Chapter III

A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories
A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Other Stories (published in England as The Artificial Nigger and Other Tales) was first published in 1955. The subject of the short stories ranges from baptism (“The River”) to serial killers (“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”) to human greed and exploitation (“The Life You Save May Be Your Own”). The collection contains the following stories:

- “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”
- “The River”
- “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”
- “A Stroke of Good Fortune”
- “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”
- “The Artificial Nigger”
- “A Circle in the Fire”
- “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”
- “Good Country People”
- “The Displaced Person”

Because the characterizations are more fully drawn, the relationships better defined and motivated, and the message clearly unified and more succinct, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is a benchmark in O’Connor’s development as a master of short fiction and amuses us because she represents typically Southern grandmothers, or as O’Connor writes to John Hawkes, 14 April 1960: “These old ladies exactly reflects the banalities of the society and the effect is of the comical rather than the seriously evil.” O’Connor feels that only when that moment of ultimate violence is reached, that moment precisely and explicitly before death, are people their best selves. Ten
characters die in these ten stories, six of them in the title story. Violence finds its way into every story because O'Connor's vision is directed by a spiritual taproot than run deep:

"The novelist with Christian concern will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience."²

Harcourt Brace published the collection on 6 June 1955; on 31 May O'Connor was interviewed on the television show "Galley-Proof" by host Harvey Breit, then assistant editor of the Book Section of the New York Times.³ As she wrote in a letter to Robie Macauley two weeks before the broadcast, she was worried about this television appearance for fear she would not be able to think of anything to say but "Huh?" and "Ah dunno" and would have to do penance "in the chicken pen to counteract these evil influences."⁴ Of the thirty-seven questions Breit asked O'Connor in the thirty-minute broadcast, which also featured a dramatization of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," she returned answers to thirty-four of them and gave a simple "Yes" or "No" eight times.

The high point of the interview occurred when Breit wanted O'Connor to summarize the story that is being dramatized because there was not time to reenact the whole of it: "Flannery would like to tell our audience what happens in that story?" Her response is characteristically blunt: "No, I certainly would not. I don't think you can
paraphrase a story like that. I thought there's only one way to tell it and that's the way it is told in the story." O'Connor's integrity concerning her art cut short queries she found insipid. Upon her return to Milledgeville, she wrote to a friend that the show had been "mildly ghastly," and she was pleased "to be back with the chickens" who were indifferent to her published book.

In the New Yorker, O'Connor got brief notice for her ability to depict the language and manners of her characters but was berated for tales that, ultimately, were meaningless and without depth. When O'Connor saw the note, she commented to a friend, "I can see now why those things are anonymous." At this point in her career, even the catholic press did not understand her orthodoxy, although they noted her "relentless vision." Catholic World reported that she delivered a "fiery rejection of Bible Beltism, of small, mean minds and small, mean ways," but then despaired with "The Displaced Person," a "marvelous parable, one not entirely clear of course."

Orville Prescott, book reviewer for the daily New York Times, called O'Connor an "extraordinarily accomplished short story writer." He praised her originality, her indifference to the "literary sachem of Oxford, Miss," but, he, like the majority, saw the stories concluding on "a note of grotesque horror." He is, however, among the first to hint at what would become a growing popular response to O'Connor's characters:

"Their stupid remarks, their wretched thoughts, their miserable conduct haunt the mind." O'Connor was a writer that many readers were beginning to respond to with a passionate zeal, precisely because she had the power to "haunt the mind." Prescott concluded his response with a knowing awareness that
readers would perceive her work the way he had: "Obviously, A Good Man Is Hard to Find is not a dish to set before most readers. Those who are attracted by it will admire it immensely." \(^{11}\)

When O'Connor read his review, she repeated to her former editor, Robert Giroux, what she had been told: "[Harcourt] sent me the Orville Prescott review and said it was as near as he never came to ecstasy and that on that day they sold 300 copies."\(^{12}\)

O'Connor redefines the family unit in each of these ten stories: for example, granddaughter-grandfather; grandfather-grandson; grandmother-son-children's mother-children; however, she repeats four times a mother-daughter situation. Many of her important characters have no names, but, rather, are referred to by the roles they assume in their stories. In each of the stories, a visitor or a visit irrevocably alters the home scene and whatever prevailing view had existed. These visitors take various shapes — an unborn child, a one-armed tramp, three juvenile arsonists, and a deranged escaped convict. As a result of some interaction, the protagonist and/or the visitor learn(s) something that he or she had not considered before the experience.

For every story, O'Connor places an action or gesture with a character that strikes the reader as strangely different; at the least, it is unexpected. At this moment, the story moves to a new level, one that transcends "any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make"; one that makes "contact with mystery."\(^{13}\) O'Connor's use of the grotesque joins with mystery in these violent moments. Aware of the modern audience who did not share her driven vision, she reached them this way:
“Violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. . . . This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.”

All of O’Connor’s stories, ultimately, turn on this point, and the reader learns something hitherto unknown.

The title story, previously published in *Modern Writing I* in 1953, is the most violent in the collection. Elizabeth Hardwick, remembering O’Connor at the time of her death, calls the story “funny . . . even though six people are killed in it.” It is a compelling piece and one of the most written about in the O’Connor canon. The story itself centres on familial relationships, in particular the son-mother relationship.

Considered one of O’Connor’s best short stories, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” depicts the callous murder of a family by a group of escaped convicts led by a notorious killer called “The Misfit” (137). The story is noted for its religious aspects, in particular O’Connor’s penchant for depicting salvation through a shocking, often violent experience undergone by characters who are spiritually or physically grotesque. Commentators have praised “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” for O’Connor’s effective use of local colour and the rich comic detail of her Southern milieu, as well as her ability to record the idiosyncratic dialect of characters such as the grandmother and The Misfit.
The opening scene of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" introduces us to an unappealing family: a vain and manipulative grandmother, her taciturn son Bailey, his passive wife and baby, and their difficult children, June Star and John Wesley. The family plans to travel on vacation from their home in Georgia to the state of Florida. Alarmed by newspaper accounts of an escaped convict, The Misfit, the grandmother attempts to persuade the family to change their vacation destination away from the vicinity of the fugitive. When Bailey fails to respond to her pressure, the grandmother attempts to get her daughter-in-law, a dull young woman with a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage" (137), to help her convince Bailey to go to Tennessee rather than Florida because the children, John Wesley and June Star, have not yet visited Tennessee. Bailey's wife also ignores the plea, but the non-vocal disrespect of the parents finds voice through the children. Their conduct toward the grandmother emphasizes the disrespect which is characteristic of the entire family.

When the family leaves for Florida the next morning, the grandmother, against Bailey's express order forbidding it, smuggles the family cat, Pitty Sing, into the car with her because she fears it will miss her too much, or that it may "accidentally asphyxiate itself if left behind" (138). The cat does survive; ironically, however, it is responsible for the auto-accident which leads to the family's death and, contrary to the grandmother's view of her importance to the cat, it befriends the man who murders the entire family. The cat alone survives.

Shortly after leaving Atlanta, the family passes Stone Mountain, a gigantic outcropping upon which are carved, in bas-relief, images of the long-dead heroes of an
equally dead Confederacy. The grandmother, dressed so that “in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (138), carefully writes down the mileage of the car in anticipation of her return home. She indulges in back-seat driving, acts as a tour guide, and attempts – by citing the conduct of children in her time – to chastise John Wesley and June Star for their rude remarks concerning “their native states and their parents and everything else” (139). Her fraudulent propriety is immediately undercut, however, when she calls the children’s attention to a “cute little pickaninny” (139), a black child, standing in the door of a shack they are passing. When June Star observes the child’s lack of britches, the grandmother explains that “little niggers in the country don’t have the things we do” (139).

As the children return to their comic books, we are given a number of life-versus-death images which prepare us for the coming catastrophe. The grandmother takes the baby from its mother, and we see the contrast between the thin, leathery face of old age and the smooth bland face of the baby. Immediately thereafter, the car passes “an old family burying ground” (139), and the grandmother points out the five or six graves in it – a number equal to the occupants of the car – and mentions that it belonged to a plantation which, in response to John Wesley’s question concerning its present location, has “Gone With the Wind” (139), an answer that is doubly ironic insofar as it recalls the death of the Old South. The family reaches The Tower café, which is run by Red Sammy Butts. In addition to June Star and the grandmother, we learn that Red Sammy and his wife are also concerned with the pursuit of material gain.
Red Sammy regrets having allowed “two fellers” (141) to charge gas; his wife is certain that The Misfit will attack the restaurant if he hears there is any money in the cash register. The scene at The Tower cafe appears to have been designed to illustrate the depths of self-interest into which the characters have fallen. There seems to be reason, however, to suspect that the scene was created with more than surface details in mind. On one level, then, The Tower may be seen as the biblical Tower where the sons of Adam had their tongues confused that they may not understand one another’s speech. On another level, The Tower functions as a low-class greasy spoon, where the characters attempt to display their good manners in order to conceal their lack of concern for their fellow men. There seems to be an inability on the part of the characters to enter into any meaningful conversation; the grandmother irritates her son by asking if he wants to dance when his wife plays “Tennessee Waltz” (141) on the nickelodeon – which costs a dime; June Star, who has just performed a tap routine, displays her lack of manners by insulting Red Sammy’s wife with the comment, “I wouldn’t live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks” (141).

The grandmother, Red Sammy, and his wife discuss the evil nature of the times and decide that, although they themselves may be good people, “A good man is hard to find” (142). By concluding that Europe is entirely to blame for the way things are now, they successfully avoid any responsibility for the human condition she also has no interest in her grandmother’s coming with them on their trip. During their long trip through Georgia the grandmother relates the story of a nearby plantation house with a secret panel. The story fires the children’s interest, consequently forcing Bailey to


take an unplanned detour down a rough dirt road in search of the house. Suddenly, the grandmother realizes that her memory has deceived her. In her acute embarrassment, she involuntarily releases the cat from its hiding place, causing Bailey to lose control of the car. As the family members struggle to free themselves from the ensuing wreck, three men in an ominous black car appear on the horizon. The grandmother's blurted recognition of The Misfit seals her family's fate and, in spite of her desperate attempts to win the convict's confidence, each is taken separately into the woods and shot. Left alone with The Misfit, the grandmother tries to bargain for her life by calling on him to pray. He responds by complaining that Jesus offers him no choice between blind faith or violent nihilism, and his pain unexpectedly moves the grandmother to a feeling of kinship.

The Misfit has pondered the human condition and has reached certain conclusions concerning his experience with life. We learn that The Misfit has been unable to reconcile himself to the punishment he has undergone and that he has found incomprehensible the explanations of a psychiatrist, who has suggested that his actions are an attempt to kill his father. For him, the crime committed is of no matter "because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (150). The grandmother's attempt to use religion as a means of escaping the death which has come to other members of her family proves to be completely unsuccessful because The Misfit, having weighed the evidence available to him, has arrived at a very definite conclusion about Jesus:

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He
did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.” (152)

In a final attempt to save herself, the grandmother is even willing to concede that:

“Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.

“I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t . . . . I wisht I had of been there,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” (152)

At this point the old lady responds to the poignancy of The Misfit’s dilemma. He has suffered for no reason he can surmise. He is angry and wants to make his crimes fit the punishments he has already received. He is uncertain, but he wants to believe. Finally, the grandmother’s head clears for an instant, and she says to The Misfit, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (152). The grandmother’s epiphany involves her recognition that The Misfit is, in some way, a product of the hypocritical attitudes and hollow actions which she and others like her have held and taken. They have given only lip service to spiritual concepts and have concerned themselves with the gratification of their physical and material desires in this life.
Having been touched by grace and having recognized that she is in some way responsible for The Misfit’s present condition, the grandmother, now capable of something other than concern for herself, reaches out to him in a gesture of sympathy and love. As she touches The Misfit’s shoulder, he shoots her three times through the chest. As though to emphasize the changed condition of the grandmother, O’Connor provides a description of the dead body, which seems to have been designed to convey the impression that the grandmother has indeed become little child, a biblical admonition given to those who would obtain salvation. She “half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (152). The struggle between the grandmother and the criminal is primarily verbal. She, with her unwitting prayers and her frantic flattery, has reminded him of his major spiritual problem. He, in turn, has unintentionally provided a strange but powerful Christian witness for the grandmother, who, “would of been a good woman” (153), The Misfit says, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (153). Thematically it brings to light O’Connor’s concern with an individual’s moment of grace, which she glosses for Andrew Lytle in these terms:

the Grandmother recognizes The Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It’s the moment of grace for her anyway – a silly old woman – but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy. 17

The two main characters (the Grandmother and the Misfit) are central to the story’s theme and purpose. It is through the actions and beliefs of the Grandmother, and the interaction between her and the Misfit, that the purpose and concept of God’s
Grace is made clear. The Grandmother initially “didn’t want to go to Florida” (137), as she was attempting to change the family’s plans to Tennessee. Her selfish needs were masked with fake concern of the Misfit, who was “headed toward Florida” (137), stating to Bailey that she “wouldn’t take [her] children in any direction with a criminal like that aoose in it” (137); she couldn’t answer to her own conscious if something happened. This is the first glimpse given of the conflict to come. The Grandmother is dressed impeccably with white cotton gloves and a “navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print” (138). She is presented as someone steeped in tradition and class standing, continually bringing up references to “good” people and their socio-economic status.

To highlight the human condition and the ever-present gift of God’s grace, O’Connor utilized a variety of symbols. To foreshadow the pending deaths of Grandmother’s family the story offers three clues. To start, in one of the first descriptions of the passing landscape, the Grandmother pointed to an old plantation and the “old family burying ground” (139) that belonged to it. Secondly, as the family was driving away from Red Sammy’s Barbeque, they passed the town of “Toombsboro” (142), which prompted Grandmother to wake and suggest they visit an old house she remembers from her childhood. Finally, the most blatant symbol of death is the Misfit’s car, which is “big black battered hearselike automobile” (145) driving towards the stranded family.

The main theme, expressed through a variety of symbols, is humanity’s relationship with God and God’s grace. Although Grandmother portrays herself as a
good, model Christian, the story leads most readers to understand that she is more concerned with the outward appearance of Christianity and charity versus the actual motives and inner beliefs behind it. The Grandmother's concern with how she was dressed, so that "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady" (138) is just one of the more glaring examples of the façade she had created for herself. Her interactions with the children are terse and, based on the children's comments to her, their relationship is strained. The very fact that her description of Bailey's wife as generic and bland is another pointed reference to the Grandmother's upbringing and feeling of being superior to most.

