Chapter II

Art as Vocation

O'Connor's practice of fiction stems from certain fundamental assumptions about the nature and function of the literary artefact and the role of the artist. The writer enters into a story both as a writer and as a human being. These two subject positions are not necessarily congruent or coincident, even though there may be large and important areas of overlap. They are revealed to be interactive in a paradoxical way. O'Connor thinks of the role of the artist as a vocation, as a consecration to a craft one gradually discovers in oneself rather than a deliberated choice. It is a gift from God that the artist can employ in order to lead men towards salvation. The paradox arises from the fact that even though art is a vocation, the artist is never more or less than the average human being. Several of her stories featuring artists deal with the dichotomy between the writer as artist and as man and implicitly seem to suggest that these two identities need to be reconciled. In others, the writer as artist seeks to overcome the resistance he might feel to common humanity by the exercise of a profound charity in the conception and delineation of character.

"The Partridge Festival" presents the protagonist Calhoun who is torn between his innate commercial instincts and the exactions of his assumed role as a literary artist. He has proved himself successful in business, and is haunted by the guilt engendered by his inability to devote all his time to the service of art, which, he thinks, is his vocation. He has come to Partridge in order to render a literary account of the Singleton incident. Singleton has been committed to the
State Mental Hospital of Quincy for murdering six citizens of Partridge consequent upon his trial and punishment by a mock court for not buying an Azalea Festival Badge.\(^1\) Calhoun considers Singleton to be a wronged saviour figure, and goes about gathering material for his projected literary defence of the mad murderer. He hopes that this exercise will contribute to mitigating his own sense of guilt. But the various interviews he conducts at Partridge and his direct encounter with Singleton at Quincy in the company of Mary Elizabeth shatter his illusions and help him discover his true vocation not in art but in business. The narrative distances itself throughout from Calhoun’s belief in the superiority of the artistic over the business vocation.

Even Calhoun’s arrival at his great-aunts’ house under the pretext of participating in the festival is presented by the text as indicative of his doubleness: his natural liking for profit, and his professed attachment to art. The description of his car, his careful movement and apprehensive appearance are evocative of his nature: “Calhoun parked his small pod-shaped car in the driveway to his great-aunts’ house and got out cautiously, looking to the right and left as if he expected the profusion of azalea blossoms to have a lethal effect upon him.”\(^2\) If the smallness of the car is suggestive of the finitude of his perception (a handicap to his artistic ambition), its pod-shape indicates the hollowness of his claim to be a prospective writer. His dread of the lethal effect of the azalea blossoms indicates his fear of Partridge itself, which, he thinks, is overwhelmingly corrupt and cruel. His cautious movement appears to be characteristic of the salesman in him who would perhaps be expected to look at business prospects in Partridge in


\(^2\) Flannery O’Connor, Collected Works, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988) 773. All subsequent page references to the book will be incorporated into the text with a prefatory CW.
the light of the Singleton incident. His fundamental depravity with regard to the aesthetic sense is further expressed in his disapproving response towards the crowded growth of azaleas. Contrary to his expectation, “the old ladies had three terraces crammed with red and white azaleas, beginning at the sidewalk and running backwards to the very edge of their imposing unpainted house” (*CW 773*). Instead of appreciating its beauty, he associates the wild growth of the plants with the frenzied mood of Partridge running backwards to the primitive, exacting, uncouth social order which, in his opinion, led to the Singleton incident. But if Calhoun thinks that the artistic impulse involves the pursuit of truth, it is clear that he himself is too biased to find it. Thus, the text implicitly suggests his inaptitude for artistic pursuits while acknowledging his potential for trade.

The ambivalent nature of Calhoun’s personality is also evident in his hypocritical dealings with the great-aunts. He exploits their pride in their great father who had initiated the town’s festival: “They would take his voluntary presence in Partridge at Azalea Festival time to be a sign that his character was improving. . . . He was here only because Singleton had captured his imagination, but he had told his Aunt Bessie over the telephone that he was coming to enjoy the festival” (*CW 773*). Calhoun’s presence in Partridge is ‘voluntary’ in so far as he wants to meet the people of the town on the Singleton issue. Ironically, his projected interest in the festival as a mark of accepting ancestral values turns out to be true. The cold indifference he exhibits at the time of his reception also betrays his dubious character: “He passed stolidly on to the porch to get over the preliminaries with his aunts. . . . After each had embraced him, he dropped limply into a rocker and gave them a sheepish smile” (*CW 773*). The formalities of reception are only grudgingly tolerated by him, as the adverbs ‘stolidly’ and ‘limply’ suggest.
The ‘sheepish smile’ comes as the culmination of his duplicity, which stands in the way of the artistic representation he is bent upon.

Calhoun’s dissembling nature is again revealed through the equivocal remarks he makes on the effect of the Singleton incident on the Partridge festival. Seizing upon Aunt Mattie’s remark that his great-grandfather would have been delighted to see his active involvement in the festival, Calhoun drags her into a discussion on his favourite topic: “‘Well,’ the boy yelled back, ‘what about the little extra excitement you’ve had this time?’” (*CW* 773). The verb ‘yell’ with its American sense of shouting in support of a sports team is suggestive of his approach to the incident. His predilection for Singleton, who, according to his reading, is maddened by the community into committing the crime, is not the shared belief of Aunt Mattie as is evident from her response: “‘An unfortunate incident,’ his Aunt Mattie said. ‘It mars the festive spirit’” (*CW* 774). The nearby girl who too believes Singleton is wronged by society resents the old lady’s displeasure. She shows her protest by slamming the book she is reading. Calhoun, on the other hand, seems to encourage his great-aunt using double-talk: “‘As I passed through town I saw more people than ever before and all the flags were up. Partridge,’ he shouted, ‘will bury its dead but will not lose a nickel.’ The girl’s front door slammed in the middle of the sentence” (*CW* 774). On account of his equivocation the implication of his utterance is lost upon the old ladies and also the girl next door. While his great-aunts see no potential threat in his statements, the girl violently protests by slamming her front door as Calhoun himself does elsewhere in the story (*CW* 784). Calhoun’s equivocation amounts to misrepresentation, questioning the credibility of his language. It is a weakness that cannot be tolerated in a literary artist. But behind his apparent dissembling lurks his latent preference for ancestral qualities, which mould him
into a successful businessman. The narrative implicitly suggests that his dissembling nature is symbolic of the commercial drive in him.

The narrative constantly underscores Calhoun’s basic commercial instincts as inherited from his great-grandfather despite his own imaginative identification with art. His great-aunts have already recognized the physical similarity between the two; Aunt Bessie tells him: “You look very like Father” (CW 774). This physical likeness is seen as a prelude to the perfect similitude to be attained in future. Hence, Aunt Mattie’s prophecy: “As you get older, you’ll look more and more like Father” (CW 775). The great-aunts’ claim is corroborated at the narrative level by the juxtaposition of Calhoun’s own assessment of the physical appearance of his great-grandfather and his evaluation of his own face as reflected in the barber’s mirror. Studying the old man’s miniature Calhoun himself uneasily recognizes features and characteristics that are his own: “The old man—round-faced, bald, altogether unremarkable-looking—sat with his hands knotted on the head of a black stick. His expression was all innocence and determination. The master merchant, the boy thought, and flinched” (CW 774). Significantly he finds the very same ordinariness in his own reflection a little later in the story: “He was confronted with an image that was round-faced, unremarkable-looking and innocent” (CW 781). We notice that the adjectives used in both cases are identical: ‘round-faced,’ ‘unremarkable-looking’ and ‘innocent.’

The identical physical features suggest their psychological affinity and account for their common successful business urge.

Calhoun’s failure to live up to the expectations of his proposed vocation and the consequent guilt are presented by the narrative as a sequel to his inability to identify his true vocation. He thinks he is an artist and schedules his life to suit the demands of art. Accordingly,
For the three summer months of the year, he lived with his parents and sold air-conditioners, boats, and refrigerators so that for the other nine months he could afford to meet life naturally and bring his real self—the rebel-artist-mystic—to birth. During these other months he lived on the opposite side of the city in an unheated walk-up with two other boys who also did nothing. But guilt for the summer pursued him into the winter. (CW 776)

Calhoun’s desire to ‘bring his real self—the rebel-artist-mystic—to birth’ is not attested by his temperament or vocation. The term ‘artist’ in the hyphenated epithet questions the innate truthfulness of his fantastical world where the terms ‘rebel’ and ‘mystic’ lose their desired density. His refusal to accept his father’s offer to finance his flat so that he could avoid the orgy of selling also shows his hypocrisy and insincerity and his natural preference for business enterprise. Instead of acknowledging the truth of his vocation, Calhoun tries to deceive himself and others by continually sticking to his assumed role as an artist.

Calhoun’s struggle to suppress his innate business urge in favour of his assumed artistic self turns out to be a fight against the irrepressible driving force behind his divinely ordained profession. He knows very well that he shares the very same commercial instincts as his great-grandfather who had been “the most forward-looking merchant Partridge ever had” (CW 774) and whose contribution to the city’s business had been the festival. Selling is so natural to him and it involves his whole personality in such a deep way that he cannot keep away from it even if it helps finance his proposed artistic pursuit. For he enjoyed selling. In the face of a customer, he was carried outside himself; his face began to beam and sweat and all complexity left him; he was in the grip of a drive as strong as the drive of some men for liquor or a woman; and he was
horribly good at it. He was so good at it that the company had given him an achievement scroll. He had put quotation marks around the word *achievement* and he and his friends used the scroll as a target for darts. (*CW* 777, emphases as in the text)

The joy that he experiences at selling and the ‘achievement scroll’ he has secured in his profession speak out for the genuineness of his vocation as a businessman. Therefore, his contempt for this ‘horribly good’ talent and his mistreatment of the ‘scroll’ amount to challenging and denying the wisdom of God that fashions him into a successful businessman in the tradition of his great-grandfather.

Singleton flashes into the dreamy world of Calhoun as a saviour when he is confounded by confusion and guilt. The very sight of his picture is enough to move him: “As soon as he had seen Singleton’s picture in the paper, the face began to burn in his imagination like a dark reproachful liberating star” (*CW* 777). The ‘dark reproachful liberating star’ bears intertextual reference to the star of Bethlehem, about which we read in the Gospel according to St. Matthew: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’” (*Matt.* 2, 1-2).\(^3\) Just as the wise men were initiated by the star into a hazardous but salvific journey to Bethlehem, Calhoun attributes to Singleton the role of his liberator who has exposed the real state of his guilt. He plans to write an exposé in defence of Singleton’s basic innocence: “He expected to write something that would vindicate the man and he expected the writing of it to mitigate his own guilt,

\(^3\) The Biblical citations in this dissertation are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Tennessee: The Melton Book Company, 1989) unless specified otherwise.
for his doubleness, his shadow, was cast before him more darkly than usual in the light of Singleton’s purity” (*CW* 776). He attributes to Singleton the role of his saviour whose virtues exist only in his fantastic world. Similarly, his quest for the proposed exposé through interviews with people who had direct interaction with Singleton is not genuine since he believes only what he wants to believe, as will be illustrated soon.

Calhoun’s view of Singleton as a persecuted saviour is progressively contradicted during the various interviews he forces upon the people of Partridge. The first dissent comes from his own great-aunts who share the view of the community. According to Aunt Bessie, Singleton “never conformed. He was not like the rest of us here” (*CW* 775). His non-conformity—the quality that Calhoun admires very much in his hero—is seen as the cause of the tragedy. Calhoun dismisses her remark with an ironic comment: “A terrible drawback” (*CW* 775). He is angry to learn that even his great-aunts miss the ennobling trait of singularity in Singleton. Notwithstanding the differences in their physical appearance, Calhoun feels a kinship with the murderer: “Though his eyes were not mismatched, the shape of his face was broad like Singleton’s; but the real likeness between them was interior” (*CW* 775). Calhoun fails to see Singleton’s physical deformities as a sign of his mental abnormalities. His complacent thoughts vanish with Aunt Bessie’s final distressing revelation: “Since he is insane, he is not responsible” (*CW* 775). His ‘redeemer’ is acquitted but reduced to the level of a mad fellow. Calhoun is provoked beyond endurance and asks where then the real guilt lies—only to be dismissed by a sudden and flippant change of topic: “Father’s head was as smooth as an infant’s by the time he was thirty. . . . You had better hurry and get you a girl” (*CW* 775). The response is suggestive of the contrast between Calhoun’s high seriousness about the Singleton incident and the lighter and more casual attitude adopted by his great-aunts and the people of Partridge.
The boy who sells limeade at the drugstore confirms the old ladies’ stance on Singleton. The following excerpts from their conversation reveal the gap that exists between Calhoun and the inhabitants of Partridge: their very different registers put them into very disparate and mutually unintelligible worlds:

'I see you’ve paid your tribute to the god,' he said.

The boy did not seem to get the significance of this.

'The badge,' Calhoun said, 'the badge.' . . .

'Are you enjoying the festive spirit?' Calhoun asked.

'All these doings?' the boy said.

'These grand events,' Calhoun said, 'commencing with, I believe, six deaths.' . . .

'They have innocent as well as guilty blood on their hands,' Calhoun said and glared at the boy.

'It wasn’t no they,' the boy said. 'One man done it all. A man named Singleton. He was bats.'

'Singleton was only the instrument,' Calhoun said. 'Partridge itself is guilty.' . . .

The boy was looking at him as if he were mad. 'Partridge can’t shoot nobody,' he said in a high exasperated voice. (CW 778-79, emphasis as in the text)

Calhoun’s reference to the badge as a mark of obeisance to the god assumes significance through intertextual reference to the book of Daniel in the Bible. While all the loyal subjects of Babylon complied with King Nebuchadnezzar’s order and worshipped the golden statue erected by him as their god, three Jewish youths who had been deported from Judah refused to do so.
These three denunciators—Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—were thrown into a burning furnace but came out unharmed by the miraculous intervention of God, in whom they trusted absolutely. Hence a comparison is suggested between the boy who wears the Azalea Festival Badge and the obedient subjects of King Nebuchadnezzar, and between Singleton who refused to buy the badge and the Jewish youths. Calhoun’s allusive and metaphorical language renders communication between the two difficult. The allusion to paying the tribute is lost upon the boy. Similarly, the irony of expressions like ‘grand’ and ‘glory’ is incomprehensible to him. Since the boy is literal-minded, he cannot understand how the town Partridge can be guilty of the murder. His contention that the murderer is ‘bats’ is a fact that Calhoun will also come to accept when he confronts Singleton later on in the story.

The old fat man whom Calhoun comes across on the road distributes the positions of the ‘innocent’ and the ‘guilty’ among the victims of Singleton. The five dignitaries of Partridge who provoked the tragedy are labelled “fine men” who “perished in the line of duty” (CW 779) whereas the “innocent man [who] received the bullet intended for the mayor” (CW 774) is called “a wastrel” (CW 779) for whose murder Singleton is excused. But he wants somebody to dispose of Singleton who is “living in the laper luxury, laying in a cool bed at no expense” (CW 779-80). Disgusted by the old man’s curious arguments Calhoun escapes to the courthouse square where Singleton was tried and punished. The sight of the “jail” sends him into a reverie: “The pathos of his friend’s situation was borne in on him with a rush of empathy. He felt himself flung in the privy, the padlock clicked, he glared between the rotting planks at the fools howling and cavorting outside. The goat made an obscene noise; he saw that he was confined with the spirit of the community” (CW 780). Calhoun’s imaginative identification with Singleton assumes significance in the context of his attempt to make an artistic rendering of the...
event. Compassion for the wronged prisoner appears to be a saving element in Calhoun, a quality that would have helped him had he possessed the artistic vocation. He is shocked out of his dream by the coca-cola-drinking girl with her disparaging remark: “Six men was shot here. . . . A bad man did it” (CW 780). Calhoun takes her for a true representative of Partridge itself and tries in vain to convince her of the necessary innocence of Singleton. Though she accepts his argument that she would shoot anyone who has been cruel to her, his lecture on the fundamental right of man to be different, to be himself has no effect on her. She only confirms her condemnation with her emphatic, unequivocal assertion: “He was a bad bad bad man” (CW 781). Calhoun is left appalled by her mysterious logic, which pulls down his hero from insanity further into moral wreckage.

