not to wet the bed" (Ibid., p. 341).

Even old Tarwater admits that the child's position was a difficult one. When he stopped
believing he was not at fault because "'They told him I was a crazy man.'" The old
man adds: "'But I'll tell you one thing: he never believed them neither. They kept
him from believing me but I kept him from believing them and he never took on none
of their ways though he took on worse ones.'"388

Rayber, then, can be comfortable neither with belief nor with unbelief. He
tells old Tarwater, "'You've got to be born again, Uncle, ... by your own efforts,
back to the real world where there's no saviour but yourself',"389 and yet he is him-
self occasionally overwhelmed by a "morbid surge of the love that terrified him,"
which "began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason
hated." With this love he feels a "rush of longing to have the old man's eyes--insane,
fish-colored, violent with their impossible vision of a world transfigured--turned on
him once again."390 This is not just love "for Bishop," as Ferris391 and Trow-
bridge392 maintain. It epitomizes the "seed" of faith the old man boasts he planted
in Rayber, which "was there for good. Whether anybody liked it or not."393

Rayber himself makes the same connection; the love

was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood ... . The
affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood
that touched them, flowing from some ancient source, some

388 ibid., p. 342. 389 ibid., p. 348.
desert prophet or polesitter, until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him and, he surmised, in the boy. 394

Moreover, Bishop is only the limiting force, not the sole object, of this love "powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise"; it can be occasioned by "anything he looked at too long." 395 But Rayber could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child. 396

Rayber, in other words, is in much the same situation (albeit many times magnified) as Tarwater when the boy fears that objects will stand before him demanding to be named, if he lets "his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something." 397 And Rayber handles his far more serious problem similarly. As Tarwater kept his vision located on the surfaces of things, so Rayber, "at the cost of a full life, staved . . . off" his love:

He had kept it from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline. He did not look at anything too long,

394 Ibid., p. 372. The old man has said, "'Good blood flows in his veins. And good blood knows the Lord and there ain't a thing he can do about having it'" (Ibid., p. 338).

395 Ibid.

396 Ibid., p. 410.

397 Ibid., p. 316. See also above, pp. 19, 125. Rayber "was not afraid of love in general. He knew the value of it and how it could be used. He had seen it transform in cases where nothing else had worked ["'Love is the only policy that works 95% of the time,'" says the salesman Meeks, p. 333], such as with his poor sister." But this is "love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding . . . " (Ibid., p. 372).
he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions. He slept in a narrow iron bed, worked sitting in a straight-backed chair, ate frugally, spoke little, and cultivated the dullest for friends. He was not deceived that this was a whole or a full life, he only knew that it was the way his life had to be lived if it were going to have any dignity at all. 398

Rayber knows "that his own stability depended on the little boy's presence"; 399 by his asceticism he balances himself "on a very narrow line between madness and emptiness, and when the time came for him to lose his balance, he intended to lurch toward emptiness and fall on the side of his choice." 400 The fact that he fulfills his own prediction is one of the striking features of his reversal.

This, then, is Rayber's situation and his relationship to Bishop. Hardly surprising is his reaction to Tarwater when the boy seeks him out:

"Everything he touched he warped," the schoolteacher said. "He lived a long and useless life and he did you a great injustice. It's a blessing that he's dead at last. You could have had everything and you've had nothing. All that can be changed now. Now you belong to someone who can help you and understand you." 401

So absorbed is Rayber in his plans to "make a man" of Tarwater that he does not even "notice any change when the boy's expression hardened until it was a fortress wall to keep his thoughts from being expressed"; on the contrary, the schoolteacher "gazed through the insignificant boy before him to an image of him that he held fully developed in his mind." 402

This kind of myopia characterizes all Rayber's dealings with the boy. Not

398 Ibid., p. 373. 399 Ibid., p. 410. 400 Ibid., p. 373.
401 Ibid., pp. 356-357. 402 Ibid., p. 357.
that he does not have some correct judgments, even some remarkably acute perceptions, about his nephew. It takes him "barely half a day to find out that the old man had made a wreck of the boy . . ."\textsuperscript{403} and in some ways he is quite right. The boy's education has a few gaps (the old man "had taught him Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment"\textsuperscript{404}); the boy is ill-tempered, stubborn, and narrow-minded,\textsuperscript{405} and could use reforming on a number of counts. Further, Rayber understands the old man's hold over Tarwater, and perceives the boy's "compulsion to baptize Bishop" with surprising clarity.\textsuperscript{406} The trouble is that, lacking an entire dimension, Rayber's perceptions are not really true or reliable. Their lack is illuminated by a similar flaw in the impressions of his erstwhile wife, Bernice Bishop, of the infant Tarwater:

She could not express her exact revulsion, for her feeling was not logical. It had, she said, the look of an adult, not of a child, and of an adult with immovable insane convictions. Its face was like the face she had seen in some medieval paintings where the martyr's limbs are being sawed off and his expression says he is being deprived

\textsuperscript{403}\textsuperscript{Ibid., p. 363.} \textsuperscript{404}\textsuperscript{Ibid., p. 305.}

\textsuperscript{405}Told he can have his own car at sixteen, Tarwater "had replied that he could walk on his two feet for nothing without being beholden" (\textsuperscript{Ibid., p. 369}); that they will go up in a plane, he answers: "'I done flew . . . I wouldn't give you nothing for no airplane. A buzzard can fly'" (\textsuperscript{Ibid., p. 406}).

\textsuperscript{406}"'The old man told you to baptize Bishop. You have that order lodged in your head like a boulder blocking your path'" (\textsuperscript{Ibid., p. 417}). See also the rest of his explanation on the same page.
of nothing essential. She had had the sense, seeing the child in the door, that if it had known that at that moment all its future advantages were being stolen from it, its expression would not have altered a jot. 407

According to Bernice's and Rayber's vision—which is, after all, more "orthodox" than the Tarwaters'—the boy's inner convictions are "insane"; in their view, the material comforts and secularist upbringing he is deprived of are the only possible advantages. This irony is one of the strengths of Miss O'Connor's two novels: that though commonsense people like Mrs. Flood and Rayber are so right and fanatics like Hazel Motes and the Tarwaters are not only wrong but wrong-headed, the eccentrics, grounded in God and the spiritual dimension, grasp what the sensible people do not even see.

It is his missing of the spiritual dimension that directly causes Rayber's reversal. What is on one level a compulsion to baptize Bishop is at the deepest level a divine vocation, and as such meaningless to Rayber; hence his advice to Tarwater to "'face it and fight it, to cut down the weed every time you see it appear.'" 408 He is really advising the boy to do as Tarwater had already decided, to drown Bishop. Rayber recognizes his own complicity after the event: "What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him until he ceased to struggle." 409 The reversal for

407 Ibid., p. 410. 408 Ibid., p. 418.

409 Ibid., p. 422. This is the compensation for his own "failure of nerve" (p. 403; see the description of Rayber's attempt to drown Bishop, pp. 388-389).
Rayber is the death of Bishop, followed by his own realization that he has so far dehumanized himself that "the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due" will never come. But an added reversal is the fact that, destructive as his influence is on one plane—he virtually counsels Bishop's death, and it is his gift of a corkscrew that enables Tarwater to get at the homosexual's drugged whiskey—both the baptism-drowning and the violation drive Tarwater on to the final acceptance of his vocation. Rayber himself is not a godly man, and these events are certainly not holy; but good and evil are not any more tidily or understandably separated in O'Connor than they are in life.

A final note on The Violent is the fact of the differences between its present Chapter 1 and an early published version of the same chapter, which appeared in 1955 as "You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead" in New World Writing. Some of these

---

410 Ibid., p. 423. This progressive dehumanization is pointed up by the machine motif which accompanies Rayber. When Tarwater first sees his uncle putting on his hearing aid: "For an instant the boy had the thought that his head ran by electricity" (p. 355). Later, he asks sardonically, "What you wired for? Does your head light up?" (p. 366). When Tarwater tells his uncle that he "tended to" old Tarwater by burning him, "Rayber heard his own heart, magnified by the hearing aid; suddenly begin to pound like the works of a gigantic machine in his chest" (p. 368). At the Cherokee Lodge, the woman notices that Rayber's eyes have "a peculiar look—like something human trapped in a switch box" (p. 396). Rayber himself tells his nephew, "My guts are in my head" (p. 405). Just before the "cataclysm," the schoolteacher "grabbed the metal box of his hearing aid as if he were clawing his heart"; he is "wooden" as "the machine [his hearing aid] picked up the sounds of some fierce sustained struggle . . . "; and he knows Tarwater's destiny "with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart" (p. 422).

411 VIII (1955), 81-97.
differences can of course be accounted for by the fact that the early version would not include details exceeding the story's temporal and thematic limits. The fact remains, however, that the changes Miss O'Connor made in adapting the early story into Chapter 1 of The Violent involve for the most part the motifs—vocation and baptizing mission, vision, hunger, and fire—and the characters—Tarwater's "friend" and uncle Rayber—which state and reinforce the ironic reversal.

The first paragraph of "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," in words identical to those of Chapter 1, tells of old Tarwater's death, and his burial by Buford Munson because young Tarwater was drunk. The story continues by describing the old man's betrayal by Rayber and his kidnapping of the baby Tarwater; sketching briefly Rayber's attempt to claim the child; and (with a short flashback to their city journey) narrating the boy's attempt at, and abandoning of, his great-uncle's burial. The story ends as Chapter 1 does, with the boy's drunkenness and his flight to the city as Meeks' rider. In outline, and frequently in words, the two versions are identical. However, many of the significant details in Chapter 1 were added to the original. Among these are all direct references to prophecy, either old Tarwater's or the boy's; Rayber's kidnapping and baptism; the necessity for baptizing Bishop;

412 Other than minor ones like word alterations (e.g., "shortly" for the original "eventually" in "Rayber, the schoolteacher, had shortly discovered where they were," The Violent, p. 306—italics mine); punctuation switches, etc.

413 The initial reference to the article in the "schoolteacher magazine" (The Violent, p. 305) occurs in the original, but not the description of the article's history and contents (Ibid., pp. 314-315). The old man was sent a "rage of vision" (Ibid., p. 306) to fly with young Tarwater; but the word "prophet" or "prophecy" does not
Tarwater's unusual birth; any sort of vocation for the boy beyond the immediate task of burying his great-uncle; and all references to vision and to hunger for the bread of life. 414

"Everything That Rises Must Converge"

This story ends in a sudden explosion of violence: the mother of Julian, the central character, is struck by a black woman whom she has offended (really by wearing a hat identical to hers, and secondarily by patronizing the woman's child with the gift of a penny). Julian's mother has a stroke, and presumably dies, after the attack. Louis D. Rubin finds this ending unconvincing, seeing the stroke as "not so much inevitable as being made to happen to make the meaning come out right." Rubin sees the central flaw in the story as Julian's being made "a lout so despicable ... [that] when he realizes the dreadfulness of what he has been and done, we don't have any sense of his being caught in a tragic plight." 415 It is true that many other things besides the black woman's blow could have happened to Julian's mother; it is true that Julian is a character difficult to empathize with. However, a

appear in the original, where old Tarwater could simply be a fanatic.

414 Not counting very brief additions (single words or short phrases), the following pages of Chapter 1 were not in the original: p. 306 (except for one brief paragraph); half each of pp. 307, 308, and 310; all of pp. 313-315; half each of pp. 316 and 319; all of p. 322 and most of 323; and all of pp. 325-327 except for one very short paragraph on p. 325. These extensive additions all involve the motifs described above.

study of ironic reversal in the story may show that it is not so simple as Rubin
indicates, in the comments quoted above or in his summary:

The title story . . . depicts a mean, selfish young man, who prides
himself on his smug liberalism in racial matters, taking his racially
prejudiced mother downtown on the bus to a YWCA reducing class.
His contempt for his mother's bigotry is unrestrained: he actually
rejoices when she is knocked down by a Negro woman . . . 416

The story reverses on two levels: Julian's, and the reader's. In both
cases, the reversal involves the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Julian's
reversal is a sudden realization (impending but not achieved at the story's end) as to
his real need for and love of his mother, and his own unpardonable behavior toward
her--a sudden entry, imminent in the last sentence, into the "world of guilt and
sorrow"; 417 the reversal the reader experiences is a growing perception of Julian's
wrongness and the relative rightness of his mother. These are spoken of as two
because the reader is allowed to see more than Julian ever realizes, even in the final
almost-epiphany. Julian's reversal is rudimentary and limited, and will be discussed
only briefly; what matters more is the realization the reader is allowed to have for
him.

Julian's realization hinges on the closely-linked "real world" and self-
knowledge motifs, repeated frequently in the story. He sees his mother's eyes as
"innocent and untouched by experience." 418 Shortly afterwards, his mother says,

416 Ibid.
418 Ibid., p. 30.
as she does "every time he took her to the reducing class": "Of course, if you know who you are, you can go anywhere." Julian "savagely" replies: "Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are." 419 When his mother indignantly recites her illustrious ancestry: "'Will you look around you,' he said tensely, 'and see where you are now?' and he swept his arm jerkily out to indicate the neighborhood, which the growing darkness at least made less dingy." 420 It is interesting that while his mother uses the pronoun who, Julian here uses also where. To him person seems existential—he and his mother are somehow diminished because they live in a shabby neighborhood—rather than, as to his mother, essential and therefore constant. At any rate, the word where indicates his imperfect understanding, or shying away from the idea, of self-knowledge. Slightly later, also, when his mother is agitated by his removing his tie, Julian answers, "'If you'll never learn where you are, ... you can at least learn where I am.'" 421 In the course of the ensuing squabble, he insists that "'True culture is in the mind, the mind," but his mother retorts:

"'It's in the heart, ... and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are.'

