Chapter III

Art and Allegory

In O'Connor's work narrative meets the demand for compassion by falling back upon the great Christian story of compassion—the Passion of Christ. Her works abound in intertextual references and allusions to Biblical narratives and themes. She also frames her stories within the contexts of compassion and salvation through a richly suggestive play of metaphor. These narrative framings work as a backdrop that throws the main action into sharp relief. Her narratives, therefore, tread a precarious path between symbolism and realism. It is the interplay between the symbolic and the realistic that gives her stories their peculiar power of suggestion and implication. The physical events always seem to point to realities and preoccupations that stretch beyond the confines of the immediate, the local, and the particular. It is this 'excess' of meaning that marks her out as one of the most significant short story writers of our time.

In "The Displaced Person," O'Connor brings into her fiction the primordial question of the responsibility of one human being towards another. Cain's question "am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4, 9) echoes throughout the story. Christ's life and teaching have been the most affirmative reply to this question. It is hoped to show in this chapter that the development of O'Connor's narrative technique represents an attempt to understand and suitably embody this answer. We begin to see the implications of this answer to narrative practice in this story.

Mr. Guizac, the displaced person who is brought from Poland, is represented in the story as a saviour who redeems the badly managed farm of Mrs. McIntyre, and by analogy, the owner of
the farm herself. But his charitable decision to bring his cousin from the refugee camp and marry her to the black labourer on her farm infuriates Mrs. McIntyre, who thinks such a situation will shake the very fabric of the society which is founded on racial discrimination. The petty, parochial sentiments aroused by her discontented white farmhand, who has returned following his wife's death, confirm her in her disgust, and she decides to fire the Pole. But before notice is given, the Displaced Person is murdered in a cleverly contrived 'accident' in full view of Mrs. McIntyre. She herself now becomes a displaced person, to be visited and instructed in the doctrines of the Church by the priest. There is no straight identification of Mr. Guizac with Christ as such as will happen in later stories, but the implication is very clearly marked by the fact that Christ himself is described as a Displaced Person. We are constantly reminded of the story of Christ's life and the message of Christian charity through the statements made by the priest whenever Mrs. McIntyre tries to fire the Pole. Mr. Guizac's death reminds us of Christ's own crucifixion. The peacock that frames the story with its appearance in the beginning and also at the end becomes a symbol of the glorified Christ, as is repeatedly suggested by the priest.

The opening scene with its suggestive imagery of an unusual procession serves as a fitting prelude to the allegoric theme, which is nested in the otherwise realistic narrative. The procession consists of Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre's white farmhand's wife, and the peacock, a legacy of her first husband. Their movement to the hill, a place from where they can have a clear view of the displaced people as they arrive, is described as if it were an event of supernatural import:

Moving one behind the other, they looked like a complete procession. Her arms were folded and as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger. . . . She ignored the
white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder. . . . The peacock stopped just behind her, his tail—glittering green-gold and blue in the sunlight—lifted . . . and his head . . . was drawn back as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see. (CW 285)

The 'procession' recalls the Biblical scene where Moses is asked by Yahweh to climb Mount Sinai with Aaron leaving the other Israelites at the bottom. Further, if Mrs. Shortley's assumed role as the 'giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger' invites comparison to Herod who was shocked at the news of Christ's birth—"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened" (Matt. 2, 3)—the 'afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged cloud' may be identified as the divine child who was "wrapped . . . in bands of clothes" as he was laid in the manger in Bethlehem (Luke 2, 7). Similarly, the peacock with his tail made 'glittering green-gold and blue in the sunlight' may be compared to the Magi whose vision had been illumined by Christ's star; and the peacock's gaze which is 'fixed in the distance on something no one else could see' to the Magi's vision fixed on the divine child in Bethlehem ever since they had seen his star. ² If the object of the peacock's gaze is invisible to others, the divine babe also had not been recognized by the people of Jerusalem. Mrs. Shortley's indifference to the sun, who is perceived as an 'intruder' seems to suggest her sceptical attitude to God and religion—a theme which will be developed later in the story. Hence a comparison is already suggested between the Displaced Person and Christ and between Mrs. Shortley and the hostile people of Jerusalem who resisted the entry of the Saviour into their sinful lives.