Calhoun’s search for material on Singleton reaches a decisive point at the barbershop. The barber’s statement that he had known Singleton well makes Calhoun immensely hopeful, and he searches in his reflection in the barber’s mirror for his hidden likeness to Singleton who, he thinks, might earlier have occupied the chair he is seated in now: “A tremor went through the boy as he realized that Singleton had probably sat in the chair he himself was now sitting in. He searched his face in the mirror desperately for its hidden likeness to the man. Slowly he saw it appear, a secret message brought to light by the heat of his feelings” (CW 782). His desire for a hidden likeness to his hero deceives him and he sees the attributed likeness of Singleton on his own reflection in the barber’s mirror. However, as often happens, because of his obsessive concern for the truth as he sees it he fails to recognize the illogicality of this ‘identification’ even after learning from the barber that Singleton had never visited the shop at all.

The barber’s ravaging portrait of Singleton provokes Calhoun to widen the scope of the literary project of representing the prisoner as a victim of an unjust social order. Calhoun’s
imaginatively conceived notion of Singleton as an individual of heroic proportions is contradicted by the barber who had personal contacts with the murderer. The barber describes him as an introvert who “kept his eyes on the ground all the time” as he passed by people (CW 782). Singleton, the barber continues, was a bastard: “One of the Singleton girls gone off on a nine-months vacation and come back with him;” he was forced to pay prostitutes: “no woman wouldn’t have had him. That was the one thing he always had to pay for” (CW 783). Calhoun’s view of Singleton as a scapegoat who is “sacrificed for the guilt of others” is dismissed by the barber on the ground that he “wasn’t a church-going man” (CW 783). Likewise, he refutes Calhoun’s contention that his hero “was an individualist” with a counter question “You’re a lawyer, ain’t you?” (CW 783). The youth’s reply that he is a “writer” evokes disgust in him: “‘Ohhh,’ the barber murmured. ‘I known it must be something like that’” (CW 783). The barber’s reaction reminds us of Partridge’s own attitude to writers, they tolerate only authors like Margaret Mitchell who has provided them with the partisan novel Gone with the Wind (CW 776). The barber’s accusation that Singleton had not subscribed to the modern amenities of life like plumbing and refrigerator, is interpreted by Calhoun as characteristic of his hero’s larger concerns like independence. But the barber counters this, too, with contempt: “He wasn’t so independent. Once lightning almost struck him and those that saw it said you should have seen him run. Took off like bees were swarming in his pants” (CW 784). Offended and infuriated, Calhoun struggles to escape from the scene: “Calhoun began fighting his way out of the bib as if it were a net he was caught in. When he was free of it . . . he made for the door, letting it slam behind him in judgment on the place” (CW 784). The barber’s bib is suggestive of Calhoun’s

prejudices which prevent him from accepting the opinions contrary to his highly serious perceptions of Singleton. His slamming the door reminds us of Christ's injunction to his disciples: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town" (Matt. 10, 14-15). The gesture is suggestive of Calhoun's belief that his own representation of Singleton has scripture-like authority which admits of no error. He leaves the place more than ever convinced of his hero's innocence and is determined to write a novel showing how primary injustice operated in the case of Singleton. Calhoun's attempt to give a true account of the Singleton incident becomes a paradox since he dismisses as false everything that contradicts his own beliefs and convictions.

Calhoun discovers in Mary Elizabeth a fellow writer sharing more or less his own views on Singleton and Partridge. Their acquaintance starts with misunderstanding and hatred. Mary Elizabeth detests Calhoun for his 'ironic' comments on the festival, as already explained. Calhoun considers her a representative of Partridge since she is taking him to the Azalea Queen contest. He is prejudiced against her: "Her round face was still childish behind her glasses. Retarded, Calhoun thought" (CW 785). He judges her gestures as unmannerly: "[She] began to rummage in a large grass bag . . . she continued to rummage . . . . Mary Elizabeth rooted in the grass bag for a key" (CW 785-86, emphases added). While the word 'rummage' means untidy search, 'root' stands for the pig's turning up the ground with its snout in search of food. It is evident that he considers her an uncouth country girl in spite of his great-aunts' introduction that "Mary Elizabeth is a real scholar" (CW 785). As they near the courthouse square, the site of the Singleton incident and the beauty contest, they begin to realize the similarity of their approach to Partridge and its festival. Mary Elizabeth despises the beauty contest: "It makes me vomit.
I’m going to finish it off with one swift literary kick . . . this whole place is false and rotten to the core . . . . They prostitute azaleas!” (CW 785-86). She sees artistic rendering as a means of transcending the meanness of Partridge which commercializes beauty. Calhoun is stunned at her blunt revelation, though, of course, he too shares her opinions. The sting contained in her outburst cannot escape Calhoun as his great-grandfather himself had initiated Partridge’s commercialization of beauty. The sarcastic tone employed in Calhoun’s offer to follow her into her father’s office also shows his suspicion of the girl’s claim to be a writer despite these revelations: “‘I shall come,’ he said, controlling himself, ‘I’d like to observe a great female writer taking notes’” (CW 786). In spite of their commonality of attitude towards Partridge, Calhoun does not acknowledge Mary Elizabeth as equal to the demands of art. The narrative suggests that the very same fate awaits Calhoun also.

The acquaintance between Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth matures into a relationship, enabling each other to discover his/her true self. Sitting together at the window of her father’s office overlooking the sight of the beauty contest, Calhoun concentrates his gaze on Mary Elizabeth:

To annoy her he began to look her over thoroughly. For what seemed at least five minutes, he did not take his eyes off her as she leaned with her elbows in the window. He stared at her so long that he was afraid her image would be etched forever on his retina. Finally he could stand the silence no longer. ‘What is your opinion of Singleton?’ he asked abruptly. (CW 786-87)

Instead of relapsing into romance their association, as the final question suggests, expends itself

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5 In one of the unpublished versions of the story the relationship between the two is decidedly sentimental. See, Kenneth Scouten, “‘The Partridge Festival:’ Manuscript Revisions” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 15 (1986): 35-41.
in the pursuit of their literary ambition. Her opinion of Singleton as a Christ-figure followed by an invitation to the scene of the contestants appearing in bathing suits reveals her reservations about Calhoun’s real motive. It provokes his final disclosure: “Get this through your head. I’m not interested in the damn festival or the damn azalea queen. I’m here only because of my sympathy for Singleton. I’m going to write about him. Possibly a novel” (CW 787). The nature of their pursuits is made known to each other. Even though both are bent upon artistic representation of the Singleton incident, Mary Elizabeth’s choice of the literary form is different: “‘I intend to write a non-fiction study,’ the girl said in a tone that made it evident fiction was beneath her” (CW 787). Thus, they proceed with their literary pursuits, following the wrong scent. But genuine compassion for their hero and sincerity in their endeavour to understand him assist their self-discovery despite their prejudices.

The discussion between Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth on the literary form most suitable to express the Singleton incident is a study in the problems of representation. Mary Elizabeth analyses the incident using mythical archetypes: “He was the scapegoat. While Partridge flings itself about selecting Miss Partridge Azalea, Singleton suffers at Quincy. He expiates” (CW 787). Calhoun opposes this categorization as it ignores the sufferer’s personality: “The novelist is not interested in narrow abstractions—particularly when they’re obvious” (CW 787). But the thinker dismisses concrete details as unnecessary as she is interested only in the hero’s role as a suffering saviour. Calhoun’s pronouncement that an “existential encounter with his personality” (CW 788) alone can make their representation credible reflects Flannery O’Connor’s own

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6 According to Rob Johnson this “battle between fictional and non-fictional realities serves the purpose of calling in question the relationship between life and art that O’Connor herself faced” (“‘The Topical is Poison:’ Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of Social Reality in ‘The Partridge Festival’ and ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’”).

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Prepared by BeeHive Digital Concepts Cochin for Mahatma Gandhi University Kottayam
stipulation on the subject. She wrote to Ben Griffith: “The first thing is to see the people at 
every minute. . . . You have got to learn to paint with words” (CW 938). She insists that a 
convincing portrait of the characters must precede their speech and action. Elsewhere she 
scorns the practice of some fiction writers:

It is a good deal easier for most people to state an abstract idea than to describe 
and thus re-create some object that they actually see. . . . They are concerned 
primarily with unfleshed ideas and emotions. They are apt to be reformers and to 
want to write because they are possessed not by a story but by the bare bones of 
some abstract notion. 7

For her, fiction represents life through concrete details. It is “an incarnational art” (MM 68) 
wherein ideas assume tangible form perceptible to human beings.

Calhoun’s resolve concerning literary creation suffers a setback from Mary Elizabeth’s 
blunt suggestion to undertake a trip to Quincy. Her unequivocal question upsets him; the fol-
lowing excerpt from their dialogue shows the shallowness of Calhoun’s commitment to art:

‘Then what’s keeping you from going and having a look at him?’ she 
said. . . . ‘Go see for yourself.’

The words fell on his head like a sack of rocks. After a moment he said, 

‘Go see for yourself? Go see where?’

‘At Quincy,’ the girl said. ‘Where do you think?’

‘They wouldn’t let me see him,’ he said. The suggestion was appalling to

7 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald 
(New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) 67-68. Hereafter, the source will be cited in parentheses following the 
quotation as MM.
for some reason he could not at the moment understand, it struck him as un-thinkable.

'They would if you said you were kin to him,' she said. 'It's only twenty miles from here.' (CW 788, emphases added)

Calhoun's bewilderment at the suggestion is brought home to us by the powerful simile, 'the words fell on his head like a sack of rocks.' That his desire to become a writer is not attested by his will is evident from his childish questions about Singleton's whereabouts and the debatable excuses he improvises in order to avoid the proposed meeting. His impulse to deny any affinity with the mad murderer further vindicates his inability to comply with the demands of art: "He was about to say, 'I'm not kin to him,' but he stopped and reddened furiously on the edge of the betrayal. They were spiritual kin" (CW 788). His 'kinship' with Singleton appears to be a mere desire, which is too weak to be dropped at the slightest threat. But, as usual, he hesitates to acknowledge the truth of his vocation and proceeds with his dream.

The anxiety generated by his decision to have a personal encounter with Singleton at Quincy turns out to be salvific in Calhoun's life. Biased about Partridge and Singleton from the very beginning, Calhoun is tricked into the project by Mary Elizabeth who offers to share the agonizing moments with him. He does not expect the journey to change his perception: "I had the general idea before I came," he told Mary Elizabeth (CW 788). But he hopes "the sight of Singleton in his misery might cause him suffering sufficient to raise him once and for all from his commercial instincts" (CW 789). His agony at the thought of the torturing experience reminds us of Christ's prayer at Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matt. 26, 39). But unlike Christ who totally submits himself to the will of his Father, Calhoun despises the gift of
doing business well) that God has given him, and desires a gift that God in His wisdom had not given him: “Selling was the only thing he had proved himself good at; yet it was impossible for him to believe that every man was not created equally an artist if he could but suffer and achieve it” (CW 789). Calhoun is basically a salesman and has proved himself successful at selling. But he is unable to acknowledge that literary artistry is a gift that cannot be attained through human endeavour and suffering alone. Calhoun’s predicament reminds us of O’Connor’s own warning contained in “The Nature and Aim of Fiction” where she says: “There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift” (MM 81). O’Connor is categorical about the necessity of a call for literary creation. In the absence of this vocation Calhoun’s earnest desire cannot bear the envisaged fruit. But his agony becomes redemptive as it leads him into an awareness of his true vocation.

Calhoun’s dream, which represents Singleton as a mediocre customer, or even a mad prisoner, also casts aspersions on his claim to the position of a literary artist. The hero of his aspirations suffers degradation in his imagination and is at odds with the detestable figure of his unconscious construct fashioned by the fusion of his commercial instinct and the unfavourable portraits provided by the people of Partridge:

He spent a restless night, dreaming in snatches of Singleton. At one point he dreamed he was driving to Quincy to sell Singleton a refrigerator. . . . He could not remember what he had dreamed but he sensed it had been unpleasant. . . . He thought of Quincy and saw rows and rows of low red buildings with rough heads sticking out of barred windows. (CW 789)

Singleton is seen as a mere customer. It is also suggested that he is a commodity that Calhoun is trying to sell; the proposed novel is only his version of Singleton. The dream itself is recalled as
unpleasant, implying the horrid picture it has presented. Again, Singleton is identified as one of the mad prisoners of Quincy Mental Hospital who stick out their rough heads through the barred windows. He has no appeal to Calhoun’s imagination: “He tried to concentrate on Singleton but his mind shied from the thought. He did not wish to go to Quincy. He remembered that it was a novel he was going to write. His desire to write a novel had gone down overnight like a defective tire” (CW 789). Singleton does not hold his attention any longer, nor can he inspire the creation of fiction. Dread of the mad prisoner even obliterates his desire to write a novel about him. Thus Calhoun tacitly acknowledges that he is not equal to the demands of art, that he cannot be a novelist since he is afraid to encounter Singleton and is unable to recreate him imaginatively as an artist is expected to do.

The laxity and shallowness of his commitment to literary art is also betrayed by the shameful ease with which Calhoun excuses himself from the proposed journey to Quincy. As the drizzle of his waking hours turns into heavy downpour, his desire to avoid the encounter with the mad murderer hardens into a strong determination. But he wishes to transfer the responsibility to Mary Elizabeth:

The rain might keep the girl from coming, or at least she might think she could use it as an excuse. He decided to wait until exactly nine o’clock and if she had not shown up by then to be off. He would not go to Quincy but would go home. It would be better to see Singleton at a later date when he would perhaps have responded to treatment. (CW 789)

His pettiness and hypocrisy are reiterated in the brief note he prepares to be left with his aunts if he has to depart without Mary Elizabeth; in it “he presumed she had decided, upon consideration, that she was not equal to the experience . . . and he ended it, ‘Cordially yours’” (CW 789).
Ironically, his wish remains unfulfilled as the girl turns up before the appointed time. Despite the deprecatory tone he uses to insinuate her inadequacy for the experience, he upholds the warmth of their relationship in their common deplorable plight. The protestation of this unity of hearts may be seen as a saving gesture that enables Calhoun to find out his real self through his openness to his counterpart.

The long awaited meeting with Singleton disillusions Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth as the hero of their fancy is recognized as an ordinary culprit who cannot be accommodated anywhere else but at the Mental Hospital of Quincy. Whatever traits Calhoun has identified in his imaginary ‘hero’ as characteristic of his unique personality are now comprehended as marks of insanity. He had interpreted the distorted features of Singleton to suit his mental construct of a saviour:

Singleton’s was the only distinctive face in the lot. It was broad and boney and bleak. One eye was more nearly round than the other and in the more nearly round one Calhoun had recognized the composure of the man who knows he will and who is willing to suffer for the right to be himself. A calculating contempt lurked in the regular eye but in the general expression there was the tortured look of the man who becomes maddened finally by the madness around him.

(CW 774-75)
The grotesqueries of the insane criminal have been represented as superior intellectual and moral qualities and his madness is perceived as thrust upon him by the community. But Calhoun’s assumptions undergo radical change when Singleton is directly and personally encountered. Hence he realizes at the sight of Singleton that even though the criminal’s eyes look exactly as they appeared to him in the newspaper the “penetrating gleam in them had a
slight reptilian quality” (*CW* 794). The emancipator of his fancy is thus recognized as a mean ‘creature’ whose reptilian quality is further revealed through his advances to Mary Elizabeth with signs and sounds which have sexual overtones: “The old man’s glare shifted to her and for one instant his eyes remained absolutely still like the eyes of a treetoad that has sighted its prey. His throat appeared to swell. ‘Ahhh,’ he said as if he had just swallowed something pleasant, ‘eeee’” (*CW* 794). The comparison of Singleton’s gestures to those of the treetoad at its mating season indicates the moral degeneration suffered by the criminal. The empathetic seeker of truth, the prospective writer is taken for a willing prostitute by the maniac. The failure of representation deals a deathblow to Calhoun’s (and Mary Elizabeth’s) ambition for literary achievement.