"'Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are.'

"'I care who I am," she said icily. 422

On the bus Julian thinks about his mother: "She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot." Ironically,

419 Ibid., p. 31. 420 Ibid.
421 Ibid., p. 33. 422 Ibid.
this thought comes immediately after Julian himself has withdrawn "into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time," and just before he thinks of his mother's claim that "he didn't yet know a thing about life," that he hadn't even entered the real world--when already he was as disenchanted with it as a man of fifty. Julian "retires again" into his inner compartment and has two bouts of fantasizing, yet continues to think that he is the one in the real world. After his mother has been knocked down, he tells her, "'You aren't who you think you are,'" and "'From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change.'" But when he stops her and looks at her, he "was looking into a face he had never seen before"; shortly before, his mother had "raked his face" with her eyes as if "trying to determine his identity," but had found him unfamiliar. Now, her remaining good eye "raked his face again, found nothing, and closed." Neither he nor his mother knows the other, nor will Julian really know even himself until he has finally entered the real "world of guilt and sorrow," but his mother does in

---

423 Ibid., p. 35. The passage continues: "This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows" (Ibid.).

424 Ibid. 425 Ibid., p. 37.

426 Ibid., pp. 36-37, 38. A fuller discussion of what these passages reveal about Julian will occur in the section on what the reader realizes.

427 Ibid., p. 43. 428 Ibid. 429 Ibid., p. 42.

430 Ibid., p. 43. 431 Ibid.
fact know who she is, as she had claimed. She "can go anywhere"; she "started off with a headlong movement in the wrong direction," and demands to be taken "Home"—to the Godhigh/Chesney mansion or to heaven—by "Grandpa" and Caroline (her old nurse); but as for Julian, "The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere."

The reversal of appearance and reality which the reader is allowed to perceive begins early in the story. Even earlier appear the details of plot on which the reversal turns: Julian's mother's high blood pressure, her "refusal to ride the buses by herself since they had been integrated," and her hideous new hat. The first indication that Julian may not be a wholly reliable interpreter of events comes while he waits for his mother to put on the hat: "... He, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him." Soon the reader learns that his mother is "a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet.'" She is also somewhat unrealistic and snobby, at least in Julian's eyes: "Since this had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago, his mother persisted in thinking they did well to have an apartment in

---

432 Ibid., p. 42. 433 Ibid., p. 43. 434 Ibid.

435 Ibid., p. 29. His mother has bought the hat because "I at least won't meet myself coming and going" (Ibid., p. 30); the saleslady made the same prediction (p. 31).

436 Ibid. 437 Ibid., p. 30.
Yet she loves and believes in Julian. When he insultingly says that when he begins making money "'You can have one of these jokes [like her hat] whenever you take the fit,'" she replies, "'I think you're doing fine . . . . You've only been out of school a year. Rome wasn't built in a day.'." She repeats this last sentence after she announces, on the bus, "'My son just finished college last year. He wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started.'" Even after Julian makes a fool of himself by asking a negro passenger for matches in the face of a NO SMOKING sign and of the fact that he himself has no cigarettes, having "quit smoking some months before because he could not afford it," his mother does not "take advantage of his momentary discomfort." Yet Julian "thought he could have stood his lot better if she had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him"; accordingly, "instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity."

Even before they board the bus, Julian's mother expatiates on her most constant topic, the racial question. She "rolled onto it every few days like a train on an open track," always coming "majestically into the station" on the same conclusion: "'They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence.'" This time Julian

---

438 Ibid. 439 Ibid. 440 Ibid., p. 35.
441 Ibid., p. 34. 442 Ibid., p. 37. 443 Ibid.
444 Ibid., p. 31. 445 Ibid., p. 36. So he thinks. 446 Ibid., p. 32.
breaks off the subject abruptly. So far, he and his mother are in this respect the intellectual young Southern liberal with broad-minded ideas on race and the shabby-genteel lady brought up in the traditions of the Old South, who still thinks that "they" ought to know their place. Indeed, to Sister Mariella Gable (judging by her diction), the mother is the villain of the piece; she "exercises a nauseous patronizing condescension to Negroes," and gives the child a penny "with unctuous friendliness."447 Rubin says that Julian "prides himself on his smug liberalism in racial matters" and lacks restraint in his "contempt for his mother's bigotry."448 Hyman sees little good in mother or son: "Integrationism is savagely travestied as sentimental and fatuous in Julian in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' and Asbury in 'The Enduring Chill,' but the opposing view is just as savagely travestied in their mothers."449 It is difficult to see prejudice "savagely travestied" in Julian's mother,450 or a "patronizing condescension" more "nauseous" than anyone else's. She has the same prejudices as many who do not have the excuses the text gives her, of Southerness and faded gentility. Further, her prejudices are at least honestly

447 "But First it Must Rise," The Critic, XXVI (June-July, 1965), 60.

448 "Southerners and Jews," 701. See also above, p. 172.

449 Flannery O'Connor, p. 42.

450 And impossible to see it in Asbury's mother. Remembering that her son was once writing a play about Negroes, she thinks, "Why anybody would want to write a play about Negroes was beyond her," ("The Enduring Chill," Everything That Rises, p. 91). She thinks once, and speaks to Asbury once, about the laziness of their two dairy hands, who happen to be Negroes; but these last two examples have no racist overtones.
expressed. But Julian, who "made it a point to sit down by a Negro" when by himself on a bus, "in reparation as it were for his mother's sins," $^{451}$ shows himself as only a pseudo-liberal, his "integrationism" as nothing of the kind. He moves to the seat with the negro, not on principle, but to spite his mother, whose face obligingly turns "an angry red," $^{452}$ and to impress the philistines on the bus ("He would have liked to get in conversation with the Negro and to talk with him about art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them . . ."$^{453}$).

Julian's integrationism, then, is largely in his own mind (he might bring home a black friend to upset his mother, but "he could not push her to the extent of making her have a stroke, and moreover, he had never been successful at making any Negro friends"$^{454}$) and strangely racist for a real liberal (the friend he brought home would be a "distinguished professor or lawyer"; he has "tried to strike up an acquaintance on the bus with some of the better types"; and he thinks of bringing home a "beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman"$^{455}$—in other words, a whitely beautiful woman with discreetly Negro touches). So absorbed is he in his fantasy that he feels no alarm when his mother's color is first "angry red," then "unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure had risen,"$^{456}$ then "purple-faced."$^{457}$ He is annoyed when the huge black woman pushes into the seat next to him, until he sees from his

$^{452}$Ibid., p. 36.  
$^{453}$Ibid.  
$^{454}$Ibid., p. 38.  
$^{455}$Ibid.  
$^{456}$Ibid., p. 37.  
$^{457}$Ibid., p. 38.
mother's face that "this was more objectionable to her than it was to him." At
the end of the story, he is oblivious to his mother's critical condition as he sees fit
to deliver a sermon on the incident's meaning:

He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing
it up with an explanation of its meaning. She might as well be
made to understand what had happened to her. "Don't think that
was just an uppity Negro woman," he said. "That was the whole
colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies.
That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you,
and to be sure," he added gratuitously (because he thought it was
funny), "it looked better on her than it did on you." Julian's obtuseness here shows that his view of his own superiority and his
mother's invariable pettiness and stupidity is not much more accurate than his
illusions about his racial broadmindedness. He thinks he is not dominated by his
mother, and she is certainly not a domineering person. Yet he is haunted by the
image of the family mansion; he "never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it
without longing." It has been sold, and is "decayed" from its former grandeur,
but it remained in his mind as his mother had known it . . . . He
preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it
was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had
been a torment to him--whereas she had hardly known the difference.
She called her insensitivity "being adjustable." Though Julian insists to himself that "It was he, not she, who could have appreciated"

\[458\text{Ibid., p. 39.} \quad 459\text{Ibid., p. 42.} \quad 460\text{Ibid., p. 36.} \]
\[461\text{Ibid., p. 32. Here and throughout, the house and all it represents is} \]
a subdued but powerful metaphor for the grandeur lost and longed for by fallen man--
a metaphor clinched by the above nostalgic passage and by the ambiguity of Julian's
mother's demand to be taken "Home."
the old mansion, he may be wrong. His mother's "insensitivity" or "adjustability" may illustrate her axiom, "If you know who you are, you can go anywhere"; his "torment" may indicate the opposite about him. He is certainly adept at absolving himself from gratitude to or respect for his mother:

If he had permitted her sacrifices, it was only because her lack of foresight had made them necessary. All of her life had been a struggle to act like a Chestny without the Chestny goods, and to give him everything she thought a Chestny ought to have; but since, said she, it was fun to struggle, why complain? And when you had won, as she had won, what fun to look back on the hard times! He could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought she had won.

His own blindness and conceit and his mother's goodness despite her faults emerge more clearly as Julian's thoughts continue:

What she meant when she said she had won was that she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and that he had turned out so well—good looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be a success), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him) . . . .

The further irony of all this was that in spite of her, he had turned out so well . . . . In spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts.

When he withdraws again, Julian's private mental compartment is described as a "high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture" (like the decaying family mansion); and though in his sermon to his mother he pro-

\[\text{\textsuperscript{462}Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{463}Ibid., p. 35.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{464}Ibid., p. 36.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{465}Ibid., p. 37.}\]
claims, "'The old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn,' it is his bitter thoughts 'of the house that had been lost for him' that make him add, "'You aren't who you think you are."' 466

Julian is not only a prisoner of the past in his gloomy romanticism and his fundamentally racist ideas; he does not manage much better in the present. He congratulates himself on his understanding of his mother's "gray" face and "look of dull recognition" of the huge black woman: "Julian saw that was because she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons. Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it. His amusement showed plainly on his face." 467 When he finally realizes that his mother's "recognition" is of the woman's hat, Julian feels uncomfortably for a moment his mother's innocence, but this sensation "lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh." 468 It is "with a sinking heart" that he sees "incipient signs of recovery on her face" and realizes "that this was going to strike her suddenly as funny and was going to be no lesson at all." 469 A sort of final seal is set upon his blindness when, with his mother's condition plain to the reader, Julian still sermonizes: "'You needn't act as if the world had come to an end,' he said, 'because it hasn't ... Buck up,' he said, 'it won't kill you."' 470

Thus Julian is narrow, small-minded, and childish, and his mother, despite

---

469 Ibid., p. 40. 470 Ibid., p. 43.
her stupidity and racial bigotry, a fundamentally good and unselfish woman. The story presents the ironic obverse of the title, but it presents as well the possibility of spiritual rising and convergence, through the mother's essential rightness and Julian's imminent realization. Rubin's objection about the unreality of the stroke is perhaps less weighty when one sees the stroke gathering, not through the black woman's opposition, but through Julian's insensitivity and vindictiveness; and though Rubin is right in saying that we do not see Julian "caught in a tragic plight," we do see him at the end on the verge of tragic possibilities, on the brink of finally becoming human.

"Revelation"

"Revelation" is a sort of variant of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, with Mrs. Ruby Turpin in both roles—chiefly the former. Mrs. Turpin, big, happy, and self-satisfied, receives a special message which she recognizes as coming from heaven, through a girl whom she helps push over the edge into insanity. The message, about the fundamental wretchedness of Mrs. Turpin's condition, shocks her first into fury at God, then into realization of the truth about herself. The rever-

471 See John J. Burke's contention that the story bears out the title ironically on the naturalistic level, literally on the theological level; "Convergence of Flannery O'Connor and Chardin," *Renascence*, XIX (Fall, 1966), 41-44, passim; and Robert Fitzgerald's explanation that, though the mutual isolation and cross-purposes are resolved "only slightly by the tragic blow," slightly "may mean a great deal in the economy of this writer" (Introduction to *Everything That Rises*, p. xxiv).
sal, announced in Mary Grace's outburst and confirmed in Mrs. Turpin's final vision, consists in the breakdown of Mrs. Turpin's neat categories. The "bottom rail" may indeed be "on top"; she may not be so fortunate, and in fact is not so "good," as she had thought. Further, those she had condemned may be quite different in God's sight from her conception of them. This reversal can perhaps best be seen by examining, first, the way Mrs. Turpin's categories operate, and second, her "revelation" through Mary Grace, and its consequences in the breakdown of her systematization of people.

Mrs. Turpin is by nature a categorizer, a formidably affable managerial woman who "sized up the seating situation" in the doctor's waiting room before assigning her husband a seat, quickly passes judgment on the adequacy of the waiting room, and even classifies the nurse's hair (the highest stack of yellow

472"Revelation," Everything That Rises, p. 185; see also "Everything That Rises," where Julian's mother (who has more in common with Mary Grace's mother than with Mrs. Turpin), says, "'I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top'" (p. 31).

473"If Jesus had said, 'You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it,' she would have had to say, 'Well, don't make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don't matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!' Her heart rose. He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you!" (Ibid., p. 175).

474 Ibid., p. 167.

475"She could not understand why a doctor—with as much money as they made charging five dollars a day to just stick their head in the hospital door and look at you—couldn't afford a decent-sized waiting room. This one was hardly bigger than a garage . . . . At one end of it there was a big green glass ash tray full of cigaret butts and cotton wads with little blood spots on them. If she had anything to do with
hair Mrs. Turpin had ever seen". But her greatest classifying activity is directed toward people. She quickly labels the others in the waiting room. The person with whom she feels the greatest affinity is first called the "well-dressed" or "stylish," then the "pleasant" lady; her daughter, a "fat girl of eighteen or nineteen," is generally the "ugly girl." The doltish child of five or six; his grandmother, a "thin, leathery old woman" in a cotton dress of the same print as the Turpins' chicken feed sacks; and his mother, a "lank-faced" woman in a "yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks, both gritty-looking," are lumped together as "the white-trash"; the child's mother, a figure of some importance in the story, is usually the "white-trash" or "trashy" woman. A "red-headed youngish

the running of the place, that would have been emptied every so often" (Ibid., p. 168).

