Chapter V

EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE
O'Connor refers to a second collection of short stories in a letter in 1962 to Robert Giroux, her chief editor throughout her writing career. At this time, she had seven stories, but she was not convinced of a satisfactory variety. Further, she was “not in any hurry.” When the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge* appeared, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, in the spring of 1965, O'Connor had been dead for over half a year. The preparation of the final manuscript occupied the last months of her life. She signed the contract in May of 1964 and continued to write and rewrite through the end of July; she died 3 August 1964.

O'Connor says in a letter to Roslyn Barnes that she took the title from a concept she discovered in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s writing, “a physical proposition that I found in Pierre Teilhard and am applying to a certain situation in the Southern states and indeed in all the world.” The comment refers to race and family relations in the story “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” The short story with this title had appeared in the October 1961 issue of *New World Writing*, and the title’s significance and importance to her soared beyond that particular story’s activity. By May 1964, however, she was less committed to the title, for in a letter to her agent, Elizabeth McKee, O'Connor listed her stories for possible inclusion and indicated that she would leave the order to Giroux, and “which story I’ll use for title.” Two weeks later, in a follow-up letter to McKee, O'Connor acknowledged her acceptance of the title, with somewhat less excitement than she evidenced in the early 1960s: “I forgot to tell Giroux that the title *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is all right with me if he thinks that is what it ought to be.” Representing the only title she ever chose from a
serious piece of prose without explicit or literal reference to it within the story itself, the phrase "everything that rises must converge" comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit paleontologist.

In 1956, O'Connor began reviewing books for the Georgia Catholic diocesan periodical the *Bulletin*. After reviewing Teilhard's book *The Phenomenon of Man*, O'Connor's response to Teilhard was so positive that when she was invited "among the number of distinguished writers, scholars and critics" by the editors of the *American Scholars* for their thirtieth anniversary issue to name "the outstanding books" of the past three decades, 1931-1961, her choice was Teilhard's *Phenomenon of Man*. She called the book "a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it." Since she had a similar penchant in her own writing vision, she considered him a kindred spirit. She was willing to do battle for him when a friend took issue with his position: "This is a scientific age and Teilhard's direction is to face it toward Christ. . . . Talk about this man after you know something about him." She calls Teilhard "dangerous" in the last review she writes of one of his books, but clarifies that word choice in a letter: "If they are good, they are dangerous."

O'Connor was especially fascinated with Teilhard's scientific explanation of the Omega Point — a continual ascent towards a greater consciousness with oneself and the world that eventually ends in Christ — and says that "it is doubtful if any Christian of this century could be fully aware of his religion until he has reseen it in the cosmic light which Teilhard has cast upon it." The context of the title comes from the explanation...
of the Omega Point: "Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greatest consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For *Everything That Rises Must Converge*." Thematical ly, most of the nine stories in the collection have characters that are in evolution toward some "supreme consciousness," but their full arrival at the Omega Point is beyond the end of the story; rather, the story suggests a projection toward that eventual arrival. The reviewers of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* were more thorough in dealing with her stories than those who had written about her earlier fiction. This is the volume that has the most in-depth reviews. For example, the *New Yorker*, which had granted her one less-than-flattering paragraph for each of her earlier three works, gives her more than a page. One reviewer is of the view that several of the stories are "just about as good as short stories can be." In fact, O'Connor's death is a part of every review of this book; some blend the review with obituary, rambling commentary on the lupus that killed her, and attempts at understanding her religious fixation. All come out, in part, in high praise for an author that has died too soon.

In *Christian Century*, Robert Drake, referring to the short stories in the collection, suggests that "her vision of the fallen world seemed to be growing sharper and her perception more deadly: most of these stories have the lethal immediacy of a loaded shotgun." Granville Hicks, in *Saturday Review*, places the violence inherent in these nine stories, where seven people die in six of the stories, in a position that is not gratuitous: "violence is an integral part of the world Miss O'Connor is describing, an
inevitable consequence of the evil she portrays.” Hicks also establish her religious vision as concomitant with the violence:

I am not saying that Miss O’Connor’s Catholicism was responsible for the harshness of her judgments; but the harshness, which probably had many causes, was compatible with her religion as she conceived it.” Concluding with a testimony to her artistic integrity, he hallows her not as a “saint,” but as “one of the best writers of short stories this era has seen.”15

For Richard Poirier, in the New York Times Book Review, her “particular genius [is] to make us believe that there are Christian mysteries in things irreducibly banal,” and she is capable of producing “as much violence from a quiet conversation as can other writers from the confrontations of gangsters or fanatics.” No review eliminates O’Connor’s “limitations”: Poirier states, “Caring almost nothing for secular destinies, which are altogether more various than religious ones, she propels her characters toward the cataclysms where alone they can have a tortured glimpse of the need and chance of redemption”16 and Webster Schott expresses her limitations bluntly when she says, “She had only a few ideas, but messianic feelings about them.”17 Upon her death, the religious entanglements of her writing were popularly perceived as its weakness. The book comprises an introduction by Sally Fitzgerald and nine stories:

- “Everything That Rises Must Converge”
- “Greenleaf”
- “A View of the Woods”
- “The Enduring Chill”
- “The Comforts of Home”
• “The Lame Shall Enter First”
• “Revelation”
• “Parker’s Back”
• “Judgment Day”

Most critics view it as a prime example of O'Connor's literary and moral genius. The collection exemplifies her ability to expose human weakness and explore important moral questions through everyday situations. The title refers to an underlying religious message central to her work: aiming to expose the sinful nature of humanity that often has gone unrecognized in the modern, secular world. O'Connor utilizes biting irony to expose the blindness and ignorance of her characters. In an unprecedented achievement that this collection of stories contains three first-prize winners from the O. Henry Awards: “Greenleaf” in 1957, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” in 1963, and “Revelation” in 1965. O'Connor is the only writers to have all three award winning stories appear in the same collection.

As mentioned earlier, “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” was first published in 1961. Douglas Rhymes suggests we need to recognize that

"we are simply us in all our rages, the Rogues’ Gallery of humanity, not the Royal Academy of Saints, and yet in just that moment when we know our acceptance we are also the Royal Academy of Saints."\(^\text{18}\)

It is necessary to recall the social upheaval which the US in general and the South in particular was experiencing during the 1950s. It took place during the civil rights movement when federal, state, and local governments made sweeping reforms in the
North and South to end poverty and racial discrimination. African Americans, long treated as second-class citizens, began to make themselves heard in America by demanding that they be given equal rights under the law. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation by colour in public buses was unconstitutional, and the protest movement gained force. Accounts of bus boycotts and freedom marches were part of the daily news reports, and Southern writers were expected to give their views on relations between people in the South, especially between Negroes and whites. Teilhard writes, "I doubt whether there is a more decisive moment for a thinking being than when the scales fall from his eyes and he discovers that he is not an isolated unit lost in the cosmic solitudes, and realizes that a universal will to live converges and is hominised in him." (italics mine)\footnote{The converging process is painful but inevitable in O'Connor's story, and the title of the story introduces the concept immediately. But first must come the rising.}

Set in the South in the early 1960s, the story has as the protagonist a young writer named Julian. He has graduated from college, and appears to be waiting for employment commensurate with his education. He lives at home with his solicited mother. The story begins with an account of Julian's mother, Mrs. Chestny: she has been directed by her doctor to lose weight, so she has started attending a "reducing class" (485). Because she is wary of black people and since the bus system has just been integrated, she insists that Julian accompany her on the bus each Wednesday night. This evening Julian waits for her to get ready as she puts on her new hat, which is "hideous" (485), and green.
As they walk to the bus stop, Julian stews about how much he resents his mother. She makes things worse by insisting on discussing the integration of black people, a topic about which she and Julian have different viewpoints. He is not racist and cannot stand talking about the subject with her. She begins to reminisce about the old mansion where she used to visit her grandfather as a little girl, and about the slaves he kept. Julian pretends to hate the place, but he has dreams about it and wishes that he were able to experience the house for which his mother is so nostalgic. He condemns her for being a widow and is ungrateful for the sacrifices she has made for him. Most damaging of all is his feeling that he “had cut himself emotionally free of her” (492).

Julian prides himself on his freedom from prejudice, but we discover that he is just fooling himself. He attempts to sit beside blacks and start conversations with them if they appear to be upper-class individuals. He dreams that he may teach his mother a lesson by making friends with “some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer” (494). If she is ill, he may be able to find only a Negro doctor to treat her, or – “the ultimate horror” (494). He may bring home a “beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman” (494). Ironically, his greatest successes are with a “distinguished-looking dark brown man” (494), who turns out to be an undertaker and with a “Negro with a diamond ring on his finger” (494), who turns out to be a seller of lottery tickets. When the black woman with the small boy, Carver, chooses to sit beside him rather than beside his mother, Julian is annoyed by her action. Just as Julian tends to misunderstand his own motivations, he also misunderstands those of his mother. Observing the shocked look on her face as she sees the black woman sit beside him, Julian is convinced that it is
caused by her recognition that “she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons” (495). He is convinced that she will not realize the “symbolic significance of this, she would feel it” (496). The irony of this scene comes from the reader's realization that the two women have, indeed, changed sons. Mrs. Chestny and Carver are innocent and outgoing; they, therefore, are able to converge – to come together. Julian and Carver’s mother, on the other hand, are both filled with hostility and anger; for them, there is not, nor can there ever be, any true convergence.

The final irony in the scene comes when Julian realizes that the stunned look on his mother’s face is caused by the presence of identical hats on the two women – not by the seating arrangements. Julian hopes his mother will realize that she and the black woman are not so different, but instead she finds it amusing, as if the woman is a “monkey that had stolen her hat” (496). What Julian finds most infuriating about her is that she is not hatefully and openly racist, but rather racist in a pitying way, which is more insulting to the black woman who hits her. She thinks that black people were better off as slaves, and that, “They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (488). When Julian realizes that the hat is the cause of his mother’s discomfort, he takes pleasure in watching her pained reaction, having only momentarily “an uncomfortable sense of her innocence” (496).

When he recognizes that his mother will be able to recover from this shock, he is dismayed because she has been taught no lesson. Mrs. Chestny and Carver are drawn together because she finds all children “cute,” and, we are told, “she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children” (495). Carver responds to
Mrs. Chestny’s affection by scrambling onto the seat beside her, much to the chagrin of both his mother and Julian. Carver’s mother attempts to separate the two but is not totally successful as they play peek-a-boo games across the aisle. Carver’s mother is described as “bristling” (496) and filled with “rage” (497), because her son is attracted to Mrs. Chestny. He hopes it will teach his mother a lesson, but instead she seems to find it amusing, and complaints the woman’s son using “the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (497).

As the four people leave the bus, Julian has an “intuition” (497) that his mother will try to give the child a nickel: “The gesture would be as natural to her as breathing” (497). He even attempts to prevent the gesture but is unsuccessful. His mother, unable to locate a nickel, attempts to give Carver a new penny. Carver’s mother reacts violently to what she assumes to be a gesture of condescension. She stares, “her face frozen with frustrated rage” (498), at Julian’s mother, and then she “seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much” (498). She strikes Julian’s mother to the ground with her mammoth red pocketbook, shouting, “He don’t take nobody’s pennies!” (498).

That this action represents another act of convergence in the story is obvious. Carver’s mother can afford the same hat as Julian’s mother, and she can ride in the same section of the bus. The violence of this convergence, however, illustrates what can happen when the old code of manners governing relationships between whites and blacks has broken down. Julian’s mother is living according to an obsolete code of manners, and, consequently, she offends Carver’s mother by her actions. The final
convergence in the story begins when Julian discovers that his mother is more seriously hurt than he had suspected. At first, he felt that she had been taught a good lesson by the black woman, and he attempted to impress upon her the changes which were taking place in the South:

whole coloured race who will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure . . . . it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means . . . . is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn.” (499)

It is only after Julian realizes that his mother may be seriously hurt that his own movement toward convergence takes place. As Mrs. Chestny staggers away from Julian, calling for her grandfather and for Caroline, individuals with whom she has had a loving relationship, Julian feels her being swept away from him, and he calls for her, “Mother! . . . Darling, sweetheart, wait!” (500). His attempt at convergence with his mother comes too late as she dies before him.