The ignominious retreat from Quincy following the crushing defeat that the ambitious writers met with offers Calhoun a moment of revelation of pivotal importance in his life. Singleton’s insane behaviour and attempted assault on Mary Elizabeth thwart Calhoun’s ambitious literary project and necessitates their speedy departure. United in their plight “they scrambled into the car and the boy drove it away as if his heart were the motor and would never go fast enough” (*CW* 795). If he drove the car to Quincy at a dreadful speed out of hatred towards Mary Elizabeth whose taunting remarks necessitated the unpleasant trip, Calhoun now drives the car at an incredible speed in order to save her. It is also suggestive of the long distance they have travelled fast enough along the hostile path of their initial hating and slighting in order to reach the ideal destination of mutual understanding and self-realization. After five miles they stop exhausted and look at each other for comfort and sympathy. Singleton, who has been instrumental in initiating their acquaintance, is still vivid in their imagination and helps their self-realization:
They turned and looked at each other. There each saw at once the likeness of their kinsman and flinched... In despair he leaned closer until he was stopped by a miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles and fixed him where he was. Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him. (CW 795-96)

Through the ‘miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles’ Calhoun is finally brought to the realization that he is destined to be a salesman in the tradition of his great-grandfather. The supernatural nature of his vocation is suggested by the reference to the ‘master salesman’ who has been ‘waiting there from all time to claim him.’ This experience of divine ordinance enables Calhoun to accept his call to be a businessman without regrets.

Calhoun’s discovery of his real vocation not as a writer but as a salesman is presented by the narrative as a culmination of his search for the truth about Singleton. The people he encounters at Partridge and the painful experience he undergoes during his journey to Quincy enable him to see through his illusions and prepare him for this revelation. Though he does not succeed in artistically representing Singleton in spite of his genuine compassion for the mad murderer, he becomes aware of his gift as a successful businessman. While Calhoun fails in his literary venture because of the absence of the necessary talent, Miss Willerton in “The Crop” is presented as a gifted artist who is able to imaginatively represent her characters even though she fails to accept them or emotionally identify with them in real life.

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Though “The Crop” belongs to O’Connor’s very early days and is not as accomplished as her mature work, it is a story in which she raises fundamental issues about her vocation and seems to argue things out for herself. As a story about a writer, it is a self-reflexive and self-conscious story. In spite of the ironic perspective from which the story is written, the problems it deals with are important and instructive. The plot coincides with the time that it takes a writer to frame a story and start writing it. Miss Willerton, the literary artist, is presented as a very ordinary and even prejudiced and opinionated person, going about the business of life, the business of living in the same matter-of-fact and mundane way as the rest of humanity does. Her selection of subjects for her stories is influenced by her class prejudices and inhibitions. Still she is presented by the narrative as a writer because of her ability to empathetically understand and represent her characters even if in real life they disgust her. Miss Willerton’s struggle to write becomes paradigmatic of the problems to be faced by a writer who tries to be as true to the imagination as to reality.

Miss Willerton is introduced as a writer who is on the lookout for a good and relevant theme for her story. She prefers crumbing the table next only to sitting in front of the typewriter since it leaves her alone with her literary project. With an ironic twist the narrative relates her method of choosing the subject: “First, she had to think of a subject to write a story about. There were so many subjects... that Miss Willerton never could think of one. That was always the hardest part of writing a story she always said. She spent more time thinking of something to write about than she did writing” (CW 732, emphases added). The double occurrence of the adverb ‘always’ is suggestive of the ‘expertise’ she claims in the art of selection. She considers

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9 It was one of O’Connor’s earliest stories and was included among the six stories submitted to the University of Iowa in 1947 in “partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts” [Robert Giroux, Introd., The Complete Stories by Flannery O’Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), viii-xvii].
and discards bakers as they are not “colorful enough” and because there is no “social tension” connected with them; she ignores teachers as not “timely”—they are not “even a social problem” (CW 733). She decides that a story about sharecroppers would be the most appropriate one for the times. She expects that “they would make as arty a subject as any, and they would give her that air of social concern which was so valuable to have in the circles she was hoping to travel! ‘I can always capitalize,’ she muttered, ‘on the hookworm’” (CW 733-34). In choosing subjects for her stories, Miss Willerton reveals herself as a writer who caters to the taste for the ‘fashionable’ and ‘topical.’ She herself does not seem to be fired by passionate commitments to ideals and issues. O’Connor is here puncturing the notion of the artist as a person caught in moral earnestness and high seriousness.

The narrative now proceeds to present the flow of creative inspiration that moulds Miss Willerton’s literary artefact. A quick flash of revelation follows her choice of the topic: “‘Lot Motun,’ the typewriter registered, ‘called his dog’” (CW 734, emphases added). The reference to the automatic registering of the sentence by the typewriter suggests that the creative agency that produces the work is independent of her volition. It is as if the story is writing itself; that Miss Willerton is a mere medium. She becomes ecstatic about her creation; the narrative records her sentiments: “Miss Willerton always did her best work on the first sentence. ‘First sentences,’ she always said, ‘came to her—like a flash! Just like a flash!’ she would say and snap her fingers, ‘like a flash!’” (CW 734, emphases added). The repeated use of the expression ‘like a flash’ evokes the inspirational nature of their formation; and the adverb ‘always’ indicates her claim to be copious in such creations. It is through a repeated but judicious sprinkling of words like ‘always’ that the ironic perspective creeps into the story. First sentences are considered the foundation of her literary edifice. The spontaneity of their appearance is reiterated...
The inspirational origin of the sentence seems to her not to deny its artistic effect. The description of Miss Willerton's method of writing, therefore, would give the impression that she is possessed of genius, that she is an instinctive writer.

Miss Willerton composes the opening scene of her story addressing herself to the demands of her favourite 'phonetic art.' She believes that the auditory impact of the words is as important as their visual effect: "the ear was as much a reader as the eye" (CW 734), she says. The word-picture that the narrative employs should satisfy the eyes with their pictorial quality and the ears with their sound effect. She types the second sentence—"Lot Motun called his dog.

The dog pricked up its ears and slunk over to him" (CW 734)—to discover the repetition of the words 'Lot' and 'dog' in the same paragraph. She substitutes the second 'Lot' with 'him' and ignores the presence of the two 'dogs' as it is not as unpleasant as the two 'Lots.' Her theory is recorded by the narrative with parenthetical comments inserted into it:

'The eye forms a picture,' she had told a group at the United Daughters of the Colonies, 'that can be painted in the abstract, and the success of a literary venture (Miss Willerton liked the phrase, 'literary venture') depends on the abstract created in the mind and the tonal quality (Miss Willerton also liked, 'tonal quality') registered in the ear.' (CW 734)

The writer here seems to look at literary creation as an enterprise ('venture') probably because of the challenges involved in presenting the sensory impressions (visual and auditory) with enough potential to become imaginative perceptions for the readers. Viewed against the New Critical background, which was O'Connor's own critical tradition, 'tonal quality' assumes significance; the New Critics used the term 'tone' ('the tone of voice of a speaker as qualifying
what he says”) to “refer to the implicit evaluation which the author manages to convey behind his explicit presentation.” The reader is enabled to create the intended image with the help of the tone dropped by the artist. Behind the apparently pretentious tone of the definition can be seen the writer’s impatience to embody the artistic possibilities contemplated by the New Critics. Applying the rules of her own phonetic art Miss Willerton finds “something biting and sharp” about her first sentence and feels “it gave the paragraph just the send-off it needed” (CW 734). She seems to doubt whether her sentences can evoke the desired perceptions of introducing the social life of the sharecroppers in the minds of the readers.

Miss Willerton’s attempt at representing the naturalistic life of the sharecroppers is confronted by her own desire for social approbation. In order to import the dusty life of her character into her story, she hesitantly adds a third sentence to the introductory scene, debating its propriety: “He pulled the animal’s short, scraggy ears and rolled over with it in the mud.” Perhaps, Miss Willerton mused, that would be overdoing it. But a sharecropper, she knew, might reasonably be expected to roll over in the mud” (CW 734). The ambivalence that her deliberation exhibits is due to her acquaintance and affinity with similar writing on the one hand and her dread of her family’s disapproval on the other. She recalls the fatal end one such book had had at the hands of Lucia, another member of her family, and her subsequent embarrassment: “When I was cleaning your bureau out this morning, Willie, I found a book. . . . It was

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12 Virginia Wray in her article “Flannery O’Connor’s Master’s Thesis: Looking for Some Gestures” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 8 (1979): 68-76 sees Miss Willerton as a theorist whose “concern with abstract theorizing” denies “the importance of vividly rendered, concrete detail.” Such a view fails to take into account the contribution to the texture made by the eye (“forms a picture”) and the ear (“tonal quality”) which Miss Willerton balances against “the abstract created in the mind.”
awful . . . I burned it . . . I was sure it couldn’t be yours” (CW 735). Her diffidence in claiming its ownership is substantiated by the manner in which she had secured it: since she was ashamed to ask for it from the library, she had ordered it directly from the publishers. Even though she hadn’t read the book in its entirety, she had read enough of it to compose the present sentence. She decides to keep the sentence regardless of what her society feels since it makes her character more convincing as a sharecropper: “Having him do that would give more point to the hookworm” (CW 735). Miss Willerton’s composition accordingly reveals the constraints under which a writer has to work, constraints that are forceful enough to bridle the free flight of imagination and inspiration.

The resistance that Miss Willerton experiences as she tries to impart a realistic note to her story reiterates the pressure encountered by the artist during literary composition. She would introduce a woman who would be incompatible with Lot; their mutual hatred would culminate in the murder of the woman; and the man would be haunted by his conscience. But when she works out the details of the scene, her preference for conventionality and sentimentality confronts the natural course the story is expected to take. Her middle class sensibility and the inhibitions of her family stand in the way of her presenting violent and passionate scenes in the story: “There would have to be some quite violent, naturalistic scenes, the sadistic sort of thing one read of in connection with that class . . . She liked to plan passionate scenes best of all but when she came to write them, she always began to feel peculiar and to wonder what the family would say when they read them” (CW 735, emphasis added). The adverb ‘always’ suggests the ironic perspective the story adopts throughout the experiments of Miss Willerton. Constrained by her own personal prejudices and the society’s inhibitions, the artist succumbs to compromise and mediocrity in her artistic creation.
The imperceptible entrance of Miss Willerton herself into the story and her identification with the character further reveal the artist’s constraints and problems in creative writing.

Miss Willerton’s characters are drawn from everyday life:

Lot would be tall, stooped, and shaggy but with sad eyes that made him look like a gentleman in spite of his red neck and big fumbling hands. He’d have straight teeth and... red hair... maybe, she mused, he’d better not roll over with the dog after all. The woman would be more or less pretty—yellow hair, fat ankles, muddy-colored eyes. (CW 736)

The gentlemanly appearance that she attributes to the man seems to her not to agree with the dusty life she would assign to him. The man and the woman would be disparate in interests and temperaments. The type of food—“the lumpy grits she hadn’t bothered to put salt in” (CW 736)—that she brings to him shows her apathy. Miss Willerton is still trying to represent two ‘low life’ characters here with whom she does not seem to identify. Their antagonism would reach the climactic moment when Lot and his wife would be running about the house trying to kill each other—Lot with his chair and the woman with the table knife. This would be the turn the story would naturally take but Miss Willerton’s social situation rebels against this and she changes the direction of the story by herself entering the story quite imperceptibly as Lot Motun the share-cropper’s wife and settles for a peaceful conjugal communion:

Miss Willerton could stand it no longer. She struck the woman a terrific blow on the head from behind. The knife dropped out of her hands and a mist swept her from the room. Miss Willerton turned to Lot. ‘Let me get you some hot grits,’ she said. She went over to the stove and got a clean plate of smooth white grits and a piece of butter. (CW 736)
The change of personae effected by the forceful withdrawal of the quarrelsome woman and the entrance of Miss Willerton herself appears inartistic, like a ‘deus ex machina.’ Similarly, the transformation from the violent scene that started with the ‘lumpy grits’ to the harmonious family life inaugurated by the ‘smooth white grits’ seems ironic since it was Miss Willerton herself who had ‘made’ Lot’s wife neglect to give him smooth grits. But her imaginative identification with the character becomes complete as she ‘takes over’ her character from now onwards calling her ‘Willie.’ The story thus shows the extent of influence a writer is exposed to during artistic creation.

Behind the deftly woven description of the conjugal and farming life of the sharecroppers run the metaphoric undertones of the story which represent the pangs of artistic creation. While the sharecroppers look forward to a prosperous harvest in order to materialize their dream of purchasing a cow which will help feed their expected baby, the artist tries to imaginatively perceive the fruition of her artistic endeavour: “[Lot] had gone out to look at the new-plowed ground as if he could count the harvest from the furrows” (CW 737). Lot is anxious about the outcome of his labour; so also is the artist. The hectic preparations made by the couple to gather the harvest before the late March rain are obstructed by Willie’s labour pain and childbirth:

Willie woke in the night conscious of a pain. It was a soft, green pain with purple lights running through it. . . . Her head rolled from side to side and there were droning shapes grinding boulders in it. . . . The sound of the droning grew more distinct and toward morning, she realized that it was rain. Later she asked hoarsely, ‘How long has it been raining?’

‘Most two days, now,’ Lot answered.
‘Then we lost.’ Willie looked listlessly out at the dripping trees. ‘It’s over.’

‘It isn’t over,’ he said softly. ‘We got a daughter.’ (CW 738)

The ‘soft, green pain with purple lights running through it’ that precedes the childbirth is also suggestive of the hopeful suffering that the artist experiences while engaged in artistic creation. The droning shapes grinding boulders in her head which evoke the pain of delivery also express the creative artist’s painful struggle to fashion (‘grinding’) works of art out of the awful raw materials of life (‘boulders’). As the sharecropper is satisfied with the birth of the child even at the loss of the harvest, the artist has succeeded in rendering an imaginative representation of her fantasy in spite of the compromises she is obliged to make.

The conflict that Miss Willerton experiences between her imaginative empathy towards the characters in her art, and disgust in real life, is paradigmatic of the problems that confront a realistic writer. Miss Willerton is given a respite from the exacting problems of representation when she is asked to go out shopping. But the scenes in the grocery shop depress her; she finds there only “trifling domestic doings” which do not provide “any chance for self-expression, for creation, for art” (CW 739). The couple she comes across do not impress her in spite of their striking similarity to the characters she herself has drawn in the story: “The woman was plump with yellow hair and fat ankles and muddy-colored eyes. . . . The man was long and wasted and shaggy. His shoulders were stooped and there were yellow knots along the side of his large, red neck. His hands fumbled . . . he had straight teeth and sad eyes” (CW 740, emphases added).

The words and expressions used to describe them almost correspond to those employed to delineate the characters of her story (CW 736). Thus the women in both instances have ‘yellow hair,’ ‘fat ankles,’ and ‘muddy-colored eyes’; while the men are ‘tall’/’long,’ ‘shaggy’ and ‘stooped’
with ‘red neck,’ ‘sad eyes,’ ‘straight teeth,’ and ‘fumbling hands’ (‘hands fumbled’). Still their very sight is sickening to her: “‘Ugh,’ she shuddered” (CW 740). But this failure to meet ordinary people or identify with them in real life does not prevent Miss Willerton from empathetically representing them in her literary works. Her artistic calling enables her to imaginatively supply the understanding that she lacks in real life.

Confronted by hostile forces, Miss Willerton’s genius for creative writing expends itself in the composition of mediocre literary works. Nevertheless, she is presented by the narrative as a writer who is able to represent her characters compassionately in her story. This narrative compassion is better exploited by O’Connor in her more mature and widely anthologized story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” where the reader’s sympathies are equally distributed between the victims and their villains.