---


479 Ibid., pp. 171 ff.; but always, except when she is called "the girl's mother," a "lady".

480 Ibid., pp. 169 ff.

481 Ibid., p. 169. Mrs. Turpin "had seen from the first that the child belonged with the old woman. She could tell by the way they sat—kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up" (Ibid.)

482 Ibid., pp. 174, 177; "Worse than niggers any day" (p. 169).

483 For example, Ibid., pp. 172, 173.

484 For example, Ibid., pp. 174, 175. Always "woman" as opposed to "lady."
woman" next to the white-trash woman, "reading one of the magazines and working a piece of chewing gum, hell for leather, as Claud would say," is "not white-trash, just common." Mrs. Turpin is able to place these people further by their shoes ("without appearing to," she "always noticed people's feet": "red and gray suede shoes" for the well-dressed lady; her "good black patent leather pumps" for Mrs. Turpin; "Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks" for the ugly girl; tennis shoes for the old lady; and "what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them" for the white-trash woman--"exactly what you would have expected her to have on.

So far, Mrs. Turpin might seem to be merely observant or inquisitive. But Miss O'Connor has been building up a picture of a woman who compartmentalizes people. This habit becomes more apparent as the reader learns of one of Mrs. Turpin's insomnious pastimes, deciding "who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself," especially if Jesus had made her choose between being black and being white-trash:

"Please, Jesus, please," she would have said, "just let me wait until there's another place available," and he would have said, "No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places, so make up your mind." She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then--but that don't mean a trashy one." And he would have made her a neat clean

---

485 Ibid., p. 170
486 Ibid., p. 169.
487 Ibid.
488 Ibid., pp. 169-170.
respectable Negro woman, herself but black.\(^{489}\)

During the remainder of the story, many of Mrs. Turpin's judgments are made in terms of these two categories, considered as categories, though one is more varied than the other ("'There's a heap of things worse than a nigger,' Mrs. Turpin agreed. 'It's all kinds of them just like it's all kinds of us.'\(^{490}\)).

Of negroes, Mrs. Turpin has a fund of knowledge, all generalized. They will no longer pick cotton "'because they got to be right up there with the white folks.'\(^{491}\) Even hired hands have to be treated ingratiatingly:

"Like you read out of the same book" the lady said, showing she understood perfectly.

"Child, yes," Mrs. Turpin said . . . "That's the way it's going to be from now on. You may as well face it."\(^{492}\)

When the white-trash woman says, "'They ought to send all them niggers back to

\(^{489}\)Ibid., p. 170. Mrs. Turpin thinks of a further complication to this dilemma after the first unpleasant stare from the ugly girl: "'What if Jesus had said, 'All right, you can be white-trash or a nigger or ugly'!' (Ibid., p. 171). In her opinion of Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin again categorizes: she "felt an awful pity for the girl, though she thought it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly" (Ibid.).

\(^{490}\)Ibid., p. 174. \(^{491}\)Ibid., p. 172.

\(^{492}\)Ibid., p. 173. The white-trash woman says: "'One thang I know, . . . two thangs I ain't going to do: love no niggers nor scoot down no hog with no hose.'" Though Mrs. Turpin exchanges a contemptuous glance with the pleasant lady, the trashy woman in her statements seems actually to echo Mrs. Turpin's private thoughts about black people. As for the girl's mother, Carter Martin says of her that, though not so important as Julian's in "Everything That Rises" or Thomas in "Comforts of Home," she is "like them in her tendency to offer easy solutions to extremely complex problems" (The True Country, p. 40). This same tendency Mrs. Turpin has to an exaggerated degree.
Africa . . . That's where they come from in the first place," and the pleasant lady (like Julian's mother) objects, "'Oh, I couldn't do without my good colored friends,'" Mrs. Turpin, agreeing with the lady, adds: "'Nooo, ... they're going to stay here where they can go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color. That's what they all want to do, every one of them, improve their color.'" Towards the end of the story, when she has told the field negroes of her terrible experience and they have responded with shocked insincere flattery, Mrs. Turpin thinks disgustedly, "You could never say anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but not with them." But, though Mrs. Turpin would not have wanted to be black, she would have wanted to be white-trash even less. She is even more positive in her contempt for and knowledge of this latter category. When the white-trash woman says she "'got me some joo'ry'" with green stamps, Mrs. Turpin mentally replies, "Ought to have got you a wash rag and some soap." When the woman objects to hogs, "'nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place,'" Mrs. Turpin, giving her the "merest edge of her attention," explains--mostly to the pleasant lady--that their hogs are neither dirty nor stinking--"'cleaner than some children I've seen'"--because they are raised on concrete and Claud "'scoots them down with the hose every afternoon and washes off the floor.'"

The woman turned her face away from Mrs. Turpin. "I know I wouldn't scoot down no hog with no hose," she said to the wall.

93ibid., p. 174. 94ibid., p. 183. 95ibid., p. 171.
You wouldn't have no hog to scoot down, Mrs. Turpin said to herself. "A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin," the woman muttered.\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.}

After the trashy woman says she "'can't get nothing down'' the old woman and the little boy "'but Co'Cola and candy,'"\footnote{Ibid., p. 176.} Mrs. Turpin thinks:

That's all you try to get down em . . . . Too lazy to light the fire. There was nothing you could tell her about people like them that she didn't know already. And it was not just that they didn't have anything. Because if you gave them everything, in two weeks it would all be broken or filthy or they would have chopped it up for lightwood.\footnote{Ibid., p. 176.}

The trashy woman (who wants to "'send all them niggers back to Africa'"") explains that she likes her little boy better sick because "'He don't give me no trouble now. It's me waitin to see the doctor . . . .'"

If I was going to send anybody back to Africa, Mrs. Turpin thought, it would be your kind, woman. "Yes, indeed," she said aloud, but looking up at the ceiling, "'it's a heap of things worse than a nigger.'" And dirtier than a hog, she added to herself.\footnote{Ibid.}

Black people and white-trash are the two lowest classes of people for Mrs. Turpin; however, she has classified all of mankind, though sometimes she has difficulty keeping the categories straight:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them--not above, just away from--were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land-owners to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common

\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 176.} \footnote{Ibid.}
and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent ... . Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.  

Mrs. Turpin does not realize that the point of this dream might be that the classes are not so rigidly hierarchical as she wants to conceive them. Still, she can congratulate herself that she does good to all classes:

To help anybody out that need it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so.

The white-trash woman, as she parallels Mrs. Turpin's real thoughts about race, parodies her self-congratulation as well. After Mary Grace, calmed at last by a hypodermic, has been carried off to the hospital, the woman asks the nurse, "'That ther girl is going to be a lunatic, ain't she?'" Receiving no answer, she announces, "'Yes, she's going to be a lunatic'"; and then, "fervently": "'I thank Gawd ... I ain't a lunatic.'"

It is Mary Grace—or the message which comes through her—who upsets

---

500 Ibid., p. 170.
501 Ibid., p. 175. Mrs. Turpin here first sounds like the Pharisee of the parable.
502 Ibid., p. 179.
503 Ibid., p. 180. Judging by Mrs. Turpin's final vision, "freaks and lunatics"—and respectable people like Mrs. Turpin—are the only humans lower than white-trash.
Mrs. Turpin's tidy categories. From the first, the girl singles Mrs. Turpin out for dislike, scowling at her "as if she did not like her looks." During the conversation about green stamps, Mary Grace shuts her book with a bang and stares through Mrs. Turpin, her eyes lit with a "peculiar" and "unnatural" light "like night road signs give." Mrs. Turpin can think of "no reason the girl should single her out for her ugly looks"; but her eyes remain "fixed on Mrs. Turpin as if she had some very special reason for disliking her," so that Mrs. Turpin has "trouble bringing her attention back to the conversation."

Gradually Mrs. Turpin becomes aware of something at least preternatural in the girl's dislike of her. Mary Grace makes a hideous face, and "for a moment" Mrs. Turpin is "certain that the girl had made it at her." Mary Grace looks at Mrs. Turpin "as if she had known and disliked her all her life--all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all the girl's life. Why, girl, I don't even know you, Mrs. Turpin said silently." The girl makes the face again, her eyes "fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin. This time there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them." Finally, Mrs. Turpin launches into her rhapsody of gratitude for who she has escaped being, ""and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides"; she is overwhelmed by a "terrible pang of joy" at having got Claud, and bursts out, "'Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!'" At that

504 Ibid., p. 169.  
505 Ibid., p. 171.  
506 Ibid., p. 174.  
507 Ibid., p. 176.  
508 Ibid., p. 177.
moment the girl's book hits Mrs. Turpin "directly over her left eye." 509

From this point Miss O'Connor quite clearly uses the folk belief, held apparently by Mrs. Turpin, in the madman as touched by God. The girl's eyes seem "a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air." 510 Mrs. Turpin is strangely drawn to her, with now "no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition." 511 She asks for and receives a revelation:

"What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely ... .

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's.

"Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered. 512

So sensible and jolly a person as Mrs. Turpin might be expected to shrug off so apparently preposterous an accusation. But Mrs. Turpin does not shrug off this revelation; she receives it as quite simply a message from heaven. At home and trying to rest, she attempts denial: "'I am not,' she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From hell'"; but she does not succeed: "The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, brooked no repudiation." 513 It is here that the inadequacy of Mrs. Turpin's categories begins to come home to her, though she does not at first admit

509 Ibid.

510 Ibid., p. 178; as if, that is, the girl is free now as she was not when she was bound by rationality.

the fact; and here that her words are again reminiscent of the Pharisee's:

She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. 514

This injustice fills Mrs. Turpin with wrath; it sends her, first to the field negroes to tell her experience, and then, receiving no satisfaction from them, to the pig parlor, which she approaches with "the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle." 515 Her battle is with God. "'What do you send me a message like that for?'" she asks him furiously. And then the heart of her problem, the breakdown of her carefully guarded categories: "'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?'" 516 She lists her qualifications for salvation: "'It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church.'" 517 She becomes progressively more furious, shouting, "'If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then.'" Sarcastically, she assures God that if he is so fond of trash, she can "'act like'" trash or a nigger; 518 she is still assuming that there is a specific way for each to act.

In a "final surge of fury," Mrs. Turpin roars, "'Who do you think you are?'"

514 Ibid. 515 Ibid., p. 183. 516 Ibid., p. 184.

517 Ibid.

518 Ibid., p. 185; although "'It's too late for me to be a nigger'" (Ibid.).
As often with Flannery O'Connor, a key sentence in the story is implied--here very clearly--rather than stated:

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer ["Who do you think you are?"] from beyond the wood. 519

Mrs. Turpin's final acceptance of the order of reality is expressed in a vision. She sees a purple streak of light in the sky, left over from the sunset, as a "vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven." 520 Given the last two words of this sentence, and the fact that at the end of the story Mrs. Turpin hears "the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah," 521 it is hard to understand how Granville Hicks 522 and Hyman 523 can think that Mrs. Turpin is damned. 524 In her vision, on the contrary, she is at last being

519 Ibid. 520 Ibid., p. 186. 521 Ibid.

522 "A Holy Kind of Horror," Saturday Review, XLIX (July 2, 1966). He sees the ending as "ferocious," with Mrs. Turpin having "a vision of herself in hell" (21).

523 Flannery O'Connor. Hyman speaks of a vision "in which Mrs. Turpin sees the good Christians like herself in a hellfire in which 'even their virtues were being burned away,'" and concludes, "In Flannery O'Connor's moral universe, in short, Hazel Motes may have backed himself into heaven, but fat Mrs. Turpin seems destined for hell" (p. 36).

524 Given, also, the fact that the respectable souls are being purified, "even their virtues ... burned away." Purgation would not be a function of hellfire in either fundamentalist protestant (Mrs. Turpin's) or Catholic (Miss O'Connor's) theology.
granted a perception of the truth about souls, not the hierarchy she had erroneously worked out, but a "vast horde." In the procession march "whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs." Finally, "bringing up the end of the procession" (not among the front ranks at all by reason of their possessions and respectability), Mrs. Turpin sees "a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right." These people are dignified, respectable, sober--much more so than the rest of the rag-tag multitude--and "They alone were on key." Yet these surface excellences are just that: Mrs. Turpin can "see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

As mentioned above, this vision is only a confirmation (and an explanation) of the real reversal, the real revelation: Mary Grace's "message." Both revelation and final vision, as with many of Miss O'Connor's stories, "work" on the literal and symbolic levels whether the reader takes them seriously as authentic

525 Thus Ruby Turpin, like Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," and like the grandmother in "A Good Man" and Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person," is a lowbrow manifestation of what Walter Sullivan calls Miss O'Connor's "basic fictional situation": "that of the gnostic, believing in himself and asserting the myth of his own independence." ("The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," Southern Humanities Review, II [Summer, 1968], 305). Further, aside from the respectable people at the end, there is no clearly established hierarchy among the souls such as Mrs. Turpin had constructed for herself.

The fact that Miss O'Connor does not force either skepticism or belief on the reader, in this story as in others, strengthens both the literal authenticity and the symbolic thrust of Mrs. Turpin's revelation.