“Everything That Rises Must Converge” is a story about race relations, about the Old South up against the New, and about a son and a mother who do not understand each other. On a deeper level, it is a story about love, and it is in love that all three of the literal stories converge. As O’Connor states in an interview, “The Georgia writer’s true country is not Georgia, but Georgia is an entrance to it for him. . . . One uses the region in order to suggest what transcends it.”20 The full seating integration of Southern buses is the vehicle that O’Connor uses for a more substantive theological projection.
Julian’s mother cries out for the unconditional love and acceptance she found as a child from her nurse Caroline; Julian’s arrogant and timely message pales in significance to her deeper need for a home, not to be found in this life. With one final raking with her eye on Julian’s face, finding nothing, she is able to transcend this moment for something elsewhere. Julian must watch his mother die — from a stroke he had not wanted to “push her to” (494) — before he can surmount his own pettiness and find the love he actually does have for her, before he can affectionately call out to her, “Darling, sweetheart, wait!” (500). At story’s end, he is moving toward the “cluster of lights . . . in the distance” (500), but he is neither going to see the light yet nor understand his full dependence on love. First he must dwell in the “tide of darkness” and then spend time in the “world of guilt and sorrow” (500). He has awareness, but full consciousness lies ahead.

With the death of his mother, Julian is brought to the point where he will be unable to postpone for long the epiphany which will reveal to him the nature of evil within him although “the tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (500). Having thus been made aware of his depravity, Julian will have been placed in a position which may produce repentance and ultimately redemption. The Convergence has occurred.21 What rises and converges in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is Mrs. Chestny’s blood pressure. Blood converges in a heart attack for this lady, who, like Joy Hulga, Maley Pointer, and old man Fortune, in the collection has heart trouble.22 As in many of O’Connor’s stories; eyes are an important indicator of the characters’ moods. As
Julian’s mother puts on her hat to leave the house, “her eyes, sky-blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten” (485). In contrast, when she is about to have a stroke after being pushed by the woman, “her eyes raked his face” (498). In contrast, Julian’s eyes are “glazed” (486) as they walk to the bus stop, and after a black man boards the bus, Julian does not look at his mother and makes “his eyes the eyes of a stranger” (492).

Disgust with the world in general is a common theme in O’Connor’s stories, and here Julian’s mother complains about the state of the world. Out of nowhere, while they are discussing her hat, she says, “With the world in the mess it’s in, it’s a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top” (487). This is a reference to racial integration, which she sees as disempowering to white families like theirs. Aboard the bus, before any black people are on it, she says to another white woman about integration, “The world is in a mess everywhere. I don’t know how we’ve let it get in this fix” (490).

Julian’s mother’s disgust with the world is closely linked to her nostalgia for the past. As they walk to the bus stop, she reminisces about the huge mansion where her grandfather lived and “the old darky” (488) who was her nurse. The mansion rotted and fell apart, and it has since been sold. But Julian remembers visiting it once as a child, and he still dreams about it; although he pretends to hate it, he resents his mother for having been able to experience it. Julian fancies himself a saint, and this pride leads to his intense guilt after his mother has a stroke. Similes throughout the story indicate that he views himself as saint-like: as he waits for his mother to get ready before they leave
the house, "he, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him" (485). As they walk to the bus stop, he is "saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith" (486). This story is a gem. Its theme is universal and timeless. Sister Feeley contends that this story unites O'Connor's ideas about "personal integrity, man's relationship with society, and the power of death to give life new clarity." The story also seems to suggest a weakness in people who cling to the past blindly, without attempting to adapt to the present and to look toward the future.

The second short story, "Greenleaf," was published first in the Summer 1956 issue of the Kenyon Review, and was also included in The Best American Short Stories of 1957. It is a dramatic and violent exposition of the workings of grace. The story takes its title from the name of a family who work on the property of a Mrs. May. It depicts the life of two different families in the 1950s: The Mays, white, and the Greenleafs, black. The May family consists of Mrs. May and her two sons, Wesley, the intellectual, and Scofield, the nigger-insurance agent. They are lazy and uncooperative, never helping her with anything, and treating her with total disrespect and scorn.

The Mays, own a farm. Mrs. May is a widow and respectable person who has devoted her life to being right. She is socially blameless. Thus, it does not make sense that bad things happen to her. For example, first, her husband died; and now her two well-educated sons continue to sponge off her largesse, but care nothing about the farm and have little or no respect for her. Mr. Greenleaf is the grounds keeper. Mrs. May states many times in the beginning that the only reason why she still employs Mr.
Greenleaf, even though he does not do his job, is he has been with them for so long. She is constantly dissatisfied with his work, nothing ever gets done the way she wants it. The Greenleaf family is made up of Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf and their twin boys named O.T. and E.T. Throughout the story contrasts are built up between Mrs. May's children, who have not been terribly successful, and Mrs. Greenleaf's children, who somehow seem to have succeeded even though Mrs. May regard them as very low down on the social scale. Mrs. Greenleaf is a religious fanatic and faith healer. She becomes the subject of some satire in the story in terms of her fundamentalist Christianity.

We first meet Mrs. May in her curlers while the Greenleaf bull stands in the moonlight, his head raised as if he listened -- "like some patient god come down to woo her -- for a stir inside the room" (501). For almost a minute there is no sound from inside, then as he raises his crowned head again, a woman's voice, guttural as if addressed to a dog, says, "Get away from here, Sir!" and in a second muttered, "Some nigger's scrub bull" (501). The action of the story is her attempt to kill or drive away the bull.

Mr. Greenleaf is soundly sleeping a half mile down the road in the tenant house. His expression, his whole figure, his every pause seems to say, "Hit looks to me like one or both of them boys would not make their maw ride out in the middle of the night thisaway. If hit was my boys, they would have got thet bull up theirself" (502). Mrs. May never eats breakfast but she sits with them to see that her sons have what they wanted. Scofield is thirty-six and he has a broad pleasant smiling face but he is not
married. Mrs. May says, “... if you sold decent insurance, some nice girl would be willing to marry you. What nice girl wants to marry a nigger-insurance man? You’ll wake up some day and it would be too late” (505). And at this Scofield says, “Why Mamma, I’m not going to marry until you’re dead and gone and then I’m going to marry me some nice fat farm girl that can take over this place! And once he had added, – some nice lady like Mrs. Greenleaf” (505). When he says this, Mrs. May rises from her chair, her back stiff as a rake handle, and goes to her room. There she sits down on the edge of her bed for some time with her small face drawn. Finally she whispers, “I work and slave, I struggle and sweat to keep this place for them and soon as I’m dead, they’ll marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything. They’ll marry trash and ruing everything I’ve done,” and she makes her mind to change her will.

The next day she goes to her lawyer and has the property entail so that if her sons marry, they cannot leave it to their wives. Mrs. May the very idea of her sons marrying a woman even remotely like Mrs. Greenleaf upsets her. One morning Mrs. May goes to inspect a field that she has wanted planted in rye but that has come up in clover because Mr. Greenleaf has used the wrong seeds in the grain drill. While she is returning she sees a snake and says, to Mr. Greenleaf, “I cannot afford to pay for your mistakes. I am a poor woman and this place is all I have. I have two boys to educate. I cannot .... In a second it came again with a terrible urgency. “Jesus! Jesus!” (506). Mrs. May sees Mrs. Greenleaf sprawled on her hands and knees off the side of the road, her head down.

Mrs. Greenleaf raises her head. Her face is a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the colour of two field peas, are red-rimmed and swollen, but her
expression is as composed as a bulldog’s. She sways back and forth on her hands and knees and groans. “Jesus, Jesus” (506). Mrs. May winces. She thinks the word, Jesus, shall be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She is a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she does not, of course, believe any of it is true. “Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!” (506) Mrs. Greenleaf shrieks. The late Mr. May, a businessman had bought the place when land was down, and when he died it was all he had to leave her. “I don’t like to hear you boys make jokes about religion . . . If you would go to church, you would meet some nice girls” (510). When she looks at the two of them, one hunched over a paper and the other teetering back in his chair, grinning at her like an idiot, she wants to jump up and beat her fist on the table and shouts, “You’ll find out one of these days, you’ll find out what Reality is when it’s too late!” (510)

Her city friends say she is the most remarkable woman they know to go, practically penniless and with no experience, out to a rundown farm and make a success of it: “Everything is against you . . . the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you. They’re all in league against you. There’s nothing for it but an iron hand!” (511). She stands on the edge and looks down at Mr. Greenleaf. “I told you to get up that bull. Now he’s in with the milk herd” (512). We see this conflict brings down to a concrete level in Mrs. May’s frequent observation that:

“I have to do for myself. I am not assisted hand and foot by the government. It would cost me $20,000 to install a milking parlour. I barely make ends meet as it is.”
“My boys done it,” Mr. Greenleaf had murmured, and then—
“but all boys ain’t alike,”
“No indeed!” she had said. “I thank God for that!”
“I thank Gawd for ever-thang,” Mr. Greenleaf had drawled.”

(514)

She stays at home all afternoon waiting for the Greenleaf twins to come for the bull. They do not come. She feels are simply going to use her to the limit. Scofield hands her the butter and says, “Why Mamma, ain’t you ashamed to shoot an old bull that ain’t done nothing but give you a little scrub strain in your herd . . . . with the Mamma I got it’s a wonder I turned out to be such a nice boy!” (517). When they tease her they speak Greenleaf English but Wesley makes his own particular tone. She crosses the kitchen and the porch and says, “the boys didn’t come for the bull so tomorrow you’ll have to shoot him” (518). For a few seconds she looks at the disappearing sun and presently as if it has just occurs to her, she asks:

“Do you know the real reason they didn’t come for that bull?” (518). Naw I don’t,” Mr. Greenleaf said in a surly voice.
“‘They didn’t come because I’m a woman . . . . You can get away with anything when you’re dealing with a woman. If there were a man running this place . . . .” (519)

The bull is in the pasture with the dry cows and Mr. Greenleaf sees from upstairs window. He detaches himself from the can slowly: “Ain’t nobody ever ast me to shoot my boys’ own bull!” he said in a high rasping voice (520). “Well,” she says aloud as if he was still in the car, “it’s your own boys who are making you do this, Mr. Greenleaf?” (521). She can hear their identical nasal voices saying, “Made Daddy shoot our bull for
us. Daddy don’t know no better than to think that’s a fine bull he’s shooting. Gonna kill
Daddy to shoot that bull!” (521). She wanted to say, “Mr. Greenleaf, if I have to walk
into those woods with you and stay all afternoon, we are going to find that bull and
shoot him. You are going to shoot him if I have to pull the trigger for you” (522).

In a few minutes something emerges from the tree line, a black heavy shadow
that tosses its head several times and then bounds forward. After a second she sees it is
the bull. Mr. Greenleaf is running toward her from the side with his gun raised and she
sees him approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping
behind him and nothing under his feet. He shoots the bull four times through the eye.
She does not hear the shots but she feels the quake in the huge body as it sinks, pulling
her forward on its head. She only seems to be “whispering some last discovery into the
animal’s ear” (524).

The religious symbolism which has accompanied the violent crescendo raises in
the reader’s mind the question of redemption: Does Mrs. May accept her moment of
grace? How do we read the line “she had the look of a person whose sight has been
suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable?” (523). That she can “see” again
may be a revelation, but the fact that the vision is “unbearable” seems ambiguous.
Because of the force of the revelation, is it too overwhelming for her to take in all at
once? Or, because of the magnitude of her sins, of which she has been unaware, can
she not accept the truth of the revelation? The reality of the situation offers Mrs. May a
basis for understanding, but textually, as John R. May points out, we find little
evidence that she accepts or rejects that offer.”24
All of the single threads of the story line – Mrs. May’s struggling dynamics with her sons, their constant comparisons to the more successful Greenleaf boys, the striking contrast of Mrs. May’s and Mrs. Greenleaf’s responses to religion – converge in the momentary dilemma of this story: the scrub bull that has come to court Mrs. May and to invade her property and her herd of cows. This bull has connections with the myth in which Zeus disguises himself as a white bull and carries off Europa to Crete, as well as biblical connections to the holy hunt of the unicorn, where the courting animal becomes a symbolic Christ figure that pierces Mrs. May through the heart with a deeper understanding of Christian reality. Before the bull and Mrs. May have a final and fatal meeting, O’Connor makes clear the limited perspective with which Mrs. May views the world.

Many themes were expressed in this story, one of them is Racism. Racism is a very dominant theme especially because of the time period, they called blacks the n-word and made racial slurs, the hatred between the families because of colour took place as well, which is why Mrs. May had to repress her desire for Mr. Greenleaf. She could not express her love for him because they were different colours. Family was also another dominant theme but it was also incorporated with irony because it was ironic how the May boys could not care less about their mother, the person who gave them life.

Frederick Asals has pointed out the scriptural echoes in this story. To begin with he cites the Song of Songs, which presents a type of Christ wooing his Church: “My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh
forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice." The connections with the first paragraph of the story seem intentional. Asals also identifies Jeremiah 17:8 as providing a possible source both for Mrs. Greenleaf’s name and her prolificacy, and also a humorous connection with her primitive religious activity.