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is a powerful story in which O’Connor upsets the received notion of the cold-blooded murderer as a sinner who does not deserve grace or salvation, and takes upon herself the very difficult narrative task of representing him at his most heartless and inhuman moment without allowing the reader to condemn the man to damnation. As if impelled by a strong premonition, the grandmother in the story tries from the very beginning to avoid an encounter with The Misfit by asking her son to reschedule their holiday trip to Tennessee instead of Florida. But as fate would have it, the grandmother herself invites The Misfit and his henchmen to help them after they have been involved in an accident. Paradoxically, they are helped out of this world, but before her murder, the grandmother is enabled to transform herself with the violence suffered by the family and the fear of imminent death. She looks through the complacent mask of her self-righteousness to acknowledge The Misfit as one of her own babies—only to be shot by him. However, her sacrifice unsettles her murderer; he is
made to realize the absence of any ‘real pleasure’ in his criminal life. The sinner is promised salvation precisely when he is engaged in the most heinous crime.

As the story begins, the grandmother dominates the scene, struggling hard to redirect the family’s holiday trip under the pretext of the possible threat to their lives at the hands of The Misfit. The Misfit is a notorious criminal and escaped culprit who roams the country exterminating people. The grandmother assumes moral responsibility to preserve her children from the criminal; she has newspaper reports in support of her premonition: “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people... I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did” (CW 137). The presence of The Misfit in Florida is used by the grandmother as a convincing reason to change the direction of their picnic spot. But the real motive is her desire to meet some of her connections in east Tennessee: “She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind” (CW 137, emphases added). However shrewd the grandmother is, she cannot altogether be condemned for her enthusiasm to avoid Florida since her fears are genuine and will be proved true in the course of the story.

The family’s decision to stick to their original plan of going to Florida ignoring the warning of the grandmother leads them directly into their inevitable doom. Bailey and his wife are culpably indifferent to the old lady’s suggestion: “Bailey didn’t look up from his reading... The children’s mother didn’t seem to hear her” (CW 137). Bailey’s silence becomes fatal; instead of steering the course of action, he yields to the pressures of his children. He and his wife seem to speak only when they find it inevitable. The children, on the other hand, try to have their own way; and they do it by monopolizing the conversation most of the time. They
even silence their grandmother, the only elder who talks in the family, with their disrespectful and slighting remarks:

John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, ‘If you don’t want to go to Florida, why don’t you stay at home?’ He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

‘She wouldn’t stay at home to be queen for a day,’ June Star said without raising her yellow head...

‘She wouldn’t stay at home for a million bucks,’ June Star said. ‘Afraid she’d miss something. She has to go everywhere we go.’ (CW 137)

They take The Misfit for a harmless ‘villain’ to be defeated by their smartness. Hence John Wesley’s claim: “I’d smack his face” (CW 137). Their failure to recognize the seriousness of the situation, coupled with their insolent character and taunting remarks, hastens the tragedy, as will be seen later in the story.

The grandmother’s concern for her ‘connections’ which prompts her to take her favourite cat with her during the trip, becomes instrumental in bringing about the tragedy. Her over-enthusiasm for outing, as alleged by her grandchildren, is vindicated by her presence in the car before anyone else. She is equipped for any eventuality:

She had her big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus in one corner, and underneath it she was hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it. She didn’t intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself. (CW 138)
The ‘big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus’ presages her journey to her doom to be actualized by the cat that is kept underneath it. Her concern for the cat, the only ‘connection’ she has near her, appears to be a compensation for the ‘connections’ she is prevented by the family from visiting. Her sentimental attachment to Pitty Sing, which is symbolic of her attachment to the world, is betrayed by her thought that the ‘cat would miss her too much’ during her absence for three days. Her safeguard against the possible asphyxiation of the cat, a quality that is to be appreciated in a sympathetic and wise woman, has its opposite effect as the cat becomes instrumental in their destruction.

The grandmother’s struggle to create virtue out of decorum and elegance betrays the shallowness of her perception of the deeper realities of life. She is seemly and vivacious unlike the children’s mother, and is bent upon transforming their trip into a significant event come what may. On account of her smartness she hopes to convert even the thought of the trip into a source of gratification. With this intent she “wrote this [the mileage on the car] down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back” ((CW 138), emphasis added). Significantly, she travels ‘many miles’ along the path of self-realization even though her purpose is defeated on the mundane plane. Her approach to death also shows her preference for the gracious and the aristocratic:

The grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (CW 138)
Paradoxically, the venue of the accident, when it occurs, happens to be a dirt road which is away from the highway; and she is murdered and thrown into an anonymous place where her identity will hardly be recognized by anyone. Her inordinate attachment to and exaltation of the accidentals over the real blind her true vision, and facilitate her doom.

The grandmother’s excessive indulgence in imaginative recreation of natural scenery makes her compromise on the vexing problems of life and precipitates her tragic end. Most of the time she is only representing things to her aesthetic satisfaction. She fancies that it is “a good day for driving, neither too hot nor too cold” (CW 138), conveniently ignoring her own apprehensions about their possible encounter with The Misfit, which will change the day from ‘good’ to ‘bad.’ She cautions Bailey against over-speed dwelling more on the dramatic chase of the patrolmen: “The patrolmen hid themselves behind billboards and small clumps of trees and sped out after you before you had a chance to slow down” (CW 138). Her imaginative frenzy expends itself in picturing the natural scenery with its interesting details evoking its sensual appeal. She portrays “the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground. The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled” (CW 138-39). Her aesthetic perception does not distinguish between the pleasure-yielding scenes of the slightly purple-streaked clay banks, the green lacework made on the ground by the various crops and the meanest of the sparkling trees in silver-white sunlight and the little Negro child they pass by. She is not struck by the poverty of the boy\(^\text{13}\) who does not have even ‘britches’ on as pointed out by June Star; instead, she explains it as something normal among the poor black children of the counties. But she is enthralled by

\(^{13}\) Doyle W. Walls in his note “O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find,’” *Explicator* 46. 2 (Winter 1988): 43-45 suggests that “the cute little pickaninny” provides a chance for the grandmother “to reveal her essential self and prepares the reader for the climax of the story.”
the possibility of an artistic rendering of the scene: “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny! . . .
Wouldn’t that make a picture, now? . . . If I could paint, I’d paint that picture” (CW 139). The
little black boy’s poverty appeals to her only as a good theme for her painting. Her imaginative
extravagance, thus, stands in the way of compassion—a serious depravity that warrants retribu-
tion.

The grandmother’s imagination further engages itself in the creation of a romantic story
with herself as the heroine. Her expression and gestures provide a dramatic effect to the story,
which is laid in the distant past:

She said once when she was a maiden lady she had been courted by a Mr. Edgar
Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia. She said he was a very good-looking
man and a gentleman and that he brought her a watermelon every Saturday
afternoon with his initials cut in it, E. A. T. Well, one Saturday, she said,
Mr. Teagarden brought the watermelon and there was nobody at home and he
left it on the front porch and returned in his buggy to Jasper, but she never got
the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials,
E. A. T.? (CW 140)

The grandmother’s preference for the noble and the colourful is evident from the selection of the
theme and time of the story. The characters satisfy her romantic aspirations: Teagarden is good-
looking and wealthy and is full of love; suggestively the maiden possesses all the qualities asso-
ciated with the heroine of a romantic story. The story evokes mixed responses in her young
audience: while John Wesley is tickled to laughter, June Star dismisses it as no good. She finds

14 Joseph Church’s essay “An Abuse of the Imagination in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man Is Hard to
Find,’” Notes on Contemporary Literature 20 (May 1990): 8-10 dwells on the extravagance of the grandmother’s
imagination, which leads to her doom.
no reason to marry a man because he brings a watermelon every Saturday. But the grandmother asserts that her lover was a wealthy gentleman who "had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out" and he died "a very wealthy man" (CW 140). The story seems to take its origin from the wistful longing of the grandmother who finds her son and grandchildren dull and unimaginative, not satisfying her craving for 'connections.'

The grandmother's nostalgic longing for communion with the 'trustful' people of bygone days stands in the way of her understanding of her own self. Red Sammy Butts, who runs the famous barbecue, caters to the old lady's tastes with gratifying conversation. As against her elusive and reserved son and impertinent and playful grandchildren, she finds in Red Sammy a sympathetic advocate of the 'virtuous' past. Their cliché-ridden dialogue suggests their apparent community of interests and denunciation of the corrupt society in which they find themselves:

'You can't win,' he said. 'You can't win. . . . These days you don't know who to trust,' he said. 'Ain't that the truth?'

'People are certainly not nice like they used to be. . . . It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust,' she said. 'And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody,' she repeated, looking at Red Sammy.

'Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that's escaped?' asked the grandmother. . . .

'A good man is hard to find,' Red Sammy said. (CW 141-42)

The grandmother's perception of the 'green world of God' as intruded upon by untrustworthy people, including the worst one, The Misfit, shows her self-righteous attitude. Red Sammy's complement that a 'good man is hard to find' implicitly suggests the inclusion of the speakers
also among the corrupt people led by The Misfit. Just as Mrs. Shortley in “The Displaced Person” does (CW 287), the grandmother blames Europe for the moral degeneration of the world. But she will be forced to recognize herself as a sinner at gunpoint later in the story.

The ‘fatal’ story that the grandmother ingeniously fashions out of her faint memory and fantasy also has its desired end of taking her into the romantic world of strange relations. The old plantation that comes alive in her mind as she wakes up from her afternoon nap has all the charms of a ‘courting countryside.’ She recalls that “the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden” (CW 142-43). The amorous undertones of the description creates in the mind of the grandmother a strong desire to live in the distant past: “The more she talked about it, the more she wanted to see it once again and find out if the little twin arbors were still standing” (CW 143). The desire is so intense that she improvises the ‘means’ to gratify it: “‘There was a secret panel in this house,’ she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, ‘and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through’” (CW 143, emphasis added). Her crafty improvisation appeals to her grandchildren who prevail upon Bailey to take the deviation, thereby inadvertently leading to their doom. Ironically, the grandmother’s exercise of her memory and imagination, however confused it is, is capable of leading her directly to an ‘inevitable’ relation whom she loathes to acknowledge.

The grandmother’s confused search for the fantastic world of her dreamy memory leads them to their ‘fated’ accident. Her faint recollections made vivid by imagination locate the exotic plantation and the silver-chested house in Georgia instead of Tennessee. While the untravelled road with sharp curves and dust-coated trees on both sides unnerves Bailey, it reminds
us of the pristine countryside of the bygone plantation era when “there were no paved roads and thirty miles was a day’s journey” (CW 144). Tired and furious, Bailey threatens to turn back—only to be reassured by the old lady whose fancy world is intimidated at that juncture by the rays of recognition, letting loose chaos and destruction:

‘It’s not much farther,’ the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting the valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey’s shoulder.

(CW 144)

The grandmother’s horrid realization of the inconsistency between her memory and reality unsettles her, and causes her to upset the valise, and this in turn causes the accident. Her desire to remain in the fantastic world in spite of the accident is evident from her hope of having sustained some injury: “The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey’s wrath would not come down on her all at once” (CW 144-45). Ironically, the accident enables her to live in her nostalgic world still untrammelled by her unsympathetic family who come short of their destination.

The accident exposes the ‘taciturn’ worlds of the grandmother’s present relations who fail to relate themselves meaningfully and sympathetically among themselves even in danger. The children are very much pleased since their yelling and screaming for some fun are realized at least in the form of an accident: “‘We’ve had an ACCIDENT!’ . . . the children screamed in a frenzy of delight. ‘But nobody’s killed,’ June Star said with disappointment as the grandmother limped out of the car” (CW 144-45, emphases added). The grandmother’s escape seems to have
spoiled the fun of the accident for the girl. The children’s mother who has escaped with a “cut down her face and a broken shoulder” comes out with one of her rare utterances in the story:

“‘Maybe a car will come along,’ said the children’s mother hoarsely” (CW 145, emphasis added). Paradoxically, her angry ‘prophecy’ comes true immediately as The Misfit and his henchmen arrive in a car. The old lady’s desperate plea for sympathy is ignored even by her only son: “‘I believe I have injured an organ,’ said the grandmother, pressing her side, but no one answered her. Bailey’s teeth were clattering” (CW 145). The grandmother is thus presented by the narrative as a helpless woman whose search for connections even in an imaginative world is justified since she does not find them in real life. The inability of the accident to break through the inscrutable defences of the family’s lack of togetherness ‘necessitates’ the intervention of a more powerful destructive agency to attain this aim.

The grandmother’s inviting gesture to the occupants of the car turns out to be an appeal for ‘violence’ to enter her family. The hapless victims sight a car slowly coming in the direction of their forced residence in the ditch into which they had been thrown ‘together’ by the accident. The “tall and dark and deep” (CW 145) woods, which wall the ditch, provide a fitting background to the emergence of the car out of it. The car itself is portentous in appearance: “It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile” (CW 145). The ‘hearse-like’ form of the car unequivocally suggests the nature of its occupants, who are bent upon sending people to their doom. Ignoring the foreboding the grandmother gestures to its occupants who seem to be watching them from a distance: “The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention” (CW 145). Her request for help in their dire need implicitly carries an appeal to the observers to enter their ‘closed’ lives as their ‘relations.’ But ironically, they prove to be the facilitators of their death.
The equivocation implied in the delineation of the men who emerge from the ‘ominous’
car serves as a prelude to their forthcoming mysterious conversation and strange actions. The
men look rather like characters in a mime whose gestures speak volumes:

The driver looked down with a steady expressionless gaze to where they were
sitting, and didn’t speak. Then he turned his head and muttered something to the
other two and they got out. One was a fat boy in black trousers and red sweat
shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it. He moved around on the
right side of them . . . . The other had on khaki pants and a blue striped coat and
a gray hat pulled down very low, hiding most of his face. He came around slowly
on the left side. Neither spoke. (CW 145-46)

The ‘expressionless gaze’ of the leader suggests that he has not yet decided upon the fate of the
people ‘fallen’ into the ditch. The ‘silver stallion’ embossed on the sweatshirt of the fat boy
gives the appearance of a medieval chivalric knight going about protecting maidens and women.
Paradoxically, the role is reversed here as he himself is in distress here. His partner’s ‘hiding
most of his face’ with his hat is indicative of his cunningly hidden malignant motive. They take
positions on the victims’ right and left sides with their guns, awaiting orders from their leader.

The leader is portrayed as the one who is in command of the whole situation:

The driver got out of the car . . . looking down at them. He was an older man
than the other two. His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-
rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face
and didn’t have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too
tight for him and was holding a black hat and a gun. (CW 146)
His commanding role is suggested by the repeated use of the expression ‘looked/looking down.’ His silver-rimmed spectacles, creased face and black hat give him a ‘scholarly’ look. Paradoxically, he lives up to these roles at least in an inverted way when he rationalizes his and his henchmen’s actions and preaches eloquently on the Saviour later in the story. This ambiguity that is latent in their characterization will become more and more apparent in their conversation and actions.

The grandmother’s family’s ‘inadequate’ perception of the leader of the gang is presented by the narrative as a serious deprivation that compels retribution. The familiarity that the stranger evokes in her from the very outset puzzles the old lady: “The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was” (CW 146). Her failure to recognize the man whose image has been haunting her ‘all her life’ reveals the inconsistency that exists between her projected concept and his ‘real’ self. He appears as a gentleman noted for his polite dealings and apparent humanity. He greets them and directs his colleague Hiram to try whether their car will run. He offers the grandmother a chance to review her conceptions when he corrects her contention that their car had turned twice: “Oncet . . . We seen it happen” (CW 146). But his gentle behaviour is resented by the children who fear his intrusion into their private lives. Their hostile attitude voiced through their audacious challenges makes ‘communion’ with them difficult. Their questions and the gang leader’s reactions reveal the extent of their differences:

‘What you got that gun for?’ John Wesley asked. ‘Whatcha gonna do with
that gun?"15

‘Lady,’ the man said to the children’s mother, ‘would you mind calling
them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous. I want all you all
to sit down right together there where you’re at.’

‘What are you telling US what to do for?’ June Star asked.

Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth. (CW 146)

The children’s questions show their ‘rejection’ of the unseemly society, which invites punish-
ment as suggested by the gaping woods ready to devour them with its ‘dark open mouth.’ The
man’s order to ‘sit down right together where you’re at’ assumes significance in the light of his
attempt to make them ‘united’ at least in their common fate. Bailey with his characteristic insu-
larility senses danger: “Look here now . . . we’re in a predicament!” (CW 146). The grandmother
employs the hints dropped by Bailey to solidify her confused concept of the man and comes out

This identification of the man as The Misfit forces reciprocation: The Misfit is provoked to live
up to the demands of his name: “‘Yes’m,’ the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in
spite of himself to be known, ‘but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of
reckernized me’” (CW 147). The grandmother’s misrepresentation of the gang leader as ‘The
Misfit’ is perhaps the immediate provocation to exterminate the family instead of merely
robbing them of their car and other possessions.

The mutually exclusive tone employed by the grandmother and The Misfit in their con-
versation sustains their exclusion from each other. The Misfit ‘ consoles’ the old lady who is

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15 According to Josephine Hendin what “frees The Misfit from total emptiness is his gun.” It is “his most
‘animal’ part, a potent extension of himself.” See her book, The World of Flannery O’Connor (Bloomington:
Indiana UP, 1970) 149.
shocked along with her grandchildren by the revelations of Bailey: "'Lady,' he said, 'don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don't mean'" (CW 147, emphases added). The equivocation implied in his consolation that 'a man says things he don't mean' throws light on his own dissembling nature. He answers her desperate question, as to whether he would shoot a lady, with his characteristic delicacy: "I would hate to have to" (CW 147). But this denial of his volition is simultaneously contradicted by his eloquent gesture,16 which is indicative of her burial: "The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again" (CW 147). Similarly, he does not deny the goodness of his parents as suggested by the old lady; he qualifies them as the "finest people in the world... God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold" (CW 147). But the accompanying smile discredits the veracity of his protestation. He tries to evade his embarrassment at the sight of his victims with an apparently harmless reference to the peculiar sky: "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither" (CW 147). The prelapsarian Edenic situation evoked by this unusual phenomenon hints at his precarious state of mind. But the import of his reference remains elusive to the grandmother, who still thinks she can change the situation by changing the designation; she calls the cloudless-sunless day "a beautiful day" (CW 147). The 'change' thus imaginatively effected necessitates an alteration of the criminal's name also; hence her advice to drop the appellation: "You shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell" (CW 147). Her attempt to accommodate The Misfit through this imaginatively transformed personality falls through since the criminal does not identify his own self with the old lady's concept of his self.

16 Kelley S. Gerald recognizes in The Misfit's "unconscious gesture with his shoe" an anticipation of the "grandmother's murder as he absentmindedly enact a burial with the toe of his shoe." ["Thank God for the shoe": The Emblematic Shoe in O'Connor's Fiction," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 23 (1994-95): 94-115].

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The Misfit is represented as a man of determination who uses euphemisms to retain his apparent politeness in behaviour. ‘Euphemism’ is the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. The Misfit’s determination renders Bailey’s daring ineffectual; the poor man experiences discrepancy between his desire and volition: “‘Hush!’ Bailey yelled. ‘Hush! Everybody shut up and let me handle this!’ He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn’t move” (CW 147). Bailey lacks the determination, which his opponent possesses. His daring strengthens The Misfit’s resoluteness further: “‘I pre-chate that, lady,’ The Misfit said and drew a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun” (CW 148, emphasis added). The sarcastic tone employed together with his suggestive gesture of drawing the circle\(^1\) with the butt of his gun reinstates his decision not to allow the victims to escape the circle of his vicious domain. Bailey’s boldness is reciprocated fittingly when The Misfit directs his henchmen to escort him and his little boy to the woods: “‘Well, first you and Bobby Lee\(^2\) get him and that little boy to step over yonder with you,’ The Misfit said, pointing to Bailey and John Wesley. ‘The boys want to ast you something,’ he said to Bailey. ‘Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?’” (CW 148). He retains his polished manners with the use of euphemisms even when he asks Bailey to walk to his doom in the woods. Even though Bailey recognizes the precariousness of his predicament, he is too enfeebled to act. He is so paralyzed that he needs Hiram’s help even


\(^2\) Terry Thompson elucidates the irony of the three killers’ names: the first one Bobby Lee takes his name from “the perfect Southern gentleman, Robert E. Lee;” the second killer’s name Hiram in ancient Hebrew means “exalted brother,” and the third one who calls himself The Misfit is “without doubt the ‘Most-fit’ character in the story.” According to him if there is “a true Misfit, it is the self-centered grandmother.” For more details, see his essay, “The Killers in O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’” Notes on Contemporary Literature 16. 4 (Sept 1986): 4.
to get up. The painful experience of helplessness, however, enables him to [re]establish communion with his mother: "Supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, 'I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!' (CW 148). And his mother responds with characteristic maternal affection and anxiety: "'Come back this instant! . . . Bailey Boy!' the grandmother called in a tragic voice" (CW 148). The Misfit's resoluteness breaks the brittle walls of 'incommunicableness' and effects the union between mother and son in their tragic plight and Bailey disappears into the woods as a helpless child inviting sympathy.

The Misfit's rejection of the grandmother's flattery alludes to the self-knowledge that lurks behind his apparently inconsistent behaviour. In a desperate bid the old lady attributes aristocratic descent to The Misfit: "'I just know you're a good man,' she said desperately. 'You're not a bit common!'" (CW 148, emphases added). But The Misfit disapproves of this wistful privilege with a realistic picture of his strange personality:

'Nome, I ain't a good man . . . but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'It's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!' (CW 148)

The imbalance that he experiences in life is imputed to his genetic factors; his incredulous nature draws him into unnecessary trouble as it prompts him to dispute the inscrutable mysteries of life.19 This awareness of the abstruse nature of his self will be better illustrated later in the

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19 John F. Desmond draws a convincing comparison between The Misfit and Lancelot Lamar of Walker Percy's Lancelot. According to him both "represent conspicuous features of the times. . . . The Misfit's and Lance's attempts to construct an autonomous 'rational' code of conduct are really attempts to recover innocence on their own terms." For further details, see his "Signs of the Times: Lancelot and The Misfit" Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 18 (1989): 91-98.
story. His attempt at giving a logical explanation to his strange behaviour is interrupted by his own deeper concerns, which he hides with his characteristic embarrassment. He puts on his black hat as if he has forgotten to be civil and turns his gaze into the woods where the stark reality of intended murder is to take place. But he returns his attention with a concocted apology, as if he were an advocate of decency and decorum: "'I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies, 'he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. 'We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped. . . . We borrowed these from some folks we met,' he explained" (CW 148-49, emphases added). The insincerity of his apology is suggested by the hunching of his shoulders; and the use of euphemism supplies a new meaning to the words 'borrowed' and 'met'—they become respectively 'forcibly taken' and 'murdered.' The grandmother's gracious offer to search for an "extra shirt" (CW 149) in Bailey's suitcase follows her fear and incomprehension of The Misfit's manners. As usual he treats the offer using the same euphemistic language: "I'll look and see terrectly" (CW 149). The import of his answer will become clear to her only when she sees her son's shirt in Bobby Lee's hand. This peculiar behavioural pattern of The Misfit places him among the self-conscious fallen men who are in need of salvation.

The Misfit's relation of his breeding is presented as a 'justification' for the veiled murders committed at his behest in the woods. The implicit connection between the killings and the murderer's reasoning is introduced by the agonizing cry of the children's mother: "Where are they taking him?" (CW 149). The Misfit's reference to his father's exploits, which comes as an answer to this query provides the raison d'être of his criminal acts: "Daddy was a card himself. . . . He never got in trouble with the Authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them" (CW 149, emphases added). The Misfit claims to have partially inherited the odd nature of his father without his 'knack' for escaping punishment. The grandmother's interference with her
usual flattery shows her unwitting approval of his father’s curious stance as worthy of imitation:
“You could be honest too if you’d only try. . . . Think how wonderful it would be to settle down
and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time” (*CW*
149, emphases added). The apparent identification of honesty with ‘knack’ (‘you could be
honest too’) reveals the old lady’s unsettled mind. Her advice to ‘settle down’ becomes ironical
as she herself is ‘unsettled’! But unlike the grandmother, The Misfit does not equate virtue with
the avoidance of punishment; his retort serves as a warning to the grandmother against her non-
moral stance: “Yes’m, somebody is always after you” (*CW* 149). The accompanying gesture of
scratching the ground with the butt of his gun reiterates his judgement on the old lady as some-
one deserving death. The grandmother’s representation of The Misfit undergoes a radical trans-
formation: her initial fear and repulsion give way to sympathy and understanding. She is con-
cerned about his physical well being and spiritual uplift. Consequently we find her noticing
“how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat” (*CW* 149). Similarly, her repeated
insistence on prayer is motivated by her concern for his salvation. But The Misfit is unable to
reconcile prayer with his criminal life. Significantly, his repudiation of prayer is followed by
the pistol-shots—a coincidence that explains the connection between the two. The Misfit is
‘honest’ in his own world where crime loses its intensity as it is represented as inexplicable.

The imbalance that The Misfit experiences between crime and punishment is recounted
as the outcome of his identification of forgetfulness with forgiving. Unaffected by the old lady’s
perturbation at the death of her son and her almost ritualistic appeal to pray, The Misfit con-
tinues the narration, recalling his own adventurous and risky life: “I was a gospel singer for a
while. . . . I been most everything. Been . . . an undertaker . . . seen a man burnt alive once . . .
I even seen a woman flogged. . . . I never was a bad boy . . . but somewheres along the line I
done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive” (CW 149). His apparent apathy towards the crime perpetrated at his bidding, and the casualness he exhibits in referring to the ‘wrong’ that sent him to the penitentiary are characteristic of the ambiguity the text employs in his characterization. He confesses to the grandmother his inability to ascertain the crime that had led to his punishment: “I forget what I done, lady. I set there . . . trying to remember what it was I done and I ain’t recalled it to this day” (CW 150). The crime is located beyond the reaches of his memory, and this makes it difficult to explain the legitimacy of his punishment. At the same time, he does not deny his crime either. He maintains that the papers, which the authorities had on him, are the proof of his crime. He dismisses the grandmother's conjecture of his crime as stealing with philosophic detachment: “Nobody had nothing I wanted” (CW 150). Similarly, he counters the psychiatrist’s observation that his crime was to “kill” his father with the stark fact that his “daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu” (CW 150). He misses the implicit allusion to his act as Oedipal patricide in the psychiatrist’s reference. He does not feel the need for prayer: “I don’t want no hep. . . . I’m doing all right by myself” (CW 150). This complacent attitude keeps The Misfit away from other possible balanced perceptions which view crime seriously.

The Misfit’s peculiar perception of crime is further made clear in his pronouncement preceding the sending of the children and their mother to their doom. He puts on the murdered Bailey’s shirt with his characteristic casualness and expounds his view of crime: “I found out the crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it” (CW 150). He seems to equate memory of the crime with the crime itself and to assume that forgetting the crime amounts to denying the intensity of the crime. His decision to send the
children’s mother also to her death reinforces his preference to remain forgetful of his crime. He wants to get rid of her lest her “heaving noises” (CW 151) at the sight of her murdered husband’s shirt should remind him of his murder. The characteristic euphemistic language employed in the following dialogue between The Misfit and the children’s mother tones down the horror attached to her fatal end: “‘Lady,’ he asked, ‘would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?’ ‘Yes, thank you,’ the mother said faintly” (CW 151). The same ‘horror-free’ language is used in his ‘generous’ direction to his colleagues to assist the mother and the girl out of the ditch: “Hep that lady up, Hiram . . . and Bobby Lee, you hold onto that little girl’s hand.” But unlike the mother, the girl breaks through the deceitful courtesy with her insulting remarks and defiant attitude: “I don’t want to hold hands with him. . . . He reminds me of a pig” (CW 151). The Misfit’s professed forgetfulness of his crimes and the euphemistic language that he uses help him take a complacent attitude towards his criminal life until he experiences the disturbing touch of salvific grace.

The final discourse between the grandmother and The Misfit throws light on the paradoxical nature of their true selves. The prelapsarian situation which is evoked again—“There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun” (CW 151)—provides the grandmother and The Misfit with an opportunity to finally acknowledge or reject their Saviour. Left alone with the criminal the old lady feels so miserable that even her ejaculatory appeal to The Misfit to pray to Jesus makes a mockery of itself: “She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, ‘Jesus. Jesus,’ meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing” (CW 151, emphases added). The presence of danger and the threat to life unsettle and confuse her. The words that escape her lack volition. The deprecatory tone of her ejaculation is only a prelude to her further lapse, soon
to be found in the story. While the grandmother lacks comprehension of the mysteries of life, The Misfit seems to grasp more and more the paradox of his Saviour’s sacrificial death. He acknowledges himself as a misfit and explains the appropriateness of his designation: “I call myself The Misfit . . . because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment…” (CW 151). In order to ascertain in future the gravity of the disproportion that he experiences between his crime and punishment he would keep an account of his crimes duly signed by himself: “That is why I sign myself now” (CW 151). He considers Christ’s crucifixion as the best example of such incongruence since the punishment He had taken upon Himself was totally inappropriate to His own moral worth: “Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me” (CW 151). Christ had thrown the accounts of sin off balance by doing away with the criteria of appropriate punishment. Since he always acknowledges his sin The Misfit does not equate himself with Christ but represents himself merely as a person whose life has been changed by the supreme sacrifice of Christ. In spite of his criminal nature he is disturbed by the violence of the non-rational act of unconditional compassion and care exhibited by Christ’s sacrifice.

The Misfit’s deep understanding of his Saviour’s Passion and sacrifice is contrasted with the old lady’s sceptical approach to religion. Unnerved by the last “piercing scream” of her grandchildren and their mother the old lady makes a final desperate attempt to save her life through prayer and flattery and even bribery:

‘Jesus!’ the old lady cried. ‘You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!’
‘Lady,’ The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, ‘there
never was a body that give the undertaker a tip.’ (CW 151-52)

Her humilitating attempt suggests that she does not distinguish prayer from flattery, or both from
bribery. But The Misfit is determined to carry out his decision as if it were an irrevocable
injunction of fate. In his ‘realm’ she is already a corpse. But he is discomfited by Jesus’ mir-
caculous act of raising the dead:

‘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 thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then . . .
enjoy the few moments you get . . . by killing somebody or burning down his
house or doing some other meanness to him.’ (CW 152)

He realizes that Jesus’ command over death deprives it of its sting, diminishing the efficacy of
punishment or revenge in the form of death. The Misfit is disturbed by the New Dispensation
where the sinner is haunted by the forgiving love of the Redeemer. If he fails to deny crime be-
cause of the authority of the ‘papers,’ he cannot deny Christ’s miracles because of his absence
on the scene. Hence his rejection of the old lady’s desperate abjuration of faith that probably
Christ had not raised the dead: “I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t . . . if I had of been there I
would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now” (CW 152).20 His confession reveals his com-
prehension of the redemptive work of Christ. At the same time it points to the divided nature of
his personality: he is divided between the paradox of wishing to do good, but ending up doing

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20 It is when The Misfit confesses that he is deprived of the grace of God because he did not see Christ
raising the dead that the “grandmother is given her moment of grace.” See Miles Orvell, Invisible Parade
(Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1972) 133. O’Connor herself explains that the “moment of grace” for the Grandmother is
when she “recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him” (Letter to Andrew Lytle
dt. 4 February 1960 CW 1121).
evil, between knowing the value of salvation and understanding the depth of its deprivation.