"Parker's Back"

One of Miss O'Connor's last stories (if not the last), "Parker's Back" is structurally one of the richest. Paul Pickrel could say of The Violent that it was "a little too schematic" for him—that "Every incident neatly advances the scheme, every character illustrates it, and every symbol is exactly in place"—that, in short, the "hand of the manipulator," although "very gifted," was "too evident in the book." Whether or not one agrees with this objection, one can see its plausibility, in Wise Blood as in The Violent, and in some of the stories. "Revelation," for example, has a fairly straightforward initial situation and an apparently simple reversal. It is saved, however, from being "too schematic" (as, I think, are the novels and most of the other stories) by the multivalence of its imagery and symbolic movement. "Parker's Back" so far escapes being over-schematic that the actual movement of the story is difficult to determine. This fact may be illustrated by a brief outline of what I take to be that movement and an examination of how it works out in the story.

527 This is especially true of both novels; of Mrs. Shortley's visions in "The Displaced Person"; and of Parker's "conversion experience" in "Parker's Back."

The opening paragraphs present O.E. Parker, married to Sarah Ruth Cates and consumed by dissatisfaction. Through flashback to their courtship—if such a term can be applied to it—the reader learns that Sarah Ruth is "saved" and Parker is not. Parker has nothing in common with the girl, yet is fascinated by her. He spurns her ("I don't want nothing to do with this one," he thinks when he meets her), yet simultaneously pursues her, visiting her with gifts of apples, peaches, and cantaloupe. Suddenly, Parker himself has a conversion experience (though he refuses to admit the fact), following which he chooses a new tattoo—a Byzantine Christ with "all-demanding eyes." Though he thinks the tattoo will

529 As Parker tells the tattoo artist, "Parker's Back," Everything That Rises, p. 200. Further, she is "forever sniffing up sin," and may have married Parker to save him (Ibid., p. 187); she beats Parker for swearing (p. 188) and "idolatry" (p. 204), and is won by his Old Testament names.

530 She had asked him if he was saved and he had replied that he didn't see it was anything in particular to save him from. After that, inspired, Parker had said, 'I'd be saved enough if you was to kiss me'" (Ibid., p. 194).

531 Ibid., p. 189. Even after their marriage: "Parker understood why he had married her--he couldn't have got her any other way--but he couldn't understand why he stayed with her now. She was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind" (Ibid., p. 187).

532 Ibid., pp. 192-193. Also, after Sarah Ruth, resisting his advances, "thrust him away with such force that the door of the truck came off and he found himself flat on his back on the ground," Parker "made up his mind then and there to have nothing further to do with her." Immediately the next paragraph begins: "They were married in the County Ordinary's office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous" (p. 194).

533 Ibid., p. 198.
please Sarah Ruth, it in fact infuriates her, and she beats him and ejects him from the house. The story's reversal is the unadmitted conversion experience and the fact that Sarah Ruth, the "saved" one, rejects Christ while Parker, the "unsaved" one, chooses him.

A bare outline conveys the reversal of "Parker's Back" even less adequately than is usual with Flannery O'Connor's stories. It is thus necessary to study, as they appear in the story, the most important foci of the story's operation and meaning: Sarah Ruth; Parker's name; the religious experience he undergoes at the story's center; and tattooing in general and the Byzantine Christ in particular, as they affect Parker.

Sarah Ruth Cates, Parker's wife, is a fairly typical Southern backwoods fundamentalist. Her father is a "Straight Gospel preacher" who is "away, spreading it in Florida"; her mother, a "large barefooted woman with a wide gaptoothed face", has a numerous family of "thin and poor" children. Sarah Ruth herself is "plain, plain," with facial skin "thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion" and eyes "grey and sharp like the points of two icepicks." She disapproves of automobiles, tobacco, liquor, bad language, and Parker's tattoos. She uses biblical language, and is tremendously impressed by Parker's biblical name ("'Obadiah

---


537 Ibid., p. 187.

538 "'Vanity of vanities,' she says of Parker's tattoos (Ibid., p. 191); she warns Parker of the "'judgement seat of God,'" and wants him to return to selling the
Elihus,' she said in a reverent voice. But Parker suspects at times that Sarah Ruth "actually liked everything she said she didn't"; and though she is rigidly unyielding before their marriage, her attitude toward Parker is somewhat less than prudish:

She liked him even though she insisted that pictures on the skin were vanity of vanities and even after hearing him curse, and even after she had asked him if he was saved and he had replied that he didn't see it was anything in particular to save him from.

Also, to Parker Sarah Ruth represents a refuge from the Christ who haunts him: "he longed miserably for Sarah Ruth. Her sharp tongue and icepick eyes were the only comfort he could bring to mind . . . . Her eyes appeared soft and dilatory compared with the eyes in the book . . . ."

Finally, despite her hidebound fundamentalist ethical views, Sarah Ruth in effect rejects the Christ who has chosen and been chosen by her husband. "'It ain't anybody I know,'" she says, and beats Parker with her broom "until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on

"'fruits of the earth'' (p. 195); at the end, she accuses Parker of "'enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree'' (p. 204).

539 Ibid., p. 194.
540 Ibid., p. 187. Nevertheless, as Carter Martin observes, "Her error . . . is that her espousal of a negative, prohibitive religion blinds her to the essential importance of a positive commitment to God." (The True Country, p. 44).
541 Ibid., p. 194. Further, in describing her aversion to Parker's tattoos, the narrative voice explains, "Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves down" (Ibid., p. 195).
542 Ibid., p. 200.  
543 Ibid., p. 204.
the face of the tattooed Christ.⁵⁴⁴ True, the tattoo affronts her conviction that religious pictures are "idolatry";⁵⁴⁵ but Sarah Ruth's very sense of outrage constitutes a good image for the frequent inability of the conventionally "pious" to recognize or accept the living presence of the holy. This inability in her is an important facet of the reversal.

Parker's real name is another. Until he tells Sarah Ruth "what them letters [O.E.] are the short of," Parker "had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only to the files of the navy and the government"; when a navy acquaintance discovered and used the name, Parker "narrowly missed killing the man . . ."⁵⁴⁶ Even when it impresses Sarah Ruth, his name "still stank in Parker's estimation."⁵⁴⁷ Though the name, Obadiah Elihue, has no exact allegorical equivalent, it establishes Parker firmly in a God-oriented context: Obadiah is the name of both Ahab's God-fearing steward and one of the minor prophets, and Elihue that of a brother of King David and of the fourth and youngest of Job's comforters. Parker's refusal to use the name may understandably be a conviction of its ugliness; it may also be an effort to deny the name's implications. He tells Sarah Ruth, "'You can just call me O.E., . . . don't nobody call me by my name.'"⁵⁴⁸ and after he has revealed it, "'If you call me that aloud, I'll bust your head open.'"⁵⁴⁹ At the end of the story it is Sarah Ruth who, in a kind of rite with mythic as well as biblical overtones, forces O.E. to pronounce

his name and thus admit his conversion. 550 Ironically enough, as soon as Parker says the words he feels the sense of meaning he had been fruitlessly seeking through tattooing, and thus definitively alienates himself from Sarah Ruth, who places religion in externals.

Parker's conversion experience, comic but not ridiculous, forms the turning point of the story. Baling hay in a field with an "enormous old tree" 551 in its center, Parker is so preoccupied with hitting on a good tattoo design for his back that he crashes into the tree with his employer's tractor. The reader is meant to

550 Or declare himself for religion, at least:

"'What you got me locked out for?'

"'A sharp voice close to the door said, 'Who's there?'

"'Me,' Parker said, 'O.E.'

"Still no sound from inside.

"'He tried once more. 'O.E.,' he said, bammering the door two or three more times. 'O.E. Parker. You know me.'

"'There was a silence. Then the voice said slowly, 'I don't know no O.E.'

"'Quit fooling,' Parker pleaded. 'You ain't got any business doing me this way. It's me, old O.E., I'm back. You ain't afraid of me.'

"'Who's there?' the same unfeeling voice said.

"Parker turned his head as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer. The sky had lightened slightly and there were two or three streaks of yellow floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline.

"Parker fell back against the door as if he had been pinned there by a lance.

"'Who's there?' the voice from inside said and there was a quality about it now that seemed final. The knob rattled and the voice said peremptorily, 'Who's there, I ast you?'

"Parker bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole. 'Obadiah,' he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him..." (Ibid., pp. 203-204).

551 Ibid., p. 196.
take this accident literally, but also as a religious visitation, with overtones of Moses' confrontation with God in a burning bush and of St. Paul's conversion on the Damascus road. After the collision, Parker flies through the air yelling "'GOD ABOVE!'"; the tree bursts into flame, and Parker sees

his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractor, the other was some distance away, burning by itself. He was not in them. He could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face. He scrambled backwards, still sitting, and if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it.  

Parker races for his truck and heads for the city, fifty miles away; he knows that a "great change" has occurred in his life, a "leap forward into a worse unknown." He goes to a tattoo artist and chooses the Byzantine Christ. All during the night, which he spends in a mission dormitory, he re-envisions the burning tree, the burning shoe, and the "all-demanding" eyes in the face of the Christ. Although the next day Parker denies that he has "got religion," his words seem "to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them." He again relives the burning of tree and shoe while he is being tattooed, and finally utters his religious name when a "tree of light," caused only by the sunrise, bursts

552 Ibid.
553 Ibid. Miss O'Connor here utilizes the narrow escape as a sign of God's action, but also the burning bush, and God's command to Moses, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3: 5; RSV). That this is a comic version does not mean that it is to be discounted.

on the horizon. The initial religious experience is what gives meaning to Parker's uttering of his name, his feeling about the Christ tattoo, and the irony of Sarah Ruth's position.

The most important of the four foci of reversal in "Parker's Back" is the tattooing. Annie Louise Blackwell calls it a "kind of self-punishment for Parker" which "parallels the wearing of barbed wire by Haze Motes," and turns her attention to Parker's "total rejection of the flesh, which he covers with tattoos and suffers to be pricked with sharp instruments." Hyman calls the tattooing a "metaphor ... for the burden of Redemption." Although Hyman's claim seems to answer more closely to the text, even it is not complete enough. Perhaps the truth is that the tattooing works so perfectly as both "reality" and metaphor in the story that it finally resists full explanation. It will be best here to trace its development and as much of its meaning as can be discerned at each appearance.

The first reference to tattooing is cryptic, and deliberately so. Parker thinks of his wife: "Her being against color, it was the more remarkable she had married him." Here, without specific explanation as to race, or garish clothes, or any other form of "color," Parker's wife is set as somehow opposed to an

important feature of her husband. The first explicit mention of the tattoo, at Parker's first meeting with Sarah Ruth, reveals initially nothing unusual about the tattoos or about Parker's attitude toward them: they are souvenirs from around the world ("I got most of my other ones in foreign parts"), and at least partly a comeon for the girls ("He did not for a minute think that she didn't like the tattoo. He had never yet met a woman who was not attracted to them"). Almost immediately, however, tattooing begins to accumulate significance. The tattooed man who had inspired Parker, then fourteen, had presented a "single intricate design of brilliant color" in an "arabesque of men and beasts and flowers" which "appeared to have a subtle motion of its own. At this display Parker had been "filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes." For "a boy whose mouth habitually hung open," this is not particularly unusual; but Miss O'Connor makes it clear that Parker's is no ordinary stupefaction:

---

560 This opposition is later amply specified; for example, Sarah Ruth "insisted that pictures on the skin were vanity of vanities" (Ibid., p. 194); urges, "At the judgement seat of God, Jesus is going to say to you, "What you been doing all your life besides have pictures drawn all over you?"") (Ibid., p. 195); and at the end complains, "Another picture ... I might have known you was off after putting some more trash on yourself" (Ibid., p. 204).

561 Ibid., p. 189.

562 Ibid. Also, Parker earlier had "found out that the tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (p. 190).

563 Ibid. 564 Ibid., pp. 189-190. 565 Ibid., p. 190.
Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed. 566

Parker's first tattoo, "some time after" this experience, hurts "just enough to make it appear to Parker to be worth doing"; before, he "had thought that only what did not hurt was worth doing." This seems less the "self-punishment" and "total rejection of the flesh" that Annie Louise Blackwell claims than a parody of the relationship between some sort of difficulty and artistic, intellectual, or moral worth. 567 Parker's search for and fascination with tattoos has an artistic element which gradually becomes metaphysical. Each tattoo satisfies him for a month or so; "then something about it that had attracted him would wear off." To Parker, the most galling thing about the tattoos is that, unlike those of the man who had so stirred him, Parker's own produce an effect "not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up." 568

566 Ibid. This change of direction foreshadows Parker's later ungentle, violent redirection by the burning tree and shoe.

567 Ibid. Of a young man who totally rejected the flesh the narrative voice could hardly say, "This ugly woman Parker married was his first wife. He had had other women but he had planned never to get himself tied up legally" (Ibid., p. 188).

568 Ibid., p. 191.
His dishonorable discharge from the navy resulted from his going AWOL when this dissatisfaction suddenly became "acute and raged in him," as if "the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks" of his tattoos "had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare." The "haphazard and botched" appearance of Parker's tattoos, besides being precisely what one would expect of an inept and not very intelligent young man who chooses each tattoo on impulse, without sufficient thought for the total effect, is a fine metaphor for man's flawed condition.