¹ Exod. 19, 24.
² Matt. 2, 1-3.
Mrs. Shortley’s aversion to the Displaced Person has its roots in her representation of the refugee as a microcosm of the brutish European society. Her biased views on Europe had been crystallized in her imaginary portrait of the displaced persons as “three bears, walking single file” (CW 286). Hence her wonder at their actual appearance: “The first thing that struck her as very peculiar was that they looked like other people” (CW 286). The animal imagery is continued in her interpretation of the refugees’ names: “The girl’s name was Sledgewig . . . something you would name a bug . . . All of them’s last name was something that only they themselves and the priest could pronounce. All she could make out of it was Gobblehook” (CW 286). Her opinion that the girl’s name can be a proper signifier for an insect and her pronunciation of their surname as ‘Gobblehook’ with its onomatopoeic association with the gobbling sound of the turkey speak out her prejudices. This beastly association culminates in the comparison Mrs. Shortley devises between the rats carrying typhoid fleas and the displaced persons transmitting the murderous ways of Europe into her country:

Mrs. Shortley recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap . . . a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out . . . This was the kind of thing that was happening every day in Europe where they had not advanced as in this country, and watching from her vantage point, Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways . . . directly to this place. (CW 287)

Her view of Europe as culturally and morally degenerated and religiously unreformed prompts her to identify the Displaced Person with the murderous and wicked ways of Europe. The association of the Displaced Person with the beast from the start assumes significance in view of
Mrs. Shortley’s later association of the Displaced Person with an agent of the eschatological dragon who comes as Antichrist bringing havoc to her prosperous and reformed country.

The development in Mrs. Shortley’s antipathy towards the Displaced Person is presented by alluding to the transformation brought about in the animal imagery already introduced. The change effected in the Displaced Person’s surname from ‘Gobblehook’ to ‘Guizac’ and the prominence ascribed to him by Mrs. McIntyre who directs Mr. Shortley to meet him exasperate Mrs. Shortley. If the Displaced Person grows in the esteem of the owner of the farm, he is detested more and more by the white farmhand’s wife. He suffers degradation from a living animal to a dead one in Mrs. Shortley’s fancy: “Her look first grazed the tops of the displaced people’s heads and then revolved downwards slowly, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass” (CW 288). Significantly, the metaphor confers the predatory role on Mrs. Shortley, a role that will be effectively played by her a little later in the story. Even though she concedes that the little girl is “better looking than either Annie Maude or Sarah Mae, Mrs. Shortley’s two girls,” she does not approve of the boy as equal to her son H. C. who “was going to Bible school now and when he finished . . . was going to start him a church. He had a strong sweet voice for hymns and could sell anything” (CW 288). Paradoxically, the superiority that she claims for her son is his ability to ‘sell anything’ under the banner of religion. By contrast, she considers the priest and the refugees to be believers in an unreformed religion, which, she thinks, is the cause of their dastardly ways: “There was no telling what all they believed since none of the foolishness had been reformed out of it. Again she saw the room piled high with bodies” (CW 288). Her association of the displaced people with the nightmarish picture of the newsreel seems to be the provocation behind Mrs. Shortley’s identification of the Displaced.
Person with a ‘carcass.’ Mrs. Shortley’s increasing antipathy towards the displaced people also contributes to the development of the underlying parallel plot in the narrative.

The priest’s ecstatic response at the sight of the peacock provides an effective counterpoint to Mrs. Shortley’s purely mundane approach to life. Unaware of Mrs. Shortley’s uncharitable thought about his ‘diabolic’ role in bringing havoc to her country, the priest is totally absorbed in the ‘celestial’ beauty of the peacock. His reaction is one of wonder: “Arrrrrr! . . . What a beauti-ful birdrrrrd!” The strange pronunciation of the words ‘beauti-ful’ and ‘birdrrrrd’ successfully evokes his feelings of wonder. Paradoxically, for Mrs. McIntyre, the bird is only a liability: “Another mouth to feed.” The priest’s exhilaration at the sun-decked tail of the peacock further unravels the latent symbolic overtones employed in the narrative: “‘So beauti-ful,’ the priest said. ‘A tail full of suns.’ . . . The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all. The priest’s homely red face hung over him, glowing with pleasure” (CW 289). The ‘tail full of suns’ bears intertextual reference to the Son of Man at the eschatological time with the “glory of God” that excels all lights of the world (Rev. 21, 23). The description of the bird as though it had ‘come down from some sun-drenched height’ and the priest’s ‘glowing’ face at this apparition also add to the already suggested apocalyptic allusions.