Flannery O’Connor is a very complex writer in terms of her use of symbolism in addition to the elements of the grotesque and black humour. She completed her third short story “A View of the Woods” by the fall of 1956 and sent it to Harper’s Bazaar. She doubted whether they would accept it. And she was correct. The story was published in the Fall 1957 issue of Partisan Review, and also included in The Best American Short Stories of 1958. In a letter to a friend about this story, she indicates her idea of art: “impressing an idea on matter” or “using reality to make a different kind of reality.” Several years later, when O’Connor had read Teilhard, she used similar language to note the scientist’s effort: “penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it.” Sightedness is also a major theme in “A View of the Woods,” which introduces the vision motif in its title. In a letter to “A,” refers to the woods as “the Christ symbol.” The view of the woods, then, becomes the position from which one sees the incarnation. For Mary Fortune, the view is clear. When her grand father decides to sell the field in front of the house, she is upset because she will no longer be able to see the woods. The grand-father does not understand.

The main characters of the story are seventy-nine-year-old Grandfather Fortune, a successful landowner, and his favourite granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, who is said to resemble him, and he believes that she shares his business acumen. The grandfather
is at the very least ambivalent toward his own daughter and dislikes his son-in-law, Pitts, but allows them to reside on a piece of his property. In one of O'Connor's typically subtle uses of irony, the grandfather says, “There's not a thing over there but the woods” (537). He retreats to his room to rest, but cannot keep himself from going to the window now and then to look at the line of trees: “A pine trunk is a pine trunk, he said to himself, and anybody that wants to see one don't have to go far in this neighborhood” (538).

When the grandfather sells parcels of his land for development, he knowingly irritates his son-in-law Pitts on every occasion. The grandfather is in return frustrated every time Pitts chastises Mary Fortune and tells her not to let him beat her. Eventually, Mr. Fortune decides to sell a parcel of land where Pitts grazes his calves for a gas station, and, in doing so, will obstruct their view of the woods. Mr. Fortune sells the land to a serpent-like man named Tilman, despite Mary Fortune's attempts to dissuade him from doing so:

Tilman was a man of quick action and few words. He sat habitually with his arms folded on the counter and his insignificant head weaving snake-fashion above them. He had a triangular-shaped face with the point at the bottom and the top of his skull was covered with a cap of freckles. His eyes were green and very narrow and his tongue was always exposed in his partly opened mouth. He had his checkbook handy and they got down to business at once. It did not take him long to look at the deed and sign the bill of sale. Then Mr. Fortune signed it and they grasped hands over the counter. (542)
The idea here will appear to be that in selling the land to Tilman, Mr. Forutne is actually handing the Garden of Eden over to the control of the serpant. She turns and looks him straight in the face and says with a slow concentrated ferocity:

“It’s the lawn. My Daddy grazes his calves there. We won’t be able to see the woods anymore.”

The old man had held his fury as long as he could. “He beats you! . . . And you worry about where he’s going to graze his calves!” Nobody’s ever beat me in my life . . . and if anyone did, I’d kill him.”

A man seventy-nine years of age cannot let himself be run over by a child of nine. His face set in a look that was just as determined as hers. “Are you a Fortune . . . or are you a Pitts? Make up your mind.”

Her voice was loud and positive and belligerent. “I’m Mary – Fortune – Pitts,” she said.

“Well I,” he shouted, “am PURE Fortune!” (541)

The little girl is acknowledging that she belongs to the Pitts; that is, she belongs to the world which is governed by God, and she accepts being governed by God as indicated by her permitting her father to chastise her. Mr. Fortune does not believe in this, however: he believes in fortune, the power of money. The situation develops into conflict after the land has been sold. The little girl takes her glasses off and belts him, and as she belts him, there is a description of five claws going into the flesh of his upper arm so that the little girl almost becomes the figure of the devil. The tragic ending comes when the old man looks up into Mary’s face as she sits on his chest, a face which is his own image, and this image says: “You been whipped . . . by me,”
and then it added, bearing down on each word, “and I’m PURE Pitts” (545). The old man reverses the situation and belts his little grandchild’s head three times against the rock and kills her. He then says: “There’s not an ounce of Pitts in me” (545). Suddenly, he becomes edged with doubt.

Towards the end of the story he is actually having a heart attack when we are told: “his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion” (546). He flies off in the direction of the woods looks, for an opening, looks to escape, but all he finds is that the place is deserted “except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay” (546). Feeley explains: “It seems clear that Mark Fortune’s materialistic view of progress determines his view of reality. He, too, is gorging himself on clay, sells off his lots that border the newly created lake to every Tom, Dick, and Harry, every dog and his brother who will pay the price.” She goes on to explain that the story is an illustration that the symbolic value of certain objects in no way detracts them from the reality they possess.

In the first paragraph the “woods appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water” (525), mimicking both Christ’s action and Peter’s. Later the child stares at the line of woods as if it is a person that she prefers to her grandfather. Then comes the emblematic moment in the story, when the grandfather is afforded a glimpse of the glory of god, even though he does not really understand it. The third time he gets up to look at the woods, it is almost six o’clock and the gaunt trunks appear to be raised in a pool of red light that gushes from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stares 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 has not apprehended before. He sees it, in his hallucination, as if someone is wounded behind the woods, “and the trees were bathed in blood” (538). After he signed away the land, and Mary Fortune has tried to hit him with a bottle, he experiences a terrible sense of urgency and anger: “His heart felt as if it were the size of the car and was racing forward, carrying him to some inevitable destination faster than he had ever been carried before” (543). He goes to the woods with the child, prepared to bet her for the first time in his life, but after removing her glasses, she fights him viciously, knocking his glasses off, too taunting him with her victory over him.

In one violent surge of energy he rolls her over and brings her head down on a rock, a grotesque reversal of the position of the psalmist’s feet in Psalm 40:2. She is dead; her eyes “rolled back down and were set in a fixed glare that did not take him in” (546). And then without his glasses he begins to see as he has never seen before. He falls back and the woods seem to converge on him. He looks for an escape route as he imagines himself being drawn faster and faster toward the water: “He realized suddenly that he could not swim and that he had not bought the boat. On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance” (546). He is dying and in his last few seconds he is being forced to walk upon the water even though, like Peter, he will need Christ’s help. At the beginning and ending of the story, these woods appear to walk on water. O’Connor alludes to the story in Matthew where Jesus moves toward his disciples in a boat across a storm-tossed sea: “And in the fourth watch of the night, [Jesus] came to them walking upon the sea” (Matthew 14:25, Rheims-Douay
Versions). Earlier in the story there is another hint that O'Connor is thinking of Peter. She describes the old man’s relationship with his granddaughter. “He had frequent little verbal tilts with her but this was a sport like putting a mirror up in front of a rooster and watching him fights his reflection” (531).

Five times in the final paragraph of the story O’Connor uses verbs of sight and seeing to refer to the old man. He has already looked “behind him for a long time at the little motionless figure with its head on the rock” (546). The last thing he sees, however, is the bulldozer; but the mechanical monster cannot help him. Nature is indifferent to him, and he rejects salvation. Because he has denied the role of God, because he has been led to murder, because he does not acknowledge that he is part of the earth, part of the Pitts, he cannot really be saved for Heaven. All he can actually come back to is the earth, death, and destruction. Hence, it is a very complex story symbolically and one that is very interesting to look at.

If the woods are only woods, whether engagingly pretty or horrifyingly ominous, the story is bleak and its vision is sullen, which is why this story cannot rest on its bizarre surface level. For O’Connor, the vision that piloted her stories was never lighthearted and easy. Integrity to her vision meant characters had to yield, to suffer, to die, if necessary, so that an essential Christian point could be driven home. During the Christmas of 1956, she sent a copy of the story to the Fitzgeralds with a message that suggests her earnestness: “I enclose a little morality play of mine for your Christmas cheer but as it is not very cheerful, I’d advise you to leave off reading it until after the season.”31 What O’Connor meant to underline is, as she told a friend, “one is saved and
the other is damned. . . . One has to die first because one kills the other." Mark Fortune is the intended damned. He thinks of the Pittses as fools, for they would "let a cow pasture interfere with progress" (525) and "with the future" (528). He prefers the selling of his land to a man who allows an outside display of "old used-car bodies . . ., stone cranes and chickens, urns, jardinières, whirligigs" (535). Mary Fortune Pitts is the planned saved. She values the view of the land, preferring the "profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds, and on across the red road, to the sullen line of black pine woods fringed on top with green" (537). Mary Fortune, however, is by no means a Christian advocate in the story, so as O'Connor's "saved," she is a pawn in a role that is larger than her comprehension.

Published for the first time in the July 1958 Harper's Bazaar, the fourth short story, "The Enduring Chill," pairs Mrs. Fox, a Southern mother, with her returned adult son. Mrs. Fox owns a dairy farm and has a couple of hired hands to assist her. Asbury, an aspiring writer, after anguishing in New York with chills and fever, returns home to Timberboro, Georgia, to await his death. He arrives home from school by train; his mother and sister, Mary George, are there in the car to pick him up at the station. He looks horribly ill, and his mother is taken aback, but he refuses to talk about it. He is very rude to his mother and to his sister, and considers how he has been dying for about four months. When he was still in New York, he had written a letter to his mother which filled two notebooks. He did not mean it to be read until after his death. It is such a letter as kafka had addressed to his father. Asbury's father had died twenty years ago and Asbury considers this a great blessing.
He knows, of course, that his mother will not understand the letter at once. Her literal mind will require sometime to discover. The significance of it, but he thinks she will be able to see that he forgives her for all she has done to him. For that matter, he supposes that she will realize what she has done to him only through the letter. He does not think she is conscious of it at all. Her self-satisfaction itself is barely conscious, but because of the letter, she may experience a painful realization and this will be the only thing of value he has to leave her. If reading it will be painful to her, writing, it had sometimes been unbearable to him – for in order to face her, he had had to face himself:

"I came here to escape the slave's atmosphere of home," he had written, "to find freedom, to liberate my imagination, to take it like a hawk from its cage and set it 'whirling off into the widening gyre' (Yeats) and what did I find? It was incapable of flight. It was some bird you had domesticated, sitting huffy in its pen, refusing to come out!" The next words were underscored twice. "I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn't you kill that too? Woman, why did you pinion me?" (554)

Writing this, he had reached the pit of despair and he thought that reading it, she would at least begin to sense his tragedy and her part in it. It was not that she had ever forced her way on him. That had never been necessary. Her way had simply been the air he breathed and when at he had found other air, he could not survive in it. He felt that even if she did not understand at once, the letter would leave her with an enduring chill and perhaps in time lead her to see herself as she was.
Shortly after picking him up from the train station, his mother has stopped the car to look at one of her sick cows. Asbury turns his head away, “but there a small, walleyed Guernsey was watching him steadily as if she sensed some bond between them. Good God! He cried in an agonized voice, ‘can’t we go on? It’s six o’clock in the morning!’” (552). When they reach the house, Asbury walks upstairs and promptly falls into bed. He remembers the letter he had written to his mother when he was still at school in New York, blaming her for his lack of creativity and for pinioning him.

Mrs. Fox interprets her son’s refusal to see Doctor Block as indication that he is about to have a nervous breakdown. She disapproves of his devotion to education and thinks he will be much better off working outside in the sunshine; but when she tells him so, he dismisses her suggestion and again refuses to see Doctor Block. Mary George, who has been sleeping in the backseat of the car, wakes up and derides her brother’s obvious disdain for their home. She makes fun of him for being so pretentious, and in the past she had claimed that he cannot be an artist since he has never published anything.

His mother and sister arrive with his luggage, and he tells them to leave him alone and let him sleep. When they are gone, he stares at the stain on his ceiling that resembles a bird with its wings spread and an icicle held in its beak. It has “always irritated him and sometimes frightened him” (555). Suffering from fever and chills, certain that he is dying, he allows his mother to put him to bed, but he refuses to see a doctor. Asbury awakens in the afternoon to find Doctor Block examining him. He is extremely rude to the doctor, who takes his blood for tests and eventually diagnoses
Asbury's illness as undulant fever contracted from drinking unpasteurized milk. This is the title's literal presence in the story, but the figurative emphasis of the title falls on Asbury himself as he begins to understand what life includes this side of death.