Parker's raging dissatisfaction images both man's futile narcissistic desire for self-perfection and his radical longing for God. Not that Parker, any more than Hazel Motes or Tarwater, admits his yearning. "Long views," like the prospect from Sarah Ruth's family's house, depress Parker: "You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion."570

Soon after his marriage, Parker's dissatisfaction again becomes acute. "Whenever Parker couldn't stand the way he felt, he would have another tattoo"; now, his dissatisfaction is of such proportions that "there was no containing it outside a tattoo," this time on his back, the only remaining surface. He thinks of a religious tattoo which will overwhelm Sarah Ruth, but is unable to hit on the right one until after his religious experience with the burning tree and shoe. Then, the

569 ibid. 570 ibid., p. 192.
571 ibid., p. 195.
eyes in the artist's catalogue say "GO BACK," as he is leafing through. 572 Interesting are the "up-to-date" pictures Parker bypasses--"The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician's Friend"--for a "flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes." 573 Interesting too is the fact that at the first stage of the tattoo, before the eyes are put in, "The impression for the moment was almost as if the artist had tricked him and done the Physician's Friend." 574 The eyes are what constitute the picture's compelling power; even Sarah Ruth's "icepick eyes" seem "soft and dilatory" by comparison: "Even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes [the Christ's], he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly." 575

Though Parker has refused to admit that he has "got religion," his behavior betrays him. When the artist is finished, Parker tries to avoid looking at his tattoo until the man, "angry at having his work ignored," forces him between two mirrors: "Parker looked, turned white and moved away. The eyes in the reflected face continued to look at him--still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence." 576 Immediately he buys and within five minutes consumes a pint of whiskey, then tries

572 Ibid., pp. 198, 200. This is not so much a deliberate choice by Parker, as Sister M. Kathleen Feeley, SSND would maintain ("Parker decided to impress his new wife with a tattoo of Christ on his back ..." ("Thematic Imagery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Southern Humanities Review, III [Winter, 1968], 20) as a choice of Parker by God, represented by the Byzantine figure.

573 Ibid., p. 198. 574 Ibid., p. 199.

to return to his old haunt, a pool hall. His acquaintances forcibly examine his tattoo; when they tease him about "witnessing for Jesus," Parker attacks all of them in a fight "like a whirlwind on a summer's day." Finally, two of the men throw him out, and "a calm descended on the pool hall as if the long barn-like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea." 577

Meanwhile, this Jonah, another reluctant prophet, examines his soul in the alley where he has been cast, and finds it a "spider web of facts and lies." He knows that "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed," 578 and thinks that Sarah Ruth "would know what he had to do"; accordingly, he heads for home. His conversion is here further confirmed by the image of Parker as a "stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night." 579 When he arrives home, he is first made to admit his conversion by pronouncing his name, then rejected precisely as the kind of convert he is. 580 But when he does say his biblical name, Parker finally reaches the wholeness he had been seeking, in an image which ties up the external tattooing with his own inadequate soul:


580 Because of the picture of Christ which now commands his obedience. Hence, Parker would seem to be crying, not "for his self-righteous wife who has rejected him," as Annie Louise Blackwell claims ("The Artistry of Flannery O'Connor," p. 87) or for what Caroline Gordon construes as his wife's Docetism and Marcionism ("Heresy in Dixie," Sewanee Review, LXXVI [Spring, 1968], 292, 297), but for the position in which he finds himself, at which Jesus himself wept outside of Jerusalem: the dilemma of the totally committed man, rejection by the respectable and by the very persons to whom he is most closely bound.


All at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts. 581

In this story, then, the total structure carries the reversal and meaning to a degree and with an integration unusual even for Flannery O'Connor. The role of the plot and characters is somewhat less obvious here, and is more tightly meshed with that of image, symbol, and diction—as witness, for example, the repetition of the words "arabesque" and "spider web," which not only pull together the notions of body (tattoo) and soul, but also show the relationship between Parker's earlier fragmentation and his final completeness.

"Judgement Day"

"Judgement Day" is one of the "at least" four of Flannery O'Connor's stories which, according to Walter Sullivan, "are, by O'Connor standards, distinctly inferior." 582 It is, in fact, both less comic and less dramatic than most of the stories so far discussed here, but that is not necessarily to claim its inferiority. All Miss O'Connor's stories, except for this one, "The Capture," 583 "The River,"

581 "Parker's Back," pp. 203-204.


and "Temple of the Holy Ghost," have as their central character or characters either a reluctant prophet (like Parker or Hazel Motes) or a self-satisfied, self-sufficient figure (intellectual like Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" or otherwise like Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person."). This character in some way comes to terms with his call or realizes his error through the story's reversal. He or she is generally presented satirically, though with the "severe sympathy" which Marion Montgomery notes as the "mark of ... charity" in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. But in the four exceptions to this pattern, sympathy wins out over satire.

The central character in three of the four stories is a child; Tanner, in "Judgement Day," is a somewhat childish old man. The point of view in all four, more interior than usual with Miss O'Connor, enhances the sympathetic tone. Thus, whether or not it is "inferior," "Judgement Day" is certainly different from most of Flannery O'Connor's other stories. It would be possible to argue that the lack of her customary asperity in itself weakens these four; but such an argument is outside the scope of this dissertation, as is the whole question of the relative worth of the stories. What is pertinent here is the fact that the greater empathy with the central character may slightly obscure the story's reversal, because of the greater interiority and lesser apparent stress on plot, imagery, and diction, which it involves.

That "Judgement Day" does nevertheless hinge upon a reversal becomes more apparent if it is compared with the early story, "The Geranium," of which it is

clearly a reworking. "The Geranium" is centrally about Old Dudley's homesickness. He sits at the window of his daughter's drab New York apartment waiting for the geranium to appear in the window of the apartment across the alley ("They put it out every morning about ten and they took it in at five-thirty,"585), and trying not to cry with longing for his southern home. The plant is not a "sho nuff" geranium like the ones at home, but is at least a sign of life, however feeble (it reminds Old Dudley "of the Grisby boy at home who had polio and had to be wheeled out every morning and left in the sun to blink"586), in this city which is "swishing and jamming one minute and dirty and dead the next."587 As he waits for the geranium, which is late this morning, Old Dudley thinks of his room in the boarding house back home, with its view of the river, and of the negro handyman Rabie, who fished and hunted with him and did his running for him. He recalls by contrast his terrifying trip through New York by subway and elevated588 and his outrage on discovering that a black man was moving in next door--and that his daughter thought he would "go messin' around with one er that kind."589

586 Ibid.
587 Ibid., 247.
588 "People boiled out of trains and up steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains--black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup. Everything was boiling. The trains swished in from tunnels, up canals, and all of a sudden stopped. The people coming out pushed through the people coming in and a noise rang and the train swooped off again" (Ibid.)
589 Ibid., 249. "He knew yankees let niggers in their front doors and let them set on their sofas but he didn't know his own daughter that was raised proper
When Old Dudley's daughter sends him on an errand to an apartment three floors down, he is frightened and feels "heavy in his stomach" at the impersonality of the people he sees. On his way back to the apartment, he is caught shooting at an imaginary bird by their black neighbor, who helps Old Dudley upstairs, calling him "old timer," patting him on the back, and "explaining guns and makes."

To Old Dudley, the black man's condescension seems like the final indignity:

He shuffled to the chair by the window and sank down in it. . . . His throat was going to pop on account of a nigger--a damn nigger that patted him on the back and called him "old-timer." Him that knew such as that couldn't be . . . . He was trapped in this place where niggers could call you "old-timer." He wouldn't be trapped. He wouldn't be.

Just at this moment, Old Dudley sees a man in the window "where the geranium was supposed to be." The man watches him cry and, in answer to Old Dudley's inquiry about the geranium, tells him, "'It fell off if it's any of your business.'" Old Dudley does not dare go down the six floors to pick up the plant, because "There'd would stay next door to them--and then think he didn't have no more sense than to want to mix with them. Him!" (Ibid.)

590 Ibid., 250.

591 As he improves upon an incident of one of his hunting trips with Rabie; Ibid., 251.

592 Ibid., 232; Old Dudley himself had explained his own gun to Rabie as the latter cleaned the pieces; Rabie "always marveled at the way he [Dudley] could put it together again" (Ibid., 247).

593 Ibid., 252. 594 Ibid.
probably be niggers with black flecks in their socks on every step, pulling down their mouths so as not to laugh.\textsuperscript{595} As the story ends, Old Dudley is "trapped" as he had resolved not to be:

"I seen you before," the man said. "I seen you settin' in that old chair every day, starin' out the window, looking in my apartment. What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don't like people looking at what I do."

It was at the bottom of the alley with its roots in the air.
"I only tell people once," the man said and left the window.\textsuperscript{596}

Though Old Dudley's entrapment is ironic, the more so in the understated style of the narration, the story does not turn on a reversal. The one ironic reversal—if such it can be called—is the destruction of the geranium whose appearance Old Dudley had been awaiting, and the misinterpretation of his interest in the plant; but this is more an illustration of Old Dudley's isolation than a central structural factor. The negro is the same sort of illustration. This lack of reversal is not surprising, since "The Geranium" was published in 1946, four years before Flannery O'Connor, schooled by the \textit{Oedipus peripeteia}, began using ironic reversal in her own stories. The material, however, apparently seemed worthwhile to her, and she refashioned the story in the new way in "Judgement Day," first published in \textit{Everything That Rises}. "Judgement Day" also begins with its central character sitting by the window of his daughter's New York apartment. This old man, Tanner, is not just gazing at

\textsuperscript{595}Ibid., 253. \textsuperscript{596}Ibid.
a geranium in a neighbor's window--there is none for him to look at—but he is waiting to escape. He has laboriously written a note, now pinned in his pocket: "IF FOUND DEAD SHIP EXPRESS COLLECT TO COLEMAN PARRUM, CORINTH, GEORGIA." To Coleman, the black man whom he "had not got rid of" after their meeting thirty years before (until he came north with his daughter), Tanner has appended a note:

COLEMAN SELL MY BELONGINGS AND PAY THE FREIGHT ON ME & THE UNDERTAKER. ANYTHING LEFT OVER YOU CAN KEEP. YOURS TRULY T.C. TANNER. P.S. STAY WHERE YOU ARE. DON'T LET THEM TALK YOU INTO COMING UP HERE. IT'S NO KIND OF PLACE.

The last sentence of the note sums up the old man's feelings about New York throughout the story. His daughter had promised him burial back home, but Tanner has recently overheard her assuring her husband that she will bury him "right here in New York. Where do you think? . . . I'm not taking that trip down there again with nobody." It is this that decided Tanner to get "some bum" to help him onto a freight car; "During the night the train would start South, and the next day or the morning after, dead or alive, he would be home. Dead or alive. It was being there that mattered; the dead or alive did not." So much does "being there"

597 "The window looked out on a brick wall and down into an alley full of New York air, the kind fit for cats and garbage" ("Judgement Day," Everything That Rises, p. 207).

598 Ibid., p. 214.

599 Ibid., pp. 207-208.

600 Ibid., p. 209.

601 Ibid., p. 208.
matter that Tanner, who chose to come north to escape subservience to the part-negro Dr. Foley, on whose property he had been squatting, would return to that subservience:

If he had known it was a question of this--sitting here looking out of this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a nigger, he would have run the still for the nigger. He would have been a nigger's white nigger all day. 602

But Tanner is in much worse condition than his counterpart in the earlier story. He has had the same traumatic trip through the city, more briefly described; 603 and he has, before the story begins, not merely glimpsed but encountered the negro who moved in next door. In his several meetings with the black man, Tanner, a self-styled expert at handling negroes, 604 had mistakenly patronized this one by calling him "Preacher" and thinking him to be from South Alabama. 605 The man, who is decidedly not a preacher, but an actor, 606 finally exploded; the violence

---

602 Ibid., p. 216

603 "The first morning here she had taken him sightseeing and he had seen in fifteen minutes exactly how it was. He had not been out of the apartment since. He never wanted to set foot again on the underground railroad or the steps that moved under you while you stood still or any elevator to the thirty-fourth floor" (Ibid.).

604 "He had never killed one, he had always handled them with his wits and with luck . . . . The secret of handling a nigger was to show him his brains didn't have a chance against yours . . . ." (Ibid., p. 212). When his daughter cautions him about trying to be friendly with their new neighbor, Tanner replies, "I was getting along with niggers before you were born" (Ibid., p. 218).

605 Ibid., p. 219.

606 "I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God" (Ibid., p. 220).
of his treatment of Tanner precipitated a stroke which has nearly incapacitated the old man. Now, he waits for his daughter to go shopping; then slowly, torturously, he creeps out of the apartment—weakness and despair giving way to confidence only to fall down the stairs, landing "upsidedown in the middle of the flight." Discovered by the black actor, the dying old man, "in his jauntest voice," says, "'Hep me up, Preacher. I'm on my way home!'" His daughter, on her return, finds Tanner's dead body pilloried in the bannister spokes.

The reversal of this story has several layers. Old Tanner heads for home; he ends up on a New York staircase, yet "home" in a spiritual sense. Further, Tanner had dreamed of being taken care of by Coleman, his black friend, when he arrives home in a coffin. Tanner momentarily mistakes the black actor for Coleman; though the actor says, "'Ain't any coal man, neither,"
he does "take care" of the old man in a devastatingly final way. In his dreams, Tanner has scratched at the inside of the box as Coleman and Hooten, a station clerk, pried it open. Springing up in the coffin, he has cried, "'Judgement Day! Judgement Day! . . . Don't you two

607 "A sensation of terror and defeat swept over him. He would never get there dead or alive. He pushed one foot forward and did not fall and his confidence returned. 'The Lord is my shepherd,' he muttered, 'I shall not want'" (Ibid., p. 222).

608 Ibid., p. 223.  
609 Ibid., p. 224.

610 Finally, in a corporeal sense as well; Tanner's daughter suffered from insomnia after burying the body in New York, so finally shipped it home to Georgia; "Now she rests well at night and her good looks have mostly returned" (Ibid.).