This story provided O'Connor with humorous and exasperating subject matter for the rest of her life. It is true that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for The Misfit's, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his; yet the unprejudiced reader will feel that the grandmother has a special kind of triumph in this story which instinctively is not allowed to someone altogether bad.18 The epigraph for the collection of short stories taking the title of this story seems particularly relevant here: "The dragon is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon."19

Most critics accept O'Connor's description of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as a tale of redemptive grace in a fallen world. The story's religious concerns are expressed through a series of motifs and emblems, cleverly muted by O'Connor's superficially naturalistic style. Critics point to the disastrous detour into the dark woods of error, for example, as a traditional theme in Christian exempla, from Dante's Divine
Comedy to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Misfit himself typifies the existential despair and guilt of the fallen sinner. As many commentators argue, the grandmother's epiphatic recognition of her kinship with the desperate figure belatedly redeems her from a life that has been petty, materialistic, and selfish. Her child-like expression as she collapses with crossed legs into her own grave has been suggested as a symbol of her sudden accession to Christian grace.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is regarded as one of O'Connor's best stories and has drawn much critical attention. Most discussions of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" have focused on the story's extreme violence. O'Connor herself justified the use of terror to shock spiritually complacent modern readers: "To the hard of hearing you shout and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." While many critics accept this rationalization, others are less comfortable with the story's abrupt descent into brutality. For some commentators, the jarring shift from comedy to tragedy takes unfair advantage of a group of characters whose depiction verges on caricature. More recent interpretations of the tale range from structural and political analysis to an examination of its classical and medieval literary influences.

The second short story, "The River," was published for the first time in the Summer 1953 issue of the *Sewanee Review*. A.R. Coulthard called "The River" O'Connor's "most theologically puzzling story." For here she places the weight of credibility on a small boy who is "four or five" (155). The premise is that Harry/Bevel's parents' lifestyle has created such a wasteland for him that he is irrevocably altered after one day with the babysitter, Mrs. Connin, and his baptism in
the river. As unimaginative as the title is, the river not only serves as the setting of the all important action in the story, but it also looms large as a symbol. Harry Ashfield, five-years-old, is often sent babysitters, while his parents are having parties and hangovers. He is a curious child, still not sure of the world’s limits and possibilities. He is simple, and somewhat trusting—in many ways. Mrs. Connin, Harry’s first babysitter. She has several other children, and a penchant for healing preachers. She is nice to Harry and indignant when she learns about his worthless parents.

“The River” begins as Harry’s father is sending him off with his babysitter, Mrs. Connin, for the day. His mother is in bed with an unnamed sickness, which turns out to be a hangover. She tells him that she is going to take him to a religious healing at the river with a preacher named Bevel, and when she asks Harry his name, he lies and says it is also Bevel. She says this is quite a coincidence, since that is also the preacher’s name:

She stood looking down at him as if he had become a marvel to her. “I’ll have to see you meet him today,” she said. “He’s no ordinary preacher. He’s a healer. He couldn’t do nothing for Mr. Connin though. Mr. Connin didn’t have the faith but he said he would try anything once. He had this griping in his gut.” (156)

They take a taxi to Mrs. Connin’s home, where she introduces Harry (called Bevel) to her children, J.C., Spivey, Sinclair, and Sarah Mildred. The children all go outside to the pig pen, and after debating throwing Harry into it, decide that their mother would punish them severely so they better not. They do, however, talk him into lifting up a bottom board of the pen to look at the pigs, which results in letting one of
them loose. Mrs. Connin leads her own children and Harry to the healing at the river. As they walk, Harry reflects that he is glad he has been able to leave his own home with this babysitter: he has discovered that “he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ” (160), a name he thought was a curse because of the way it was used in his own home. Mrs. Connin gave him a children’s book about Jesus’s life to look at, and he stole it by slipping it into the lining of his coat. They arrive at the river, where Bevel the preacher begins to speak. He tells them that if they have come just to be healed and to “leave your pain in the river” (162), then they have come for the wrong reasons. An old woman approaches him who has been suffering from a disorder that makes her arms flap and her head wobble for thirteen years. A man named Mr. Paradise, who suffers from cancer and who is skeptical of Bevel’s ability to heal, yells out that clearly that woman has not been healed and that the preacher is only there for money. Mrs. Connin tells Bevel the preacher that she has brought a boy from town who has not been baptized. The preacher says:

“You might as well go home if that’s what you come for,” he said. Then he lifted his head and arms and shouted, “Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain’t but one river and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ Blood. That’s the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus’ Blood, you people!” (162)

Harry goes down to the river and jokingly tells the preacher that his name is also Bevel, but the preacher does not find it funny. He dunks Harry in the water,
baptizing him. Then Mrs. Connin calls out that they need to pray for the boy’s mother, who is sick. However, when Bevel asks Harry what his mother suffers from, he answers, “She has a hangover” (165). This makes Mr. Paradise laugh, but everyone else falls silent. Mrs. Connin returns Harry to his parents’ apartment at the end of the day. When his father calls him by his name, Harry, Mrs. Connin corrects him, saying that the child’s name is Bevel. Harry’s mother in turn corrects her, and they get into a tense conversation about the preacher named Bevel and the healing Mrs. Connin has taken Harry to see. After realizing that his parents have no faith, Mrs. Connin leaves without taking their payment for babysitting. Harry’s mother discovers the book he stole from Mrs. Connin’s house in the lining of the coat and she and her friends make fun of it. Before Harry falls asleep, his mother comes in to say goodnight.

The next morning, Harry wakes up before his parents and putters around the apartment, making trouble by emptying ashtrays onto the floor. He decides to return to the river, and leaves the apartment to follow the path he and Mrs. Connin took the day before. He passes by Mr. Paradise’s house, and the man gets in his car to slowly follow Harry as he walks down the highway. Soon Mr. Paradise parks and follows him on foot. Harry runs into the river to drown himself and discover the Kingdom of Christ the preacher had talked about. Mr. Paradise jumps in after him, but Harry is caught in the current and after drifting far down the river, Mr. Paradise gives up without rescuing him.

Here O’Connor works directly with the sacrament of baptism – a theme to which she will return later in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. In this story she
develops a "two kingdoms" theology which explores the ramifications and ambiguities of the Christian life, anchors on earth, but focuses on heaven. She establishes a contrast between the worldly life and the spiritual life, creating an intricate series of associations. Harry Ashfield's parents, for example, neglect the basic needs of their child because their lives are so consumed with drinking, partying, and recovering from hangovers. His mother paints her toenails red, and wears "long black satin britches" (166), traditional garb of the worldly woman. She does no nurturing, and after his baptism Harry feels that her questions are attempts to pull him out of the river, which he now associates with the kingdom of God.

Likewise, at the end of the story Mr. Paradise, the sinister figure who sits beyond the crowd of believers and taunts them, makes a futile attempt to rescue Harry from the river. "The old man rose like some ancient water monster and stood empty-handed, staring with his dull eyes as far down the river line as he could see" (171). Mr. Paradise's ear is covered with a purple cancer, a detail which connects him with Mrs. Connin's hog which was "long-legged and hump-backed and part of one of his ears had been bitten off" (159). The hog, a traditional symbol of sensuality and gluttony, also finds thematic development in the picture book Mrs. Connin reads to Harry: "The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve" (160). The child has never before heard of Jesus, and having just a few minutes before escaped from the hog which was chasing him (as Mrs. Paradise would later chased him), he listens with particular interest to the story of "the carpenter driving a crowd of pigs out of a man" (160).
In the one kingdom – the earthly life of Harry Ashfield – the hog, Mr. Paradise, and his parents predominate. In the other kingdom is Mrs. Connin who feeds Harry breakfast and reads him the gospel, and Jesus, who banishes the hogs. But Mrs. Connin, although she is a caretaker and provides for Harry’s needs, as she is able, lives with several dull and apparently evil children. One feels the particular dilemma of a two kingdoms’ theology in her life. It opens with Mrs. Connin complaining the child is not ready to leave the house because “he ain’t fixed right” (154), the father says, “Well then for Christ’s sake fix him” (154). It will be precisely for Christ’s sake that Mrs. Connin will have Harry baptized. Later, the child thinks, “They joked a lot where he lived. If he had thought about it before, he would have thought Jesus Christ was a word like “Oh” or “damn” or “God” (160), or may be somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime.

Whether or not the preacher realizes it, he is a sacramentalist. Bevel “came to a good end,” O’Connor asserts: “He was saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death. He has been baptized and so he went to his Maker.”22 This suggests that the material world is a vehicle for attaining the spiritual one, and although considered “good” from that standpoint, still the spiritual self ought to count the world as dung, as Augustine tells us.23

The Grace of God is the most important theme in this story. Grace is misinterpreted by Mr. Paradise and the young boy, Harry. Mr. Paradise has unrealistic expectations of Bevel the preacher, attacking him for not being able to perform any real miracles. Harry, having been brought up without religion, fails to understand Bevel’s
preaching and drowns himself in the River. However, he achieves Grace in death, since
he chooses to strive for salvation rather than live in the atheistic household with his
parents.

Mrs. Connin is compared to a skeleton three times: while she looms in the
doorway waiting for Harry to be ready to leave in the morning, she is described as “a
speckled skeleton” (154); as she naps in the taxi on the way to her house at the
beginning of the story, “she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton” (156);
and when she realizes that Harry’s parents have no faith at all as she drops him back off
at home, “Mrs. Connin stood a second, staring into the room, with a skeleton’s
appearance of seeing everything” (167). This description could imply that she is naked
before God, ready to be saved and open to Grace, or it could be interpreted as a
foreshadowing of Harry’s death at the end of the story, brought on by her suggestion of
Grace. As she leads her own children and Harry to the healing, “they looked like the
skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the
highway” (159).

In contrast, other characters are compared to animals through similes. Harry is
described as “mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out” (155). Mrs.
Connin’s children’s ears twitch slightly, like those of anxious animals, as they debate
whether to abuse Harry. This seems to signify their readiness to be herded toward God
by believers like Mrs. Connin. But when Mr. Paradise is compared to an animal at the
end of the story, it signifies that he is still lost to God; he does not understand the
meaning of Harry’s suicide and has not achieved Grace. Harry hears a shout and turns
his head to see, "something like a giant pig bounding after him" (171). Mr. Paradise is as far away from Grace as the pig that broke free at Mrs. Connin’s house the previous day.

The symbol of the sun is used to represent Christian faith: its reflection is "set like a diamond" (161) in the river where Harry is baptized. The personification of the sun enforces the idea that hope and faith overcome the darkness of sin and lack of faith. As Mrs. Connin leads her own children and Harry to the healing at the river, "The white Sunday sun followed at a little distance, climbing fast through a scum of gray cloud as if it meant to overtake them" (159). When Bevel the preacher tells Harry that after he is baptized he will "count" (165), Harry looks over his shoulder "at the pieces of the white sun scattered in the river" (165). When Harry wakes up in his parents’ apartment, "The sun came in palely, stained gray by the glass" (168) of the window; it cannot shine brightly in that home because his parents have no faith. In contrast, as he follows the path he and Mrs. Connin took the day before to return to the river, "The sun was pale yellow and high and hot" (170).

As in many of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, the sky is an important symbol: here, it represents openness to faith. As Bevel preaches in the river, his eyes follow the paths of two birds. They eventually settle "in the top of the highest pine and sat hunched-shouldered as if they were supporting the sky" (171). When Harry tells the preacher that his name is also Bevel, jokingly, the preacher’s face is "rigid and his narrow gray eyes reflected the almost colorless sky" (172), in this moment before Harry’s baptism. But when he is displeased, after Harry tells him that his mother is in fact only suffering
from a hangover, "the sky appeared to darken in his eyes" (172). As Harry runs into the river to drown himself, "The sky was a clear pale blue, all in one piece - except for the hole the sun made - and fringed around the bottom with treetops" (170). Here, the sky represents Harry’s mentality: he is focused and determined, and the only thought in his mind is faith, represented by the sun.

O'Connor uses the pronoun "she" to reflect a sense of Otherness, from Harry's point of view. As the story begins and Mrs. Connin is picking him up at his parents' apartment, she is only referred to as "she." The reader does not learn her name until Harry's father calls her by it as he is saying goodbye. Over the course of the day, Harry becomes more and more comfortable with Mrs. Connin and with the religion she represents. When she returns him to his parents at the end of the day, it is his mother who is only referred to as "she." Harry has redefined himself as Bevel, and when his mother corrects Mrs. Connin, "she" is italicized to emphasize her Otherness: "'His name is Harry,' she said from the sofa. 'Whoever heard of anybody named Bevel?'

(166).

The next short story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," published two years earlier than "Good Country People," was in some respects O'Connor's practice ground for many of the themes and images in the later story and has an inconsequential plot. Originally appearing in the Spring 1953 Kenyon Review, reprinted in the 1954 O.Henry Prize Stories, and eventually sold to General Electric Playhouse, the story was aired on the Schlitz Playhouse on 1 February 1956. An old woman, Mrs. Lucynell Crater, and her deaf, thirtyish daughter, Lucynell, who has never learned to speak, sit
on the porch of their desolate house and watch a one-armed tramp come to the farm. He calls himself Tom T. Shiftlet, a carpenter and a man possessing a "moral intelligence" (176), a man more concerned with spiritual than material wealth. He wears a suit and carries a tool box and stops inside their gate and takes his hat off. At first sight of Mr. Shiftlet, the old woman sizes him up as a "tramp and no one to be afraid of" (172).

The sun and the moon together are traditional references to the mourning of all creation at Christ's crucifixion. Mr. Shiftlet himself strikes a peculiar crucifixion pose as he enters Lucynell Crater's yard. When Mrs. Crater greets Mr. Shiftlet, he throws his arms up against the sun and forms a "crooked cross" (173). He seems to be a young man but he has a look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understands life thoroughly: "Lady," he says in a firm nasal voice, "I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening" (173).

Mr. Shiftlet's pale sharp glance has already passed over everything in the yard – the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig tree that three or four chickens are preparing to roost in – and has moved to a shed where he sees the square rusty back of an automobile. "You ladies drive?" (173) he asks. He checks out a car sitting in a shed. The old woman says it has not run since way back when her husband died. He then tells her that a surgeon can hold a man's heart in his hand but he will not understand that heart any more than either she or himself. She asks him twice where he comes from. He lights a cigarette, takes his time, and tells her he is from Tennessee, but points out that he could tell her he is from anywhere and it matters nothing: he is a man, and what is a man? She is annoyed. She asks about his tool box and suggests that
there is plenty of work around the place, but he will have to work for food and shelter. He tells her there is more to life than money, that he is twenty-eight, and that he has had a lot of jobs, including gospel singer. He has seen a lot of people that does not care how a thing is done, but he was not raised like that. The whole world exists in a desolate place like this, with that amazing sun.