The grandmother’s acceptance of The Misfit as her own child is ratified by her sacrificial death, paving the way for the salvation of the victim as well as the murderer. The Misfit’s regret at his inability to transform himself because of his absence from the scene of Christ’s raising the dead offers the grandmother a moment of clarity when she seals her relationship with the criminal with her own blood: “She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest” (CW 152). The grandmother is enabled to perceive even a criminal as her own child and her death becomes the price she pays for this redemptive act. The transformation of the grandmother is indicative of her ability to transcend the moment of doubt and fear. The Misfit recognizes this change in the old lady and acknowledges it: “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (CW 153). The grandmother’s self-sacrifice disillusioned The Misfit as is revealed by his final utterance: “It’s no real pleasure in life” (CW 153). The gratuitous

21 A. R. Coulthard sees the old lady’s salvation in her acceptance of The Misfit, a “miserable, lowly sinner, as one of her own children.” While doing this, she is “admitting her own sinful nature for the first time, and it is in this epiphany that she finds salvation” (“Flannery O’Connor’s Deadly Conversions” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 13 1984: 87-98).

22 In her Letter to John Hawkes O’Conor contends that “Grace has been offered and accepted” when “the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children” (CW 1119). However, Kathleen G. Ochshorn in “A Cloak of Grace: Contradictions in ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’” Studies in American Fiction 18. 1 (1990): 113-17 disputes this view. According to her the Grandmother’s “limitations are so extreme that it seems impossible to imagine her thinking about anyone but herself, even for a moment.”

23 Leon Driskell suggests that “[a]pparently, the Misfit recognizes that the grandmother’s values were false and that she thought too well of herself and her ethical system. Her death is more hopeful than her life, for she spent her life in paying lip service to Christianity while glorifying externals of dress, family, and financial security” (“Parker’s Back’ vs. ‘The Partridge Festival’ Flannery O’Connor’s Critical Choice” Georgia Review 21. 4 Winter 1967: 476-90).
sacrificial death of his ‘newly acquired mother’ shakes him out of his scepticism. He can no longer be complacent in the world of forgetfulness and criminal retribution since he is introduced into the communion of extravagant love and sacrificial forgiveness.

The ‘tragic’ encounter between the grandmother’s family and the criminal group headed by its leader The Misfit assumes a higher dimension due to O’Connor’s peculiar narrative strategy. The grandmother who is introduced as a self-righteous woman on the lookout for connections elsewhere discovers her ‘real’ connection with the notorious criminal, The Misfit, whom she acknowledges as one of her own children. Her hostile attitude to The Misfit, which is what the story begins with, undergoes a steady and ‘transformative’ progression towards identifying herself as the ‘sinner’s mother.’ This recognition and her sacrificial death compel The Misfit to question the appropriateness of leading the criminal life. On the other hand, through his ‘cruel’ intervention The Misfit becomes instrumental in establishing warmth and affection among the members of the grandmother’s family; they walk into the ‘dark and deep woods’ feeling the ties of mutual love and care. He also enacts the role of the primordial tempter for the grandmother and shakes her out of her complacency through scepticism into belief by his deep understanding of the nature of Christ’s redemptive passion and sacrifice. The conventional representations of the good and the bad are rewritten by the story which stresses the importance of being able to recognize and allow for the possibility of salvation and grace precisely at the moment of sinfulness and evil. This enables us to leave the story, feeling bad for the murdered family, at the same time not condemning the murderer either.24 If The Misfit experiences an ambivalence in

life because of his inability to accept unquestionably the salvific words and deeds of his Saviour, the little boy in "The River" follows the stipulations of the scripture and the preacher literally and experiences salvation as he goes down the stream.

"The River" is a complex story, which explores the intricate connections between metaphor and reality. Harry Ashfield, who is passed from babysitter to babysitter, is represented as a figure for the artist because of his capacity to believe the words of the preacher and the Bible and acts accordingly. He assumes the name of the preacher as if to claim ancestry from him; he steals from his latest babysitter the book that contains the story of the carpenter who, he is told, has brought him into the world; and he finally interprets the metaphorical words of the preacher and goes down the stream as they promise him the kingdom of God. His experiences with the new babysitter have already introduced him to the miraculous world of the Bible; and his unquestioning acceptance of Christ's miracles enables him to imaginatively live the life required of him by the sacred scripture.

Harry Ashfield's adoption of the preacher's name is represented as the beginning of the boy's mysterious voyage of self-discovery. Harry is the neglected child of an urban family where the grown-ups around him treat everything as a joke: "They joked a lot where he lived" (CW 160). He is passed on from babysitter to babysitter as his parents try to escape responsibility. Mrs. Connin, the last sitter, takes him out of the house, even to the realms of the mysterious and the godly: "[She] would take you away for the day instead of an ordinary sitter who only sat where you lived or went to the park. You found out more when you left where you lived" (CW 160). His introduction to the preacher, the Reverend Bevel Summers, takes place during one of these outings. Bevel Summers is presented as a "particular preacher [who] don't get around this way often" (CW 154). Mrs. Connin considers him "no ordinary preacher. He's
a healer” (CW 156). The preacher seems to appeal to Harry so much that he accepts the name Bevel as his own. The change of name occurs as an unpremeditated act in response to Mrs. Connin’s inquiry regarding his first name: “His name was Harry Ashfield and he had never thought at any time before of changing it. ‘Bevel,’ he said. . . . ‘Bevel,’ he repeated” (CW 156). The adoption of the new name suggests the boy’s desire to claim ancestry from the preacher who, he thinks, possesses the panacea for all his deprivations. Significantly, from this time onwards the narrative calls him by the new name only, indicating the substantial change effected in the boy by the alteration of his surname. The boy’s belief in the efficacy of the new name is also suggested by his repeated assertions that he is ‘Bevel.’ It indicates his ability to imaginatively identify the potentialities of the ‘preacher-healer’ with the name itself.

The boy’s acquaintance with Mrs. Connin becomes instrumental in transporting him to the world of the miraculous and the mysterious. The swear word of his house ‘Jesus Christ’ undergoes radical transformation for him in the “tan paper brick” house of Mrs. Connin (CW 157). There the boy is attracted to a “colored picture over the bed of a man wearing a white sheet. He had long hair and a gold circle around his head and he was sawing on a board while some children stood watching him” (CW 157-58). He learns from Mrs. Connin that the carpenter who is seen ‘sawing’ in the picture is Jesus Christ who has brought him into the world: “He had found out . . . that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he had thought it had been a doctor named Sladewall . . . but this must have been a joke” (CW 160). He accepts the babysitter’s revelations unquestioningly as against his earlier information, and learns more about the carpenter from her book ‘The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve.’ One of the pictures that he comes across in the book is about Christ driving unclean spirits: “It was full of pictures, one of the carpenter driving a crowd of pigs out of a man. They were real
pigs, gray and sour-looking, and Mrs. Connin said Jesus had driven them all out of this one man” (*CW* 160). The boy relives the experience of the demoniac when he is chased by a pig on Mrs. Connin’s farm: “Something snorted over him and charged back again, rolling him over and pushing him up from behind and then sending him forward” (*CW* 159). Again at the climactic moment in the story when he is repulsed by the water he has a vision of a “giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting” (*CW* 171). His association of the pigs on the farm and the pig-like thing in the river with the evil spirits that come out of the demoniac suggests that he is already living in the domain of the gospels.

Bevel’s first journey to the river in the company of the Connin family is portrayed as pre-cursory to his final and decisive voyage. Their movement along the road itself is described as a cruising boat, which is being chased by the haunting sun:

> They walked to the river, Mrs. Connin in front with him and the three boys strung out behind and Sarah Mildred, the tall girl, at the end to holler if one of them ran out on the road. They looked like the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway. The white Sunday sun followed at a little distance, climbing fast through a scum of gray cloud as if it meant to overtake them. (*CW* 159, emphases added)

The Sunday sun’s apparent attempt to overtake them bears intertextual reference to the Bible where Jesus Christ seems to pass by his disciples who were struggling against the waves in their boat: “When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. . . . Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased” (*Mark* 6, 48-51). As the disciples experienced calm only with Christ’s entry into their boat, it is suggested that the pilgrims to the river also
will experience peace only when they accept Christ’s salvific message. The sun imagery is sustained as Bevel whose mind is “dreamy and serene . . . began to make wild leaps and pull forward on her hand as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the sun which was rolling away ahead of them now” (CW 160-61). If the fanciful and unperturbed mind of Bevel is indicative of its capacity to receive revelations (of the mysterious and miraculous world of the Bible), his apparent attempt to ‘snatch the sun which was rolling away’ suggests his eagerness to catch hold of the apparently elusive source of this revelation. Their journey through the woods which appears to Bevel as “a strange country,” to the open pasture where he sees in the orange stream the “reflection of the sun . . . like a diamond” (CW 161) continues the imagery of their spiritual pilgrimage.

Bevel’s baptism in the river is represented as an act of supreme courage, which erases the distinction between metaphor and reality. Against the muddy-coloured water in the river the preacher Reverend Bevel Summers dwells on the River of Life that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven: “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. . . . It’s a River full of pain itself . . . moving toward the Kingdom of Christ” (CW 162). Bevel who is already living in the world of the Bible takes the river he is standing in for the River of Life and accepts the preacher’s invitation to be baptized in the river since he thinks it will lead him directly to Heaven. But his immersion in water does not bring him to the Kingdom as promised by the preacher; he thinks he has been kept in the river only for a short while, not enough to travel to the Kingdom of God. Unlike the older members who have come to the river either to attain some favours—like the “old woman with flapping arms whose head wobbled as if it might fall off any second” (CW 163)—or to mock—as Mr. Paradise who “always comes to show he ain’t been healed” (CW 159)—the boy
alone is able to accept the words of the preacher seriously and act upon them. He interprets the preacher's words literally and considers them real and alive. This accounts for his second and final Baptism the following day. He travels the same path he treaded the previous day, followed furtively by the sceptic Mr. Paradise and 'sheltered' by the sun. His decisive Baptism takes place in full view of the sun:

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. His coat floated to the surface and surrounded him like a strange gay lily pad and he stood grinning at the sun. He intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. . . . He put his head under the water at once and pushed forward. (CW 170)

The implicit comparison between the sun clad in blue and the clear sky fringed with treetops, and the boy surrounded by the 'strange gay lily pad' evoked by his floating coat suggests the supernatural dimension his Baptism assumes. He overcomes the last temptation which appears in the form of the river's resistance to hold him and the shout of Mr. Paradise dissuading him from his attempted plunge into the river. He goes down the river once again: "This time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and his fear left him" (CW 171). This final act which is

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22 In "Knowledge and Innocence in Flannery O'Connor's 'The River'" Studies in American Fiction 17. 1 (1989): 143-55 Stephen C. Behrendt contends that in spite of his 'minority' Harry Ashfield 'knows' what he is going to do. Thus, he takes 'only a single streetcar token from his mother's pocketbook.'

26 During an interview, O'Connor defends Bevel's death as "a good end. For he's been baptized and so he goes to his Maker; this is a good end." See Rosemary M. Magee, ed., Conversations with Flannery O'Connor (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987) 58.
without fury and fear turns out to be the outcome of the boy’s identification between the word and the thing, metaphor and reality, signifier and signified.

The transformation of the boy from Harry Ashfield to Bevel is presented by O’Connor as a development from the child’s stark earthly existence to a moment of absolute faith when he is able to imaginatively live in the miraculous and mysterious world of the Bible and the preacher. His unquestioning acceptance of the scriptural revelations facilitates his final supreme courageous act of Baptism in the river as a means of reaching the Kingdom of Heaven directly. Unlike the elders who take the words of the preacher as only metaphoric, and not real, the boy accepts them as absolutely real. He does not distinguish between the River of Life as depicted by the preacher and the red river where he is standing listening to the preacher. This characteristic potential of the artist to perceive reality in signs and symbols is elaborately expounded in O’Connor’s story “The Enduring Chill.”

“The Enduring Chill” deals with an aspiring artist who passes through dejection and suffering before he comes to an awareness of his literary vocation. Asbury Porter Fox considers himself a failed artist and comes home sick and prepared to die. The main flaw in his character both as an artist and as a human being is his inability to develop compassionate and non-judgmental understanding. He holds his mother responsible for his failure in his artistic pursuit, and views his impending premature death as a fitting punishment for what he considers to be his mother’s failure in cultivating the values of freedom and imagination. He is extraordinarily rude

27 Robert McCown considers the story as “the best example of Flannery O’Connor’s remarkable talent for creating children characters, and of molding them, as it were, from the inside out, exploring the tenderness, but without a trace of sentimentality, the mysterious process of their thought and motivation.” See his article “Flannery O’Connor and the Reality of Sin,” Catholic World 188. 1126 (Jan. 1959): 285-91.

28 David Aiken compares and contrasts Asbury with Stephen-Dedalus of James Joyce. He concludes that in O’Connor’s “theocentric world, even to the young artist, the last word is God’s.” For a detailed study, see “Flannery O’Connor’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Failure” Arizona Quarterly 32. 3 (1976): 245-59.
with her and his sister Mary George, and even with the physician who is called frequently to his bedside. But his experience of sickness, his mother’s loving kindness, the unfailing care and attendance of the physician, and the blunt but benign interference of the old Jesuit enable him to transcend his limitations and open himself up to the salvific workings of the Holy Spirit.

Asbury’s transformation is completed in an act of imaginative vision, which turns out simultaneously to be an act of receiving grace. Hints are dropped throughout the narrative suggesting Asbury’s ability to imaginatively conceive and represent even casual phenomena, and this makes his final transformation convincing when it comes.

Asbury’s belief that he is a failed artist is challenged at the narrative level in the opening scene itself by juxtaposing his convincingly sickly appearance with his transient vision of an imaginary temple at the country junction at Timberboro. The arrival of the sick artist at the country junction itself is described as part of the divine ordinance governing his life. The precision with which the train stops indicates the providential nature of the events that happen to him:

“Asbury’s train stopped . . . exactly where his mother was standing waiting to meet him” (CW 547, emphasis added). He alights ‘exactly’ into the hands of his mother whose genuine concern for her child is revealed by the sudden change of her facial expression: “The smile vanished so suddenly, the shocked look that replaced it was so complete, that he realized for the first time that he must look as ill as he was” (CW 547). The dismal look of the mother suggests that his appearance satisfactorily represents his sickness. But Asbury’s perception of the atmosphere as surcharged and his momentary vision seem to contradict his contention that he has no artistic talent:

The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods that surrounded
Timberboro. It cast a _strange light_ over the single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks. Asbury felt that he was about to witness a _majestic transformation_, that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the _mounting turrets of some exotic temple_ for a god he didn’t know. The illusion lasted only a moment.

_(CW 547, emphases added)_

Through intertextuality the ‘strange potentate from the east’ may be identified as one of the magi who startled Herod and the people of Jerusalem with the news of the divine babe’s birth:

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star...’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt. 2, 1-3). An atmosphere of regeneration is thereby suggested, and this contrasts with the characterization of Asbury as someone who has come home to die. His imaginative vision of the ordinary shacks of the collapsing country junction assuming ‘a majestic transformation’ to turn into ‘the mounting turrets of some exotic temple’ is indicative of his potential for imaginative perception.

Asbury’s antipathy and bias towards his fellow beings are represented as serious flaws that defeat his attempts at effecting meaningful communion in life and convincing representation in art. He is too biased against his mother to accept her loving advice to take away his coat since, she believes, it is not cold at Timberboro as in New York: ‘“You don’t have to tell me what the temperature is!” he said in a high voice. ‘I’m old enough to know when I want to take my coat off!”’ (CW 547). Her genuine concern for his health is misrepresented as an infringement upon his freedom. This unsympathetic approach becomes clearer in his rejection of her
anxious offer to take him to Doctor Block. The conversation between the two throws light on their disparate dispositions:

She said, ‘You did well to come home. . . . I’ll take you to Doctor Block this afternoon.’

‘I am not,’ he said . . . ‘going to Doctor Block. . . . Don’t you know they have better doctors in New York?’

‘He would take a personal interest in you,’ she said. ‘None of those doctors up there would take a personal interest in you.’

‘I don’t want him taking a personal interest in me. . . . What’s wrong with me is way beyond Block.’ (CW 549)

Asbury’s aversion to his mother’s proposal is indicative of his inability to acknowledge the value of backwoods culture. The personal interest that Doctor Block is expected to take in the case of Asbury is deemed as peculiar to the country life which is noted for its virtues of compassion and understanding; the urban doctors, by analogy, are projected as heartless professionals who are bereft of these qualities. There is an implicit suggestion that Asbury also is included among the urban population since he too shares their callous attitude and apathetic temperament. His critical approach to the interference of the doctor takes its origin from his belief that the death he is awaiting is a reward sent by Art for his faithful service: “He had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him Death” (CW 563-64). Ironically, he does not recognize the illogicality of rejecting the physician whose compassionate care also is part of the divine plan that shapes his life and career.