611 Ibid., p. 223.
fools know it's Judgement Day?" The black actor mockingly says, "'Ain't no judgement day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgement day for you.'"612 In the terms of the story, he is more correct than he knows.

One of the most important and least obvious features of "Judgement Day" is the number of references to the shared humanity of the characters. Coleman Parrum looked like a bear when he was young, like a monkey now he is old; Tanner, on the contrary, was monkey-like and is now bearlike.613 When Tanner tamed Coleman, he did so with a pair of "glasses" made of bark and wire. When the negro donned the glasses and "grinned, or grimaced, Tanner could not tell which," the white man "had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot."614 Tanner called the bespectacled Coleman ""Preacher,""615 as he later erroneously does the black actor, who himself wears "horn-rimmed spectacles."616 That the three are so bound together is in itself a reversal, or at least a paradox, which with the death and judgment motifs deepens this story far beyond the narrative of an old man's homesickness which "The Geranium" presents.

612 Ibid., p. 221; when he thinks he has actually arrived, he cries, "in a weak voice," Judgement Day! Judgement Day! You idiots didn't know it was Judgement Day, did you?" (p. 223).

613 Ibid., p. 210. Tanner thinks about Coleman: "You make a monkey out of one of them and he jumps on your back and stays there for life, but you let one make a monkey out of you and all you can do is kill him or disappear" (p. 214).

614 Ibid., p. 214. 615 Ibid. 616 Ibid., p. 218.
This chapter has been an attempt to trace the operation of structural irony in Flannery O'Connor's two novels and in some of the stories. The same process could have been observed in as great detail in her other stories as well. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "The River," the ironic reversal is somewhat softened, as explained above, but present nonetheless. In the former, a child, absent from the fair her two silly cousins and their Church of God blind dates attend, learns about God's will and the nature of reality from the hermaphrodite's commentary ("I don't dispute hit") without even fully understanding what a hermaphrodite is. The same commentary is to her cousins no more meaningful than an old nun's instructing them to resist young men's advances by crying, "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." In "The River," little Harry-Bevel, caught in a miserable earthly situation, seeks and finds the kingdom of heaven in the river of his baptism. He is urged on at last by the pursuing presence of old Mr. Paradise (whom the child equates with a hog which terrified him); the old unbeliever lumbers after the child with a peppermint stick in his hand and (presumably) less than honorable intentions in his mind, yet he is in fact a proximate cause of Harry's finding the kingdom.

In the remaining stories, the reversal is clearer and more sharply ironical. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head, who thinks that "with years" he has

---

617 See above, p. 186.

entered "into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young." Mr. Head tells his grandson that the city will "be full of niggers"; Nelson's self-confidence and enjoyment of the day are initially shaken by his non-recognition of his "first nigger," who walks through their coach, and restored at his grandfather's masterly handling of another (the waiter in the dining car). When they arrive in the city, however, Mr. Head proves inadequate to his self-chosen role of guide. He loses the way; worse, he hides from Nelson and denies even knowing him when the child, panicky at being deserted, knocks down a woman in his headlong flight in search of his grandfather. The two are reconciled only by the sight of the "artificial nigger," a plaster figure on an estate wall, which they stare at "as if they were faced with some great mystery"; they can "feel it dissolving their differences like

620 Ibid., p. 196. 621 Ibid., p. 197.
622 Ibid., p. 201.
623 The waiter hinders their examination of the kitchen by proclaiming that "'Passengers are NOT allowed'" there; "in a haughty voice," Mr. Head silences the man with his "wit": "'And there's good reason for that, . . . because the cockroaches would run the passengers out!'" (Ibid., p. 202).
624 Ibid., p. 212.
an action of mercy. At the end, it is the grandfather, even more than Nelson, who has discovered that he "was not as smart as he thought he was." Further, he has learned at last what divine mercy feels like, whereas before their momentous journey "he had been too good to deserve any." 

In "The Partridge Festival," an uncollected story, two young intellectuals, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, discover that old Singleton, whom they had thought a martyr to the provincialism and narrow rectitude of the citizens of Partridge, is indeed a foul-mouthed and lecherous old maniac and murderer, as the town had said. Their error not only embarrasses them, but reveals to them appallingly the inaccuracy of their own self-esteem. In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May, obsessed with asserting her independence in the face of all threats (from the enterprising sons of her shiftless hired man, Mr. Greenleaf, to their encroaching bull), is finally

---

625 Ibid., p. 213. This figure can be a mystery because both Nelson and his grandfather have regarded the real negroes they encounter as essentially mysterious (though "going about their business just as if they had been white," Ibid., p. 207).

626 Ibid., p. 213.

627 The Critic, XIX (February-March, 1961), 20-23, 82-85.

628 Carter Martin points out that they "realize that Singleton is guilty but not responsible; that Partridge is right about him but not innocent; and that they themselves had seen the mote in their brother's eye without considering the beam in theirs" (The True Country, p. 132).

629 Who contrast favorably with her own two, Wesley and Scofield; Mr. Greenleaf "never hesitated to let her know that in any like circumstance in which his own boys might have been involved, they--O.T. and E.T. Greenleaf--would have acted to better advantage" ("Greenleaf," Everything That Rises, p. 51).
conquered when the bull "buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover" (he has from the first been described as a "patient god come down to woo her"). Old Mark Fortune, in "A View of the Woods," counts on his favorite granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, to support him against the rest of her family, whom he scorns.

But when he decides to sell the lot in front of the house to Tilman, a gas station proprietor, and thus spoil the family's view of the woods, Mary Fortune proves adamant. In the story's violent climax, the child tempestuously resists being beaten by her grandfather, who reacts by beating her--as it happens--to death, before he himself dies of a heart attack. At the end, the old man is deserted even by the progress he had espoused, symbolized by the steam shovel for whose presence he is responsible:

He looked around desperately, for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay.

In "The Comforts of Home," Thomas, a young historian, resents the "hazy

---

630 Ibid., p. 65. 631 Ibid., p. 45. See also above, p. 90.

632 "His daughter had married an idiot named Pitts and had had seven children, all likewise idiots except the youngest, Mary Fortune, who was a throwback to him" ("A View of the Woods," Everything That Rises, p. 68).

633 "You been whipped," she says, "by me, . . . and I'm PURE Pitts" (Ibid., p. 85). As Carter Martin says, "The very quality which her grandfather had nourished in her is the one which destroys both of them" (The True Country, p. 239).

634 Ibid., p. 86.
charity" 635 of his do-gooder mother which has brought the nymphomaniac Star Drake--really Sarah Ham--to their house for an indefinite stay. He has threatened to leave, but cannot do without the comforts of home. 636 His final ploy to get rid of the girl by framing her literally backfires: in a struggle over the gun he has planted in Sarah's bag, Thomas shoots, not the girl, but his own mother. The sheriff Thomas has summoned arrives just in time to be a witness, and to form his own conclusions:

He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl . . . . Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. He was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he had hoped to find them, but this one met his expectations. 637

Sheppard, the guidance counselor of "The Lame Shall Enter First," neglects his own unattractive motherless child for Rufus Johnson, a clubfooted young criminal who finally gets caught on purpose "'to show up that big tin Jesus,'" 638 his would-be savior. Too late, the savior himself realizes the real import of his self-defense, "'I did more for him than I did for my own child.'" 639 Penitent, he rushes to his own

636 "He did not know where a suitcase was, he disliked to pack, he needed his books, his typewriter was not portable, he was used to an electric blanket, he could not bear to eat in restaurants" (Ibid., p. 111).
637 Ibid., p. 130.
638 "The Lame Shall Enter First," Everything That Rises, p. 162.
639 Ibid., p. 164.
son, Norton, only to find that the little boy has "launched his first flight into space," hanging himself to find his dead mother in the heaven Rufus Johnson had taught him about.

So much, then, for the presence of structural irony in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Chapter IV will examine its operation as an instrument of her vision.

---

Ibid., p. 165.

The reversals not discussed in this chapter have been described above in Chapter II. See pp. 31-32 ("A Late Encounter With the Enemy"), 34-35 ("The Enduring Chill"), and 35-36 ("The Life You Save"). Miss O'Connor's third novel, only a fragment at her death, seems, in the portion published under the title "Why Do the Heathens Rage?" in Esquire, LX (July, 1963), 60-61, to carry in it the seeds of reversal. The central character may be either Mrs. Tilman, who has just brought her stroke-incapacitated husband home from the hospital, or her son Walter, directionless at twenty-eight. Mrs. Tilman is the O'Connor no-nonsense farm manager, practical and earthly; her son is a shiftless fellow who writes letters under fictitious names and personalities, and reads things "that made no sense for now" (61), like St. Jerome's letter to Heliodorus. The precise form of the reversal is not predictable, but its occurrence, even thus far, seems implicit in the characters and situation (to some extent the reverse of those in "Good Country People").
CHAPTER IV
AND CONCLUSION

THE RELATION BETWEEN VISION AND STRUCTURAL IRONY

Vision

The first chapter of this dissertation attempted to show how, to Flannery O'Connor, vision meant one's total perception of (and hence beliefs about) reality. This application of the word was examined briefly in Miss O'Connor's personal statements ("I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is contained in our redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that."1) and at greater length in her fiction. The problem of interpreting Flannery O'Connor's vision was held to be central to the consideration of her work; whether she was an Irish Catholic jansenist, simplistic in her good-evil distinctions; or, similarly, a prophet of gloom who preached redemption but did not demonstrate it in her fiction; or what she claimed to be, a writer who believes, . . . in Pascal's words, in the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars." This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed

himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead . . . . This God is the object of ultimate concern and he has a name. 2

The problem of Flannery O'Connor's vision is complicated by several factors. One is the metaphorical and tonal density of her style, described incidentally in Chapter III, above; another is the difficulty for any artist--of which Miss O'Connor was well aware--of making the experience of encounter with God "understandable, and credible, to his reader." 3 A third factor is the particular kind of

2 Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," p. 161. In "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," Miss O'Connor said: "When we look at the serious fiction written by Catholics in these times, we do find a striking preoccupation with what is seedy and evil and violent. The pious argument against such novels goes something like this: if you believe in the Redemption, your ultimate vision is one of hope, so in what you see you must be true to this ultimate vision; you must pass over the evil you see and look for the good because the good is there; the good is the ultimate reality. The beginning of an answer to this is that though the good is the ultimate reality, the ultimate reality has been weakened in human beings as a result of the Fall, and it is this weakened life that we see. And it is wrong, moreover, to assume that the writer chooses what he will see and what he will not. What he sees is given by circumstances and by the nature of one's particular kind of perception" (Mystery and Manners, pp. 178-179).

3 "Novelist and Believer," loc. cit. She continues: In any age this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a well-nigh insurmountable one." See also her comments in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," pp. 162 and 163, quoted above on p. 2. William Van O'Connor, asking whether Flannery O'Connor's is "a simplified black and white morality," replies that the answer to his question will in part depend on the orthodoxy or indifference to orthodoxy in the reader" ("Flannery O'Connor: A Tribute," Esprit, VIII [Winter, 1964], 38-39). But it will depend also on his understanding, as Miss O'Connor realizes. Granville Hicks failed to understand her treatment of evil, or perhaps the doctrine behind it, and was troubled by how readers should react to her fiction if they did not share her theology--people who could not accept "the ideas of absolute evil, if only because we do not believe in absolutes of any sort" ("A Holy Kind of Horror," 21).
vision which Flannery O'Connor thought the fiction writer must possess. In answer to a question about what aspiring fiction writers should do, Miss O'Connor wrote:

The short story writer particularly has to learn to read life in a way that includes the most possibilities—like the medieval commentators on Scripture, who found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text. If you see things in depth, you will be more liable to write them that way.4

Later, at a symposium at Sweetbriar College in March, 1963, Miss O'Connor particularized "seeing things in depth" to some extent:

The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality. This in no way hinders his perception of evil but rather sharpens it, for only when the natural world is seen as good does evil become intelligible as a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom.5

In another place she further described the writer's vision:

The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation.

This is one of the three kinds of meaning found in Scripture by the medieval exegetes:

... allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; ...
tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and ... anagogical, which had to do with the Divine Life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all

4"Replies to Two Questions," Esprit, III (Winter, 1959), 10.

of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature.  

Flannery O'Connor, then, attempted to see and to portray life "in a way that included the most possibilities," and ambivalence can be a difficult challenge to the reader; moreover, many of the "possibilities" in man's situation on earth are for evil. Both of these facts compound the problem of characterizing her vision. If one remains with Miss O'Connor's non-fiction statements, this problem is minimal. Besides grounding her belief in an incarnational redemption, and making the other comments already quoted, she held that "this physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source"; that man can have a faith relationship with God which "is the experience of an encounter, of a kind of knowledge which affects the believer's every action . . . ." Thus, though "the sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him," and though Flannery O'Connor deplored the public demands, which she considered constant, for "positive" fiction, her vision comes across in these state-

---


8 Ibid., p. 160.

9 Flannery O'Connor. These words from an unnamed talk are included by the editors in a footnote to "The Fiction Writer and His Country," Mystery and Manners, p. 26.

ments as ultimately hopeful. 11

But one cannot remain with any artist's pronouncements about his work. Ultimately, the statement is that work itself; yet about the vision expressed in Flannery O'Connor's work, there is much disagreement. Views range from those as close to Miss O'Connor's own conception of her vision as Brainard Cheney's:

She invented a new form of humor . . . . This invention consists in her introducing her story with familiar surfaces in an action that seems secular, and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical, and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise, an unaccountability that is humorous, however shocking. 12

to those which, like J. Oates Smith's, differ sharply from Flannery O'Connor's ideas about her writing:

1111 . . . People without hope do not write novels. Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay . . . . If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation, or he simply won't survive the ordeal." ("The Nature and Aim of Fiction," pp. 77-78). As Donald Racky summarizes her statements on the subject of "positive" fiction: "The purely affirmative view denies full value to reason, is a deviation from truth, and therefore distorts the value of emotion. It denies reason because it neglects man's limitations, his evil" ("The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," p. 83).