Mrs. Shortley’s conversation with the black labourers on the farm further reveals the metaphoric undertones of the narrative. Her hostile attitude towards the displaced persons contrasts sharply with the more humane approach of the Negroes:

‘Displaced Persons,’ he [Astor] said. ‘Well now. I declare. What do that mean?’
‘It means they ain’t where they were born at and there’s nowhere for them to go—like if you was run out of here and wouldn’t nobody have you.’

‘It seem like they here, though,’ the old man said in a reflective voice. ‘If they here, they somewhere.’

‘Sho is,’ the other agreed. ‘They here.’ (CW 290)

Mrs. Shortley’s definition of the ‘Displaced Persons’ reminds us of Christ’s description of himself to the scribe who volunteered to follow him: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8, 19-20). It again recalls the Son of Man’s admonition to the wicked on Judgement Day: “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me” (Matt. 25, 43). Thus, the parallel between the Displaced Person and Christ is already hinted. The Negroes, on the other hand, do not consider the refugees as ‘displaced’ at all—their ‘universal’ outlook easily accommodates the Poles as fellow human beings. Mrs. Shortley is disappointed by the “illogic of Negro-thinking” (CW 290). The illogicality that she experiences suggests her inability to recognize the compassionate attitude the Negroes entertain towards those who suffer.

Mrs. Shortley is represented as a false prophet whose predictions of doom are based on her own interpretation of the signs of the times. While she considers the Displaced Person a ‘representative’ of the countless refugees from Europe, she does not recognize the significance of the sign represented by the peacock’s tail:

Then she stood a while longer, reflecting, her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock’s tail . . . [which is] full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun . . . She might have been looking at a map of the universe but she . . . was seeing the ten million billion of them pushing
their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a house, telling the Negroes that they would have to find another place. (CW 290-91)

She does not recognize the universal brotherhood of humanity signified by the intricate design on the peacock’s tail which could stand for a map of the universe with different planets and stars. Instead, she fancies herself as a ‘giant angel’ who could visualize the possible danger of the Negroes being replaced by the influx of the displaced persons from Europe. It is this perverted genius of Mrs. Shortley that sets in motion a series of misrepresentations of the Displaced Person that ultimately necessitates her own displacement and that of others.

The conflicting representations of Mr. Guizac by Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley point to their inability to recognize the truth about the new farmhand. For Mrs. McIntyre, he is an efficient labourer who has ‘redeemed’ her badly managed farm with his proficiency in operating all sorts of machines on the farm: “Mr. Guizac could drive a tractor, use the rotary hay-baler, the silage cutter. . . . He was an expert mechanic, a carpenter, and a mason . . . [who] would save her twenty dollars a month on repair bills alone” (CW 292). His honesty complements this ‘redemptive’ role; he is only “disappointed” (CW 293) when Mrs. McIntyre lets off the Negro labourer Sulk who has been caught by him for stealing a turkey. Mrs. McIntyre’s satisfaction with the new farmhand is so great that she recognizes him as her redeemer: “But at last I’m saved! . . . One fellow’s misery is the other fellow’s gain. That man there . . . has to work! He wants to work! . . . That man is my salvation!” (CW 294). Even though the Displaced Person is acknowledged as a ‘savior’ from the purely mundane point of view (she exploits his misery to her advantage), the supernatural dimensions of his ‘redemptive’ role will be made clear to her later in the story. But Mrs. Shortley denounces this redemptive aspect of the Displaced Person:
“I would suspicion salvation got from the devil” \((CW\ 294)\). Her objection seems to take its origin from her association of the term ‘savior’ with religion which she believes has “the devil the head of it and God the hanger-on” \((CW\ 294)\). Even though both of them are biased in their representations of the Displaced Person, compared to Mrs. Shortley’s negative approach, Mrs. McIntyre’s materialistic view admits the possibility of transformation.