The animosity between mother and son operates on a surface level in the story. A more significant aspect of the story is Asbury's unrequited movement toward the Teilhardian Omega Point. What Asbury needs to learn about life and death can take place in the humble setting of his origin, and New York, with its expansive cultural eclectic charm, pales by comparison. At the beginning, the story is ripe with wondrous overlay that adds mystery to the setting of an ordinary country town in middle Georgia; the sun is like "some strange potentate" (547), and the light it casts can turn flat roofs into "mounting turrets of some exotic temple" (547). Asbury has been in New York and his imagination has been fed by a world of people who see things differently from the provincial folks of his native town. Mrs. Fox, on the other hand, represents everything from which Asbury has tried to remove himself. Yet, in the end, O'Connor elevates Mrs. Fox's position; she is the kind of character that lets her intellectual son have his say, but not necessarily his way. She may not know much of the world beyond Timberboro, but she knows how to survive at home, indifferent to a desire for enlightenment.

While Asbury is still in New York, his friend Goetz explores and rejects Buddhism with this simple denial: "Although the Bodhisattva leads an infinite number of creatures into nirvana, in reality there are neither any Bodhisattvas to do the leading nor any creatures to be led" (549-550). In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva is an enlightened
being who has arrived at perfect knowledge and acts as a guide for others toward nirvana, the attainment of disinterested wisdom and compassion. Goetz, an existential agnostic, believes that death is an illusion. Ironically, O’Connor chose a name for him of German derivation, which is “a pet form of Godizo (God).” Goetz has a similar response to the lecture on Vedanta, which is a Hindu philosophy that affirms the identity of the individual human soul, atman, with Brahman, the holy power that is the source and sustainer of the universe. Asbury, who is bored by the lecture, finds a Roman Catholic priest among the disparate audience whose nonverbal gestures appear to match his own lack of appreciation. The Hindu references also provide a source of subtle humour, as the cow, a sacred animal to the Hindu, is later determined to be the source of Asbury’s undulant fever. When she suggests that Asbury see Doctor Block, he refuses, expressing disdain for this country doctor. Instead, he thinks about his friends in New York: Goetz, a psuedomystic who defines salvation as “the destruction of a simple prejudice” (550), and a priest, Ignatius Vogle, S.J., whom Asbury sees at a lecture on “Vedanta” (550).

Rather than accepting Grace, Asbury has been worshiping Art as a god instead. He realizes this when he overhears Mary George say that he has decided to be an invalid because he cannot be an artist, thinking, “He had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him Death” (563-64). He goes to sleep thinking of the peaceful spot in the family burying ground where he will soon lie, and after a while he sees that his body is being borne slowly toward it while his mother and Mary George watch without interest from their chairs on the porch. He has a
mysteriously saturnine face in which there is a subtle blend of asceticism and corruption. Asbury is laid in a shallow grave on the hillside and the indistinct mourners, after standing in silence for a while, spread out over the darkening green:

The Jesuit retired to a spot beneath a dead tree to smoke and meditate. The moon came up and Asbury was aware of a presence bending over him and a gentle warmth on his cold face. He knew that this was Art come to wake him and he sat up and opened his eyes. Across the hill all the lights were on in his mother’s house. The black pond was speckled with little nickel-colored stars. The Jesuit had disappeared. All around him the cows were spread out grazing in the moonlight and one large white one, violently spotted, was softly licking his head as if it were a block of salt. (564)

For Asbury the danger of raw milk is not the issue at all; he is more interested in defying the segregation taboos of his culture and irritating his mother. Asbury dreams of “two large boulders were circling each other inside his head” (571). Over the next few days, Asbury’s health declines even though his mother is able to convince him to sit out on the porch. He remembers his interactions with Randall and Morgan, the two black farmhands. Last year when he was writing a play about black characters, he had spent time with them on the job, and they had bonded over breaking one of his mother’s rules by smoking in the barn. However, when he tried to convince them to go even further by drinking some of the milk from the farm, they had refused.

After deciding that his mother is insufficient company, Asbury surprises her by requesting a visit from a priest. He believes that he will be able to have an intellectual
conversation with a Jesuit priest, even though he is not that religious. His mother finally obliges and makes a phone call to arrange for one to visit the next day. That evening, Asbury overhears his mother and sister talking about him; Mary George insists that he is making himself sick because he is failing as an artist. He knows she is right in a sense, but does truly believe himself to be ill, and that night he dreams about his own death.

The next day, Father Finn arrives. He is blind in one eye and deaf in one ear, so Asbury must shout to have a conversation with him. Asbury is disappointed because the priest is clearly not as intellectual as he had hoped; instead, Father Finn encourages him to speak to Jesus. The priest gets right down to the most important business of all. “God is a spirit infinitely perfect... You are a very ignorant boy” (566). The Priest continues to quiz Asbury on the catechism he does not know and finally says to him, “The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are – a lazy ignorant conceited youth!” (567). He berates the mother for neglecting her spiritual duties to her son and concludes by repeating, “He’s a good lad at heart but very ignorant” (567).

The next morning, Asbury is surer than ever that he is on the brink of death, and he asks to see the two black farmhands, Morgan and Randall, with the hope of recreating their special moment when they smoked a cigarette together the year before. He gives them cigarettes, but their visit does not satisfy him because they just keep assuring him that he looks fine, which is obviously a lie. They end up bickering, and Asbury’s mother asks them to leave. Asbury is extremely disappointed, having realized that “there would be no significant experience before he died” (570). After the
blind priest's admonition that God will not send the Holy Spirit to anyone who do not ask for it, Asbury notices the bird more frequently and feels it is there for some purpose that he cannot divine. O'Connor explains that terror: Asbury "undeniably realized that he is going to live with the new knowledge that he knew nothing. That really is what he is frozen in —humility."

His humility is furthered by the water stain which symbolizes "the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend" (572) on Asbury. When he discovers that he is not dying, but is ill with a disease that will come and go throughout his life, the "blinding red-gold sun" (572), begins to penetrate the wall he has set up against it. The old life in him is exhausted. He awaits the coming of the new. It is then that he feels the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it is like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath comes short:

The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. (572)

Freud tells us that culture derives from a need for immorality, but achievement eats up the hours of our life. The fruits of culture, such as those left by the artist, are enjoyed by the whole tribe but confirm the death of the individual. Asbury, however, ironically feels his art will enable him to transcend death. But he is never shown actually producing anything, actually participating in life. He suffers from an
unconscious terror of life, more powerful than a terror of death. The paradox in Asbury’s case is seen in his feeling that somehow dying a unique death will enable him to overcome death by escaping the common fate. Above all, Asbury feels that his fate cannot be the common one of the earthbound.

As is common in many of O’Connor’s stories, the sky and sun play an important role in reflecting the mood of the characters. When Asbury arrives at the train station as the story begins, “The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods that surrounded Timberboro” (547). His mood is like the sky, since he believes he is about to die. When he discovers that he will not die, but will instead suffer his entire life from undulant fever, “A blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud. Below it the treeline was black against the crimson sky. It formed a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming” (572). The treeline represents Asbury’s determination to culminate his life as a suffering artist in an early death; however, the sky, which represents his chance at life, overwhelms that opportunity.

The stain on Asbury’s bedroom ceiling can be interpreted as representing the Holy Ghost. It appears to him as a “fierce bird with spread wings. It had an icicle crosswise in its beak” (555). Since he has closed himself off to faith, he finds it irritating and sometimes frightening. After Father Finn leaves, having instructed him about the Holy Ghost, Asbury “looked at the fierce bird with the icicle in its beak and felt that it was there for some purpose that he could not divine” (555). When he realizes
that he is doomed to a long life suffering from undulant fever, “the fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion” (555-556). It descends toward him, since he is doomed to suffer for his refusal to open his mind to Grace. Eyes are a common symbol in O'Connor’s stories, and they are often violent. When Mary George tells Asbury that if she looked as bad as he does she would go to the hospital, “Her mother cut her eyes sharply at her and she left” (555). As Doctor Block examines Asbury for the first time, his “drill-like gaze swung over [his mouth] and bore down” (556). When Father Finn chastises him for being ignorant of the Holy Ghost, Asbury “moved his arms and legs helplessly as if he were pinned to the bed by the terrible eye” (567) through which the priest sees. Similarly, when Doctor Block has reported that he is suffering from undulant fever and will not die, “Block’s gaze seemed to reach down like a steel pin and hold whatever it was until the life was out of it” (572).

Language is similarly represented as a tool of violence in this story. When Asbury asks for a Jesuit priest to visit and insists to his mother that he is going to die, “he tried to make each word like a hammer blow on top of her head” (562). When his mother eventually contradicts this statement with proof from Doctor Block that he in fact only has undulant fever and is not going to die, “Her voice broke in on him with the force of a gunshot” (571).

A level of racism is apparent in Asbury’s interactions with Randall and Morgan, although he does not believe himself to be racist. The very idea that he would be
writing a play about “The Negro” (651) is, of course, racist. Last year when he was writing the play, he had spent time with them on the job, and they had bonded over breaking one of his mother’s rules by smoking in the barn. He saw this moment as “one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing” (558). However, he is dissatisfied with their visit because they simply insist that he looks well, which is obviously a lie, and end up bickering with each other.

The next short story, is “The Comforts of Home,” is O’Connor’s most explicit description of the bond between a powerful mother and her effeminate, dependent son. Given Thomas’s attachment to his electric blanket, the word “comforts” in the title takes on a double meaning which adds to the humour of this otherwise gruesome story. Thomas, a typical male chauvinist, sees virtue as a principle of order, but the virtues he approves of in his mother are a tidy house and good meals. His mother’s capacity for charity is enormous even though she herself seems a bit naïve.

Thomas tries to control his mother, who infuriates him by offering her home to Sarah Ham, a delinquent young woman she wishes to help. Thomas sees clearly what is wrong with his mother, but cannot see the irony in his diagnosis of her ills, which actually identifies his own spiritual illness. He complains that she makes “a mockery of virtue to pursue it with such a mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous” (574). His mother’s offending virtue is that she has had released from jail Sarah Ham, an unregenerate floozy, a bad check writer, and a drunk, and has taken her into her own home, against the wishes of her son.
Thomas loved his mother. He loved her because it was his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became nothing but pure idiot mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control. She proceeded always from the tritest of considerations – it was the nice thing to do – into the most foolhardy engagements with the devil, whom, of course, she never recognized (575).

Thomas considers Sarah a “moral moron” (575), and naturally he believes that she does not belong in his comfortable, orderly territory. When she finds her way to his bed, he is outraged and backs her out of the room and down the hall with a chair, like a lion-tamer. The virtuous man wards off the lure of sin, as if it were a beast which must be kept at bay. But in this emblem, Thomas does not recognize his own depravity. He considers himself a moral being, but virtue is for Thomas merely a “principle of order” (575), a way of keeping the surface calm. The mother does not relent. She keeps saying to him, “I keep thinking it might be you” (575). The idea completely revolts Thomas; even though at one point he feels “a deep unbearable loathing for himself as if her were turning slowly into the girl” (575).

Sarah herself picks up on this theme, complains, after he shoves her out of his car, “What if you were me and I couldn’t stand to ride you three miles?” (581). Thomas sees only “blameless corruption” (580) in the girl, whose behaviour psychologists have explained with the O’Connor finds so repugnant. The girl is labelled a nymphomaniac and a congenital liar, suffering from insecurities. These psychological labels the girl herself threw around, using them as excuses for her actions. She is a creature who takes
no responsibility for her own behaviour, "He grabbed the red pocketbook. It had a skin-
like feel to his touch and as it opened, he caught an unmistakable odor of the girl" 
(592), and he reveals "the sexual fantasy his consciousness so violently denied."36

Thomas belongs to another, who seems to have returned from the dead to direct 
him, but this one certainly bore no fruit for God. In fact, the father represents the 
opposite of everything the mother stood for. At the end of the story he literally stands 
with a smoking gun, his mother dead. As the sheriff peers around the corner of the door 
he sees "over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's 
arms" (594). The law here, represents by the sheriff, actually catches and condemns 
Thomas, but Thomas has already seen the connection between himself and Sarah Ham. 
He has recognized his entry into the ranks of sinners. Now perhaps he can be saved. 
When Thomas fires it, he is a man spent, with, "the echo died away in waves" (593).

Sheriff Farebrother, who has just come in the door, is left reading a scene that the 
literal Thomas never writes: Farebrother saw the crafty man in the arms of the young 
slut. Thomas’s unconsciousness, however, has made another scenario possible: he has 
shot his mother to erase his embarrassment in front of her. The self-centered Thomas, 
on the other hand, is devastated, for a horrible travesty has occurred. The “peace of 
perfect order” (593), alone again with his mother and all the comforts of home, which 
to him are “home, workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and as 
necessary” (585), were lost forever.