Asbury’s attempt at establishing rapport with the black workers of his mother’s dairy is presented as a goodwill gesture despite its failure. He works with the farmhands in order to
know "how they really felt about their condition" (CW 558), a knowledge that he considers essential to write a realistic play about the Negroes. But in the absence of genuine understanding between the two sects, the desired communication becomes difficult; Asbury also seems to share the condescending and biased attitude of the white about the black: "The two who worked for her had lost all their initiative over the years. They didn’t talk. . . . When they said anything to him, it was as if they were speaking to an invisible body located to the right or left of where he actually was" (CW 558). They are judged as having lost their initiative and being incapable of personal encounter. He succeeds with them only when he tries something bolder than mere talk: he makes them smoke with him. He considers this to be a moment of 'trans-racial' communion: "It was one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing" (CW 558). But he fails to extend the 'communion' to making the black workers drink milk with him. The return of two cans of milk from the creamery because "it had absorbed the odor of tobacco" (CW 559) and his mother’s consequent displeasure bring the Negroes back to their 'safe world of reserve' which allows for no communion with the white. In an almost ritualistic manner, Asbury invites Randall to drink from the cup he has drunk, only to be refused by him since it was not allowed by Mrs. Fox. Excerpts from their dialogue show their mutually exclusive visions of life:

Asbury poured out another glassful and handed it to him.

'She don’t ’low it,' he repeated.

'Listen,' Asbury said hoarsely, 'the world is changing. There’s no reason I shouldn’t drink after you or you after me!'

'She don’t ’low noner us to drink noner this here milk,' Randall said.
Asbury continued to hold the glass out to him. ‘You took the cigarette,’ he said. ‘Take the milk. It’s not going to hurt my mother to lose two or three glasses of milk a day. We’ve got to think free if we want to live free!’ . . .

‘Don’t want noner that milk,’ Randall said. (CW 559)

Randall’s repeated rejection of the offer suggests the narrow world into which the Negro is constrained by the legal stipulations of the white. This makes communion between the two meaningless. Suggestively the white boy’s endeavour to produce a realistic play about blacks remains an evasive dream. However, Asbury’s attempt is genuine since he tries to be realistic in his artistic representation of the Negroes’ life, and it also happens to be the beginning of his struggle to acquire the qualities of compassion and understanding in life and art.

Asbury’s description of himself as a ‘failed’ artist is itself presented as a proof of his potential for artistic creation. The two-book long letter, modelled after Kafka’s “Letter to His Father” and meant to be read by his mother only after his death, expounds her share in his ‘tragedy’:

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

He attributes his ‘failure’ to the slavish and unaesthetic atmosphere of home bequeathed by his mother. His attempt to liberate himself from her unwholesome influence has been proved futile.
since he thinks his artistic capabilities had already been crippled by her inartistic temperament, which determined the atmosphere in which he had been brought up: “Her way had simply been the air he breathed and when at last he had found other air, he couldn’t survive in it” (CW 554-55). Ironically, the very same qualities he bemoans he does not possess are exhibited in the representation of the ‘failed’ artist.

The wistful dream of Asbury’s funeral, which foreshadows his final resurgence as an artist is also represented as a mark of his potential for imaginative creation. His prolonged illness and the solemn seriousness his mother and the doctor exhibit set the background of the dream. The thought of the family burial ground with which he goes to sleep blossoms into a full-grown vision of his funeral. The characters in this ‘dream-fiction’ are the incarnation of his own imaginative perception of himself and others. His mother and sister are indifferent and apathetic: “His mother and Mary George watched without interest from their chairs on the porch” (CW 564). Their reaction suggests the disinterestedness that Asbury maintains towards them and his own death. This transference of qualities is indicative of his creative genius. The priest who follows the procession is modelled after his imaginative construct of the Jesuit who fascinated him during his sick days in New York: “He had a mysteriously saturnine face in which there was a subtle blend of asceticism and corruption” (CW 564). The qualities ascribed to the priest are deemed necessary by Asbury for anyone to understand the “unique tragedy of his death” (CW 550). His departure to a “spot beneath a dead tree” following Asbury’s burial in order to “smoke and meditate” (CW 564) seems a natural sequel to his ambivalent character. The dead tree provides a fitting background for him to meditate upon the mystery of death.

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29 Irving Malin, in his “introduction” to the New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982) 10-11 says that “Miss O’Connor is trying to show Asbury’s ambivalent feelings towards Catholicism, his mother and sister, and himself. If the dream were eliminated, we would not understand his actions.”
which, theologically perceived, is a transformation of human existence. The representation of the moon as an incarnation of the god of art who comes to resurrect Asbury continues this theme of transformation:

The moon came up and Asbury was aware of a presence bending over him and a gentle warmth on his cold face. He knew that this was Art come to wake him and he sat up and opened his eyes. . . . The black pond was speckled with little nickel-colored stars. . . . All around him the cows were spread out grazing in the moonlight and one large white one, violently spotted, was softly licking his head.

(CW 564)

The ‘gentle warmth,’ which he associates with his god, Art, is successfully evoked by the ‘bending’ presence of the moon. If his death were God-sent, his resurrection would be viewed as an act of God Himself. The reference to the ‘nickel-colored stars’ and the violently spotted cow remind us of the “woman . . . with a crown of twelve stars” (Rev. 12, 1), and the “white horse” of the Lamb (Rev. 6, 2) of Revelation which deals with the glorious second coming of the Son of Man at the end of the world. Hence the possibility of a new life is clearly indicated. The dream with its suggestiveness and imaginative probability of characters and incidents justifies Asbury’s claim to be an artist.

Doctor Block’s unfaltering endurance and saving care are presented as an efficacious means to effect Asbury’s final resurgence. Block is introduced as an angel whom Mrs. Fox has brought to her son: “‘Here’s Doctor Block!’ she said as if she had captured this angel on the rooftop and brought him in for her little boy” (CW 556). Significantly, like his Biblical archetype, he fulfills the role assigned to him by taking Asbury out of his dreamy courtship with Death to a new life. He counters Asbury’s insolent and abusive remarks with his characteristic
humility and understanding. He accepts Asbury’s contention that his illness is beyond his power to cure: “Most things are beyond me. . . . I ain’t found anything yet that I thoroughly understood” (CW 557). His absolute trust in God and his resignation to divine will guide him in his treatment of Asbury: “Then he took out a syringe and prepared to find the vein, humming a hymn as he pressed the needle in. . . . ‘Slowly Lord but sure. . . . Blood don’t lie’” (CW 557).

At the end of his regular visits he comes out with the glad news that Asbury’s illness is not fatal. The text casts his decisive arrival in an apocalyptic setting: “[Asbury] awoke a little after six to hear Block’s car stop below. . . . The sound was like a summons . . . that the fate awaiting him was going to be more shattering than any he could have reckoned on. He lay absolutely motionless, as still as an animal the instant before an earthquake” (CW 571). The summons signified by the stopping of the car reminds us of the angels’ summoning the dead from their graves at the bidding of the Son of Man who comes in glory: “He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds” (Matt. 24, 31). Asbury’s foreboding that the fate awaiting him is more shattering is corroborated by Mrs. Fox who reveals the doctor’s diagnosis of his illness: “You have undulant fever. It’ll keep coming back but it won’t kill you!” (CW 571). He is called out of his complacent communion with Death to a life of undulant fever—a fever engendered by drinking “unpasteurized milk” (CW 572). Paradoxically, drinking the unpasteurized milk which he thought of as a means of establishing communion with the Negroes turns out to be the cause of his enduring illness. But the illness itself becomes salvific since it enables him to recognize the value of compassion, a quality an artist should necessarily possess.

Asbury’s recognition of the leak-drawn shape as the Holy Ghost is presented as a supreme act of representation facilitated by the shower of grace. Even as a boy he had identified
shapes among the water stains on the ceiling of his room: "Long icicle shapes had been etched by leaks and, directly over his bed on the ceiling, another leak had made a fierce bird with spread wings. It had an icicle crosswise in its beak and there were smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail" (CW 555). If the interpretation of the casual marks as a fierce bird is indicative of his imaginative faculty, the suggestiveness of the image speaks out for its inspirational dimension. It is as if the 'fierce bird' had shattered his exclusive trust in himself, which had hitherto been pinioning the wings of his imagination, enabling him to fly bearing the cross of life which comes in the form of the enduring chill. The disillusionment effected by Doctor Block's final revelation about the enduring nature of his illness brightens his imaginative vision: "[His eyes] looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him" (CW 572, emphases added). Asbury relives the experience of St. Paul who had been struck blind by the "light from heaven" and been restored to spiritual vision by the intervention of Ananias (Acts 9, 3-18). He looks through the window of his room with his 'shocked clean' eyes to realize the frailty of his defence against the imminent revelation: "A blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud. Below it the tree line was black against the crimson sky. It formed a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming" (CW 572). This acknowledgement of his vulnerability followed by the experience of the 'death' of his old self prepares him for the decisive revelation:

The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill . . . so peculiar . . . that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird . . . appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of
illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days . . . he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. *(CW 572)*

The experience of warmth in cold presages the experience of grace through suffering. The vision of the bird in motion coincides with the dawn of another revelation—that his transformation is to be effected through suffering. In this perfect clarity he identifies the fierce bird as the Holy Ghost. Thus, the imaginative vision is perfected through the reception of grace, which is made possible through the patient acceptance of the enduring chill.

The story of Asbury's emergence as an artist throws light on the formative elements that assist the development of an artist. His onward movement starts with a realization of his inability to cope with the trying demands of his 'high' vocation. The disillusionment that follows Doctor Block's shocking discovery completely shatters his complacent perception of his illness as a recompense for his allegiance to Art. But his initiation by his mother and Doctor Block into the virtues of compassion and understanding, whose absence had defeated his attempt at establishing communion with the Negroes, takes him a long way in his development as an artist. The realization of his imaginative potential comes as a culmination of his spiritual growth which enables him to acknowledge suffering as providential and redemptive. O'Connor's story "The Comforts of Home" also deals with an artist who lacks these essential qualities of compassion and understanding.

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"The Comforts of Home" features an artist who is baffled by the exuberance of his mother’s compassion. Thomas is a writer of history, who believes that his writing can happen only in a context that shuts out disagreeable reality. He lives quietly with his mother until she finds a new subject for her compassion in the person of Sarah Ham who calls herself Star Drake. Her unconditional sympathy for the girl is resisted by Thomas who assumes the diametrically opposed spirit of his dead father. Instead of empathizing with the girl as befits a writer of history, he considers her a ‘slut’ who has destroyed his domestic harmony, exploited his mother’s kindness, disturbed his work and privacy, and even posed a threat to his virtue. For his mother, on the other hand, the girl represents the general condition of humanity, and of modern man deprived of love and comfort, hope and understanding. With her, representation cannot be meaningful unless it takes its directions from compassion. Her charity reaches its zenith when she sacrifices her own life for the ‘slut’ whom Thomas tries to dispose of in a cleverly contrived deed of ‘theft.’ While underscoring the non-judgemental attitude of the mother, the narrative sympathy is equally divided between Thomas and Star Drake.

Thomas’s annoyance at his mother’s ‘excessive’ charity is related as a serious handicap, which is capable of defeating the very purpose of his career as an historian. Instead of taking a realistic view of Star Drake who is brought home by his mother he is guided by prejudice:

His mother emerged slowly, stolid and awkward, and then the little slut’s long slightly bowed legs slid out, the dress pulled above the knees. With a shriek of laughter she ran to meet the dog, who bounded, overjoyed, shaking with pleasure,

31 Sister Kathleen Feeley in her book The Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick: Rutger’s UP, 1972) 32 suggests that both “Thomas, a middle-aged bachelor and local historian, and his mother, a mindlessly benevolent woman, are overdrawn figures of comedy in a story which ends in melodrama.” She sees in their delineation O’Connor’s expertise for cartooning.
to welcome her. Rage gathered throughout Thomas's large frame with a silent ominous intensity, like a mob assembling. (CW 573)

The 'stolid' and 'awkward' appearance that is attributed to his mother reflects his own perturbed mental state brought about by his mother's 'immoderate' charity. His stigmatization of the girl as 'slut' may be imputed to his 'moral extravagance' whose credibility is challenged at the narrative level by the sensational tone insinuated in his perception of the girl as she emerges out of the car. The ominous intensity of his rage forebodes the diabolic turn his anger is to take in the course of the story. Significantly, the dog also is presented as a figure of the loving father of the gospel\textsuperscript{32} as it welcomes the girl jubilantly and accords only a quiet reception to Thomas a little later in the story (CW 591). Thomas would have left the house immediately had it been possible for him to pursue his writing career without the 'comforts of home.' Prejudice blurs his imaginative vision and he fails to live up to the expectations of his vocation as an artist and to recognize the girl's predicament in the absence of love and compassion.

Thomas's mother is presented as a Christ-figure whose self-effacing love for the 'little slut' becomes paradigmatic of the compassion required of a writer like Thomas. With her unrelenting compassion she admits as true the girl's representation of herself as an unfortunate person who was forced to flee from her own relatives and boarding houses because she was pestered by perverted people. Even after the girl's confession that "her story was untrue on account of her being a congenital liar," and that "she lied . . . because she was insecure" (CW 578), the mother's understanding admits no diminution. Similarly, her willingness to call her Star Drake, the name concocted by the girl herself, instead of her original name Sarah Ham as

\textsuperscript{32} Through the parable of the prodigal and his brother, Jesus introduces the loving Father in Heaven who is ready to forgive even the worst sinner if he repents (Luke 15, 11-24).
found out by the lawyer, also shows her willingness to acknowledge the girl as she is and on her own terms. She does not expect her charity to be reciprocated. Hence her reaction to Thomas’s revelation that the girl does not hold her charity in any high esteem: “I know I’m nothing but an old bag of wind to her” (CW 582). Like Christ who does not condemn the woman caught in adultery, she does not abandon the ‘little slut’ in spite of her attempted seduction of her son. She tries to pacify Thomas, recalling the girl’s description of herself as “Nimpermaniac” (CW 574). Her very pronunciation of the word itself (Thomas corrects it as “Nymphomaniac”) is suggestive of her non-judgemental attitude. For any objection that Thomas raises against the girl her answer is that it could have been Thomas instead of Star: “I keep thinking it might be you. . . . If it were you, how do you think I’d feel if nobody took you in?” (CW 575). Her identification of her son with the sinful girl raises her to the level of humanity’s mother. Like the loving father of the gospel who wholeheartedly accepts his prodigal son who comes home after squandering all his property and leading a sinful life, she takes back the drunken girl from the boarding house despite Thomas’s protests and his directions to send her back to the jail or a hotel or to a mental asylum: “She doesn’t need a jail or a hotel or a hospital . . . she needs a home” (CW 584). Her compassion reaches its climax when she rushes to the scene where Thomas makes his last bid to get rid of the girl and gets killed instead: “Thomas fired. . . . The old lady lay on the floor between the girl and Thomas” (CW 593). Her sacrificial death becomes the price she pays for her compassion. It sends a signal to Thomas that his artistic endeavour cannot succeed without taking lessons from compassion.