12"Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," 557. Though this statement does not attempt to describe the essence of Miss O'Connor's fiction, it does characterize an important facet, and in terms with which she herself would probably agree--except that perhaps, where Cheney says that the "naturalistic situation has become metaphysical," she might protest that it had been metaphysical as well as naturalistic, all along.
She has spoken of herself as a "born Catholic," but it is difficult to understand precisely what she means by "Catholic," for her conception of man's relationship to God suggests that of the American Calvinists more than that of the Roman Catholics: the absolute denial of free will, the insistence upon the brutal, even bloody, and always catastrophic experience of faith, and the eclipsing of New Testament affirmation by Old Testament wrath. 13

With Mrs. Smith as with other critics and readers, Miss O'Connor's use of violence as an image of grace and a vehicle for her vision may have recoiled upon itself. Self-deception or ambivalent feelings in a Hazel Motes or Tarwater are taken for denial of free will; 14 the events which demonstrate how radical is man's hunger for God, for the brutality of the faith experience; and Miss O'Connor's insistence upon penetrating to the core of experience where terror and love differ little (if at all), for the dominance of Old Testament wrath. That Flannery O'Connor has been interpreted, by some at least, as an exponent of wrath when she meant to be an exponent of redemption is a fact; whether or not her stories warrant such an interpretation can be examined, but is ultimately decided from the interpreter's point of view. In Chapter III of this dissertation the emphasis was on the ironic reversal in each story discussed, and the reversals do often take the shape of defeat and disaster for the central character. But it is here that Miss O'Connor's "anagogical" vision, her ability "to see different levels of reality in one image or one

---

13 "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," 559-560.

14 For discussions of this self-deception and emotional ambivalence, see above, especially the sections on Wise Blood, pp. 72-85, passim, and on The Violent, pp. 122-171, passim.
situation," functions. In the discussions of most of her stories it has been necessary to describe several levels of meaning; to stop at the catastrophes is to see only one level.

The operation and redemptive focus of Flannery O'Connor's anagogical vision appear in almost any story; a few examples can illustrate its workings. At the end of *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes is blind, weakened by rigorous penances, and finally dead from exposure and a blow of the policeman's club. Yet he has at last realized that he is "not clean"; he has stopped running from the Jesus he had once seen as his pursuer, and later tried to ignore or deny. He looks forward to seeing after death: he hopes that "when you're dead, you're blind," because "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more." Hazel's behavior is, to be sure, crabbed and fanatical; but as Miss O'Connor says,

> Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature. In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.

As to Haze's freedom or lack of it: his flight from Jesus, apparently compulsive, is fruitless. "Jesus," as Hazel's grandfather had foretold, has "never let him forget he was redeemed." But the boy's fascination with Jesus is proof that his flight is not unequivocal. As his creator says of him,

18 *Wise Blood*, p. 16.
... Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen. 19

"The River" could be construed as (on one level, it is) a grim story about the unloved child of two drunken partygoers, who seeks the Kingdom in the river where he was baptized more because even death is preferable to his life than because of any real religious impulse:

"If I Baptize you," the preacher said, "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. 20

But the note of regeneration appears early in the story. Mrs. Connin, a country woman taking care of the little boy for the day, tells him that they are going to hear the Reverend Bevel Summers preach down at the river. Asked his own first name, the child ("His name was Harry Ashfield and he had never thought at any time before of changing it" 21) replies that it is Bevel. From here until the end of the story, the little boy is called Bevel by the narrative voice when he is given a name at all. 22

---

19 Note to 1962 edition of Wise Blood, Three, p. 8. The same "many wills" which conflict in Hazel Motes are prominent also in Tarwater and in O.E. Parker.


22 With one exception: when the child is returned to the apartment, and his parents and their guests greet him as Harry, Mrs. Connin protests that his name is Bevel, "the same as our preacher," and, angered at the response, announces the news of the child's baptism and the healer's prayers for Mrs. Ashfield's "affliction." Mrs. Connin leaves without taking the money. Mr. Ashfield shrugs; the other adults "were looking at Harry" (Ibid., p. 155). This does not seem just an accidental
Hearing that the Reverend Summers is "no ordinary preacher," but a healer:

"Will he heal me?" Bevel asked.
"What you got?"
"I'm hungry," he decided finally. 23

Not fully understanding, Bevel nonetheless wants to be healed by the preacher. Hearing for the first time about Jesus, 24 and understanding even less about him than about faith healing, he steals the book from which Mrs. Connin had read to him, "The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve," as somehow valuable. 25 As they approach the river for the healing, Bevel, who "had never been in the woods before," walks "carefully, looking from side to side as he were entering a strange country." 26

When the preacher takes the child to baptize him, the little boy at first clowns, but suddenly has the

switch of name. From the time that the child leaves with Mrs. Connin at the opening of the story, he is as it were beginning a new life. This life is confirmed by his baptism and only temporarily deflected by his return to the apartment.

23 Ibid., p. 146.

24 "If she had thought about it before, he would have thought Jesus Christ was a word like "oh" or "damn" or "God," or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime" (Ibid., p. 149).

25 Because the carpenter the book is about had made him, Bevel; even more, perhaps, because one of the pictures shows him conquering a "crowd of pigs, ... gray and sour-looking" (p. 150), right after the child's own terrifying encounter with a hog. In contrast to Bevel's theft of the book is the implied theft by his parents' guest George, to whom the book is also "valuable," but because its 1832 date makes it "a collector's item" (Ibid., p. 156).

26 Ibid., p. 150.
feeling that this was not a joke. Where he lived everything was a joke. From the preacher's face, he knew immediately that nothing the preacher said or did was a joke. 27

The child is baptized, and for the first time in his life he "counts," whereas, in the physical realm as well as the spiritual, he "'didn't even count before.'" 28 He returns to the river the next day, taking only a car-token and "half a package of Life-Savers"—no suitcase, because "there was nothing from there he wanted to keep." 29 He intends "not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river," but at first the river rejects him. Bevel thinks this is "just another joke"—just his own home all over again—and begins in "pain and indignation" to "hit and splash and kick" the river. He dives under once more in flight from Mr. Paradise;

this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him. 30

The above details have been cited to show that, in its anagogical and even its surface

27 Ibid., p. 153.

28 Ibid., p. 154. Questioned later by his mother as to what the preacher has said, little Harry-Bevel answers, "'He said I'm not the same now, . . . I count'" (Ibid., p. 156).

29 Ibid., p. 158.

30 Ibid., p. 159; italics mine. The italicized words help to show that on one level Harry is indeed moving toward the "Kingdom of Christ."
meaning, this story is not about a child's suicide, as Walter Elder\textsuperscript{31} and Irving Malin\textsuperscript{32} claim; rather, as J. Oates Smith describes "The River," it is about the capacity for innocence to choose between two worlds without hesitation, rejecting the sensual, materialistic world of Mr. Paradise and the city people, and accepting the world of Christ which is attainable only through death.\textsuperscript{33}

Even the stories which end in violence and disaster demonstrate the presence of a redemptive force, sometimes though not always specified as divine. The deaths of the six people in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" illustrate The Misfit's inverted principles:

"If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him."\textsuperscript{34}

Further, the grandmother's death is immediately preceded by her one genuine moment of charity, as she dimly realizes her kinship with the homicidal maniac who kills her.

\textsuperscript{31}"That Region," 668.

\textsuperscript{32}New American Gothic, p. 121. To state further, as Malin does, that Harry-Bevel, with Tom Shiftlet of "The Life You Save," is "perverting the Christian voyage" (ibid.) is to discount the terms of the story itself.

\textsuperscript{33}"Ritual and Violence," 557. Ruth M. Vande Kieft sees Bevel in "The River" and Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First" as demonstrating how God "provides young and innocent children, set down in corrupting environments among adults who will only distort their lives, with a natural and intuitive faith, a powerful thirst for Him, and a mindless drive to the most direct means of getting to Him quickly: the sacrament of baptism, and/or an early death" ("Judgment in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," 351).

\textsuperscript{34}"A Good Man," p. 142. See also above, p. 87.
In "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Cope's pride has been defeated, and her woods destroyed, by the boys who tormented her; but they are prophets of God, come to insist that her place and her wellbeing come from God, not from her own industry and competence; and the child is able to link her own "new misery" with that of her mother and "anybody, a Negro or a European or . . . Powell himself."35 Mrs. May, in "Greenleaf," is finally "won" in death by the Greenleaf bull, who had been likened to "some patient god come down to woo her"36 and, with the amatory if not the divine overtones, to "an uncouth country suitor."37 For the first time she has a revelation, unspecified, presumably of a level of reality above the material—a level which had previously existed for her only in the despised and religiously "immoderate" Mrs. Greenleaf.38 At the end of "The Enduring Chill," Asbury sees himself as condemned "for the rest of his days" to live "in the face of a purifying terror"; but the terror is purifying, and it is "The Holy Ghost" who descends upon the young man.39 Even in those stories which end in apparent total negation, like "A View of the Woods" and "The Comforts of Home," the negation is generally of the central characters' own negative attitudes. But, as Miss O'Connor herself states, the novelist

36 "Greenleaf," p. 45.  
37 Ibid., p. 46; even here, the bull's hedge-wreath looks "like a menacing prickly crown" (Ibid.); of thorns, perhaps.  
38 "I'm afraid your wife has let religion warp her," Mrs. May once told Mr. Greenleaf of his half-mad faith-healing wife. "Everything in moderation, you know" (Ibid., p. 64). Constantly in the stories appears the absurdity of "moderation" in one's relationship with God.  
may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one.  

**Structural Irony**

The second chapter of this dissertation briefly surveyed the development of the term *irony* to show how various historical and philosophical accretions have contributed to its ambiguity. Literary irony in the twentieth century, the end product of this long evolution, was then described as a device presenting an appearance-reality contrast, having a character and/or the reader as "victim," evoking the reader's divided response by its ambivalence, and demanding his intellectual involvement by its difficulty. This irony Flannery O'Connor's works amply demonstrate, both in incidental instances of speech or event and in the pervasive ironic pattern of a given work. It is this pattern whereby a situation reverses itself on all levels (plot, character, diction, symbol, tone, etc.) which, under the term *structural irony*, has been the subject of this dissertation.

Structural irony stems not from the ironic tradition to which Miss O'Connor belongs (though she was influenced to some extent by earlier ironic writers) but from the exigencies of each story. Hence, Chapter III examined in some detail both of Flannery O'Connor's novels and eight of her stories, showing how the reversal, or

---

40"Novelist and Believer," p. 168. Note, however, that Miss O'Connor does not say this is what the novelist *sets out* to do.
in an early story the germ of a reversal, operates.

Miss O'Connor had much to say about her purposes and her vision, but little about her irony, except as irony is subsumed in her statements about the grotesque. She had little use for discussions which isolate technique:

Technique in the minds of many is something rigid, something like a formula that you impose on the material; but in the best stories it is something organic, something that grows out of the material, and this being the case, it is different for every story of any account that has ever been written. 41

But if Flannery O'Connor herself comments little upon her irony, the same is not true of her critics. Noteworthy in many critical statements is the fact that her irony is conceived of as operating throughout, imbedded in, the story. Walter Sullivan, for example, says that it is the O'Connor characters' "lack of understanding of the laws of God--which continue to operate whether one believes in them or not--" which "contributes to her usual effect of comic irony undergirded by a deadly serious moral view." 42 Robert Detweiler describes something like what has here been called structural irony:

In Miss O'Connor's novels and tales, most of the situations become a paradigm of the human awareness and assumption of individual guilt and the struggle to find grace, so that the structure of the action corresponds to the encounter with guilt and the attempt to rid oneself of it.

Paradox develops through the merging of symbol and irony. In many


of her stories there is a secondary level of meaning which, once interpreted, reveals an irony that deepens into paradox. 43

Occasionally Flannery O'Connor's irony suffers or is faulted through a critic's own thesis or predisposition. Irving Malin commends the irony, but is forced by the scheme of images and motifs he has set up in New American Gothic to say that her irony "lies in an awareness that all people-criminal and grandmother-are in love with themselves." 44 If he is correct, then Miss O'Connor's fiction, contrary to much of its own inner tendency as well as to her non-fiction statements, is a-redemptional because even the characters' good impulses or revelations spring from their own self-fascination and are presented for the reader's wry amusement; if he is wrong, he illustrates Wayne Booth's claim, quoted in Chapter II:

Once we decide that against their conscious aims authors work their wonders, no critical hypothesis, however far from the author's provable intentions inside the work or out, can be refuted . . . 45

Annie Louise Blackwell concedes that "Irony and humor work together in almost all

43 "The Curse of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," 236, 244.

44 New American Gothic, p. 36. Narcissism is one of the major motifs, to Malin, in New American Gothic fiction; he insists upon it repeatedly (e.g., pp. 38-39), to--I think--a distorting degree.