O’Connor’s choice of the biblical name Thomas plays on the doubting apostle 
story as well as the meaning of Thomas, “twin” (John 11:16). When Jesus appears to
his apostles the first time after his crucifixion, Thomas is not present to see his Master, so he does not believe. On the eighth day, Jesus appears to Thomas; then he believes: “Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed” (John 20:29, Rheims-Douay Version). In O’Connor’s story, on the eighth day Thomas shoots his mother. The sad extravagance of his mother’s death is essential to Thomas’s beginning understanding of the potential comforts of an eternal home. Further, Thomas as “twin” has doubling implications with literally every character in the story. Thomas duplicates both mother and father partially: “Thomas [has] inherited his father’s reason without his ruthlessness and his mother’s love of good without her tendency to pursue it” (577).

Though he struggles with Sarah Ham’s intrusion into the quiet of his home, his mother sees her repeatedly as interchangeable with Thomas: she could be him. In fact, the suggestion affects him so profoundly that the distance between them the polar opposition each represents, fades as he feels he is “slowly turning into the girl” (575). Farebrother, an ironically suggestive literal name, is not only the double of Thomas’s father, but of Thomas as well. Sarah Ham thinks Thomas looks like a cop she saw in a movie, and Farebrother asks if Thomas “want[s] to swap jobs,” since he knows how “it ought to be done” (590).

Like his biblical namesake, O’Connor’s Thomas does not realize the cost and responsibility of Christian goodness, nor does O’Connor’s Thomas fully appreciate the power of devil. As a historian, Thomas would seek verifiable evidence when writing about the past, just as the biblical Thomas needed tangible proof before believing in the
resurrection of Christ. Both overlook the bigger issue – Christ’s resurrection as a denial of the remaining apostles’ witness and Thomas’s mother’s self-denying attention to an inconvenient other as a refusal to forego the amenities of a comfortable existence:

“[Thomas’s mother] was counting on his attachment to his electric blanket” (573). In a letter to a friend, O’Connor once stated: “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.” Thomas loves his mother; he wants to protect her from herself. However, his long deceased father, who has taken up “squatter’s rights” in Thomas’s head, serves as the tempting and directing devil. He is the one who gives the order to “Fire!” (593), and Thomas does so. Only when he stares into the face of the horror he has committed can he begin to understand the ultimate value of his mother’s sacrifice.

Of all O’Connor’s stories, “The Comforts of Home” lends itself most easily to both Freudian and Jungian analysis. Frederick Asals calls Thomas's attachment to his mother and his hatred of his father “thunderingly Oedipal.” Marshall Bruce Gentry suggests that “O’Connor’s most overtly Freudian” scene is when Thomas puts the gun in Sarah Ham’s red pocketbook. The red pocketbook has a “skin-like feel” with “an unmistakable odor of the girl” (592). In the final moment of the story, Thomas has the opportunity to see the true value of his mother through his pitiful shortcomings, and to begin the long upward route toward convergence at the Teilhardian Omega Point.

In the next short story, “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Rufus Johnson, a clubfoot delinquent with a high IQ, enters the lives of Sheppard, a widowed atheist do-gooder, and Norton, his snivelling ten-year-old son, who is still grieving for his dead mother.
Andrew Lytle, editor of the *Sewanee Review*, published the story in the Summer 1962 issue, along with two critical articles on O'Connor's fiction. One of these articles, John Hawkes's "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," provided the first serious challenge to O'Connor's position on evil. Since Rufus Johnson declares that "Satan . . . He has me in his power" (600), Hawkes's commentary provides a deeper exploration of the story, and it remains today a significant entry in O'Connor criticism. The debate between O'Connor and Hawkes centres on the source or identity of the devil. O'Connor claims "explicit acceptance for the devil's existence"; her devil is Lucifer, a fallen angel. Hawkes, on the other hand, sees O'Connor using an "authorial-devil," which she employs as a "vehicle for satire," one that is a "subjective creation."

As the story begins, Sheppard and Norton are having breakfast. Sheppard tells Norton that he saw Rufus Johnson the day before, trying to eat out of a garbage can. He hopes to stir some kind of compassion in his son, whom he finds lacking in this area, but does not succeed. Sheppard is the City Recreational Director, and he has tried to help Rufus at the reformatory where he works as a counsellor once a week. As Norton says, "He was helping boys no one else cared about" (597). Sheppard has given Rufus the key to their house with an open invitation. Over breakfast, he tries to impress on Norton how lucky he is, but only upsets his son when it comes up that Norton's mother has been dead for over a year. Norton vomits up his breakfast and Sheppard tells him to go lie down, extremely disappointed with him.

Sheppard remembers how when he first met Rufus, he knew there was something special about the boy. Rufus is incredibly smart and has a club foot which he keeps in a
battered old shoe. Sheppard used to meet with him every week until he was released from the reformatory. Rufus’s father had died before he was born and his mother was in jail; when he was released from the reformatory, his grandfather got custody of him. But Sheppard hopes he will run away from home and come to stay at his house so that he can take credit for helping the boy. Sheppard decides that his own son, who has so much, will benefit from sharing what he does have with one “less fortunate” (598).

That afternoon, while Norton is at home alone, Rufus uses the key Sheppard gave him to enter the house. He orders Norton to make him a sandwich. Then he storms around the house, touching Norton’s mother’s things. This is offensive to Norton, but Rufus will not stop disturbing all her things. When Sheppard arrives home a half hour later, he is absolutely delighted to find Rufus in the parlour reading an encyclopedia. Rufus tells him that his grandfather has died. While Sheppard considers how to ask Rufus to stay at their house for good, he finds his son, Norton, hiding in one of his mother’s coats in the hall closet. Sheppard tells Rufus that Norton needs the company of another boy in the house, and asks him to stay because he needs his help. Despite Norton’s protestations, Rufus agrees:

“I have something to say to both of you,” Sheppard said in a voice without inflection. His eyes moved from one to the other of them and he spoke slowly as if what he was saying he would say only once and it behooved them to listen. “If it made any difference to me what Rufus thinks of me . . . . then I wouldn’t be asking him here. Rufus is going to help me out and I’m going to help him out and we’re both going to help you out. I’d simply be selfish if I let what Rufus thinks of me interfere with what I
can do for Rufus. If I can help a person, all I want is to do it. I’m above and beyond simple pettiness.” (608-609)

After Sheppard leaves, Rufus asks Norton how he can stand his father, since “He thinks he’s Jesus Christ!” (609). A few days later, Sheppard and Rufus look through the telescope that Sheppard has bought for him and set up in the attic. Meanwhile, Norton sulks in a corner and shows no interest in the telescope. Rufus says he is bored with the telescope because all you can see is the moon, and he will never even go there: instead, he is going to hell when he dies. When Sheppard gently tells him that there is no way to know if there is a hell, Rufus points out that it says so in the Bible. Norton becomes afraid that his mother is burning there, though Sheppard tries to comfort him with the idea that she just does not exist anywhere anymore. It does not work, and Norton instead listens to Rufus, that since his mother believes in Jesus, “She’s saved”:

The child still looked puzzled. “Where?” he said. “Where is she at?”

“On high,” Johnson said.

“Where’s that?” Norton gasped.

“It’s in the sky somewhere,” Johnson said, “but you got to be dead to get there. You can’t go in no space ship.” There was a narrow gleam in his eyes now like a beam holding steady on its target. (612)

The next day, Sheppard sees Rufus talking secretly to Norton behind the bleachers at the ballpark. That night, Norton is focused intently on the telescope in the attic, but he does not know where Rufus is. Soon, their question is answered when Rufus is brought home by a police officer, who accuses him of breaking into a house and destroying property. Though Rufus denies having committed the crime, Sheppard
is extremely disappointed and lets the police officer take Rufus to the station. However, the next morning, the police sergeant calls to tell Sheppard that Rufus has been cleared, and Sheppard goes to the station to pick him up. Sheppard feels horrible, and Rufus seems to have no problem making sure he suffers in his guilt.

It is time to pick up the special shoe for Rufus’s club foot, but when they get to the brace store they discover that the shoe is too small and a new, a bigger one must be made. This is extremely disappointing for Sheppard, though it pleases Rufus. That night, Sheppard drops Norton and Rufus off at the movies while he goes to a meeting. When they get home, the police are there again, accusing Rufus of breaking into another house. But Sheppard sticks up for him, saying that he was at a movie, and that he will defend Rufus. When the boys are in bed, Sheppard goes into Rufus’s room and asks him if he left the movie theater at any time; Rufus responds with outrage that Sheppard does not trust him, and accuses him of planning to go across the hall to ask Norton what happened. So when Norton beckons to his father from bed, Sheppard ignores him.

The next day, Sheppard and Rufus return to the brace store; the shoe is ready and it fits perfectly, but Rufus declares that he will never wear it. He needs to have his physical handicap to maintain his identity and perhaps to believe that he will get into heaven since, as he quotes the Bible, “The lame shall enter first” (631). That night, the police come to their home again, this time with proof that Rufus has broken into another home: his club foot has left distinct tracks. However, Sheppard declares that Rufus has been at home with him all night, and they leave. But Rufus immediately
says, “You ain’t such a bad liar yourself” (623), and points out that at one point, Sheppard went upstairs to see Norton and left him alone. Sheppard can tell that Rufus is trying to get him to kick him out of the house, but he refuses to; he wants to save him. But he does wish that the boy would leave on his own accord.

The next morning, Norton and Rufus bring the Bible to the breakfast table and read it together. Rufus says they have stolen it from a store, and Norton begs him to repent so that he will not go to hell; Sheppard thinks that repenting is nonsense. He tells Rufus that he is too intelligent to believe in the Bible, but Rufus tears out a page and chews it, then tears another with his teeth and grinds it, making a reference to the behaviour of Ezekiel: “I’ve eaten it . . . and it was honey to my mouth!” (628; see Ezekiel 3:1-3). After dinner, Sheppard goes up to the attic to ask Norton where Rufus has gone. Instead of answering, Norton declares that he has found his mother through the telescope. Sheppard dismisses this news and tells Norton to be in bed in fifteen minutes.

Policemen arrive at the house again, with Rufus in their custody, and Rufus claims that he wanted to be caught. There is a reporter there, and Rufus tells the reporter that he would rather go to jail than live in Sheppard’s house, since Sheppard thinks he is God but the Devil has him in his power. Sheppard watches the police car drive away with Rufus inside it and tries to console himself that “I did more for him than I did for my own child” (631). But then he realizes that he has neglected Norton, and runs upstairs to hold his son, deciding to love him and treat him better. However, when he reaches Norton’s room, he finds that Norton has hanged himself.
O'Connor's message from Rufus to Sheppard in the story comes from the notes in the Rheims-Douay version of the Bible for this verse: "By this eating of the book is signified the diligent attention and affection with which we were to receive, and embrace the word of God; and to let it, as it were, sink into our interior by devout meditation." Sheppard cannot hear the warning. O'Connor is not ready to relinquish him yet, however, for she has Rufus deliver a line with opposite meaning to his apparent intent: "He don't know his left hand from his right" (630).

After four incidents with various police officers suspecting Rufus's crimes, the last where Rufus reports that Sheppard has made "immor'I suggestions" (630), to him, Sheppard attempts his defense: "I did more for him than I did for my own child" (630). The sexual misconduct that Rufus's comment hints at evaporates when Rufus defines what Sheppard has said: "He's a dirty atheist . . . . He said there wasn't no hell" (630). He is now a man "shriveled," "paralyzed, aghast" (632). Almost simultaneously though, his physical move toward Norton is instant, he is speedy to rectify his wrong and to establish a new relationship founded in a nonselfish love toward his son. But Norton hangs from an attic beam, having just launched his flight to see his mother, and Sheppard "reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit" (632). He sees himself clearly for the first time, and he is revolted. Picking up the emblem of eating with which the story begins, O'Connor writes that "he had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton" (632). He has ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He feels "a rush of agonizing love for the child" (632), and he runs to find him, but it is too late.
Sheppard does not know, nor did he listen to the truth Rufus cites: that only Jesus can save him. He is in the end the most alienated character in the story, alienated from Christ. He represents, according to O'Connor, the empty man who filled up his emptiness with good works.

Robert Fitzgerald suggests that O'Connor's development of Rufus, Sheppard, and Norton is "a second effort with the three figures of [The Violent Bear It Away], Tarwater, Rayber and Bishop." In fact, earlier drafts of the novel's manuscript contain a "Florida Rufus Johnson," whom O'Connor removes from the novel's finalized version. Both Rayber and Sheppard attempt to convert Tarwater and Rufus, respectively, to their views; both fail to do so. Tarwater and Rufus each has an older fanatical relative who has reared him: old Tarwater, the great-uncle, has passed the mantle of prophecy onto the fourteen-year-old Francis Marion, and Rufus's grandfather has deserted his fourteen-year-old grandson to travel "with a remnant to the hills.... to bury some Bibles in a cave" and reenact the story of Noah, only this time with fire (607). Bishop, the idiot son, here becomes Norton, a "normal" child. Both are overlooked while more interesting young men come into their fathers' lives; both die, and at their fathers' final awareness of their indirect contributions to their respective fatalities, the fathers have the chance to reconsider former ways.