Sensing not only a handyman but a suitor for her daughter, Mrs. Crater asks if Mr. Shiftlet is married, to which he responds, “Lady ... where would you find you an innocent woman today?” (175). Mrs. Crater then makes known her love for her daughter, Lucynell, adding, “She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe” (176). Mrs. Crater is clearly offering her daughter’s hand to Mr. Shiftlet. He tells Mrs. Crater that she shall not let any man take Lucynell away. Mrs. Crater says that any man will have to stay here, to have Lucy. Then Mr. Shiftlet says that he can fix this place up, even though he is only part a man, still a man. When Mrs. Crater tells him he will have to sleep in the old car, his answer is an analogy to “the monks of old” who “slept in their coffins!” (176).

The car becomes symbolically more significant for Mr. Shiftlet – it is a place to be, a shelter at night, a way to get away from where he is to some other place he is not sure he wants to be. The car is the spirit part of a man, “always on the move” (179), so the green colour he paints the car is reflective of that movement; and his destination, Mobile, is a pun on his need to propel elsewhere. To the boy behind the counter, he identifies his goal as Tuscaloosa, a city about a three to four hours’ drive north of Mobile, in the opposite direction of where he is heading. His fixing the car is serious
business, equivalent to "raising the dead" (178). He does not have to be like a "monk" any longer; he has turned his "coffin" into spirit. Within one week as a drifter, more than anything Mr. Shiftlet values his freedom, much like a "bird" (176), which can go anywhere it pleases. He even starts working on the car. He tells Mrs. Crater that these old cars were built by people who cared, not like people nowadays. She agrees. The old woman suggests he teach her the word "sugarpie" (177), and he gets her meaning right away. She says she will buy a new fan belt for the car, like he asked. He asks how old Lucynell is. Mrs. Crater says sixteen – but really she could be; you could not tell she was thirty. He wants to paint the car and Mrs. Crater says she will see about that later.

The next day he walks to town for gas and after some horrible sounds crash out of the shed, Lucynell starts shouting "Burrrddtt! Bddurrdddtttt" (178). The car moves stately, out of the shed, with Mr. Shiftlet looking proud behind the wheel. That night, rocking on the porch, the old woman begins her business at once: "'You want you an innocent woman, don't you?' she asked sympathetically. 'You don't want none of this trash!'" (178). So as the story progresses, Mr. Shiftlet uses Mrs. Crater's desire for a son-in-law to get money to fix up the car. At this time Mrs. Crater gives her daughter's hand in marriage over to Mr. Shiftlet, but he declines saying, "I can't get married right now . . . . Everything you want to do takes money and I ain't got any" (179).

And when Mrs. Crater finally comes out and voices her desires for a marriage, Mr. Shiftlet becomes uneasy and jack up his demands by using the excuse that he does not have enough money to "take her to a hotel and treat her" (179). Finally, Mrs. Crater gets fed up with Mr. Shiftlet's resistance and says:
"Lucynell don’t even know what a hotel is," the old woman muttered. "Listen here, Mr. Shiftlet," she said, sliding forward in her chair, "you’d be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don’t need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain’t any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man.” (179)

With those words, Mrs. Crater has said the worst thing possible to Mr. Shiftlet. He knows he has a disability, but has reasoned he is just as good as any other man. Mr. Shiftlet, upon hearing the goodies he will get in return for marriage, perks up a bit. His smile "stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire" (179). After a second he recalls himself and says, "I’m only saying a man’s spirit means more to him than anything else. I would have to take my wife off for the week end without no regards at all for cost. I got to follow where my spirit says to go” (179-180).

On Saturday the three of them drive into town in the car that the paint has barely dried on and Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell are married in the Ordinary’s office while the old woman witnesses. As they come out of the courthouse, Mr. Shiftlet begins twisting his neck in his collar. He looks morose and bitter as if he had been insulted while someone held him:

“That didn’t satisfy me none . . . . That was just something a woman in an office did, nothing but paper work and blood tests. What do they know about my blood? If they was to take my heart and cut it out . . . . they wouldn’t know a thing about me. It didn’t satisfy me at all.”

“It satisfied the law,” the old woman said sharply.
"The law," Mr. Shiftlet said and spit. "It's the law that don't satisfy me." (180)

Every now and then Mrs. Crater's placid expression is changed by a sly isolated little thought like a shot of green in the desert. "You got a prize!" the old woman says (180). As Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell drive, his daydreams about his new car are interrupted by thoughts of depression every time he looks at Lucynell, who is humorously picking the cherries. After the wedding Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell go on their honeymoon. They stop in a restaurant and have dinner. There Lucynell falls asleep. Once she is sound asleep on the counter of the diner, Mr. Shiftlet gets up out of his seat and begins to leave. The boy behind the counter looks at the girl and then back at Mr. Shiftlet in a confused manner. Seeing how beautiful Lucynell is, the boy exclaims, "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (181). Mr. Shiftlet then replies "Hitch-hiker" (181), and leaves her at the restaurant.

There are times when Mr. Shiftlet prefers not to be alone. He feels too that a man with a car has a responsibility to others and he keeps his eye out for a hitch-hiker. Occasionally he sees a sign that warns: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own" (182). Ironically, Mr. Shiftlet feels no responsibility towards a helpless creature like Lucynell. The sun sets in front of him, and he sees a young man by the side of the road with a cardboard suitcase – he does not have his thumb out but he takes the offered ride. The young man is glum. Mr. Shiftlet feels oppressed, and starts talking about mothers, about his mother, about how a boy should not leave his mother and how sorry he is that he left his mother. The boy tells him to shut up. He tells the boy that his own "mother was a very angel of Gawd" (183), and his eyes tear up. The boy tells him
that his own mother is a flea bag and Mr. Shiftlet's is a stinking pole-cat and he snaps, before leaping from the car. Shocked, Mr. Shiftlet "felt that rottenness of the world was about to engulf him . . . . Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from the earth!"

(183). At that moment a storm begins and the rear of his car is splattered with rain. It sounds like "tin-can tops" (183), an appropriate simile for a honeymoon car. Two clouds appears the shapes of turnips descending in front and behind of him. The turnips are tornadoes, and the reader senses that Mr. Shiftlet is going to meet his fate as he "raced the galloping shower into Mobile" (183). O'Connor notes that "there was nothing more relating to the mystery of that man's personality that could be shown through that particular dramatization."24

Through imagery, dialogue, and moments of revelation, O'Connor explores the themes of morality and religion, both frequent concerns in her work. The name "Crater" shared by Lucynell and her mother suggests a giant hole. And in the case of the old woman, we see a gaping moral hole in her personality as she later pawns her daughter off on Mr. Shiftlet. Mr. Shiftlet is a skinny, gaunt, one-armed man whose figure "listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him" (172). Thus we find in the story: Mr. Shiftlet with his one arm, Lucynell with her mental limitations, and Mrs. Crater with her moral bankruptcy. O'Connor goes on to describe Mr. Shiftlet with almost animal like features: "He had long black slick hair that hung flat from a part in the middle to beyond the tips of his ears on either side. His face descended in forehead for more than half its length and ended suddenly with his features just balanced over a jutting steel-trap jaw" (172). And although Mr. Shiftlet appears as little
more than a well-scrubbed rube, O'Connor goes on to say, "He had a look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly" (172). Indeed, Mr. Shiftlet is an extremely jaded man who has been around the block a few times and knows how to get along in the world despite his physical deformity.

The title is ironic. Not only are no lives saved, several are damaged. Mr. Shiftlet apparently saves his own, but at a cost to himself. He wants to believe all the things he says, and he feels terribly depressed about his bad behaviour, but not enough to make him do anything different. Mrs. Crater ought to know better, but is also blinded by another sort of greed, and sacrifices her idiot daughter. Greedy people treat each other terribly, and the tragedy in the story turns rather funny, when so much of the discussion turns on doing the right thing because so few people do things right nowadays.

In his interactions with the Lucynell Craters, Mr. Shiftlet has a chance to achieve Grace. He has been wandering and has no friends, and has found in this household a chance to work hard, watch a beautiful sunset every night, and live a quiet life. This opportunity is hinted at when he first approaches the two women sitting on the porch and turns his back to them to face the sunset: "He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross" (172-73). That crooked cross embodied in his figure represents his chance at salvation. As he drives toward Mobile, having missed his chance, he prays, "Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" (183).

Mr. Shiftlet, like many other characters in O'Connor's short stories, is disenchanted with the state of the world. After the elder Lucynell Crater tells him that
her car no longer runs, he says, “Nothing is like it used to be, lady... The world is almost rotten” (173). Later, when he is fixing the car, he comments that “the trouble with the world was that nobody cared, or stopped and took any trouble.” (177). By the end of the story, after he has abandoned the younger Lucynell Crater and caused the hitchhiking boy to jump out of his car, he “felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him” (183).

O'Connor's use of simile hints at larger meaning in the story. As her mother and Mr. Shiftlet make small talk about the sunset, the younger Lucynell Crater watches him “with a cautious sly look as if he were a bird that had come up very close” (176). The first word he teaches her to say is “bird” (176), implying that he is revealing a part of himself to her; they have a special form of communication. When Mr. Shiftlet starts the old car for the first time in fifteen years, he has “an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead” (178). This little miracle, tied to the miracle of Jesus raising the dead Lazarus in the New Testament, links the car to Mr. Shiftlet himself. He was dead, and in the Lucynell Craters has a chance at new life. When the elder Lucynell offers him her daughter in marriage, she says, “Lemme tell you something: there ain’t any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man” (179), almost as a threat, and “the ugly words settled in Mr. Siftlet's head like a group of buzzards in the top of a tree” (179). As he gets the idea to take the car and abandon her daughter, his “smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire” (179). The snake simile suggests the devil, as opposed to his chance at salvation. He will choose to listen to this devil as he abandons Lucynell at The Hot Spot.
As in many of Flannery O'Connor's stories, weather is an important indicator of characters' moods and important moments. As Mr. Shiftlet drives off with the younger Lucynell Crater in the car, supposedly to go on a honeymoon, "The early afternoon was clear and open and surrounded by pale blue sky" (181); he still has a chance to redeem himself. But after he abandons her at The Hot Spot, he has lost his chance at salvation; this moment is enforced by the weather: "Deep in the sky a storm was preparing very slowly and without thunder as if it meant to drain every drop of air from the earth before it broke" (182). After the hitchhiking boy has thrown himself out the passenger door, all is really lost for Mr. Shiftlet, and "there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car" (183).

The intensity of the weather is increased by its personification throughout the story. When Mr. Shiftlet approaches the house of the Lucynell Craters at the beginning of the story, he leans to the side "as if the breeze were pushing him" (172), with his face turned toward the sun "which appeared to be balancing itself on the peak of a small mountain" (172). As Mr. Shiftlet drives along slowly after the boy in the overalls has leapt from his car, "A cloud, the exact color of the boy's hat and shaped like a turnip, had descended over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind the car" (183).

The next short story, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," was first published as "A Woman on the Stairs," and is, at least, an important transition between her early work and her more mature writing. The protagonist, Ruby, disparages her in-laws, her
brother, and her neighbours. This story marks O'Connor's first measurable growth as a writer away from institutional restrictions and with the confidence of a published author; she seems to have a firmer grasp on the direction her writing is taking. In retrospect, however, she wrote to the Fitzgerald's about this story, "It is, in its way, Catholic, being about the rejection of life at the source, but too much of a farce to bear the weight."25

"A Stroke of Good Fortune" is a masterful little story. By no means Flannery's most popular; it strikes at the heart of post-War American aspirations and the spiritual challenges that accompany them. Ruby Hill is another of Flannery's tortured souls. As with most of her sorry characters, Ruby's miseries are produced by a bad interaction between her state in life and her refusal to understand and accept it gracefully. Her ambitions are patently American and modern rather than specifically Southern. Ruby is caught up in self pity over her daily routine of walking eight blocks each way for groceries and having to carry them up four flights. In her head spin aspirations of one-storied suburban life, a novelty in 1949. She pines for the good life, desperately seeking to avoid the miseries of her mother who bore eight children and lost several along the way. She is proud of having mastered her fertility which in her mind is both wise and progressive.

Ruby enters her apartment building with her groceries, leans them on the hall table and looks at herself in a mirror without even recognizing herself, she is so tired and sick. She is short and round, and the curls in her hair are a mess from the heat and her walk. She has bought collard greens to cook for her little brother – Rufus, just
home from the war in Europe. He is unchanged, has no "get" (184) in him. He has come to stay with her and her husband – Bill Hill, who sells Miracle Products. Rufus is good for nothing, like most of her kin. Even Bill Hill saw this immediately.

She leaves the sack for Bill to bring up, and tries to mount the stairs. Even Madame Zoleeda, the palmist, agrees she is sick. But Madame Zoleeda has told her that her long illness will result in a stroke of good fortune. Ruby knew this already: she and Bill are going to move, hopefully to a subdivision. Bill has to agree one of these days. These steps are killing her, though thirty-four years old is not that old. Her mother looked terrible at thirty-four. It was all those children that did her in. Several had died. Ruby considers it terrible ignorance. Ruby’s sisters have kids and she cannot tell how they stood it. Rufus was so hard for her mother to birth – Ruby walked ten miles and watched three picture shows just to get away from the screaming. And now Rufus is worthless and looks old. Ruby looks young for her age. She sits down on the stairs, exhausted, and sits on a neighbour boy’s toy pistol. The boy’s mother acts like the little brat is her greatest fortune. Ruby would smack the little brat, if she could.

She feels nauseous, but she will not go to a doctor. They will have to knock her out, first. She wonders whether it is heart trouble. She looks good, and Bill seems happy that she has put on weight lately. Her neighbour Mr. Jerger, seventy-eight years old, comes out and shouts to her – he is part deaf. He always wants to ask her silly questions, and then tell the answer when she did not know. He says that people just do not like to think anymore, and that Ruby should ask her husband these questions when he got home. She escapes back to the terrible stairwell.
She feels a pain in her stomach, things pushing around. She wonders whether it is cancer. She gasps up a few more steps to her friend Laverne’s door, and knocks with the toy pistol. Laverne asks Ruby why she does not go to the doctor, and marches around the apartment with her stomach stuck out. “Quit that!” Ruby yelled. “Quit that! I’m sick”” (191). Laverne leans down in front of Ruby and looks into her face with one eye shut as if she is squinting through a keyhole. “You are sort of purple” (191), she says. “I’m damm sick,” Ruby glowers:

Laverne stood there, swaying with her stomach stuck out, and a very wise expression growing on her face. Ruby sat sprawled in the chair, looking at her feet. The room was getting still. She sat up and glared at her ankles. They were swollen! I’m not going to no doctor, she started, I’m not going to one. I’m not going. “Not going,” she began to mumble, “to no doctor, not . . . .”