Mrs. Shortley’s aversion to the Displaced Person grows in proportion to the development of her jealousy and fear of exposure. Mrs. McIntyre’s acknowledgement of the new farmhand’s worth and her willingness to raise his salary are quite unacceptable to Mrs. Shortley: “‘He’s worth raising,’ Mrs. McIntyre said. ‘He saves me money.’ This was as much as to say that Chancey had never saved her money” \((CW\ 295)\). Added to this ‘ingratitude’ is Mrs. McIntyre’s suggestive remark on the probable cause of Mr. Shortley’s illness: “If Mr. Shortley is over-exhausted . . . then he must have a second job on the side” \((CW\ 295)\). Her doubt easily falls on the Displaced Person who, she thinks, must have informed her mistress of Mr. Shortley’s still in “the farthest reaches” of Mrs. McIntyre’s land. For

The Negroes knew about his still but he knew about theirs so there had never been any disagreeableness between them. But with foreigners on the place, with people who were all eyes and no understanding, who had come from a place continually fighting, where the religion had not been reformed--with this kind of people, you had to be on the lookout every minute. \((CW\ 295-96)\)

The Displaced Person is considered a threat to the mutually beneficiary stance adopted by the Negroes and Mr. Shortley. His inability to compromise is interpreted as lack of ‘understanding,’ and this is attributed to the traditional and unreformed religion they practise in Europe. Her association of the Displaced Person’s straightforward approach with Catholicism (the ‘religion
[which] had not been reformed') has its natural sequel in her implied identification of cunning with the reformed religion. Hence the suggestion that she ranks herself among the opponents of truth and honesty.

Mrs. Shortley’s antagonism towards the Displaced Person and his mediator reaches the climactic point when she identifies them as the devil and his agent, and herself as the prophet of doom. The priest’s frequent visits are interpreted as attempts to prevail upon Mrs. McIntyre to bring another Polish family onto the farm. Mrs. Shortley visualizes the consequences of such a situation with the Negroes gone and her family set against the two uncivilized foreign families: “She began to imagine a war of words.... She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw... all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the news-reel” (CW 300). The image of the room piled high with mutilated dead bodies is extended to the possible aftermath of the clash between English and Polish words. Mrs. Shortley’s prejudice against the Europeans and their unreformed religion is retained in her description of the Polish words as ‘unreformed’ and ‘dirty.’ The priest who, she thinks, is instrumental in perpetrating this malady, is represented as the apocalyptic devil who brings in abomination in the person of the displaced Pole: “Here he was: leading foreigners over in hoards to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot niggers, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous!” (CW 300-01). The ‘Whore of Babylon’ is “Babylon the great, mother of whores” described in the book of Revelation (Rev. 17, 5). If Babylon stands for the persecuting Roman Empire, the Displaced Person here is described as the persecutor of the Negroes.

3 Notes on Rev. 17, 6 The New Jerusalem Bible (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985) 2045.
Paradoxically, Mrs. Shortley does not think of the Displaced Person as a threat to herself, although she herself will be the first one to be displaced as will be seen a little later in the story. With the ensuing vision, Mrs. Shortley elevates herself to the position of a prophet denouncing the wicked ways of Europe:

Suddenly while she watched, the sky folded back in two pieces... and a gigantic figure stood facing her... She was not able to tell if the figure was going forward or backward... A voice, very resonant, said the one word, ‘Prophesy!’... ‘The children of wicked nations will be butchered,’ she said in a loud voice. ‘Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?’ (CW 301)

The vision appears to be a combination of the chariot of Yahweh witnessed by Ezekiel (Ezek. 1, 4-28) and the “great red dragon” of the apocalyptic times seen by St. John in his vision (Rev. 12, 3-4). Her prophecy against the displaced persons contains a mixture of the Psalmist’s denunciation of the enemies of Yahweh’s chosen people—“Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Ps. 137, 9)—and the scene Mrs. Shortley had seen in the newsreel (CW 287). Her self-righteousness and presumed sense of security over the Negroes are behind this fantastic vision which itself is a curious union of diametrically opposed scenes—a clear instance of her misrepresentation of the Displaced Person.

Mrs. Shortley’s tragic death is represented as a natural consequence of her inability to properly interpret the signs of the times. Blinded by self-righteousness and preoccupied with her self-appointed role of safeguarding the interests of the Negroes, Mrs. Shortley has failed to foresee the fate awaiting her inefficient husband. Her overenthusiasm in watching the priest’s intrusions into the affairs of Mrs. McIntyre’s farm is rewarded by her mistress’s dreadful
revelation, foretelling Mr. Shortley’s doom: “I’ve decided to give Mr. Shortley his month’s notice” (CW 303). The impact of this disclosure on Mrs. Shortley is conveyed by a suggestive simile: “Her face was an almost volcanic red” (CW 303). The frantic preparations that she makes with the assistance of her two daughters and her husband in order to leave before Mr. Shortley should “adjust another milking machine on this place” (CW 303) and the tense journey they make in the thickly packed car send her a heart attack:

[Mrs. Shortley] suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley’s elbow and Sarah Mae’s foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself... She thrashed forward and backward... then all at once her fierce expression faded into a look of astonishment and her grip on what she had loosened. (CW 304-05)

Displacement from Mrs. McIntyre’s farm and her consequent death en route, which dispossesses her of all her belongings and connections, seem to ‘reveal’ to Mrs. Shortley the deeper mystery of the uprooted life which the Displaced Person is fated to lead. Hence her suggestive posture following death: “[She] seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country” (CW 305). The supernatural dimension of life brought home to her by her experience of being ‘displaced’ by the Displaced Person is suggested by her apparent contemplation of the ‘tremendous frontiers of her true country.’ In death, she clutches at the meaning of life, which has been evading her all her life!

Mrs. McIntyre’s complacency suffers a setback when her segregationist world-view confronts the universal vision of the Displaced Person. With the Shortleys gone on their own, Mrs. McIntyre is contented for a while with Mr. Guizac’s efficient management of her farm. She ignores quite indifferently the old Negro worker’s apparently harmless reference to the
Displaced Person’s strange behaviour—“In Pole it ain’t like it is here. . . . They got different ways of doing” (CW 307)—and the import of his reminiscence of the old Judge’s saying—“the devil he know is better than the devil he don’t” (CW 308). But her discovery of Mr. Guizac’s cousin’s photograph in the other Negro worker’s hand and the Pole’s promise to marry her to the Negro youth if he spent half of the expenses to bring her from the refugee camp embarrass her. In her discomfiture she realizes that her ‘savior’ is reduced to the level of the other white trash and the Negroes: “They’re all the same. It’s always been like this” (CW 311). She tries in vain to convince the Displaced Person of the impossibility of such an interracial marriage in the segregationist society: “Mr. Guizac . . . that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can’t talk to a nigger that way. You’ll excite him and besides it can’t be done” (CW 313). It is significant that Mrs. McIntyre is too prejudiced against the Displaced Person to employ his boy Rudolph as usual. She prefers to believe Mrs. Shortley’s contention that the new farmhand “understands everything, he only pretends he don’t so as to do exactly as he pleases” (CW 314). The Displaced Person’s inability to comprehend Mrs. McIntyre’s angry outbursts is evident from his casual response: “‘I cannot understand how a man who calls himself a Christian,’ she said, ‘could bring a poor innocent girl over here and marry her to something like that. I cannot understand it. I cannot!’ . . . ‘She no care black,’ he said. ‘She in camp three year’” (CW 314). Her contention that as a white ‘Christian’ the Displaced Person cannot marry his cousin to a Negro is ironic when viewed against the universal brotherhood advocated by Christianity. Through her denunciation of his anti-segregationist behaviour Mrs. McIntyre acknowledges the Displaced Person’s trans-racial view of life which becomes a claim the narrative makes for his similarity to Christ.
Mrs. McIntyre’s discussion with the priest about the Displaced Person’s dismissal from her farm assumes significance when it is viewed against the suggestive background of the peacock’s display of his colourful tail. Mrs. McIntyre tries to force upon the priest her own opinions about the Displaced Person who, despite his efficiency, has been unacceptable to her because of his inability to properly “understand” and “get on” with her Negroes. She is not ready to wait until he learns to “fit in” as suggested by the priest (CW 316). Their discordant dialogue which is followed by the priest’s ecstatic reactions at the sight of the peacock’s display of its tail is suggestive:

‘I tell you if I had a white man who understood the Negroes, I’d have to let Mr. Guizac go,’ she said. . . .

He turned then and looked her in the face. ‘He has nowhere to go,’ he said. . . .

She smiled angrily and said, ‘I didn’t create his situation, of course.’