O'Connor was uneasy with the story, convinced that it did not work: "The story doesn't work because I don't know, don't sympathize, don't like Mr. Sheppard in the way that I know and like most of my other characters." Sheppard is a man who, according to O'Connor, "fills up his emptiness with good works," and of this type of
character she has no “felt-knowledge.”43 The other-serving Sheppard, the name suggestive of one who would lead his flock responsibly, finds substitutes for the loss of his wife. The bedroom he shared with her stays intact, with all her clothes in the drawer and her accessories laid out on a linen runner, as though she herself would soon return. Sheppard has removed himself to another room, where an “ascetic-looking iron bed [stands] on the bare floor” (605), and he eats his breakfast out of the individual cardboard box it comes in. In his spare time, he coaches a little league baseball team on which his son does not play and volunteers his Saturday time to counseling wayward youths in whose lives he wants to make a difference. On one of these Saturdays, he meets Rufus and instantly assesses that his problem is his deformed clubfoot. Sheppard does not know that charity begins at home. He is bothered by his selfish son, certain that Norton will be able to overcome his too-long grief if he can “stop thinking about [himself] and think what [he] can do for somebody else” (597). Sheppard’s involvement with Rufus Johnson is his attempt to follow his own advice to Norton.

Rufus remains alienated from everyone; Sheppard, from Norton. The alienation theme works for the dichotomy between science and religion, which O’Connor introduces through symbols. Rufus, who is evil, brings Norton to the Bible; their relationship wanes, however, as Norton becomes interested in the telescope (science). When Sheppard completely shuts out Norton in order to win Rusfus’s confidence, Norton suffers a loss of faith that leads to despair and ultimately to his attempting through suicide to join his dead mother in “heaven” among the stars. Sheppard does not know, nor does he listen to the truth Rufus cites: that only Jesus can save him.44 He is
in the end the most alienated character in the story, alienated from Christ. He represents, according to O'Connor, "the empty man who fills up his emptiness with good works." Sheppard believes himself to be Christ-like, but because he has no actual faith he is misguided. He compares himself in his office at the reformatory to a priest in a confessional, but thinks that "his credentials were less dubious than a priest's; he had been trained for what he was doing" (597). Rufus also believes that Sheppard sees himself this way, declaring to Norton, "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" (609). When he is finally caught breaking into a house, Rufus tells the reporter that Sheppard "thinks he's God... The Devil has him in his power" (630).

In contrast, Rufus declares himself to be controlled by Satan on the very first day he meets Sheppard. However, unlike Sheppard, he actually believes in God and begins to teach Norton about heaven and hell. But instead of identifying himself in terms of faith, he identifies himself by his handicap: his club foot: "Johnson was as touchy about the foot as if it were a sacred object" (610). Although Sheppard pays for him to have a special shoe that fixes his gait, he refuses to wear it. He needs to have his physical handicap to maintain his identity and perhaps to believe that he will get into heaven since, as he quotes the Bible, "the lame shall enter first" (631). Though he is a juvenile delinquent, Rufus achieves Grace because he believes in Jesus and tries to share the truths of the Bible with Norton. He resents Sheppard for trying to act like Jesus Christ while lacking all faith, and tells him, "Satan has you in his power, not only me. You too" (627). Sheppard tells him he is too intelligent to believe in the Bible, but Rufus eats a page of it and tells him that he will never eat earthly food again.
Eyes are important in many of O'Connor's stories, and here they are often described as violent. As Sheppard talks to his son, he tries “to pierce the child's conscience with his gaze” (595). Likewise, when Rufus encounters Norton for the first time, “his look went through the child like a pin and paralyzed him” (603). When he tells Norton about heaven, there is “a narrow gleam in his eyes now like a beam holding steady on its target” (612). However, eyes can also reveal the characters’ moods: when Rufus first tells Sheppard that Satan has him in his power, a “black sheen appeared in the boy's eyes” (600), and as Sheppard believes himself to be making progress with the boy, “he watched his eyes and every week he saw something in them crumble” (601).

When Norton says he is going to be a space man when he grows up, clearly having decided to commit suicide, “there was a glitter of wild pleasure in the child’s eyes” (627); and when he tells Sheppard that he has found his mother through the telescope, “there was an unnatural brightness about his eyes” (629). Both Rufus and Norton are often compared to animals, especially in their actions. When Rufus notices Sheppard watching him as he picks through trash, he “vanished with the swiftness of a rat” (602) and when he first appears to Norton, he “stood there like an irate drenched crow” (603). Norton, on the other hand, “squatted motionless like a large pale frog” (602), in his room before Rufus comes to the house, and when he sees the other boy for the first time, he speaks “in a kind of mouse-like shriek” (603). Literary exerted speculate that O'Connor used animal images in this story to emphasize the characters' grotesqueness and their distorted spirituality.
The short story, "Revelation," appeared in the 1964 Spring Sewanee Review, the last story published separately before O'Connor's death that summer. Critics are in general agreement that "Revelation" is O'Connor's finest story, and, in many ways, it serves as the ultimate culmination of her vision and develops the theme of conflict between parents and children in a wider, more complex way than any of the previous stories. The complexity of the story comes less from its action than from its themes and imagery.

Mrs. Ruby Turpin, a smug Southern woman, enters, and dominates by her large size, a crowded waiting room at a doctor's office. She is accompanied by her submissive husband Claude, who takes the last empty seat in the room. It is here that she occupies her thoughts by placing the occupants of the waiting room into what she considers to be their proper categories, using clichés which clearly reveal her view of the world in which she finds herself. In her head, she labels each person, judging them by her own self-important standards: a pleasant woman, her daughter, a white trash woman and her sleeping son, and an old woman (the white trash woman's mother).

Mrs. Turpin strikes up a conversation with the pleasant woman about the importance of being refined and having a good disposition. They also talk about being grateful and how it is important to be thankful for the good things you have been given in life, clearly tied to their notions of what it means to be a good Christian. Mrs. Turpin lives by what O'Connor has called the Southern code of manners. This code allows her to appear genteel on the surface and to keep to herself the less attractive thoughts which seethe behind her facade of gentility. From this gathering in a physician's waiting
room, we discover that Mrs. Turpin has a preferential hierarchy of people: “the rich, home-and-land owners, just home-owners, white trash, and blacks” (636). Basically, it is an economic hierarchy. Mrs. Turpin, is of course, thankful to be on the upper end. This reminds the reader of Luke 18:11: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself. God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” O’Connor refers to her as a “country female Jacob. And [her] vision was purgatorial.” With deft strokes, O’Connor outlines a complete milieu, lying bare both good and bad aspects of that society. 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” (636).

As indicated by her comments as she chats with the others in the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin has a tremendous amount of arrogance and self-satisfaction about herself and her station in life. Indeed, she often praises Jesus for not having made her what she sees of a lesser person than herself. For example, O’Connor writes, “Her [Mrs. Turpin’s] heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus thank you . . . . Thank you thank you thank you!’” (642). Inevitably Mrs. Turpin ceases musing to herself and speaks her judgments aloud. With self-righteous sincerity she says, “If it’s one thing I am . . . . it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!‘ It could have been different!” (644).
The entire time they are conversing, the white trash woman repeatedly interjects comments that show her ignorance and lack of intelligence. The pleasant woman’s daughter, Mary Grace, a fat ugly college girl with bad acne, scowls at Mrs. Turpin and seems to grow angry during the course of the conversation. She becomes more resentful still when her mother, Mrs. Turpin and Claude begin to speak about her as though she is a small child, saying she ought to be paddled at one point. Outraged, Mary Grace hurls the book she is reading at Mrs. Turpin and lunges at her throat. The book, significantly entitled “Human Development,” strikes Mrs. Turpin above her eye. The girl is subdued by the doctor and nurse who call an ambulance to come and take the girl away. Before she leaves, she whispers a powerful message to Mrs. Turpin. The reader should realize the typically O’Connor notion that her name, Mary Grace, reveals her role as a vehicle of God’s grace and the Virgin Mary’s true motherly concern for all of God’s children, not just those inclined to a Protestant Calvinist theology.

Looking into her Grace’s eyes, Mrs. Turpin asks her, “What you got to say to me?” (646). On a deeper and more thematic level, however, Mrs. Turpin’s question seems to be a request for a form of divine revelation. The story suggests such a mystical or divine encounter: “There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did not know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (645-46). Mrs. Turpin even asks her a question, “waiting, as for revelation” (646). Seen this way, Mrs. Turpin’s question would seem to be a request for a divine revelation from God. The revelation proves to be a shocking one: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!” says Mary Grace (646).
Mrs. Turpin finds this comment very unsettling, and she wonders if it may have been a message from God, who may be trying to intervene in her life. She returns home only to be plagued by Mary Grace's statement. They spend the afternoon lying in bed resting, and while Claud sleeps, Mrs. Turpin fixates on what the girl said to her. She cries at first, but then gets angry that she should be the target of this message, since there were so many other, lesser people in the room to whom it could have been directed. Before Claud takes the black farmhands hoe in the pick-up truck, Mrs. Turpin brings them ice cold water to drink. Mrs. Turpin confides in them what happened, but when they react with sympathy and compliments she only becomes annoyed since she knows they are insincere. Still frustrated, Mrs. Turpin marches off to the pig parlor with the "look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle" (651), where, in outright rebellion, she enters into a direct conflict with the Deity. In her confrontation with God, Mrs. Turpin begins with the question, "Why me?" (652). She then notes that even if He were to decide to "put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!" (653). Finally, she demands, "Who do you think you are?" (653).

Mrs. Turpin's answer is presented through an epiphany which causes her to reevaluate her assumptions concerning her specific value in the divine scheme of things. She gazes into the pig parlour "as if [she were looking] through the very heart of mystery" (653) and that it is "as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (653). Her tenacity is rewarded by a vision in which she sees "a vast horde of souls" (654), marching into heaven. In that marching horde are "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” (654). It is only at the end of the procession that she sees people a “who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior” (654).

It should be remembered that Mrs. Turpin has spent her life ranking individuals in what she takes to be the proper order. While doing this, she has forgotten the clear teachings of Christ who said, “But many who are now first will be last, and many who are now last will be first” (Matthew 19:30). Consequently, she discovers “by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away” (654). The story ends with Mrs. Turpin walking back to the house: “In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (654). Although Mrs. Turpin’s vision is not presented with the degree of high seriousness which usually accompanies the traditional presentation of a religious experience, there appears to be no question that O’Connor intends the reader to see Mrs. Turpin as one of the elect – saved, however mysteriously, by the grace of a forgiving God.

Mary Grace’s name marks her clearly as the symbol of grace in the story. Though Mrs. Turpin is already saved because of her Christian faith, she needs a revelation from Mary Grace to realize that her world view is inconsistent with her Christianity. Mrs. Turpin asks Mary Grace, during her seizure, “What you got to say to me?” and waits,
"as for a revelation" (646). This question reflects Mrs. Turpin’s self-absorbed nature, since rather than feeling concern for the girl’s health she is focused on how the girl’s actions and attitude relate to her. But it also implies that Mrs. Turpin recognizes Mary Grace’s closeness to God in that moment, and her desire for a revelation (which she receives, though it is bizarre and not what she expected). These words inspire Mrs. Turpin’s revelation at the end of the story, when she sees herself, Claud, and those of equal socioeconomic status bringing up the rear of the procession to Heaven. Though they are saved, they must follow those whom Mrs. Turpin has considered beneath her. Mary Grace’s eyes are particularly important as symbols of her judgment of Mrs. Turpin and of her ability to communicate a message from God. She has violent eyes that seem "alternately to smolder and to blaze" (637).

When she begins to lose patience with her mother and with Mrs. Turpin, she slams her book shut and stares violently at Mrs. Turpin. Her eyes “seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give” (637). This comparison to road signs in the night hints at the girl’s ability to send an important, guiding revelation to Mrs. Turpin. As Mrs. Turpin thinks about the uselessness of helping people like the white-trash woman, Mary Grace’s “eyes fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin. This time there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them” (642). Immediately preceding the revelation, however, “The girl’s eyes stopped rolling and focused on her. They seemed 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” (645). This openness is what allows the revelation to happen. The sun and sky are important
symbols for O'Connor, and here they indicate the stages of Mrs. Turpin's acceptance and understanding of the revelation. Before she tells the black farm hands what Mary Grace said to her, as she thinks about it, "the sun was getting whiter and whiter, blanching the sky overhead so that the leaves of the hickory tree were black in the face of it" (650). As she walks toward the hog pen to wash down the animals, "The sun was a deep yellow now like a harvest moon and was riding westward very fast over the far tree line as if it meant to reach the hogs before she did" (651). It is as if the sun is God, hoping to reveal to Mrs. Turpin the error of her ways before it is too late. The sun is personified again as Mrs. Turpin sprays down the hogs angrily, before her revelation: "The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs" (652). With this comparison, it is clear that the sun is meant to represent God, and that Mrs. Turpin, as well as other humans, are like hogs in many ways.