“How long you think you can hold off?” Laverne murmured. (191-192)

Ruby sits, exhausted, staring at her ankles, while Laverne asks if Ruby likes her new shoes and whether Rufus is at home so she can show him. Ruby scowls, “‘That Rufus ain’t but an enfant!’ just waiting to make his mother that much deader” (192).

They talk, and Laverne staggers around and sings “MOTHER MOTHER!” (193) and Ruby gets very upset. She tries to convince herself that it is not cancer, and she will not go to a doctor. Laverne wants to know how long she is going to hold out. Ruby says Bill takes care of making sure there are no babies. Laverne points out that he slipped up. Ruby is furious, and stomps out, saying Bill better move
her before her heart gives out. Laverne tells her to give up the gun before she shoots somebody. Ruby slams the door and then looks at her stomach, though she does not want to. Her skirt is tight. And it is not a skirt that is usually tight. She tries going upstairs again, but decides not to:

She gasped and shut her eyes. No. No. It couldn’t be any baby. She was not going to have something waiting in her to make her deader, she was not. Bill Hill couldn’t have slipped up. He said it was guaranteed and it had worked all this time and it could not be that, it could not. She shuddered and held her hand tightly over her mouth. She felt her face drawn puckered: two born dead one died the first year and one run under like a dried yellow apple no she was only thirty-four years old, she was old. Madam Zoleeda said it would end in no drying up. Madam Zoleeda said oh but it will end in a stroke of good fortune! Moving. She had said it would end in a stroke of good moving. (195)

There is a bang at the bottom of the stairs and a little neighbour boy rushes up the stairs in a racket. Mr. Jerger tries to hush him and grab him but the little boy cusses him and runs up with his two pistols and crashes right into Ruby. She reels, and thinks “Good Fortune… Baby (196). All is hollow and dark. She recognizes a little roll, as if it were not in her stomach, but resting somewhere outside, waiting, “with plenty of time” (196).

This is one of the collection’s shorter stories, and the structure is very simple. Ruby does not want to admit that she is pregnant, that her husband might have fooled her, that a child can be good fortune. She cannot think of anything more deadly than
children, after watching her mother’s struggle with difficult childbirths and dying children. For Ruby children mean defeat, not good fortune.

O’Connor has Ruby run into a series of hints “When was Florida born? Where is the fountain of youth?” (189). Ruby is concerned with aging and health. There is the toy pistol, and Laverne’s teasing. And Bill Hill “takes care of that” (193). In a typical O’Connor detail, he sells “Miracle Products” (184). Ruby is a naive narrator: though she believes him, it is very clear to us that he has tricked her and is enjoying the result. As in many of O’Connor’s stories, the ending is rather tragic. Ruby does see, eventually, that she is pregnant, but she is horrified. This thing inside her is creepy and waiting to destroy her.

The major themes in this story concern aging, worthlessness, and the horror of “good fortune” (185). Ruby is constantly repeating her age to herself, and counting her health or lack thereof, and trying to work her mind around what she wants: to move to a subdivision as soon as possible. She looks young for her age, and thinks Rufus is still an infant. Ruby does not want to grow up. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., sees Ruby as “disgustedly fighting off knowledge of her own pregnancy with disgusted recollections from childhood of her mother’s various pregnancies.”

Worthlessness is embodied in Rufus. Ruby cannot imagine why he wants collards after being in Europe. She thinks he will not make anything of himself – he has already destroyed their mother. He has not moved beyond infancy for her. She believes that she is the only one of her siblings who is worth something – because she married Bill Hill and moved to the city and will not be making any children.
The story's title is ironic, as are many in the book. Ruby trusts Madame Zoleeda, who, like everyone else, can see that Ruby is pregnant. Of course, Ruby trusts Madame's predictions because she sees them her way: she will move to a subdivision. By the end of the story, it is clear that Ruby will not see her pregnancy as Good Fortune, but only as a stroke of bad luck.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" was written in 1954 and published in 1955. It is one of O'Connor's only explicitly Catholic stories. A devout Roman Catholic, O'Connor often used religious themes in her work, but more commonly described rural Southern Protestants. The story is told from the perspective of a 12-year-old girl and involves a visit from a pair of her 14-year-old cousins, Roman Catholic convent school girls, who were recently lectured by the nuns about preserving their bodies as "Temples of the Holy Ghost" (199). The title refers to a verse from 1 Corinthians 6 (RSV): "Do you not know that your body is a temple to the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body."

The child's mother asks her daughter for some suggestions about how to entertain the two fourteen-year-old cousins during their visit, and the child petulantly suggests a visit from Mr. Cheatam, the boyfriend of their boarder, Miss Kirby. This is a ridiculous idea, since Cheat will not be pleasing to the girls at all, and the child has purposefully suggested it to make fun of Miss Kirby. Susan and Joanne... were fourteen – two years older than she was – but neither of them was bright, which was why they had been sent to the
convent. If they had gone to a regular school, they wouldn’t have done anything but think about boys; at the convent the sisters, her mother said, would keep a grip on their necks. The child decided, after observing them for a few hours, that they were practically morons and she was glad to think that they were only second cousins and she couldn’t have inherited any of their stupidity. (197).

The two girls joke about how Sister Perpetua has instructed them to defend themselves against would-be wooers by saying, “Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!” (199) but the child’s mother does not get the joke; she confirms that they are in fact, temples of the Holy Ghost. The child likes that idea, and considers that she, too, can be one. The child makes the legitimate suggestion that the neighbourhood boys Wendell and Cory Wilkins can come to entertain Susan and Joanne, and the mother agrees that that is a good plan.

The next day, Wendell and Cory come to visit and the girls immediately begin to giggle. The child watches the action by standing on a barrel hidden in the bushes as Wendell begins to sing to the girls. He sings simple songs about Christ, including “The Old Rugged Cross,” and when he is finished, the girls make fun of him by responding with their own songs in Latin. Wendell and Cory are not Catholic, they are members of the Church of God, so they do not recognize the Latin words and conclude that it “must be Jew singing” (202). The boys, who want to be Church of God preachers, try serenading the girls, who respond with Tantum Ergo²⁹ as an end to the singing. As the girls giggle, the child betrays her hiding place by shouting, “You big dumb ox!” (202) and falling off the barrel.
The child does not eat dinner with Susan, Joanne, Cory, and Wendell; instead she hides in the kitchen to eat with the cook. After dinner, the four older children leave for the fair, but the child is too proud to ask to accompany them. She stays in her bedroom and daydreams about one day becoming a saint. However, she worries that she might be too afraid to withstand martyrdom by some horrible method. Finally, she gets into bed and says her prayers, thanking God that she is not in the Church of God like Wendell and Cory.

The child is awakened by the return of Susan and Joanne, and she asks them about what they saw at the fair. They tell her that some things they cannot explain to her because she is too young, but she eventually convinces them to reveal that they have seen a hermaphrodite. The hermaphrodite showed them its genitals, saying,

“I’m going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way.” The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low, just flat. “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He might strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it. I don’t dispute hit.” (206)

The child does not understand what a hermaphrodite is, but she falls asleep imagining the hermaphrodite repeating, “I am a temple of the Holy Ghost, Amen” (207). The next morning, the child and her mother accompany the girls back to the convent as Alonzo Meyers drives them in his taxi. When they arrive, a nun embraces the child’s mother,
but the child refuses to be embraced. She is in a bad mood, and thinks cynically, “You put your foot in their door and they got you praying” (208). They follow the nun into the chapel and the child kneels down, still thinking “ugly thoughts” (208), until all at once she realizes that she is in God’s presence. She begins to pray for God to help her not to be so mean:

“Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do. Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-coloured in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it.” (208)

As the priest raises the host, which represents the body of Christ, during the ceremony, the child remembers the hermaphrodite saying, “I don’t dispute it. This is the way He wanted me to be” (209). As the child and her mother leave the convent, the child allows herself to be kissed by the nun, and does not mind that the nun’s crucifix is mashed into the side of her face. Revelation, thus, occurs in a circus tent, in a dream, and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. On the drive home, Alonzo reports that the fair has been shut down because some preachers from town protested against it to the police.

The hermaphrodite represents an acceptance of God’s will, and has clearly achieved Grace by not questioning its situation. Susan and Joanne witness the show by the hermaphrodite at the fair, and later tell the child about it when they are all in bed. O’Connor herself suffered from lupus, a crippling disease that resulted in the loss of the use of her legs and eventually her death. This story demonstrates a sympathy for
“freaks” (208), as the hermaphrodite is called at the fair, and a respect for accepting the lot you are dealt in life. O’Connor wrote of the story in a letter, “As near as I get to saying what purity is in this story is saying that it is an acceptance of what God wills for us and acceptance of our individual circumstances.” In fact, the hermaphrodite’s body is certainly a temple of the Holy Ghost in the mind of the child: as she watches the priest raise the host, which in the Catholic faith is believed to literally become the body of Christ, she remembers the hermaphrodite’s words.

The child, who is on the surface ornery, suffers from a prideful disposition. She does not ask to go to the fair with the older children, and decides that even if they asked her she would not accompany them because she is too proud. But O’Connor gives the reader insight into the workings of the child’s mind, and it is revealed that she strives for Grace, even considering a saintly death to be her calling. There is a tension in the child’s mind between her “ugly thoughts” (208) and the knowledge that she is a temple of the Holy Ghost, and in the end, the sun represents the triumph of Grace in the child’s being.

The fact that the child remains nameless is significant, since it implies that the child could represent children everywhere, at least in her ability to observe and absorb influences and details. The child can also be interpreted as a representation of O’Connor herself, since the author often described herself in letters as socially awkward and lacking grace. Like a comic author might, the child makes cynical judgments about the intelligence of those who surround her, concluding that she is much more intelligent and faithful. But it is only at the end of the story, when she lets...
go of her pride and allows herself to be wrapped up in the experience of the Catholic mass, that she achieves Grace. That revelation has an effect on the child as does the expression “a temple of the Holy Ghost,”28 which the girls titteringly use to describe their bodies. The sun is a symbol of Catholic faith in this story, and its intensity mirrors the characters’ embodiment of that faith. After Wendell sings to the girls, they use the Latin songs they have practiced at school to make him and Cory feel confused and embarrassed; accordingly, “The sun was going down and the sky was turning a bruised violet color” (201). After the child has achieved Grace in the chapel of the convent school, during the drive home, “The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees” (209). The Host, which Catholics like O’Connor believe is literally transformed into the body of Christ, is also linked to the hermaphrodite’s body when the child thinks of the “freak” (208) during the mass ceremony.

The religious themes in this story are direct: the Protestant hymns verses the Catholic ones (the boys call them Jew songs), and the visit to the convent with the service – which provides the child with a moment of peace. She is sad about the freak show in the end – not because she will miss seeing it, but because she understood the freaks basic plea: God made me this way, it was His will. This is one of O’Connor’s most directly positive portrayals of religious sentiment. The end of the story reflects upon the acceptance of God’s will as in the case of the hermaphrodite.29

Wendell and Cory, who are not Catholic, are baffled by Susan and Joanne’s beautiful Latin singing. The child calls out, “You big dumb ox!” (202) and the animal
similes used by O'Connor corroborate this view of the boys: "They sat like monkeys" (201) on the porch banisters while the girls sit together in the swing, and while Wendell sings his simple Church of God songs to the girls, "He looked at Susan with a dog-like loving look" (201). Perhaps this characterization is meant to point out the deficiencies of the Church of God as compared to the Catholic Church in the child's mind; in fact, she later fervently thanks God for having her not be a member of the Church of God.

On the rural roadsides throughout the South, the traveller can still purchase concrete statues to which the title of this story is a reference. Many proprietors sell representations of Jesus, Mary, deer, and different male versions, what O'Connor's uncle called "nigger statuary." The molds for each concrete piece assure sameness in position and form. Though the colours may vary, the people statues are usually painted brown or black, with red and white clothes. The statues are about one to three feet in height and thirty to fifty pounds in weight. The "artificial nigger" that O'Connor depicts in the story, however, is not the jockey most often associated with this concrete genre, but rather a variant holding "a piece of brown watermelon" (229). O'Connor's decision for this title came from a story her mother told her about needing directions when she got lost trying to buy a cow: "Well, you go into this town and you can't miss it 'cause it's the only house in town with a artificial nigger in front of it." O'Connor knew she had to find a story to fit that expression.

When the story was published for the first time in the Spring 1955 Kenyon Review, coinciding with the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, the editor, John
Crowe Ransom, wanted to change the title. According to O'Connor, he said, "Well, we'd better not use this title. You know, it's a tense situation. We don't want to hurt anybody's feelings." O'Connor was firm in her stand, however, for as she reported in a letter to Ben Griffith, what she "had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all." And O'Connor uses the "plaster figure" (229) as the medium through which grace is delivered to Mr. Head and Nelson. "The Artificial Nigger," for several years, was her own "favorite and probably the best thing" she thought she would ever write. The story also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories of 1956.*

It is a story of youth, age, and redemption. Mr. Head and his ten-year-old grandson, Nelson, live in a small rural town in Georgia. Mr. Head and Nelson live in a state of subdued tension in which each works to outdo the other. Their planned trip to Atlanta has made this competition worse. Even though Nelson has never been to the city, he is cheekily sure that he will enjoy it. Mr. Head wakes up at two a.m. and notes the fall of moonlight and the sleeping form of his grandson, Nelson, on the floor, with his new suit and hat in boxes next to him. It occurs to Mr. Head that the room, his own pants slung over a chair, is rather noble. Mr. Head's idea is "that only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" (210). Coming at the beginning of the story, his idea is ironic; but it sets up the journey motif which hints of other, more famous journeys and guides - Virgil and Dante, Raphael and Tobias. Mr. Head is his grandson's guide in the city. Mr. Head and Nelson wake up early in the morning to go to Atlanta for the day. They are typical
country bumpkins: Mr. Head is cranky and prideful while Nelson is smug and pretends to understand more than he does. Nelson thinks he was born in Atlanta because Mr. Head lied to him about his origins, which were less glamorous. They discuss how Nelson has never seen a black person, though he thinks he probably did as a child, and Mr. Head warns that there will be plenty of black people in Atlanta, trying to intimidate his grandson.