45 The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 370. See also above, p. 32. Malin's book frequently becomes, I think, a procrustean bed for the six diverse authors he treats (Miss O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, John Hawkes, James Purdy, and J.D. Salinger) because of his need to fit them into one "school" or class, New American Gothic, and one set of themes and images: narcissism; the distorted (narcissistic) family; nightmare; haunted houses; the journey; and impaired vision and speech (see New American Gothic, passim; especially introduction, where these themes are enunciated, pp. 3-13).
of Miss O'Connor's stories," but continues:

If the critic must have a special term to describe her humor, other than to say that she is a traditional humorist, the word "hostile" will suffice. There is a strain of hostility in Miss O'Connor's work which cannot be denied. 46

Although not all critics praise Flannery O'Connor's irony, or see its effect as she did, few if any would say that it is adventitious or purely ornamental. Its direction may be seen by a critic as toward damnation rather than redemption, but direction and symbolic function it is conceded. It remains now in this dissertation to explore this function; to study how structural irony in Flannery O'Connor's fiction serves as an instrument of her redemptive vision.

The Relation Between the Two

It was because of the "anagogical" and paradoxical nature of Flannery O'Connor's vision that Chapter II of this dissertation termed structural irony the "instrument most suited" to her. 47 This irony in her fiction follows the shape not only of action and symbol, but even of the very view of reality which underlies them. As Miss O'Connor says in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction":

... However the past of fiction has been or however the future

46 "The Artistry of Flannery O'Connor," p. 138. Miss Blackwell's further remarks place her with those critics who, in isolated instances or habitually, describe Flannery O'Connor as ferocious or attacking her characters. These will be treated in the next section.

47 See above, p. 41
will be, the present state of the case is that a piece of fiction must be very much a self-contained dramatic unit.

This means that it must carry its meaning inside it. It means that any abstractly expressed compassion or piety or morality in a piece of fiction is only a statement added to it. It means that you can't make an inadequate dramatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it or at the beginning of it. It means that when you write fiction you are speaking with character and action, not about character and action. The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense. 48

Flannery O'Connor felt, then, and labored to that end, that the form of a piece of fiction was inseparable from what it had to say. This is hardly a startling departure from the theory and practice of other serious fiction writers; but she held further that what a piece of fiction has to say is virtually inseparable from the writer's act of seeing: "The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look... Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees." 49 He must "render what he sees and not what he thinks he ought to see...", 50 and "if what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look." 51 This can, she realized, constitute a dilemma for the Catholic novelist:

... What he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies. Is he to reproduce this? Or is he to change what he sees and make it instead of what it is, what in the light of faith he thinks it ought to be? 52


52 Ibid.
Miss O'Connor answers her own question in the negative in this essay. She phrased the same answer even more tellingly, if obliquely, as a pseudo-problem in "The Teaching of Literature":

Possibly the question most often asked these days about modern fiction is why do we keep on getting novels about freaks and poor people, engaged always in some violent, destructive action, when actually, in this country, we are rich and strong and democratic and the man in the street is possessed of a general goodwill which overflows in all directions.  

But Flannery O'Connor did not see or write about sin unrelieved; rather, as she put it, her "subject in fiction" was "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." Redemption in her stories comes in and through destruction, and redemption is perceived by a keenly ironic though compassionate sensibility. Hence it would perhaps be more accurate to say, not that structural irony is the instrument most suited to Miss O'Connor's vision, but that it is the only vehicle possible.

If this claim is correct, then the violent defeats and/or deaths of O'Connor characters, the ironic reversals of the stories, are either redemptive in themselves

53 p. 130.
54 "On Her Own Work," p. 118; see also above, p. 157.
55 "Compassionate in her sense, the "sense of being in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity." ("Novelist and Believer," p. 165). She was sardonic about the "popular" kind of compassion, which she described severely: "Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without ... . Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human" ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque," p. 43).
or somehow revelatory of redemption. This is of course not categorically denied by all critics, but a significant number describe her fiction--a single character or story, a group of stories, or the whole corpus--as "black," hostile, or working toward damnation. A fairly typical comment is Annie Louise Blackwell's:

In Miss O'Connor's view, man exists in a moral universe where, in the folk idiom, "Justice will come home to roost." Some of the most heavily ironic stories she wrote reveal her antipathy for the self-righteous middle-aged woman.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

With her more sophisticated, middle-class characters, the humor fades into derision and hostility. Her attacks on the intellectual do-gooder and the self-righteous middle-aged woman are humorous only in the irony of the turn of fate which brings justice to them. 56

56 "The Artistry of Flannery O'Connor," pp. 139, 146. Ample additional examples of the same critical interpretation have already been cited in this dissertation: Webster Schott on Miss O'Connor's work in general, pp. 23-24; Robert O. Bowen on The Violent, p. 24; Warren Coffey on the Stories in Everything That Rises, p. 25; Jonathan Baumbach on Mrs. Flood, p. 85, n. 52; Hyman on "A Good Man," p. 89; on Rayber, p. 160; on Julian and his mother, p. 181; on Mrs. Turpin, p. 200; Walter Elder on "A Good Man," p. 91; Annie Louise Blackwell on "A Circle in the Fire," p. 99; Louis D. Rubin on Julian, pp. 171, 177; Sr. Mariella Gable on Julian's mother, p. 177; and Granville Hicks on Mrs. Turpin, p. 193, n. 521. Hicks, in his review of Everything That Rises, finds "almost no compassion" in the stories ("A Cold, Hard Look at Humankind," Saturday Review, XLVIII [May 29, 1965], 23; in a later article he says that Flannery O'Connor "was compassionate only in the sense that the Inquisitors were compassionate: she did deeply want souls to be saved, but she hadn't much pity for those who rejected what she regarded as the only means of salvation" ("A Holy Kind of Horror," 22). Cf. Miss O'Connor’s description of compassion in n. 55.
The first section of this chapter looked at Flannery O'Connor's redemptive vision as it operates in a number of stories. In each of these examples, as in all of her fiction where structural irony functions, the action of grace works precisely through the pattern of reversal. In *Wise Blood*, a seeing Hazel Motes flees from Jesus and his vocation. One by one his Jesus substitutes prove inadequate, and he finally capitulates; blinded, he at last witness to Jesus before Mrs. Flood, his one-member church. The grandmother in "A Good Man" comes into her first authentic saving contact with grace through the worked-out consequences of her selfishness, and Harry-Bevel of "The River" finds life only through death. In "The Life You Save," Tom Shiftlet marries Lucynell Crater only to get her mother's car, and then deserts the girl on their "honeymoon," at their first stop. He has wanted the car ferociously--so much so that he has bargained almost openly with Mrs. Crater. The reversal is that he gets it, through his scheming and his brutal desertion of Lucynell; yet his victory is clouded by guilt. At the end of the story, he asks God

---


58 He tells her that if she buys a fan belt she can make the car run; she, ignoring the car, extols the virtues of her daughter and a "permanent place." Shiftlet "casually" asks the girl's age, which Mrs. Crater almost halves in reply. Mr. Shiftlet answers:

"It would be a good idea to paint it too, ... You don't want it to rust out.'

'We'll see about that later,' the old woman said" ("Life You Save," p. 165).

59 Shiftlet, however, tries to deny or at least transfer the guilt; he counsels,
to "'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth'"; 60 his haste in racing the "galloping" shower may indicate that he fears the rain is a direct and literal answer to his prayer. Though Shiftlet has by no means reformed, it is his very meanness to Lucynell which makes him realize—even though he will not admit his realization—his need for reform.

In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," it is the hermaphrodite's plight itself—or, if this one is a fake, the kind of callousness that conducts freak shows and exploits man's gullibility—which brings about the child's illumination. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head's self-importance, and, under stress, his betrayal of Nelson, are the very means of his deepened relationship with his grandson, and his realization of his own need for mercy. From the moment Mrs. Cope, in "A Circle in the Fire," utters the speech described in Chapter III as "the hinge of the reversal," 61 she begins growingly to taste her own finitude and oneness with the rest of humanity, until this realization becomes full-fledged and inescapable with the firing of her woods.

his young hitchhiker not to leave his mother, saying: "'I never rued a day in my life like the one I rued when I left that old mother of mine'" (Ibid., p. 169). She was, he says, "an angel of Gawd" (p. 170)—the very term the counter boy at The Hot Spot used for Lucynell (Ibid., p. 169). He feels "that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him" (Ibid., p. 170); in other words, he tries to place the guilt outside rather than within himself.

60 Ibid., p. 170.

61 See above, p. 104. She says: I have the best kept place in the county and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it . . . I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not always looking for trouble" ("A Circle," pp. 217-218).
In "A Late Encounter With the Enemy," Sally Poker Sash displays her 104-year-old grandfather, dressed in his Confederate uniform, at her belated college graduation to show "them" ("all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living") her heritage: "'Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions! Dignity! Honor! Courage! See him!'" But the general stands for none of these things. The only significant past event for him is the movie premiere in which he had taken part twelve years before the story.

He had forgotten history and didn't intend to remember it again. He had forgotten the name and face of his wife and the names and faces of his children or even if he had a wife and children, and he had forgotten the names of places and the places themselves and what had happened at them.

Not until the "black procession" (the graduation procession, but the procession of death as well), which has "been dogging all his days," is upon him does the old man even try to "find out what comes after the past." As with Mrs. May, the moment of his death is a moment of revelation.

Hulga's violent betrayal by the bible salesman is what shows to the reader of "Good Country People," if not to her, how naive she is and how unconvincing is her determined atheism; the catastrophic reversal of her mother's and Mrs. Freeman's part of the story reveals, through the utter inadequacy both of their moral simplism and of the bible salesman's similarly cliched approach to life, the presence of what

---

62 "A Late Encounter," p. 234. 63 Ibid. 64 Ibid., p. 240. 65 Ibid., p. 241. 66 Ibid.
Flannery O'Connor called mystery. In "The Displaced Person," it is only Mrs. Shortley's stroke and subsequent death, and Mrs. McIntyre's rapid disintegration after the D.P.'s violent death, which reveals to each their essential displacement and contingency. Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, of "The Partridge Festival," attain a measure of humility in the realization of their error through following their own wrong-headed illusions about Singleton to a logical conclusion. In The Violent, it is young Tarwater's violent attempt at rebellion (the baptism-drowning), and the rape he suffers on the way back to Powderhead, which open him at last to the vision of the bread of life and to acceptance of his mission.

Julian's small-mindedness, in "Everything That Rises," is precisely what contributes to his mother's stroke, but through that stroke comes the young man's redemptive "entry into the world of guilt and sorrow." It is Mrs. May's fight against the Greenleafs and their bull which brings about her death, not only a defeat

67 Mystery is a word which Miss O'Connor often used and did not precisely define. In her writings it seems to mean that which is beyond, but seen through, everyday concrete realities. In "The Regional Writer," Miss O'Connor said significantly that Southern writers, through the Civil War, "have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence . . ." (Mystery and Manners, p. 59).

68 "Everything That Rises," p. 43.

69 Religious in dimension especially by virtue of the bull-god-lover, Mrs. Greenleaf and her faith healing ("I'm afraid your wife has let religion warp her . . . Everything in moderation, you know," "Greenleaf," p. 64), and Mrs. May's assertion of self-sufficiency ("I'll die when I get good and ready," Ibid., p. 54; and, like Mrs. Cope: "Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I've worked, I have not wallowed" (Ibid., p. 64).
but a revelation and an embrace. The violence at the end of "A View of the Woods" and "The Comforts of Home" brings a revelation, not to the characters, but to the reader, of the dimension of life Mark Fortune, with his devotion to progress, and Thomas, with his to comfort, have been ignoring. The descent of the Holy Ghost upon Asbury Fox at the end of "The Enduring Chill" is made possible only by the "death" of his self-defeatingly false personal and artistic self-concept.

In "The Lame Shall Enter," it takes Rufus' malevolence and Norton's suicide to jolt Sheppard into the realization of how dreadful his playing God has been. "Revelation," "Parker's Back," and "Judgement Day" present their central characters confronted with God through message, the Byzantine Christ, and death, respectively. In the first two stories, some form of violence--insanity, and fear and rejection--is the vehicle of confrontation; in the last, the violence of Tanner's ungentle death helps to reveal the meaning of that confrontation to the reader.

So it is that throughout Flannery O'Connor's fiction an ironic reversal, carried in plot, character, diction, symbol, and tone, reveals or makes possible the working of grace. It is when critics do not see this coextension of reversal and redemptive action that they interpret a particular instance of irony as attack or condemnation; this dissertation has contended that no irony in Flannery O'Connor can be so isolated, but must be viewed in its place in a story's total structure. Structural irony as here described is inseparable from her anagogical vision of the world, and that vision is inseparable from the faith which informs it; as Miss O'Connor wrote
"Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate." 70

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Works by Flannery O'Connor


II. Writings On Flannery O'Connor


Bowen, Robert O. Review of The Violent Bear It Away. Renascence, XIII (Spring, 1961), 147-152.

Burke, John J. "Convergence of Flannery O'Connor and Chardin." Renascence, XIX (Fall, 1966), 41-47.


---

1 In sections II, III, and IV, the more important and/or helpful critical works have been marked with an asterisk (*).


*____. "Southern Gothic With a Vengeance." *Saturday Review*, XLIII (February 27, 1960), 18.


Lensing, George. "De Chardin's Ideas in Flannery O'Connor." Renascence, XVIII (Summer, 1966), 171-175.


Pritchett, V. S. "Satan Comes to Georgia." New Statesman, LXXI (April 1, 1966), 469, 472.


III. Works By and About Analogous Writers, in Order of their Appearance

Nathaniel Hawthorne


Nathanael West


Ring Lardner


Fadiman, Clifton. "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate." The Nation, CXXXVI (Marcy 22, 1933), 315.


William Faulkner


IV. Writings on Irony


The dissertation submitted by Sister Melinda Keane, S.H.C.J., has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/11/70

Date

[Signature of Adviser]