In many of her stories, O'Connor compares people to animals. Here, Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin a wart hog, and the comparison weighs heavily on Mrs. Turpin's mind. She marches to the pig parlor in a determined way, as if to confront God's revelation in front of the animals to whom she has been compared. The white-trash woman's disdainful words haunt her: "A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin" (651). Mrs. Turpin sprays down the hogs violently, as if trying to wash away her own sins by cleaning her animals. She is like the hogs, below humans, because she is unable to see that all people are equal before God. Racism, a common theme in O'Connor's stories, is very evident in Mrs. Turpin's view of the world. Though she prides herself for being
kind to her black farmhands, she considers them to be idiots. In considering the classes of people, she puts black people “on the bottom of the heap” (636) at the same level as white-trash people, but separate. But the white-trash woman in the waiting room is also racist, and considers herself to be above black people. When Mrs. Turpin complains that black people do not want to pick cotton anymore because “they got to be right up there with the white folks” (638), the white-trash woman interjects, “They gonna try anyways” (638), and after the black errand boy leaves, the white-trash woman comments that all black people should be sent back to Africa where they came from.

“Parker’s Back” is the last short story that Flannery O’Connor published during her lifetime, in 1965, while she was lying in the hospital a few weeks before her death. The story occupies a unique position in her career, not just by virtue of its belatedness but also for the relative gentleness of its ending. Mentioned in a letter as early as December 1960, initial work on “Parker’s Back” was concurrent with O’Connor’s reading of Teilhard’s *The Divine Milieu*, his second published book in America. However, the writing was not going well; O’Connor observed that the story was “too funny to be as serious as it ought.” In her review of Teilhard’s book she quotes an important question: “Where is the Catholic as passionately vowed (by conviction and not by convention) to spreading the hopes of the Incarnation . . . ?” Her own reply acknowledges her bewilderment: “It is a question depressing to answer today when the sense of expectation has largely disappeared from our religion.” O’Connor returned to “Parker’s Back” a few months before her death in August 1964. In this story, she comically illustrates how that “sense of expectation” for the “hopes of the Incarnation”
can come from the most surprising of places. O'Connor creates a frustrated, tattoo-covered O.E. Parker, who cannot understand the source of his "peculiar unease" (658) and ultimately addresses his lingering malaise with a tattoo of the Byzantine Christ on his back. The story appeared in the April 1965 *Esquire*, shortly before the publication of the posthumous collection.

The title refers to Parker's physical back, where he will eventually place a Christ tattoo that will simultaneously correspond with the direction that Parker finds himself heading. He travels literally back home to be rejected, but his true destination becomes a spiritual movement back home. The story is really about the encounter of law and gospel. It is reputed to be one of her most deeply symbolic, religiously engaged, and emotionally complex short stories.

The protagonist, O. E. Parker, a profane and shiftless man, resembles Hazel Motes, the protagonist of O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*. Both characters undergo a disturbing experience at a fair, both try to reject any involvement with religion, and both finally succumb to the demands of the spirit. O'Connor does not follow a strict time sequence, but, instead, she uses flashbacks to provide background information.

Parker's initial awakening occurs at a fair where he sees a tattooed man whose "skin was patterned in what seemed from Parker's distance – he was near the back of the tent, standing on a bench – a single intricate design of brilliant colour" (657). The fourteen-year-old O.E. Parker sees his first tattooed man at a fair and is "filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes" (657-658). From this moment, the "ordinary; as a loaf of bread" Parker feels the "peculiar unease" but does
not realize that he has been turned “so gently in a different direction” (658). Obtaining tattoos becomes his reason for existence; like a man at the fair, Parker wants to be a “single intricate design of brilliant color” (657). The tattoos he acquires and the order of his preferences “follow a Teilhardian path toward his own Omega Point.”49 He moves from the world of the inanimate to the animal kingdom to humans, to religious symbols and deities, and, ultimately, to Christ: an eagle perched on a cannon, his mother’s name on a heart, anchors and crossed rifles, tiger and panther, a cobra coiled about a torch, hawks, obscene words, Elizabeth II and Philip, Buddha, peacocks, and the Byzantine Jesus. Along the way, the tattoos he selects only satisfy him “about a month” (659), but the sought-after “intricate arabesque of colors” does not emerge; instead he is “something haphazard and botched” (659).

This experience has a subtle effect on the fourteen-year-old boy, who, prior to that time, had never felt “there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed” (658). After seeing the tattooed man, however, he becomes unsettled, and it is “as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know that his direction had been changed” (658). Following this awakening, Parker tries to emulate the tattooed man by having himself tattooed. Even though he discovers that his tattoos “were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before” (658), and that each new tattoo could temporarily ease the sense of dissatisfaction which he feels, he becomes frustrated because he has not achieved that transforming unity of being that the intricately patterned skin of the tattooed man at the fair represented.
Following a five-year term in the navy, from which he was discharged, and deciding that country air is the only kind fit for breathe, he rents a shack, purchases an old truck, and takes "various jobs which he kept as long as it suited him" (659). While working at one of these jobs, "He was buying apples by the bushel and selling them for the same price by the pound to isolated homesteaders on back country roads" (659), Parker meets the hawk-eyed, horny-handed, sin-smelling female who later becomes his wife. Although Parker acknowledges her uncommon ugliness, he finds himself repeatedly returning to court the woman who has rejected his tattoos as "a heap of vanity" (660). The courtship of Sarah (the name means "princess" or "mistress") Ruth ("friend" or "companion") Cates by Parker proceeds on the basis of his furnishing fruit for her entire family. At their third meeting, Sarah Ruth succeeds in coaxing Parker to reveal his full name on the condition that she will never reveal it to anyone. Parker's refusal to acknowledge his full name can be seen as his refusal to recognize that even he has a role to play in the divine scheme. Later, however, after he is touched by grace, he is able to accept his full name.

Parker's having revealed his full name to Sarah Ruth establishes a bond between the two which ultimately leads Parker to marry her even though he has no conscious desire to do so. After they are married, he sometimes suspects that "she had married him because she meant to save him" (655). It should also be noted that, in addition to the meaning of her name, O'Connor also plants other suggestions which point out Sarah Ruth's function in the story. When Parker first meets her, she is described as "a giant, hawk-eyed angel" (656). Also, he is driven to get a tattoo which will please her.
And after he has that tattoo, he finds her “icepick eyes were the only comfort he could bring to mind” (669). Parker and Sarah Ruth are married in the County Ordinary’s office because Sarah Ruth thinks churches are “idolatrous” (663). Marriage does not change Sarah Ruth and it makes Parker gloomier than ever.

Every morning he decided he had had enough and would not return that night; every night he returned. Whenever Parker couldn’t stand the way he felt, he would have another tattoo, but the only surface left on him now was his back. To see a tattoo on his own back he would have to get two mirrors and stand between them in just the correct position and this seemed to Parker a good way to make an idiot of himself. (663)

Parker becomes progressively more dissatisfied with his life. His preoccupation with a suitable design for his back causes him to drive a broken-down tractor into the only tree in a field where he is baling hay. The tractor upsets and catches fire, and Parker finds himself in the presence of a metaphorical burning bush. The obvious parallel with Moses’ experience is reinforced by O’Connor’s comment that if “he had known how to cross himself he would have done it” (665). As a result of this spiritual experience – which he interprets as only a sign that the tattoo on his back should be that of the face of God – Parker drives barefoot into the city and contacts a tattoo artist.

Parker rejects the entire romantic pictures of Christ as he flips through the book of available designs because he is convinced that when he reaches “the one ordained a sign would come” (667). Finally, he is compelled to select a “Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” (667). Even though Parker is caught up in a rush of events which he cannot control, he still attempts to avoid the “someone” who is trailing him. That
someone is, of course, the inexorable approach of the Divine which Parker has been trying to avoid. His experiences with the tattooist (he denies that he is saved, and, initially, he refuses to look at the finished tattoo), his attempt to get drunk, his fighting with the men who ridicule his new tattoo, and his expulsion from the pool hall (described as being like the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea) are all elements within the story which function to emphasize Parker's attempt to avoid acceptance of his new spiritual condition.

This lack of acceptance is carried still further, and although Parker now realizes that “the eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (672), he makes one final attempt to return to his former state by returning to Sarah Ruth. He feels that she “would clear up the rest of it, and she would at least be pleased” (672). As he drives homeward, “he observed that his dissatisfaction was gone, but he felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country” (672). The change in Parker is in some way intuitively recognized by Sarah Ruth, who refuses to let him into the house when he arrives home. His insistence that “It’s me, old O. E.,” (673) does not convince Sarah Ruth to let him in. It is a puzzled Parker who turns and looks behind himself “as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer” (673). O'Connor presents the descent of grace on Parker through the use of colour and light imagery. As he looks to the east, the sky lightens, and he sees “two or three streaks of yellow (the colour of the sun and of divinity) floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline” (673). This image, of course, recalls the tree of fire image which has set him
on his final quest. The effect of these events is to cause him to fall back against the
door “as if he had been pinned there by a lance” (673). With this image, O’Connor ties
together the crucifixion (“One of the soldiers opened his side with a lance,” John
19:34) and the earlier passage from Romans 6:6: “For we know that our old self has
been crucified with him, in order that the body of sin may be destroyed, that we may no
longer be slaves to sin.”

Now touched by grace, Parker whispers his name through the keyhole, “and all at
once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect
arabesque of colours, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (673). No longer has “old
O. E.,” Parker proclaimed his full name: Obadiah (serving Jah, or God) Elihue (God of
him) unknowingly proclaims his complete acceptance of the Deity. This, of course,
marks the culmination of Parker’s desire to emulate the tattooed man at the fair and
brings him to the “destination” toward which he has been directed since he was
fourteen. Parker’s names that he has revealed only to “government files” but never
before to man or woman he divulges “in a low voice” to Sarah Ruth (662). “Obadiah”
is a common Old Testament name, occurring at least a dozen times, and which means
“servant of the Lord.” The Book of Obadiah, a minor prophet, is a single chapter,
foretelling the destruction of Edom and predicting the day of God’s rule on earth.

The tattoo that Sarah Ruth, when forced to choose, will say she likes the best is
the “chicken,” which Parker explains is an “eagle” (660). Part of the biblical Obadiah’s
warning, to which the fictional Obadiah eventually heeds, has to do with the pride of
the eagle: “Though thou be exalted as an eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the
stars: thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord” (Obadiah 1:4, Rheims-Douay). His middle name is “Elihue,” another common Old Testament name with six references, which means God is He; the closing scene in the story is a symbolic transformation of Parker to God, giving “Elihue” its literal meaning.

Sarah Ruth is the daughter of a “Straight Gospel preacher but he was away, spreading it in Florida” (662). His influence on her life is apparent in her worldview that churches are “idolatrous,” and she prefers Parker in total darkness or “dressed and with his sleeves rolled down” (663). She preaches Parker’s doom at “the judgment seat of God” (664), and she extends her ascetic sense of decorum to food preparation: “Sarah Ruth just threw food in the pot and let it boil” (664). She shares a name with the biblical Sarah, wife of Abraham, who, surprisingly late in life, gave birth to Isaac; with her attitude about Parker, Sarah Ruth’s pregnancy is also surprising. The biblical Ruth, after her husband dies, follows her mother-in-law Naomi into a land different from her own, declaring “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16, Rheims-Douay). O’Connor’s character is an ironic inversion of the biblical Ruth; she does not subscribe to Parker’s view of religion. But both are driven souls: Sarah Ruth wants to deny the flesh, and Parker wants to feel the pain of the flesh.

Parker’s frustration in the marriage reflects his dissatisfaction with his life. He wants something more; he interprets this vague yearning in terms of another tattoo. The effect of the sun in his eyes as he bales hay on the afternoon of his wreck predicts the tattoo he will seek: “The sun, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front to behind him, but he appeared to see it both places as if he ad eyes in the back of
his head” (665). As the tractor propels into the only tree in the field, it bursts into flame, but not before separating Parker from his shoes, which also catch on fire. Parker himself screams out in capital letters, “GOD ABOVE!” (665), as a curse and as a direct address. The scene and the details of the cast-off shoes reflect the biblical story of Moses speaking to God in the burning bush: “And [God] said: Come not nigh hither, put off the shoes from thy feet: for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5, Rheims-Douay). Parker’s vague malaise disappears; he knows “that there [has] been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there [is] nothing he could do about it” (666).