They walk to the train and get on when it stops specially for them. As the conductor takes their tickets, Mr. Head puts Nelson down in front of him, pointing out how ignorant Nelson is of everything and that he has never been to the city. Soon a black man boards the train, and when Mr. Head points him out to Nelson, Nelson cannot recognize what is different about him. Mr. Head has told him that “niggers” (212) are black, and he is confused because, of course, this man is actually “tan.” Nelson feels hatred toward the black man for making a fool of him.

They decide to walk to the dining car, where they find more black people working in the kitchen and the black man from earlier sitting at a table. When one of the black kitchen workers tells Mr. Head that passengers are not allowed in the kitchen, Mr. Head makes fun of him and Nelson feels proud. They return to their seats, and soon the train arrives in Atlanta. They walk through the streets, and Nelson is excited by all the stimulation. Mr. Head is appalled that Nelson is reacting positively rather than being overwhelmed and terrified, so he tries to terrify his grandson by showing him the sewer system; it does not work. As they continue to walk through the city, it becomes apparent that they are lost. They have entered a predominantly black
neighbourhood, which makes them feel even more lost and confused. Mr. Head accidentally lost their bag lunch, so they are also hungry. They are too nervous to ask a black person for directions, but eventually Nelson asks a woman standing in her doorway how to get back to the train. He feels drawn to her and overwhelmed by their interaction, and they take her directions toward the streetcar that will bring them back to the train station.

When they have made their way out of the black neighbourhood, Nelson sits down on the sidewalk to rest. They realize that they might have been following the streetcar tracks in the wrong direction, since they do not recognize their surroundings. Nelson falls asleep from exhaustion, and Mr. Head decides to teach him a lesson by hiding from him. But when Nelson wakes up and finds himself abandoned, he dashes down the street more quickly than his grandfather can chase him. Eventually, Mr. Head finds him: Nelson has knocked over a woman carrying groceries, and she is claiming that he broke her ankle. A crowd is condemning Nelson, and he clings to his grandfather for support. In an act of incredible cowardice and betrayal, Mr. Head denies knowing his grandson. The woman is appalled more by this action than by Nelson’s collision with her, and leaves them alone.

Mr. Head walks away, and Nelson follows him at a distance. Mr. Head feels horrible about his betrayal, and tries to make peace with Nelson by offering him some water at a spigot. However, Nelson refuses to speak to him and they continue to wander through strange neighbourhoods. When he sees a man out walking his dogs, Mr. Head ridiculously and desperately begs him for directions to the train; it turns out they are
only a few blocks away from the station. As they walk in the direction of the station, still with a large distance between them, they encounter a fake black figure leaning on a brick fence holding a piece of watermelon. Mr. Head exclaims, “An artificial nigger!” (229) and Nelson repeats it in the same tone. They stand gazing at the artificial Negro as if they are faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brings them together in their common defeat. Mr. Head opens his lips to make a lofty statement and hears himself say, “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” (230). After a second, the boy nods with a strange shivering about this mouth, and says, “Let’s go home before we get ourselves lost again” (230).

As the train leaves them at the country stop, the moon silvers the landscape once again:

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. (230-231)

He feels overwhelmed by his disgusting betrayal of his grandson as well as by Nelson’s ability to forgive him. As they watch the train rolls away, Mr. Head “saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise” (231). During this moment of
Grace, Nelson declares that he will not return to the city, though he is glad he went once.

Mr. Head’s revelation on the train ride home to the country suggests that he has immediately gained Grace, though throughout the story there are no hints as to the role that his Christian faith plays in his life. This type of sudden revelation is characteristic of 1950s symbolic prose in the style of James Joyce and Joseph Conrad. Thus it is fitting that the “artificial nigger” they see during their fight is an agent of Grace, allowing for their reconciliation: their shared confusion about black people in the city brings them together. The “artificial nigger” is the cause of a seemingly artificial realization of God.

Before they leave the house, the grandfather thinks to himself that the trip to the city was “to be a lesson that the boy would never forget” (211). This thought foreshadows the events that are to come, but it is also ironic because the grandfather does not know the nature of the lesson Nelson will learn. He thinks Nelson will be terrified of the big city and decide not to go back, but in reality it is Mr. Head’s betrayal of him when he is scared and vulnerable that convinces Nelson not to return to the city. In the end, he learns the lesson of forgiveness, achieving Grace by reconciling with his grandfather despite the gross betrayal.

Racism is important in this story; though neither Mr. Head nor Nelson feels explicit hatred toward the black people they encounter, they certainly view them as others and are nervous around them. When Mr. Head disrespects the black kitchen worker on the train, Nelson feels proud of him. He realizes that he is dependent on his
grandfather to protect him from the unknown, including black people. When Nelson asks the black woman for directions to the train, he is overwhelmed by her presence because she is so different from anyone he has ever seen. Mr. Head later makes fun of him for gawking at her.

Ghost imagery is apparent throughout the story, especially with regard to Mr. Head. As Mr. Head and Nelson await the train on the way to Atlanta, they stare straight ahead “as if they were awaiting an apparition” (213). As they ride to the city, they see each other’s reflections in the glass window of the train: “There he saw a pale ghost-like face scowling at him beneath the brim of a pale ghost-like hat. His grandfather, looking quickly too, saw a different ghost, pale but grinning, under a black hat” (214). When he receives directions to the train from the man walking his dogs, Mr. Head “stared as if he were slowly returning from the dead” (229).

Mr. Head is compared to an animal as he plans to scare Nelson by leaving him on the sidewalk sleeping and as he decides to betray his grandson. As he hides and watches Nelson sleep, he is “hunched like an old monkey on the garbage can lid” (225). When Nelson wakes up and finds himself abandoned, he “dashed down the street like a wild maddened pony” and Mr. Head “galloped after” (225). When he finds his grandson, who is being accused of breaking a woman’s ankle after colliding with her as he ran, Mr. Head denies that he knows his grandson. “The old man’s head had lowered itself into his collar like a turtle’s” (226). This comparison to animals emphasizes the ignorance of the two characters. Mr. Head’s plan is stupid and unsafe, and his betrayal of his grandson is cowardly.
The religious themes in this story are sharpest at the end. Mr. Head's vision of his denial of Nelson is so painful — so absolutely and totally terrible and shameful to him — that he can see God's hand in granting a moment for reconnection to Nelson. At the start of the story, Mr. Head believes that it is only long experience that allows the old to guide the young. At the end, he realizes not only that he needs guidance, but that he is capable of terrible things, and that mercy (or God's love) can save a person. Experience is only viable, then, when one sees God's hand in the goings-on, and one learns to appreciate that divine gift.

The realization of mercy is the point of this story. It is surprising that the mercy comes in the form of a sad old statue — the boy and the man do not realize what they are looking at: the manifestation of a whole people's sorrow. They only see something they cannot fathom: an artificial person of such low class that they cannot comprehend why the statue exists. But it makes them feel better: the threat they have felt from these people is removed because the statue cannot do much, say much, or respond to them in any way. They can agree on their reaction to the thing, and they desperately need agreement at the moment. The divine mercy of the story is the coincidence of the statue, of having a moment when they can agree — and go on.

"The Artificial Nigger" is an interesting story and very different from the rest of her stories. This is because O'Connor usually ends the story so that one of the characters in her stories dies. She does this in the belief that the true identity of a person comes out in the moment right before their death when reality hits them. The story resembles a lot of O'Connor's other stories because she shows a lot of racism by
referring African Americans to the repulsive and degrading name of “Nigger”: “Mr. Head stopped where he was and turned. ‘And there’s good reason for that,’ he shouted into the Negro’s chest, ‘because the cockroaches would run the passengers out!’” (217). She also seems to always have where she was born, Georgia, into the plot setting of her stories. Mr. Head is characterized as a wise old man that always needs someone to talk, and comes across as the type that can never swallow his pride to admit when he is wrong. He hates being at fault because of the reactions that he thinks Nelson is going to have towards his mistakes like in this quote, “Mr. Head had to make special arrangements with the ticket agent to have this train stop and he was secretly afraid it would not, in which case, he knew Nelson would say, ‘I never thought no train was going to stop for you’” (213). Nelson, on the other hand, is the normal ten-year-old obnoxious boy that thinks he is smarter than he really is. He looks up to his grandfather, but will not give him the satisfaction of knowing it: “‘How you know I never saw a nigger when I lived there before?’ Nelson asked. ‘I probably saw a lot of niggers.’ ‘If you seen one you didn’t know what he was,’ Mr. Head said, completely exasperated” (213).

“A Circle in the Fire” was first published in The Kenyon Review in 1954, eight years after the writer burst onto the literary scene as an innovative short story author. The story was republished in 1955 in three separate volumes, including her short story collection A Good Man is Hard to Find; Prize Stories 1955: The O’Henry Awards; and The Best American Short Stories of 1955. It was also included in a posthumous short story collection, The Complete Stories, in 1971.
"A Circle in the Fire" is not necessarily considered O'Connor's finest short work. However, the story exposes key themes from her oeuvre: grotesque characters, a strong sense of irony, a dark sense of humor and the role of religious faith in motivating characters. Like most of O'Connor's work, "A Circle in the Fire" appears to be set in the rural South during the first half of the twentieth century. Because three visitors appear from Atlanta, some believe the story is set in Georgia.

As the story opens, Mrs. Cope, the owner of a large, prosperous farm, is weeding a garden as Mrs. Pritchard, who works on the farm along with her husband, tells Mrs. Cope about the funeral of a distant relative. Mrs. Pritchard, a pessimist, dotes on calamity; Mrs. Cope, an optimist, tries vainly to raise the tone of the conversation. Mrs. Cope, as her name implies, is trying to get by, to hold on to her farm and raise her little girl. She is a widow, and she has hired help. She constantly tries to tell herself and others around her that she is very lucky to have what she has got, though she is always worried that she is about to lose it. She also quite often reaches her limit of patience. She is small, and always looks astonished. Mrs. Cope's twelve-year-old daughter Sally Virginia listens to the conversation from the window of her upstairs room. Through the girl’s thoughts, readers learn that the one chink in Mrs. Cope’s armour of optimism is her constant fretting about the possibility that a fire will start in the woods and destroy her farm.

When Mrs. Cope sees Culver, an African American hired hand, driving the tractor around a gate to avoid stopping to open it, she tells Mrs. Pritchard to stop him so that she can reprimand him. Culver listens to Mrs. Cope and obeys her command to
open the gate and drive the tractor through it, but he refuses to look at her. In response to this exchange, Mrs. Cope says, “I thank the Lord all these things don’t come at once. They’d destroy me” (234). Mrs. Pritchard heartily agrees. Mrs. Cope responds by declaring that trials do not all come at once and that everyone has much to be thankful for and should say a prayer of thanksgiving at least once a day. She also speaks of her hard work and its role in keeping disaster at bay, saying, “I don’t let anything get ahead of me, and I’m not always looking for trouble” (235).

Mrs. Pritchard continues to insist that if trouble did all come at once, there would be nothing Mrs. Cope could do about it. As they are having this exchange, a truck stops nearby and lets off three teenage boys, who begin to walk up the dirt road toward the women. One of the boys is carrying a suitcase. From her window, Sally Virginia is the first to see the boys, and then the women see the boys coming toward them.

When the boys come face to face with the women, they stare sullenly. The boy carrying the suitcase says, “I don’t reckon you remember me, Mrs. Cope” (236). She does not, but he explains that he is Powell Boyd, whose father once worked on the farm. He says his father is dead, his mother has remarried, and the family now lives in a “development” (239) of apartment houses in Atlanta. Powell introduces his friends, a big boy named Garfield Smith and a smaller one named W. T. Harper. Mrs. Cope says it is “sweet” (236) of Powell to stop and see her. Harper volunteers that Powell has been telling the other boys about the pleasures of the farm, especially riding horses, and has told them they can ride the horses:
“... all the time we been knowing him he’s been telling us about this here place. Said it was everything here. Said it was horses here. Said he had the best time of his entire life right here on this here place. Talks about it all the time.”

“Never shuts his trap about this place,” the big boy grunted, drawing his arm across his nose as if to muffle his words. (236-37)

They are part devil, creating mischief and havoc wherever they are let loose. But these boys are also attracted irresistibly to Mrs. Cope’s farm, which, of course, contains the trees and the peculiar sunset. One of the boys reports that Powell says once that “when he died he wanted to come here!” (237). Mrs. Cope tells them the horses are not shod and it is too dangerous for the boys to ride.

Mrs. Cope’s response is to offer the boys soft drinks and food. When she and Mrs. Pritchard go into the kitchen to get refreshments, Mrs. Pritchard warns Mrs. Cope that the suitcase means the boys intend to stay. Mrs. Cope replies, “I can’t have three boys in here with only me and Sally Virginia. I’m sure they’ll go when I feed them” (238). As she serves the food, Mrs. Cope sees Garfield spit a lighted cigarette onto her lawn. Calling him “Ashfield” (238), she tells him to pick it up; he does, correcting her pronunciation of his name at the same time.

Harper tells Mrs. Cope that Powell fantasizes about having one of her horses in Atlanta and that he says he will “bust this concrete to hell riding him!” (239). Mrs. Cope says she is sure Powell does not use such language. Powell informs her that the boys intend to spend the night in Mrs. Cope’s barn and that Powell’s uncle, who
dropped them off, will pick them up in the morning. Mrs. Cope says they cannot do
that since she fears their cigarettes would start a fire. Powell suggests the woods, and
she says, “I can’t have people smoking in my woods” (240). She finally tells them that
they can sleep next to the house. Garfield mutters, “Her woods” (240). The boys walk
away as Powell says he is going to show them the place. They leave the food uneaten.

At sunset, the boys return to the house. When Mrs. Cope offers them guinea to
eat, they say they do not eat such things. Still they wolf down the sandwiches she
brings them. It is clear from their appearance that the boys spent the afternoon riding
horses, which they deny. Harper tells Mrs. Cope that Powell once locked one of his
brothers in a box and set fire to the box. Mrs. Cope says she is sure Powell would not
do that. Mrs. Cope asks the boys if they thank God every night “for all He’s done for
you” (241), and the boys respond with silence. Sally Virginia makes a choking noise
from her window so that the boys notice her for the first time. Garfield says, “Jesus,
another woman” (242). Later Mrs. Cope assures her daughter the boys will be gone in
the morning.