33 The story of the woman caught in adultery is related in the Gospel according to St. John 8, 1-11.

Thomas's representation of Sarah Ham/Star Drake as 'the little slut' lacks credibility since it is not rooted in compassion. Unlike his mother he fails to recognize the human being in the apparently sinful girl. Instead of acknowledging her sexual urge expressed through her advances, he chases her out of his room as if she were a wild animal: "He had... backed her out the door, holding the chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat" (CW 573-74). The gravity of his aversion to the girl may be seen in his 'categorizing' his mother also among the bestial class: "Thomas stood before her, the chair still lifted in front of him as if he were about to quell another beast" (CW 574). The enthusiasm he shows in correcting his mother's assent to the girl's description of herself as a 'nimpermaniac' is also suggestive of his judgemental nature: "Nymphomaniac... Born without the moral faculty--like somebody else would be born without a kidney or a leg" (CW 575). This self-righteousness assumes divine proportions in his perception of the girl in the dining hall: "He needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption, but blameless corruption because there was no responsible faculty behind it. He was looking at the most unendurable form of innocence. Absently he asked himself what the attitude of God was to this, meaning if possible to adopt it" (CW 580). Ironically, in his attempt at assuming the role of the Judge he ignores God's infinite compassion towards the sinner. But he concedes that she is unable to commit sin since she lacks the moral vision: "There was something... that suggested blindness but it was the blindness of those who don't know that they cannot see" (CW 581). His perception of the girl remains at the non-spiritual level, liable to suffer deterioration at the slightest temptation.

Thomas's imaginative identification with his unscrupulous father effects a drastic change in his attitude towards the girl, leading to misrepresentation and consequent tragedy. With his assumed 'personality' he manipulates the disappearance of his gun to realize his
wicked plan to get Star Drake back to prison. Taking inspiration from his dead father’s spirit, he attributes the theft to the girl: “His father’s image leered at him. Idiot! the old man hissed, idiot! The criminal slut stole your gun! See the sheriff! See the sheriff!” (CW 588-89). But his plan misfires since he returns from the sheriff to find his gun in its original place. He continues his father’s dishonest inspiration in this diabolic pursuit to be caught red-handed by the girl: “He grabbed the red pocketbook. It had a skin-like feel to his touch and as it opened, he caught an unmistakable odor of the girl. Wincing, he thrust in the gun and then drew back. His face burned an ugly dull red. ‘What is Tomsee putting in my purse?’ she called” (CW 592). The latent sexual overtones of the narrative also insinuate his sexual assault on the girl, as against his projected image of himself being a passive victim of her advances. The desperate attempt he makes to deny this change of roles renders his position more precarious: “‘I found it in her bag!’ Thomas shouted. ‘The dirty criminal slut stole my gun!’ His mother gasped at the sound of the other presence in his voice. The old lady’s sybil-like face turned pale” (CW 593). His mother’s sibylline insight penetrates into the hypocrisy of his insincere protestation of innocence. Significantly, her ‘prophetic’ identification of the sinful girl with her ‘virtuous’ son is now vindicated. In his confusion Thomas fires at the girl but kills his mother who rushes in between to save the girl. Her sacrificial death becomes the price she has to pay for her son’s false representations. It is just at this moment that the sheriff comes to the scene with his ingenious but perverse


36 In her book The World of Flannery O’Connor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970) 118 Josephine Hendin says that by “killing a mother who has helped him destroy him sexually, yet taunts him with his effeminacy, he may hope to destroy what he finds threatening and fearful in her while preserving what comfort she gives him. When he fires the shot, he wants to kill the Star in her while preserving her Sarah qualities, to purge the matriarch of the slut.”
interpretation: “The sheriff’s brain worked instantly like a calculating machine. He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl . . . As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other’s arms” (CW 594). Thus, the story ends with the most fantastic of representations which were triggered by Thomas’s un-charitable attitude towards the girl.

The story thus presents a series of representations, which vie with each other, and finally lead to the death of the most compassionate character. As an historian Thomas should have been able to see that his response to the girl and his mother’s response to the girl are two equally valid but not necessarily truthful interpretations of her character. But, by virtue of its compassion, his mother’s interpretation is the more humane and valid response to the phenomenon of Star Drake. Thomas’s reactions to and representation of the girl are influenced by his own personal prejudices. For him the girl is an amoral creature whose intrusion spoils his domestic peace and writing career. His mother, on the other hand, tries to see the saint in the sinful girl. She responds to the girl, as she would to her own son had he been in similar circumstances. Her moral stance makes her a martyr of love and brotherhood, of compassion and understanding. If Thomas’s mother is the Sacrificial Lamb of God in person, Julian’s mother in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” represents something of the reverse qualities. She, too, dies a sacrificial death for her artist son who lacks compassion.

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge” also O’Connor presents an artist figure whose imaginative representations are distorted because of his inability to take lessons from compassion. Julian has qualified to become a writer but is torn between his intellectual sympathy for the emancipated black and emotional affinity with the aristocratic world of his
ancestors that had taken slavery for granted. He chastises his mother for her segregationist sympathies, but is himself discomfited in the company of the Negroes both in his real world and in the illusory world of his fancy. His mother, on the other hand, represents herself as an ‘old world’ lady who thinks she can still be gracious to the Negroes despite her fear of the integrated society. The unprecedented encounter with the emancipated, self-conscious Negress who resists her gracious behaviour violently unsettles her and consequently kills her. But death does not alter her attachment to the old world. Notwithstanding her failure to live up to the expectations of the integrated society the narrative sympathetically draws her as a gentle lady whose sacrifice is engendered more by the clash of representations than by any personal flaw in her character.

Julian is presented as an aspiring writer whose projected sympathy for the emancipated Negroes is at odds with his filial affection for his aristocratic mother. As an educated youth he poses as an advocate of the integrated society and considers life with his mother insufferable. He clashes with her when she recalls nostalgically his great-grandfather who had two hundred slaves: “‘There are no more slaves,’ he said irritably” (CW 487). In the bus he purposely sits near a large Negro in order to embarrass her. But his attempt at making conversation with him by borrowing a packet of matches does not succeed since the Negro refuses “to come out from behind his paper” (CW 493). The Negro’s reticence is suggestive of his doubts about the condescending white’s real motive. Once the real encounter fails, he recoils into his fantasy world where he pursues his wicked plan imaginatively:

He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend the evening. . . . He imagined his mother lying

37 While Josephine Hendin perceives a similarity between the fictional Julian and the emperor, Julian the Apostate (The World of Flannery O’Connor 104-05), Alice Hall Petry develops the similitude to its full in her “Julian and O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’” Studies in American Fiction 15. 1 (1987): 101-08.
desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. . . . He
brought home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman. . . . This is the woman I
have chosen. . . . Now persecute us. . . . Drive her out of here, but remember,
you're driving me too. (CW 494)

Even though his imaginative extravagance is capable of producing the desired effect of annoyance in his mother, his speedy race through these wistful fantasies betrays his own rather than his mother's discomfiture in the company of the black. His distress is foregrounded when the "large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman" gets on the bus and sits beside him: "To his annoyance, she squeezed herself into it [his seat]. He saw his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him" (CW 495). Julian's attempt to project his mother's annoyance over his own reveals the shallowness of his sympathy for either. With malicious glee he watches the identical hats worn by his mother and the Negress. He wonders: "Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson" (CW 496). This moment of 'triumph' is disturbed by his fleeting filial affection for his mother: "For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him" (CW 496). Julian is thus torn between his intellectual sympathy for the emancipated Negroes, and his ineffectual compassion for his mother, both of which are too feeble to materialize.

Julian's mother is a more transparent lady whose supreme sacrifice is necessitated by her inability to cope with the changed values represented by the integrated society. She clings to her aristocratic origins and insists on being a gracious and condescending lady in a world that has
turned social hierarchies upside down. She claims: “I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am” (CW 487). The expression ‘who I am’ bears intertextual reference to the Bible which reveals Yahweh as “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3, 13-14). Hence her proud claim to self-knowledge assumes divine proportions, a serious sin for which she makes amends with her death. She graciously fondles the stout woman’s cute little boy who sits beside her: “Isn’t he cute? . . . I think he likes me,” Julian’s mother said, and smiled . . . . It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (CW 497). But she is annoyed to realize that her graciousness is repulsed by the black woman who warns her boy against playing with the white woman as if it were foolish to do so: “Quit yo’ foolishness . . . before I knock the living Jesus out of you!” (CW 497). In spite of this annoyance and her worldly-wise son’s strong advice she tries to give the black boy a shining penny as they alight from the bus. The self-conscious black woman explodes at this condescending charity: “The huge woman turned . . . her face frozen with frustrated rage, and stared at Julian’s mother. Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian . . . heard the woman shout, ‘He don’t take nobody’s pennies!’” (CW 498). The intensity of her rage is evoked by the familiar imagery of the machinery which is about to explode at the extra ounce of pressure exerted by the white lady’s ‘pennies.’ Julian only aggravates his mother’s tension by his unsympathetic admonitions: “You got exactly what you deserved. . . . I hope this teaches you a lesson” (CW 498-99). The old lady realizes painfully that even her son is a stranger in the

38 Alice Hall Petry makes an extensive comparison between the social situation presented in O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind. See her article “Miss O’Connor and Mrs. Mitchell: The Example of Everything That Rises” Southern Quarterly 27. 4 (1989): 5-15.

39 The recently minted penny that Julian’s mother finds in her pocketbook instead of her favourite nickel is seen by John Ower to signify the replacement of the segregationist society by the liberal one represented respectively by the Jefferson nickel and the Lincoln cent. For details see “The Penny and the Nickel in ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’” Studies in Short Fiction 23.1 (1986): 107-10.
emancipated world: “She leaned forward... trying to determine his identity. Then, as if she found nothing familiar about him, she started off” (*CW* 499). She succumbs to her shock with Julian’s final equivocal but uncharitable tirade against the old world order: “The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn.” He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him” (*CW* 499). Unlike her son whose loyalties are suspect, she dies adhering to her old world values: she breathes her last calling upon his grandpa and her coloured nurse, Caroline. Her death sends a signal to her artist son that the feelings of the heart are as important as the thoughts and ideas of the mind. As an aspiring writer, he has to take insight from compassion to resolve the conflicting representations of the black and the white, the innocent and the guilty.

Julian’s misrepresentation of compassion is recounted as responsible for his mother’s sacrifice. His sympathies for the emancipated Negroes remain only at the intellectual level without any roots in the emotions of the heart. Similarly, his latent preference for the ancestral values is too deep-rooted to be exchanged for superficial ideologies. His criticism of his mother’s aristocratic allegiance becomes a substitute for his failure to live up to his beliefs. Even though he comprehends his mother’s basic innocence, he dare not acknowledge it because of his ‘principles.’ His failure as an artist to resolve the crisis arising out of the conflicting representations of the white and the black about themselves and about each other thus leads to the tragic death of his mother who is deprived of compassion and understanding at a time when she needs them most. Another story “Judgement Day” also presents an old man whose death is hastened by the denial of compassion and understanding by his own daughter.

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40 Doreen Ferlaino Fowler in “Mrs. Chestny’s Saving Graces” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 6 (197): 99-106 also considers Julian’s mother’s death a sacrifice.
O'Connor's fiction "Judgement Day" forces us to find goodness and the possibility of hope where we least expect to find it. This is the way in which, as a successful writer, she expresses compassion. Tanner in the story is a typical white southerner in whose world the hierarchy between white and black is permanent and irrevocable. Uprooted from his native country he is forced to live with his daughter among New Yorkers, who pride themselves on being beyond racial prejudice. But the old man's experience with the black actor next door proves that New Yorkers lack compassion. The Negro actor rejects his repeated offers of friendship and sends him a stroke instead. Even his daughter seems to have imbibed the spirit of the city—she backtracks from her promise to bury him in the country. In his attempt to escape the dehumanized life of the city he collapses on the stairs where the black actor and his wife hasten his death. Before his death he hallucinates that he is already home, that he is rising from the dead on Judgement Day. The narrative is compassionate towards the old man in spite of his racial prejudice and seems to suggest that God's verdict on Judgement Day may not be as harsh as that of the New Yorkers.

Tanner's decision to move to New York itself is prompted by his racial pride. He has been living in a world of make-believe in the country catering to his opinionated ideas and prejudices. He has controlled the Negroes by outsmarting them all the time and making them believe that it is impossible to beat the white man's brains: "The secret of handling a nigger was to show him his brains didn't have a chance against yours; then he would jump on your back and know he had a good thing there for life" (CW 681). When he finds that his hands have begun to tremble he takes to carving wood with a pen knife in order to hide his disability from the Negroes: "He had had something wrong with his kidney then that made his hands shake and he had taken to whittling to force that waste motion out of sight" (CW 681). But once he loses all
his land and is finally given the option of working for the Negro doctor on whose land he has built his shack, running his still, or clearing out, his pride takes the upper hand. He decides to join his daughter who is living in New York rather than “working for the colored” (CW685).

He is too proud to consider the black doctor’s warning that his daughter might not want an old daddy like him. He regrets his decision when he has experienced the dehumanized life of the city where even his daughter is high-handed in her dealings: “If he had known it was a question of this—sitting here looking out of this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a nigger, he would have run the still for the nigger” (CW685). His racial pride suffers a setback and the Negro doctor appears to him as more compassionate than his urbanized daughter.

Tanner’s stay in New York whether alive or dead is marked by the total absence of compassion. His daughter talks only to herself as if she does not want to communicate with others: “She questioned herself in one voice and answered herself in another” (CW 676). The black couple who lives next door hesitates to speak to him. The Negro is infuriated at the old man’s advances. He denies vehemently the designations used by Tanner who takes him for a preacher from south Alabama: “I’m from New York City. And I’m not a preacher! I’m an actor” (CW 689). Instead of understanding the old man’s predicament as befitting an actor he takes his words as a personal affront and reacts violently when encountered subsequently: “The negro slammed him against the wall. . . . Then he grabbed his shirt front and shoved him backwards to his open door and knocked him through it” (CW 690). His treatment is so hard that it sends the old man a stroke. To add to his shock his daughter backtracks on her promise to bury him in the country. He overhears her conversation with the son-in-law: “Where you going to bury him?” the son-in-law asked. . . . ‘Right here in New York,’ she said” (CW 678). This blatant denial of even his last wish is so unbearable to the old man that he makes up his mind to journey home.
whether alive or dead. He collapses on the stairs where he hallucinates himself being borne in a wagon. The rattling footsteps of the approaching black actor and his wife are taken for those of his companions Coleman and Hooten and he calls out: "Judgment Day! Judgment Day. You idiots didn’t know it was Judgment Day, did you?” (CW 694). Even though he identifies them to be his coloured neighbour and his wife, the black actor ill-treats him and expedites his end: "The actor leaned closer and grasped him by the front of his shirt. ‘Judgment day,’ he said in a mocking voice. ‘There’s not any judgment day, old man. Except this. Maybe this here is judgment day for you” (CW 694). His daughter finds him with his “head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell” (CW 695). Even in death he is denied compassion. If his coloured neighbours had perhaps disgraced his body his own daughter wrongs him by burying him in New York City against his wish. Having gone through nightmares of remorse, she becomes compassionate to her father: “Night after night she turned and tossed and very definite lines began to appear in her face, so she had him dug up and shipped the body to Corinth” (CW 695). This belated compassion shown to Tanner by his daughter is suggestive of her altered representation of her dead father consequent upon her spiritual transformation. By analogy, the narrative redeems itself by the expense of compassion.

Tanner’s obsolete perception of society as white-dominated has deprived him of the compassion and understanding he needs badly in his life, especially in old age. But he is presented as a finite human being who is compassionate in his own world and who deserves sympathy. His proud refusal to work under the Negro doctor undergoes transformation when he is denied communion by both whites and blacks in New York City. His decision to go back and to work under the Negro doctor comes as a culmination of this change of attitude. His genuine attempts at communication and friendship are either ignored or misrepresented by his daughter
and the black neighbours. Compassion would have enabled the black actor to accept the old man in his peculiar situation, understanding his ‘coloured’ words and expressions as a mere legacy of the ‘old world’ of white domination. This failure of compassion is perhaps even worse than racial prejudice. The narrative is non-judgemental in its delineation of Tanner and is compassionate to him up to the end.

It is clear from the above discussion that O’Connor attaches the greatest importance to the virtue of compassion. The artist with his superior dedication goes out to meet common humanity on the ground of compassion and draws inspiration and example from the Gospel narratives to communicate a powerful, if unspoken, sympathy with even the basest of characters. The next chapter looks at the various narrative strategies resulting from this basic orientation.