What Parker knows is that he must get God, literally, on his back. When the tattoo artist wants help on defining the specific area of the God subject matter, Parker’s response is ambiguous: “Just God . . . Christ. I don’t care. Just so it’s God” (666). “Christ” in his reply works in two directions – as a curse and as a synonym for God. When Parker, again through some mystery, is directed to the Byzantine Christ, he notes the “all-demanding eyes” (667). Parker’s sacrifice is complete: he pays the artist’s price, he gives the two days’ time, he sleeps fitfully in the Haven of Light Mission with a “phosphorescent cross glowing at the end of the room” (669), taunting him from a history he is about to unconsciously enter, and he suffers the taunts of his peers, who remind the conscious Parker that he has “got religion” (671). A fight erupts, started by the “whirlwind” that is Parker, and ends when his buddies throw him out of the pool hall, “as if the long barn-like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea” (672). Parker has become a “stranger to himself” (672).
Parker’s realization that he needs Sarah Ruth that her “icepick eyes” are soft and dilatory compared to the “all-demanding eyes” of Jesus on his back (669-70) sends him home. Returning to his literal home, he meets rejection, for Sarah Ruth does not recognize the Byzantine Jesus as God. To her, God is a spirit that “no man shall see” (674). Her retort is a heated reference to his idolatrous behaviour: “Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree!” (674), which O’Connor takes from Jeremiah 2:20, who quotes God as saying: “For On every high hill and under every green tree thou didst prostitute thyself” (Rheims-Douay). Taking the weapon she prizes above all, the broom, she begins to thrash Parker, as she had on their first meeting when she heard the blasphemous tirade of “Jesus Christ in hell! Jesus God Almighty damm!” and he was face-to-face with a “tall raw-boned girl with a broom” (656).

He had married that girl and now she was his pregnant wife, lighting into his shoulders and then “nearly knock[ing] him senseless,” causing “large welts [to from] on the face of the tattooed Christ” (674). When she takes the last look, at story’s end, Parker has become symbolically a crucified Christ on Calvary. He leans against the lone “tall pecan tree on a high embankment” (655) “crying like a baby” (675). His hands, no doubt, cover his eyes as he faces into the tree and cries, giving his body against the straight trunk a cross like appearance; outwardly, the barebacked Parker’s flat Byzantine face of Christ would be puffy with welts, to give the appearance that Christ, too, cries in the lonely night. Figurately, Parker understands his moment with the Omega Point, and the religious burden he will from this moment have to suffer. But he is not alone in the scene. Sarah Ruth moves into the realm of symbolic substance,
for she stares square into the face of her own culpability, her own part in denying
Christ, and misses its whole significance. In O'Connor's world, there is no middle
ground; Sarah Ruth represents those who have yet to begin movement toward the
Omega Point.

The conclusion of the story, while presenting a generally humorous picture,
carries with it an expository burden which should not be overlooked. Obadiah Elijue's
suffering clearly places him in the ranks of the saved as the following passage from the
Beatitudes would indicate: "Blessed are you when men reproach you and persecute
you, and speaking falsely, say all manner of evil against you, for my sake. Rejoice and
exult, because your reward is great in heaven; for so did they persecute the prophets
who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). O'Connor thinks it "odd" that this story did
not receive more critical attention and is never "anthologized."50 O'Connor's gift was
in tapping the reader's sympathy for the most unseemly characters. Erikson identifies
the behaviour of adolescents precisely as a morbid preoccupation with identity
determined by "the eyes of others."51 O'Connor's editor, Robert Giroux, received
"Judgment Day" in early July, 1964, a month before her death. In May she had written
to him that she had been working on the story intermittently for several years. In a
letter to Janet McKane, O'Connor wrote that she was "doing a lot of necessary
rewriting on old stories and today in bed I did a day's work. This must be the result of
my friends' prayers."52

In her final story, "Judgment Day," O'Connor returned for part of her material to
her earliest published story, "The Geranium," which first appeared in 1946. Manuscript
evidence indicates that O'Connor reworked the material and entitled it “An Exile in the East” before she finally settled on the present version and title. Both the first and final versions of the story have a displaced Georgian (each of whom has been brought to New York by his daughter) as the protagonist. Both protagonists find the city intolerable and spend a considerable amount of time reminiscing about their old life with a particular black companion whom they had grown close to, and both long to return home.

The action of “Judgment Day” covers the final hours of Tanner’s life, with flashbacks being utilized to provide additional information about the old man. The story opens with old Tanner suffering from a stroke which was caused by an earlier encounter with a sour-tempered northern black person. Tanner is now plotting to escape the city and return home, and he has made this decision because two days earlier he heard his daughter and son-in-law had decided to ignore their promise to return him to Corinth, Georgia, for burial. As he waits for his daughter to leave the house, his mind wanders back over scenes from his past life.

When she leaves the apartment, Tanner makes his way out of the apartment, and he succeeds in getting to the stairs before a second stroke paralyzes his legs and causes him to tumble down the first flight of steps to the landing below. After Tanner overhears his daughter and her husband decide to break their promise to return him to Georgia for burial, he chastises her for planning to break her promise, and he lays a curse upon her: “Bury me here and burn in hell!” (678). As she attempts to reason with him and to respond to his curse “And don’t throw hell at me. I don’t believe in it. That's
a lot of hardshell Baptist hooey” (678), Tanner’s thoughts drift back over the events which brought him to New York. His daughter found him living in a shack, on land he did not own, with Coleman Parrum, a black companion of thirty years. Tanner had become friends with Coleman because of an experience they had years earlier. At that time, Tanner had prided himself particularly on his ability to handle black workmen by threatening them with a “sharp penknife” (681). When he first saw Coleman, however, he realized that his usual technique would not work. Instead of threatening Coleman, he handed him a pair of wooden glasses, which he had absent-mindedly whittled, and he asked the man to put them on. Coleman did so, and when he looked at Tanner and grinned, Tanner had “an instant’s sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it” (683). The result of this epiphanal moment is the establishment of a relationship with Coleman which comes to be based on mutual respect and admiration even though the two men preserve the appearance of having established the traditional black-white relationship between them.

Consequently, Tanner comes to the defense of Coleman when Tanner’s daughter suggests that duty demands that he move out of the shack that he is sharing with the black man. He tells his daughter that the shack they live in was built by both of them. He refuses to return to New York with her. Tanner’s plan to stay in Georgia is shattered, however, when a half-breed entrepreneur, Dr. Foley, confronts him on the afternoon of the same day that Tanner has the confrontation with his daughter. Dr. Foley has purchased the land upon which Tanner and Coleman are squatting, and he
informs Tanner that he can stay on the land only if he will operate a still for him. Indignant, Tanner refuses to accept those conditions, and he goes to live in New York with his daughter.

The misery of living in the city destroys at least part of Tanner's pride, for he has decided to return "to squat on the doctor's land and to take his orders from a nigger who chewed ten-cent cigars. And to think less about it than formerly" (687). Tanner's last vestiges of pride are destroyed when he fails to deal properly with a black man who moves into the apartment house in which Tanner's daughter lives. Motivated, at least partly, by a desire to speak to someone from the South, Tanner thinks to himself, "The nigger would like to talk to someone who understood him" (688). He fails, however, in his first attempt to communicate with the man.

For the remainder of the day, Tanner "sat in his chair and debated whether he would have one more try at making friends with him" (690). His further attempt to make friends with the man, albeit a somewhat falsely motivated one sets Tanner somewhat above his daughter, whose plan for getting on with people is to

"... keep away from them. Don't you go over there trying to get friendly with him. They ain't the same around here and I don't want any trouble with niggers, you hear me? If you have to live next to them, just you mind your business and they'll mind theirs. That's the way people were meant to get along in this world. Everybody can get along if they just mind their business. Live and let live ... Up here everybody minds their own business and everybody gets along. That's all you have to do." (688)
That afternoon, Tanner makes his second attempt to befriend the black man—only to be told, “I don’t take no crap . . . off no wool-hat redneck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you” (690). When Tanner attempts to pursue the matter further, the man knocks him through the door of his daughter’s apartment, where he falls reeling into the living-room. The stroke which results from that encounter destroys Tanner’s plan to leave when his government cheque comes. When he is able to talk again, he learns that his daughter has used the cheque for his doctor bills. Denied the option of going to Georgia, Tanner gets his daughter to promise that she will return his corpse to Georgia in a refrigerated car so that he will keep on the trip. He then rests peacefully, dreaming of his arrival at the station, where he envisions a red-eyed Coleman and Hooten, the station master, waiting for him. In his dream, he imagines that he springs from the coffin and shouts at the two men, “Judgment Day! Judgment Day! . . . Don’t you two fools know it’s Judgment Day?” (692)

After he hears his daughter’s plan to bury him in New York, Tanner begins to plan his escape. He writes a note directing anyone who finds him dead to ship his body “express and collect” (496) to Coleman, and then he waits for his opportunity to leave the city, which he describes to Coleman in a letter as “NO KIND OF PLACE” (676). When his daughter leaves the apartment to go to the store, Tanner begins his trip home. Crippled by the stroke he has had, Tanner finds himself barely able to move. When he stands up,

His body felt like a great heavy bell whose clapper swung from side to side but made no noise. Once up, he remained standing a moment, swaying until he got his balance. A sensation of terror
and defeat swept over him. He would never make it. 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 . . . I shall not want.” He began moving toward the sofa, where he would have support. He reached it! He was on his way. (693)

Laboriously, Tanner makes his way into the hall and starts for the stairs only to be struck down by another stroke which causes him to fall down the steps to the first landing. As he lies on the landing, the vision which came to him in his dream appears to him again, and as he regains consciousness, he cries out to the black form leaning over him, “Judgment Day! Judgment Day! You idiots didn’t know it was Judgment Day, did you?” (694) is his exited cry of greeting as bursts out of the coffin to meet an astonished Coleman. Judgment Day, in other words, contains no judgment for him personally, although he is certain that it will have meaning for his daughter:

“The Judgment is coming . . . The sheep’ll be separated from the goats. Them that kept their promises from them that didn’t. Them that did the best they could with what they had from them that didn’t. Them that honoured their father and their mother from them that cursed them. Them that . . . ” (686)

For a moment, he becomes rational enough to recognize that the black man bending over him is not Coleman that it is the black actor whom Tanner tried earlier to befriend. His final words, “Hep me up, Preacher. I’m on my way home” (694), anger the black man, and he leaves Tanner stuffed through the spokes of the stair banister to be found by Tanner’s daughter, suggesting a semi-redemptive gesture on Tanner’s part.
Earlier, before the daughter goes out, Tanner momentarily feels guilty, a sign of admission to himself that he "had been nothing but a nuisance to her" (692) and that she has been good to him. The moment is quickly undercut by his reaction to the "life" he tells his daughter as he tries to kill the outrageous taste that his lie creates in his mouth. So again, the old father rejects his moment of grace, his chance for reconciliation. He does not change in his own self-relationship. He is, in that way, consistent throughout. According to Ralph C. Wood, however:

The entire action of the story bears this affirmation out [that Tanner has made his way home]: Tanner has confessed his sin (albeit unwittingly in a series of remembrances meant to justify his racial pride), received his judgment, done his penance, and thus gone to his eternal destiny well prepared.53

Tanner does make his way home only after the daughter suffers pangs of guilt because she has broken her promise to her father, an act which suggests she does have a conscience and a tie back home after all, Tanner's confessions are undercut by his egregious pride and lack of conviction; his judgment is precisely his moment of racial pride when he catches up to his daughter, thereby escaping Foley, an act for which he later repents; and his penance, his admission that his daughter is good, is also undercut by his comment about his being a liar. Instead of being well-prepared, he meets death at the hands of fate, as a result of his trying to negotiate the stairs when he is physically unprepared to do so. Mentally, he is prepared to die trying, an attitude which reflects his pride. His appearance of being in stocks can be interpreted as his own self-imprisonment to that pride. His reliance on the actor at the very end becomes as futile as the grandmother's moment with The Misfit.
When his daughter returns to the apartment, she discovers Tanner dead, "his head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks" (695). Tanner has violated the social rules of the culture into which he has been transplanted, and his punishment has been not only public humiliation, Puritan style, but death.
REFERENCES


10. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* 571


27. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* 175.


34. The image of the Spirit descending like a dove is mentioned in Mark 1:10.