In the morning, Powell tells Mrs. Cope that his uncle is not coming and that
they have their own food. Mrs. Cope says, “You boys know that I’m glad to have you,
but I expect you to behave. I expect you to behave like gentlemen” (242). She reminds
them that “this is my place” (242). The boys walk away. Mrs. Pritchard arrives and
tells Mrs. Cope how her husband Hollis tried unsuccessfully the day before to keep the
boys from riding the horses. She also reports that the boys have been drinking milk
from cans in the barn and that they argued with Hollis over whether Mrs. Cope owned
the woods. She reports a conversation between the boy and her husband:

“This morning Hollis seen them behind the bull pen and that big one ast if it wasn’t some place they could wash at and Hollis said no it wasn’t and that you didn’t want no boys dropping cigarette butts in your woods and he said, ‘She don’t own them woods,’ and Hollis said, She does too,’ and that there little one he said ‘Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too,’ and that there one with the glasses said, ‘I reckon she owns the sky over this place too,’ and that there littlest one says, ‘Owns the sky and can’t no airplane go over here without she says so,’ and then the big one says, ‘I never seen a place with so many damm women on it, how do you stand it here?’ and Hollis said he had done had enough of their big talk by then and he turned and walked off without giving no reply one way or the other.” (243)

Mrs. Cope swears that they will leave on the milk truck, when it comes to pick up the milk later in the day. The boys agree, and then do not show up. Sally says that she can take care of them, but her mother tells her to stay away from them. Sally watches from the window as her mother and Mrs. Pritchard search for the boys, and the boys sneak away from them. Mrs. Cope has not been inside long before Mrs. Pritchard comes running towards the house, shouting something. “They’ve let out the bull! . . . . Let out the bull!” (245). And in a second she is followed by the bull himself, ambling, black and leisurely, with four geese hissing at his heels. Mrs. Pritchard cannot stand an anticlimax. She requires the taste of blood from time to time to keep her equilibrium:

“I known a man oncet that his wife was poisoned by a child she had adopted out of pure kindness,” she said. When they returned from town, the boys were not on the embankment and she said,
"I would rather to see them than not to see them. When you see them you know what they're doing." (246)

That night Mrs. Cope and Sally sit on the porch until nearly ten o'clock and nothing happens. The only sounds come from tree frogs and from one whippoorwill who calls faster and faster from the same spot of darkness. "They've gone . . . . poor things" (247), and she begins to tell Sally how much they have to be thankful. The emblematic moments in this story provide the allegorical impetus. The boys come toting a "black pig-shaped valise" (249), which, Mrs. Pritchard discovers, is filled with food. They do not eat Mrs. Cope's food, but they do drink milk from the barn and ask her for water. She sees hunger on their faces, and against her better judgment she allows them to spend one night in the field, thus responds inadvertently to Christ's direction to feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, and takes in the stranger. She, of course, cannot give them the type of food or shelter they require. They must steal the milk from her, and she is helpless to force them off her land. She cannot respond to their needs, because she has not recognized that she, too, is needy.

Next morning, Sally puts on overalls, places two pistols in a holster, and sets off to find the boys, determined to get rid of them. When she finds them bathing in a cow trough, though, she hides and listens to them. Harper says he wished he lived on the farm; Garfield says he is glad he does not. Powell says that if the farm were not there, they would not have to think about it anymore. They get dressed, and Powell suggests they set fire to the woods. As the fire quickly spreads, Sally runs back to the house. When the boys set her woods on fire, the mother appears as she has never been seen before. She screams at the workers to hurry to put it out. Culver, knowing it is futile,
responds, “It’ll be there when we git there” (250). The child, Sally, looks at her, shocked into a new awareness: “It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself” (250-251). As she watches her woods burn, she realizes her link with others who have suffered in the past. She becomes one of those she pities earlier in the story. The boys dance in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel has cleared for them.” These are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo from Daniel 4-thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into the fiery furnace, and preserves by the Lord to be a witness to the King.36 Sally turns her head quickly, and past the Negroes’ ambling figures she can see the column of smoke rising and widening uncheck inside the “granite line of trees” (251). She stands taut, listening, and can just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy: “as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them” (251).

The visitation of misfortune and the question of thankfulness are most evident in this story. There are a few questions raised. When should one be thankful, and when cautious? If one is not thankful enough, will misfortune be greater? Does Mrs. Cope bring on her own troubles, or is her helplessness a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Misery is discussed as well. Mrs. Pritchard is fascinated by misery – almost as it were pure evidence of evil. The woman in the iron lung dies, with her baby, which also brings up the question of innocence and responsibility. In a sense, both Mrs. Cope and the boys are innocent, and responsible. Mrs. Cope sees how the combination of innocence and responsibility in the boys is disastrous – they have obviously not had
someone looking after them – but it is so different than anything she has experienced, she has no idea of how to respond. Her own misery is the result.

“A Late Encounter with the Enemy” was written in 1953 and published in 1955. It is O'Connor's only story to overtly refer to the American Civil War. O'Connor believed that with the loss of that war, the Southerner has “gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence – as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country.” Through the medium of the Civil War she expresses a deeper, more personal issue – the individual’s own contact with the essence of his or her true self. A picture of General and Mrs. William Jordan Bush on the first page of the Milledgeville Union-Recorder in August 1951 was the suggestion for Sally Poker and her grandfather George Poker Sash. Altering the relationship from husband-wife to grandfather-granddaughter, O'Connor also adds a Boy Scout nephew, young John Wesley, “a fat blond boy of ten with an executive expression” (258).

The story is loosely based upon a newspaper article about a Civil War veteran attending his wife's graduation that Flannery O'Connor read in the early 1950s. Typical of O'Connor, the little story deals with the darker sides of human relationships. In this case, each character has a (or more than one) flaw, the combinations of which create a dark humour. There is little to be said for the sympathetic qualities of the three characters, but the totality is more comedic than tragic. All three are simple, self-centered, and ultimately ridiculous. Yet, the author seems to ask the reader to forgive their foibles and go away ruminating on some of the absurdities of personal
relationships. Not only is the wry and ironic humour of O'Connor something to be admired, but the internalization of the old soldier's senility – the view from inside – is creative and to be considered for its potential validity. A Civil War antique, 104 year old General Sash, is the central figure. For him, “living has got to be such a habit... that he couldn't conceive of any other condition” (252).” This tale opens with a carefully crafted description of the absolute mutual inability of the Sash and his 62 year old granddaughter, Sally Poker, to operate on the same wave length.

Sally dotes on the fabricated fame of her ancient grandfather, and Sash, whose memory is essentially gone except for his recall of “beautiful guls” (254) and his love of being on stage, lives for the moment while scarcely grasping it. The story revolves around the later-in-life acquisition of a BS degree by Sally, and her need to have her famous grandfather behind her at the ceremony in his full Hollywood military attire. Colonel Sash never doubts that he will live to see his granddaughter's graduation: living has become a habit of his. But he prefers pretty girls and parades to ceremonies and processions. But he agreed to sit on stage and be seen. But Sally is not sure he will live. The world has a way of turning against her. Sally had endured for twenty years the heat of the Georgia summer to finish her degree – not to become a better teacher, but to show everyone what she comes from. She should have been resting, summers. That she came home each fall and taught exactly the way they told her not to was not enough revenge. She wants her grandfather on stage at the graduation, to show all those upstarts where she comes from, what is behind her and not them. She wants to stand on that stage and show the courage, honour, and pride of her background:
“See him! See him! My kin, all you upstarts! Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions! Dignity! Honour! Courage! See him!” One night in her sleep she screamed, “See him! See him!” and turned her head and found him sitting in his wheel chair behind her with a terrible expression on his face and with all his clothes off except the general’s hat and she had waked up and had not dared to go back to sleep again that night. (253)

He likes to sit on stages in his uniform, though it is not a real uniform. He was not a general, and cannot remember the Civil War or being a colonel. He does not like being asked questions about the past because he only remembers one past event, which took place twelve years ago: he was asked to come to an event put together by a motion picture company, and they gave him the uniform to wear, and renamed him General Sash, and put him in a parade with lots of pretty girls. He likes to sit on the porch and tell visitors about it, about all the pretty girls surrounding him. They gave him a sword, too.

They stayed in a fancy hotel room, and a limousine came to get them, and there were crowds outside the auditorium and all the important people, including the General, were going to be introduced on stage. Sally helped him up. The Confederate Battle Hymn is played and a blonde young man asked him how old he was – but “General Sash” did not want to leave the stage, and kept talking: “I kiss all the pretty girls!” (256). And only because Sally looked down at her feet and saw that she had forgotten to change out of her old oxfords did he get hauled off stage. She was so embarrassed. The colonel slept through the movie.
Since then, his feet stopped working and he only went down to the museum once a year on Confederate Memorial Day to sit in an exhibit in the museum in his uniform, sort of a living history exhibit. He scowled at the people who came through, and smacked a child who once tried to touch his sword. You could barely tell he was alive, except occasionally he talked about the movie premiere and the beautiful girls.

All goes as planned for Sally. She spends her last summer at school while relatives take care of the old man, and she makes all the arrangements for his appearance at the graduation. Her nephew, ten-year-old Boy Scout John Wesley, will wheel the old gentleman onto the stage. The day comes and she gets the old man dressed up:

"Aren't you just thrilled, Papa? . . . . I'm just thrilled to death!"
"Put the soward acrost my lap, damn you," the old man said, "where it'll shine."
She put it there and then stood back looking at him. "You look just grand," she said.
"God damn it," the old man said in a slow monotonous certain tone as if he were saying it to the beating of his heart. "God damn every goddam thing to hell."
"Now, now," she said and left happily to join the procession (258).

He swears at her and asks for his sword. She lines up with the other graduates, looking back to check the progress of the old man and the boy. The day is very hot. She knows that the old man, herself, and the boy in his crisp Boy Scout uniform will be the hit of the day. She loses track of them, and then catches the boy standing in the full sun
sipping a coke, while the old man sits half senseless baking in the sun. She chastises
the boy and tells them to get going on stage.

The final pages of the story enter — literally and figurative — into the head of the
“General” as he perceives his personal “black procession” (261). The old man thinks a
hole has opened in his head, and he cannot reach up to fill it with his finger, even. He
sees the procession and people in black keep picking up his hand and shaking it and
putting it back. The stately music enters his head through the hole. The procession
makes a black pool in front of him, though he does not know what the whole thing is
about. Then one of the black robes is talking, about him, and he is wheeled forward and
the boy bows and bows again. Sash wants to think of the pretty girls, but words from
the speech come to him, place names, people, familiar from the past, but not quite
clear. The words pursue him, come after him like the black procession: “The words
began to come toward him and he said, Dammit! I ain’t going to have it! And he started
edging backwards to get out of the way” (261). He cannot get away from them, he tries
to run, his past pursues him and he tries to get away, to look over the black to his
future, and clutches his sword into the bones of his hand. Sally receives her scroll,
finally, and glances over at the old man, whose eyes are wide and face fiercely set. As
soon as it is all over, John Wesley makes a bee-line for the coke machine. Sally finds
him in line, waiting with the corpse of the old man.

The story touches on several dichotomies dear to O’Connor: past/present,
history/moment, old/young, and desire/fear. The past here literally comes after the old
man, and it means something quite vague to Sally. The present moment, the ceremony,
is a moment of glory for both of them, but not in the usual way. And it backfires on Sally.

The old man hates history, hates to have it imposed on him. He realizes that it really does not have much to do with him. He prefers the young flesh of the moment, the pretty girls he can see and touch. The girls are much more real to him than events he cannot remember. John Wesley is very young, a Boy Scout but mostly a boy. Of course he wants a coke on a hot day, and is oblivious to the old man's distress. Sally did not foresee this problem, and though her desires are satisfied, so are her worst fears.

Thus both major characters have a late encounter with the enemy, and both learn something not entirely articulated but suggested by the author. For Sally, the adversary is pride, for Sash, the little enemy is History and his stubborn refusal to understand its importance; but for him, as well, the enemy is his own sense of inflated self. For Sally, receiving her degree pales in its importance to having her grandfather sit on the stage so that the people in the audience can see her rich heritage. Sash, on the other hand, is interested in attracting people. Both characters use one another to move the self into a superior position. At the precise instant of her brief time onstage, a moment of grace occurs for each of them. This late encounter is realized instantly and finally for the old man and beyond the end of the story for the new graduate.

The contents of the collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* had already been decided when O'Connor finished "Good Country People" and wanted to add it at the last moment. It was published in *Harper's Bazaar* in June 1955, the same month the collection was available. At the end of the magazine story, an editor's note calls
attention to the collection: “Allen Tate, the distinguished American poet and critic, considers ‘Good Country People’ ‘the most powerful story of maimed souls by a contemporary writer.’” 40

“Good Country People” is one of Flannery O’Connor’s most successful and frequently anthologized stories. As with many of her works, “Good Country People” addresses themes of good versus evil, the possibility of redemption achieved through an encounter with violence, and the foolishness of intellectual pretensions. It is a complex short story, showing the disgusting results of a belief system that denies meaning in life. The end results of a nihilistic philosophy of life are hideous. Many people hold destructive opinions without considering their full implications. O’Connor uses characterization, symbolism, and irony to warn people with a nihilistic philosophy of life that their beliefs will inevitably lead to ruin.

The story begins with a description of Mrs. Freeman, specifically concerning her interactions with Mrs. Hopewell. She has been working for Mrs. Hopewell for four years, and the two women often converse over breakfast in the Hopewell’s kitchen. Mrs. Hopewell considers Mrs. Freeman to be extremely nosy, but she knew that before she hired her and has dealt with this problem by making sure that it is Mrs. Freeman’s job to know everything; she is in charge of the whole household. Mrs. Hopewell likes to say that the Freemans and their girls are good country people. When Mrs. Hopewell checked out their references, before she hired them, one gentleman told her that Mrs. Freeman was a problem — into everyone’s business. Mrs. Hopewell, who had no other real possibilities, decided to hire them anyway and put Mrs. Freeman in
charge of knowing everything. Mrs. Hopewell was good at seeing people's usefulness, and the Freeman's had been with her four years.

Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell's favorite sayings. Another was: this is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too. She would make these statements, usually at the table, in a tone of gentle insistence as if no one held them but her, and the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage has obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it. (264-265)

Hulga (born, Joy), Mrs. Hopewell's daughter, is in constant contact with a vain but simple-minded mother and an apparently simple-minded but shrewd hired woman. Mrs. Hopewell survives in a self-made world of illusion, isolating herself from the real world by mouthing pseudo-philosophical, clichéd maxims which only isolate her further from her daughter who has a PhD in philosophy. Included in Mrs. Hopewell's repertoire of good country philosophy are such old standards as "You're the wheel behind the wheel . . . . I know it. I've always been quick. It's some that are quicker than others . . . . Everybody is different" (265). But, significantly, Mrs. Hopewell cannot reconcile herself to a daughter who is different, despite the fact that Mrs. Hopewell can sound as though she has an all-accepting, catholic compassion. In fact, Mrs. Hopewell would probably sum up her inability to understand her daughter by saying, "She is brilliant, but she does not have a grain of sense" (268). Consequently, Mrs. Hopewell considers Hulga's acts of rebellion to be little more than pranks of an immature mind.
Hulga's manner of dress also contributes to the vast misunderstanding that exists between the two women. Mrs. Hopewell thinks that Hulga's wearing "a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it" (268) is idiotic, proof that despite Hulga's PhD and her name change, she is "still a child" (268). Mrs. Hopewell is convinced that Joy pondered until she "hit upon the ugliest name in any language" (266), and then legally changed her name. When Joy decided to change her name to Hulga, it reminded her mother of "the broad blank hull of a battleship" (266). And O'Connor describes Hulga's response to her former name, Joy, as "purely mechanical" (266).

It is precisely Hulga's PhD degree in philosophy which creates a major problem between the two women. Mrs. Hopewell thinks that girls should go to school and have a good time – but Hulga has attained the ultimate educational degree, and yet education did not bring her out; Mrs. Hopewell is glad that there is "no more excuse for her to go to school again" (267). Mrs. Hopewell would like to brag about her daughter, as she can brag about Mrs. Freeman's daughters, but bragging about Hulga is next to impossible. Mrs. Hopewell cannot say, "My daughter is a philosopher" (268). That statement, as Mrs. Hopewell knows, is something that "ended with the Greeks and Romans" (268).

Mrs. Hopewell is embarrassed and angry about her daughter's behaviour, but she knows that she must ultimately accept it – because of the hunting accident which cost Joy her leg when she was ten. This misfortune is compounded by a doctor's opinion that Hulga will not live past forty because of a heart condition; furthermore,
Hulga has been deprived of ever dancing and having what Mrs. Hopewell calls "normal good times" (266). The chasm between the two women is even further deepened by Mrs. Hopewell's attitude toward the Freeman girls – as opposed to her attitude toward Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell likes to praise Glynese and Carramae by telling people that they are “two of the finest girls” (264) she knows, and she also praises their mother, Mrs. Freeman, as a lady whom “she was never ashamed to take ... anywhere or introduce ... to anybody they might meet” (264).

In contrast, Mrs. Hopewell is deeply ashamed of Hulga’s name, the way she dresses, and her behaviour. Hulga’s own attitude toward the two Freeman girls is one of repulsion. She calls them “Glycerin” and “Caramel” (261) (oily and sticky sweet). Mrs. Hopewell is aware that Hulga disapproves of the Freeman girls, but she herself remains enchanted by them, totally unconscious of her own daughter's deep need to be accepted – even though Hulga states that “If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM” (266). Mrs. Hopewell had told Hulga, in simple, good country terms, that a smile on her face would improve matters: “a smile never hurt anything” (268). In a moment of seemingly immense insight, Hulga lashed out at her mother, yelling, “We are not our own light!” (268).

Mrs. Freeman diagnoses Carramae’s morning sickness as a pregnancy “in the tube” (274), and, by contrast, in the next sentence Joy/Hulga cracks “her two eggs into a saucer” (274). Joy/Hulga, with her advanced degrees, is more than twice Carramae’s age, yet her sexual experience is nil. Her belief in nothing is based on Martin Heidegger’s writings, and her studies encompass the French philosopher Nicolas
Malebranche, who correlated sensation with mental creation to correspond with things in the physical creation. Hulga lumbers around the house and stomps into the kitchen one morning while the two women are talking. Hulga makes eggs while her mother considers how she probably should not have earned a PhD in philosophy, since it has not brought her any good. Hulga has a weak heart and probably does not have long to live, which is why she lives at home. Her mother also connects her education to her lack of faith in God, since she has read a passage suggesting this in one of Hulga’s science books.

As Hulga makes eggs, her mother wonders what she said to the Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, who visited the day before. He arrived with a large valise, apparently lugging around Bibles to sell, and charmed Mrs. Hopewell with his simple-mindedness. He told her that he was just a poor country boy and that he had a heart condition that might kill him soon. He did not want to go to college; he just wanted to sell Bibles. Mrs. Hopewell was moved to invite him to stay for dinner, during which Hulga completely ignored him.

After dinner, Manley overstayed his welcome telling Mrs. Hopewell about his poor family for two hours. When he finally left, Hulga was standing in the road and he stopped near her to talk. Mrs. Hopewell watched from afar, but could not hear what was said. Now, Mrs. Hopewell wonders what was said between her daughter and Manley as Mrs. Freeman prattles on about her daughters. Eventually, Mrs. Hopewell brings up the Bible salesman and Mrs. Freeman mentions that she saw him leave; clearly, she saw him talking to Hulga as well.
Hulga stomps off to her bedroom. She is supposed to meet Manley at the gate at ten o’clock. She remembers their conversation the evening before, during which she lied to him and said she was only seventeen years old, and he told her he thought she was “real sweet” (275). They connected about the fact that they both might die soon from a heart condition, and he invited her on a picnic for the next day. Now, she sets off to meet him at the gate. That night, she lies in bed imagining dialogues between herself and Pointer that are insane on the surface but which reach below to depths that no Bible salesman would be aware of. “Their conversation . . . had been of that kind” (275), she says. She also imagines that she has seduced him and will have to deal with his remorse. She also imagines that she takes his remorse and changes it into a deeper understanding of life. Finally, Hulga imagines that she takes away all of Pointer’s shame and turns it into something useful.

She finds it easy to continue her misconceptions about his innocence and her wisdom. Their kiss – Hulga’s first – is used by O’Connor to indicate that Hulga’s plan may not go as smoothly as she imagines. Even though the kiss causes an extra surge of adrenaline, like that which “enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house” (278), Hulga is now convinced that nothing exceptional happened and that everything is “a matter of the mind’s control” (278). The pink weeds and “speckled pink hillsides” (279) serve to emphasize how Hulga is slowly losing control of the situation.

Having made her commitment to Pointer, Hulga allows herself to indulge in a fantasy in which “she would run away with him and … every night he would take the
leg off and every morning put it back on again” (281). Since she has surrendered her leg (now functioning emblematically as her soul) to Pointer, Hulga feels “entirely dependent on him” (282). Hulga’s epiphany, or moment of grace, occurs as a result of Pointer’s betrayal of her faith in him and his destruction of her intellectual pretensions. Prior to his betrayal of her, Hulga considered herself to be the intellectual superior of all those around her. She relied upon the wisdom of this world to guide her, contrary to the biblical warning to “See to it that no one deceives you by philosophy and vain deceit, according to human traditions, according to the elements of the world and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

However, in order for Hulga to progress beyond her present state, it is necessary for her to realize that “God turned to foolishness the ‘wisdom’ of this world” (1 Corinthians 1:20). From Hulga’s point of view, the surrender of her leg was an intellectual decision; consequently, the destruction of her faith in the power of her own intellect can come only through betrayal by the one whom she rationally decided to believe in, to have faith in. Manley Pointer plays his role by removing Hulga’s leg and setting it out of her reach. When she asks that he return it, he refuses, and from a hollowed-out Bible (emblematic perhaps of his own religious condition), he produces whiskey, prophylactics, and playing cards with pornographic pictures on them. When a shocked Hulga asks whether or not he is “good country people” (282), as he claims he is, Pointer replies, “Yeah . . . but it ain’t held me back none. I’m as good as you any day in the week” (282). Disillusioned, Hulga tries to reach her wooden leg (soul) only to have Pointer easily push her down. Physically defeated, Hulga attempts to use her
intellect to shame Pointer into returning the leg. You’re a fine Christian! . . . You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all – say one thing and do another” (283), only to hear Pointer tell her that he is not a Christian. As Pointer is leaving the barn loft with Hulga’s wooden leg, he further disillusions Hulga by telling her that he has obtained a number of interesting things from other people, including a glass eye, in the same way that he took Hulga’s leg. Pointer’s final comment strips Hulga of her last resource – her feeling of intellectual superiority. “And I’ll tell you another thing,” Pointer says, “You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born” (283). Consequently, it is a totally chastened Hulga who turns “her churning face toward the opening” (283) and watches Pointer disappear, a “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.” (283)

It seems odd that the story, whose focus is Hulga and her wooden leg, begins with a description of Mrs. Freeman and her interactions with Mrs. Hopewell. But this characterization is important, since Mrs. Hopewell believes the Freemans to be “good country people” (265). Later, she decides that Manley must also come from “good country people” (271), which turn out to be a gross misconception. When he tells her that he is just a simple country boy, she answers, “Why! Good country people are the salt of the earth!” (271).

This elevation of what Mrs. Hopewell considers “good country people” is linked to the theme of disgust with the world in general, which is prevalent in many of O’Connor’s stories. Mrs. Hopewell tells Manley, “I think there aren’t enough good country people in the world! . . . I think that’s what’s wrong with it . . . You don’t see
any more real honest people unless you go way out in the country" (271). Of course, this judgment of Manley is incorrect, since he is a liar and swindler.

Hulga’s deformity, her missing leg, has shaped her as a character. She used to be insecure about her wooden leg, but now she reveres it as her defining quality, besides her education. She takes care of it by herself and never lets anyone see it. However, this type of attitude without any faith in God is represented as leading to her downfall, since once she lets Manley take off her leg, she becomes extremely vulnerable. She does not know how to be without it, so she panics, and he ends up stealing it and abandoning her in the loft.

Hulga’s education is connected to her lack of faith in God, especially in the mind of her mother. When Mrs. Hopewell reads one of her daughter’s science books, the words “worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish” (269). Hulga tells Manley that she does not believe in God. Instead, during their interactions, she tries to maintain control of her mind. When he kisses her, she is pleased to discover that it is just “a matter of the mind’s control” (278). Before he tells her he loves her, “her mind never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings” (279). But operating in this way leaves her handicapped when she becomes vulnerable. When Manley tells her that he likes her wooden leg because it makes her different, “she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood” (281). Her mind, of course, is incapable of this feat.

As is common in many of O’Connor’s stories, eyes are an important symbol. In this case, they are used to reveal that the people whom Mrs. Hopewell believes to be
“good country people” are in fact nothing of the sort. In the opening of the story, Mrs. Freeman’s face is compared to a truck, specifically with regard to the action of her eyes: “Her eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it” (263). This aggressive gaze is referenced again at the end of the story as she and Mrs. Hopewell watch Manley walk away after abandoning Hulga in the loft: her “gaze drove forward” (284). Manley, also believed by Mrs. Hopewell to come from “good country people,” has eyes that are described violently as he is distracted by Hulga’s disconnected wooden leg: “Every now and then the boy, his eyes like two steel spikes, would glance behind him where the leg stood” (282).

In this grotesque story, O’Connor develops several themes. We see that Hulga has never really grown up. She is acting like a rebellious teenager, stomping around the house, slamming doors, accusing her mother of being stupid, wearing a grungy old skirt and a sweatshirt with a cowboy on it. We see also her pride in her own intellect and in her mastery of existentialism, which comes crashing down when she is so gullible and naive as to be easily manipulated by the young “Bible salesman” (269).

Hulga may actually be on some kind of spiritual search, in spite of her denial that God exists. She is fooled by Manley, who makes her think he is a simple religious country bumpkin way beneath her. But Manley is much more worldly-wise than Hulga; he seduces her, instead of the other way around. And she is left sitting alone in a hay loft without her glasses and without her wooden leg. He, in fact, is not innocent and tells her he has been believing in nothing ever since he was born. Hulga is a maimed
soul, maimed. Part of the brilliant writing in this story shows how people tend to use clichés in ways that make it easy for them to avoid thinking or seeing clearly.

O'Connor published a short version of "The Displaced Person" in the Fall 1954 *Sewanee Review*. The rewritten and expanded final rendering in the collection is in three parts, with the first part substantively changed. The powerful description of Mrs. Shortley's physical stature, for example, was dropped: "It was the kind of stomach that the faces of Washington, Jefferson, and Lee might have been carved on, or a sign splashed that said, DAMNATION TO THE EVIL-DOER. YOU WILL BE UNCOVERED." 43

In "The Displaced Person" Flannery O'Connor focuses on the ill treatment meted out to a Polish refugee seeking shelter on a farm in the American South during or shortly after World War II. The story presents a grim vision of America. It highlights extreme characters troubled by poverty, lack of opportunity, as well as racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. The story seems to be a call to change; O'Connor writes with a ray of hope, recognition of human frailty, and belief in the possibility of renewal and redemption for all. O'Connor often used religious themes in her work and her own family hired a displaced person after World War II.

The story takes place on a farm in Georgia, just after World War II in the 1940s. The owner of the farm, Mrs. McIntyre is about sixty, a widow and twice married after that. The farm belonged to her first husband, a judge she once worked for who was much older than her. They actually had a few good years, and after he died and she discovered that he was nearly penniless, she became determined to make something of
the only thing he left her: the family farm. She is always looking for decent hired help, fires people often, and has recently been convinced by a local priest, Father Flynn, to try hiring a family displaced by the war in Europe.

The Shortleys are the hired help at the start of the story. Mr. Shortly is the dairyman – slow and a bit lazy – and Mrs. Shortly has been a friend to Mrs. McIntyre. Mrs. Shortly is distrustful, knows which side the bread is buttered on, and has been impressed by pictures of the death-camp victims in Europe. Mrs. Shortley climbs a hill, with "The Peacock was following up the road to the hill where she meant to stand" (285), and watches as a black car pulls up to Mrs. McIntyre’s house. Astor and Sulk watch, too, from behind a tree, but they do not see Mrs. Shortley watching them. The peacock is one of O'Connor’s most symbolically resonant figures. In addition, the eyes in the feathers are thought to represent either God’s omniscience or the Church’s eternal presence. So in “The Displaced Person” when Mrs. Shortley is followed very closely by a peacock, the implication is that God was in pursuit. Mrs. Shortley, however, is indifferent, keeping her back to the bird. Furthermore, “she ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder and cast her gaze down the red clay road that turned off from the highway” (285).

An old priest, gets out of the car, and then a family: a woman and two children (a boy and a girl), and a man with a sway-back. He is the Displaced Person they have all been hearing about, a Polish refugee, and Mrs. McIntyre is hiring him. Only the boy speaks any English, and Mrs. Shortley watches him translate. She and Mrs. McIntyre
have been calling this family the "Gobblehooks" (286), being unable to pronounce the name. Mrs. Shortley moves forward and Mrs. McIntyre introduces her and asks where Mr. Shorty is. Mrs. Shortley says he does not have time to rest or visit. Mrs. McIntyre calls them the Guizacs now. The Guizac's are from Poland, and are very grateful to be placed with Mrs. McIntyre. Mr. Guizac is hard working, honest, and barely speaks English, though he probably understands more than he lets on. He sees things very practically, and does not understand Mrs. McIntyre, always, or her preferences, but is deferential and bends to his work. His hard work puts a lot of money into Mrs. McIntyre's hands, and he knows this.

The two hired Negroes Astor and Sulk are supposedly half-lazy, but the older one (Astor) is very aware of what is going on – he has been on the farm since before Mrs. McIntyre. He keeps his mouth shut, but knows the score. The younger man, Sulk, is more gullible, but he knows the probable outcome of his deal making with Guizac as well. He is not so clever with Mrs. McIntyre. Father Flynn, the old priest, is happy to find a place for the Guizacs, and would like to convert Mrs. McIntyre. But he is very non-confrontational. He will not discuss problems with Mrs. McIntyre. He would rather admire her peacocks. He idolizes their beauty and catches sight of the peacock, and exclaims that he is the most beautiful bird he's ever seen, "A tail full of suns" (289).

Mrs. McIntyre thinks he is daffy – the priest looks like an amazed little boy. The priest drives the Guizacs to their new shack-house, and Mrs. Shortley finds Astor and Sulk behind the tree and asks them what they think. They had never heard of the
Displaced Person, and want to know what the word “displaced” means. Mrs. Shortley explains that it means they have nowhere to be. Astor asserts that they are here, and that is someplace. Mrs. Shortley thinks Negroes are daft. She tells them to get to work or they will be replaced by people like the Guizacs.

Three weeks later Mr. Guizac has done so much work, and accomplished so many tasks, that Mrs. McIntyre is enthralled. And besides, she thinks, “If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?” (287). The week before, he had come upon Sulk at the dinner hour, sneaking with a croker sack into the pen where the “young turkeys were.” (293) The Negro mutters and grumbles and says, “God might strike him dead if he had been stealing any turkey, he had only been taking it to put some black shoe polish on its head because it had the sorehead. God might strike him dead if that was not the truth before Jesus” (293). Mrs. McIntyre sighs with pleasure:

“At last,” she said, “I’ve got somebody I can depend on. For years I’ve been fooling with sorry people. Sorry people. Poor white trash and niggers,” she muttered. “They’ve drained me dry. Before you all came I had Ringfields and Collins and Jarrells and Perkins and Pinkins and Herrins and God knows what all else and not a one of them left without taking something off this place that didn’t belong to them. Not a one!” (293)

Mrs. Shortley’s furor finally works into a rage, culminates in her making her family leave the farm. On their way out Mrs. Shortley has another vision, one that puts her into a catatonic state. According to one critic, it is “the most clearly developed case
of demonic revelation in O'Connor's works. This perversion of the golden rule becomes the key statement of the story, for before revelation can occur Mrs. Shortley has to be divested of her idea that she must do unto others as they have done unto her. As she comes to recognize the commonality of all persons, she will realize that she, too, is a displaced person. She says of her husband emphatically, "It is no man ... that work as hard as Chancey, or is as easy with a cow, or is more of a Christian" (296). If faith exists at all in her, it is works-oriented, which makes it all the more surprising that she is chosen by God to prophesy.

When Mrs. McIntyre buys a new silage machine and Mr. Guizac proves his worth by being able to run it efficiently, Mrs. Shortley says that the field may be cut in two days, "if don't no terrible accident occur" (296). The accident does not occur in Mrs. Shortley's lifetime, but when it does occur in Mr. Guizac's and ruins Mrs. McIntyre. Recognizing the Guizacs' threat to her own position, Mrs. Shortley begins to read Scripture, concentrating on the Apocalypse and the Prophets. She begins to see that she is part of a mysterious plan, but once again, she sees only half the truth. She sees plainly that the meaning of the world is a mystery that has been planned and she is not surprised to suspect that she has a special part in the plan because she is strong.

She sees that the Lord God Almighty has created the strong people to do what has to be done and she felt that she will be ready when she is called. Mrs. McIntyre, who believes that with the Guizacs' arrival she has been saved, must learn the true meaning of salvation. She, unlike Mrs. Shortley, recognizes the worth of Mr. Guizac. She does not know anything about him except that he does the work. The truth
is that he is not very real to her yet. He is a kind of miracle that she has seen happen
and that she talks about but that she still does not believe.

The money is part of a plan to bring his sixteen-year old cousin from a Polish
work camp to this country. In exchange, he promises the girl’s hand to the black man.
Mrs. McIntyre is appalls and disillusioned. She stumbles upon truth in her conclusion
that they are all the same but she does not yet see that she is herself of that sameness.
She decides to announce to the priest that she will let the Guizacs goes at the end of the
month, but in their conversation, she and the priest talk at cross purposes. Mrs.
McIntyre sees the truth, but it has not made her free. She dreams that the priest is
speaking to her of the Holocaust: “Dear lady, I know your tender heart won’t suffer
you to turn the porrrrr man out. Think of the thousands of them, think of the ovens and
the boxcars and the camps and the sick children and Christ Our Lord . . . He’s extra
and he’s upset the balance around here” (322).

Mrs. McIntyre learns that Sulk is engaged to be married to Mr. Guizac’s
sixteen-year-old cousin, who is trapped in a Polish detention camp. Mrs. McIntyre is
furious and unleashes her anger on Mr. Guizac, explaining that his white cousin cannot
marry her black employee. She tells him she will fire him if he takes it any further. He
tries to explain that the marriage might be the girl’s only chance to live, but she does
not care.

Father Flynn comes to visit, and Mrs. McIntyre has to drink some whiskey just
to get the nerve to talk to him. She tells him that Mr. Guizac is not satisfactory, because
he does not understand the Negroes. But Father Flynn does not really listen in
confrontational situations. He waits, and then tries talking about his interests – the fabulous bird, the peacock, for instance. The peacock fans his tail, and Father Flynn is so amazed, he says that “Christ will come like that!” (317), pointing to the peacock.

“He didn’t have to come in the first place” (317), Mrs. McIntyre responds several lines later, referring to Guizac. The priest, who is still thinking of the peacock and not really concentrating on Mrs. McIntyre’s words, replies, “He came to redeem us” (317). Mr. Shortley returns. Mrs. McIntyre sees the black car drive up and realizes she has missed Mrs. Shortley something terrible. Mr. Shortley gets out, and says that his wife had seen through the Pole from the first, and that she died of a stroke. He blames Mr. Guizac and vows revenge.

Mrs. McIntyre promises to fire Mr. Guizac but cannot. Mr. Shortley complains to the townspeople about her failure and they pressure her into action. Mrs. McIntyre goes to fire Mr. Guizac one Saturday morning. He is working beneath a tractor, with his legs sticking out. Sulk is nearby. Mr. Shortley parks the larger tractor on a hill. The break slips. The tractor starts to roll. Nobody warns Mr. Guizac and the tractor snaps his spine, killing him. Sulk and Mr. Shortley leave the farm.

Watching the priest administer the sacrament of last rites, Mrs. McIntyre “felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance” (326). This final emblem of the story shows the priest arriving with his bag of breadcrumbs for the peacocks, feeding them, and then sitting by Mrs. McIntyre’s bedside, expounding the “doctrines of the Church” (327), feeding her bit by bit, week
after week – breaking the bread of life. Like the gambler, the Displaced Person “came merely as a culmination, the apex if a human movement, and gets all the punishment.” Mrs. McIntyre has a nervous collapse and then steadily declines until she is blind, speechless, and bedridden. Visitors are rare, but the priest comes over once a week and talks to her about the Catholic religion.

Racism is an extremely important theme in this story, and is quite explicit in dialogue and in the characters’ judgments of each other. When Mrs. McIntyre asks Mrs. Shortley where her husband is during the Guizacs’ arrival, she answers, “He don’t have time to rest himself in the bushes like them niggers over there” (288). Later, while she discusses the Guizacs’ arrival with Astor and Sulk, O’Connor reveals that “The illogic of Negro thinking always irked Mrs. Shortley” (290). But Mrs. Shortley is also racist toward Europeans, and is suspicious of the Guizacs for this reason. In conversation with her husband, she reveals, “I’d rather have niggers than them Poles” (298). Mrs. McIntyre decides to do away with Mr. Guizac because he is trying to organize a marriage between his white cousin and Sulk, a black farmhand, even though her financial success will be negatively affected by his departure. Her racism is clear toward the black farmhands as well: “The niggers don’t leave - they stay and steal. A nigger thinks anybody is rich he can steal from” (294). Even Mr. Guizac, whose point of view never dominates the story, has racist feelings toward the black farmhands: “The Negroes made him nervous” (293).

Mr. Guizac can be interpreted as a Christ-like figure. This connection is most clear in Mrs. McIntyre’s outburst to Father Flynn that “Christ was just another
D.P" (320). (D.P. stands for "displaced person.") Likewise, the peacock on the McIntyre farm symbolizes Christian faith: Father Flynn and Astor, the only two characters who are concerned with religion, are also the only two characters who care about the bird. Mrs. Shortley, who "had never given much thought to the devil for she felt that religion was essentially for those people who didn't have the brains to avoid evil without it" (294), is followed around by a peacock in the very first sentence of the story, hinting at her chance to accept Christ. At first, she looks at the peacock with "unseeing eyes" (290), unable to open herself up to Grace. O'Connor, incidentally, uses the peacock as a major symbol here for the first time, a symbol which she explained in a letter to Janet McKane: "The eyes in the tail stand for the eyes of the Church." Later, she has a prophesy inspired by clouds that resemble fish – the fish is a universal symbol of Christ – that foreshadows her mental breakdown in the car as the family is sneaking off the McIntyre farm.

Throughout "The Displaced Person," point of view oscillates between characters. As the story begins, it is told from Mrs. Shortley's point of view; that is how the reader is first introduced to the Guizac family. In the second and third parts of the story, the reader mostly learns things from Mrs. McIntyre's point of view, although the reader also has moments of insight into Mr. Shortley's and Father Flynn's points of view. By denying Mr. Guizac a voice, O'Connor makes him the most sympathetic of the characters.

Though on the surface, the story's title refers to Mr. Guizac, who has physically been displaced from Poland, it can be interpreted as referring to Mrs. McIntyre. She is
the character most displaced from Grace, and she constantly displaces blame for her actions. Mr. Shortley, a witness to Mr. Guizac's murder, is also quite far from salvation. His figurative deadness is made clear in his own conversation with his wife, while he pretends to be a corpse. As she worries about their job on the farm, he says, "Don't worry me now, I'm a dead man" (297), and "If everybody was as dead as I am, nobody would have no trouble" (297), though she ignores him.

Eyes, which are a prominent symbol in many of O'Connor's short stories, are often violent in "The Displaced Person." When Mrs. McIntyre exclaims toward the beginning of the story that Mr. Guizac is her salvation, Mrs. Shortley looks straight ahead "as if her vision penetrated the cane and the hill and pierced through to the other side" (294) before answering that she would be suspicious of "salvation got from the devil" (294). Before her physical spasm in the car, Mrs. Shortley has "a peculiar lack of light in her icy blue eyes" (304); immediately following it, her eyes are "like blue-painted glass" (305) and in death she "seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country" (305). O'Connor borrows this line from a prayer to St. Raphael: "The prayer asks St. Raphael to guide us to the province of joy so that we may not be ignorant of the concerns of our true country." 47 Mrs. Shortley's myopic vision in the first part yields in the split second before death – expressed on her face immediately in death – to a larger understanding that in life she would not have been able to articulate. Mrs. Shortley is not blinded by the brilliance of the afternoon sun, and her description of the peacock's "tail full of suns" as "nothing but a peachicken" (289) staggers the old priest. This is evidence that her comprehension of
the mystery and wonder that exists in the world is crushed by her encapsulation in a code of manners that has long dictated her response to life. They change as a result of her religious vision. Mr. Guizac’s gaze is piercing when Mrs. McIntyre scolds him: “His eyes were like two bright nails behind his gold-rimmed spectacles” (313).

Language as a violent, animate entity is a recurring image in O’Connor’s stories: here, Mrs. Shortley’s fear of the Guizac family manifests as an imaginary battle between the Polish language and the English language: “She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other” (300). When Mrs. McIntyre yells at Father Flynn in Part III, “her voice fell across his brogue like a drill into a mechanical saw” (316). As Father Flynn preaches to her, Mrs. McIntyre does not listen, but rather waits for “an opportunity to drive a wedge into his talk” (320).

To conclude, one reader makes a very interesting and unique observation about 

_A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Other Stories:_

This stuff is twisted, sparse, clipped, dark, doomy, funny, dramatic, Southern, angry, sexy, super Catholic, death-haunted, maniacal, bizarre, possibly racist, apparently desperate, fatalistic, existential, dreary, ugly, fetid, frenzied, morbid, lax, stern, prepossessing, unforgiving, unrelenting, anti-everything, aged, “retro”, haunting, parabolic, anecdotal, moral, redemptive, sublime, reasoned, feverish, dreamlike, unsparing, sparse, I said that one already, seductive, craftsmanlike, worried, extremely well conceived, taut, brooding, polarizing, scary, and powerful.
I literally didn’t know one could write like this until I heard her do it. I didn’t know that the human mind would conceive of this until she did. Not that it’s simply freaky- o no, that would be too easy- it’s just so carefully done and well-proportioned in its flatness and its odd grace.

Masterpieces, pretty much to a story.⁴⁸
REFERENCES


3. A tape of the *Galley-Proof* show featuring O'Connor is housed in the O'Connor collection in the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia College in Milledgeville. This tape makes available the only extant means to see O'Connor and hear her talk.


16. “The Misfit explains his philosophy clearly and its echoes can be heard in the voices of Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and other alienated agnostics. Because he 'wasn't there,' and 'he couldn’t know,' he refused to open his mind to belief. Some writers might have made him an existential hero, but Flannery O'Connor portrays the moral sterility of his world.” Kathleen Feeley, in *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*, 73.


19. Attracted by what she called a “wonderful quotation,” (Letters 126), O'Connor borrows from Saint Cyril of Jerusalem.


24. Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners 94.


35. Nathaniel Hawthorne explores this idea in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” in terms not unfamiliar to O'Connor, who considered him “a very great writer indeed” (The Habit of Being 70).


39. According to Mary Barbara Tate, Atkinson Auditorium at Georgia College is the setting for this story, a setting O’Connor would have known from her college days there.