The priest let his eyes wander toward the birds. . . . The cock . . . raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. . . . ‘Christ will come like that!’ he said. (CW 317)

While the priest’s representation of the Displaced Person as one who ‘has nowhere to go’ recalls his similarity to the Son of Man as already explained, Mrs. McIntyre’s evasive response that she ‘didn’t create the situation’ ranks her with the wicked who are deprived of the heavenly bliss because they have disowned the Son of Man who had approached them as homeless.4 The

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4 When the Son of Man comes in his glory to judge the nations he will denounce those who have not cared for the homeless: “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me” (Matt. 25, 43).
priest's 'transfixed' posture at the peacock's spreading of his tail and his exclamation that
'Christ will come like that' remind us of Christ's transfiguration which gave a foretaste of his
final glory to his apostles and sent them "weighed down with sleep" (Luke 9, 28-36). The
appearance of Moses and Elijah along with the transfigured Christ "speaking of his departure
[his Passion and Crucifixion], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" is recounted in
Mrs. McIntyre's disclosure to the priest about the Displaced Person's fate (which will later be
realized in his murder by the end of the story). The metaphorical thread is sustained in the
ensuing exchange with its apparently disconnected and mutually exclusive registers: "'The
Transfiguration,' he murmured. She had no idea what he was talking about. 'Mr. Guizac didn't
have to come here in the first place,' she said . . . 'He came to redeem us,' he said (CW3 17).
Consequently, the implied parallel between the Displaced Person and Christ is developed in
tune with the plot's progress.

Mr. Shortley's return to the farm and the national sentiments he instils into her mind con-
firm Mrs. McIntyre's decision to dismiss the Pole. She is moved by Mr. Shortley's revelation
that his wife, whom she herself "had been missing" was "killed" (CW 318) by the Pole. He ex-
exploits her sentiments further by representing himself as one who has "fought and bled and died
in the service of his native land" (CW 320), and the Displaced Person as, apparently, a "man
who had thrown a hand-grenade at him" (CW 318). Ironically, he ignores Mrs. McIntyre's re-
minder that the Displaced Person is a Pole and therefore could not have been the German whom
he had been fighting. His illogical but sentimental narration has its effect on Mrs. McIntyre as
is evident from her conversation with the priest:

'For,' he was saying, as if he spoke of something that had happened yesterday in
town, ‘when God sent his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord’--he slightly bowed his head--‘as a Redeemer to mankind, He . . . ’

‘Father Flynn!’ she said. . . . ‘As far as I’m concerned . . . Christ was just another D. P.’ (CW 320)

Her description of Christ as ‘another D. P.’ against the priest’s presentation of Christ as the ‘Only Begotten Son’ of God is especially significant in that both Christ and the Displaced Person have the same fate. Their similarity is further developed in Mrs. McIntyre’s vacillating stance on the Displaced Person’s discharge: “I’m going to let that man go,’ she said. ‘I don’t have any obligation to him. My obligation is to the people who’ve done something for their country” (CW 320). Her preference for the nationalist interests over her efficient farmhand’s fate persuades her to exchange her ‘savior’ in favour of the inefficient farmhand.

The conflict that Mrs. McIntyre experiences between her parochial and moral concerns renders her indecisive in the tradition of her Biblical archetype, Pontius Pilate. Despite her successful arguments with the priest “she felt let down” and “looked as if something was wearing her down from the inside,” while “the Pole and all his family were getting fat” (CW 321). She is too blinded by prejudice to recognize the alarming discrepancy between the Displaced Person and Mr. Shortley as far as their work on the farm is concerned: “The Pole never did anything the wrong way but all the same he was very irritating to her. Mr. Shortley himself did things as he pleased--not always her way--but she didn’t seem to notice” (CW 321). She is further confounded by Mr. Shortley’s provocative comment that the Pole will be able to buy her out in the immediate future. In disappointment she promises Mr. Shortley that she would serve the Pole a month’s notice, but fails to do so for reasons unknown to her. Even her sleep is disturbed by her
continued worry and by unpleasant dreams. Her resolve to finally act follows a series of such suggestive and disturbing dreams:

One night she dreamed that Mr. Guizac and his family were moving into her house and that she was moving in with Mr. Shortley. This was too much for her . . . and one night she dreamed that the priest came to call . . . saying, 'Dear lady, I know your tender heart won't suffer you to turn the porrrrr man out. Think of . . . the camps . . . and Christ Our Lord.'

'He's extra and he's upset the balance around here,' she said . . . 'and there are . . . no camps and no Christ Our Lord and when he leaves, he'll make more money. He'll . . . buy a car. . . .'

The next morning, she made up her mind . . . that she would give him his notice. (CW 322)

The nightmare which develops out of her jealousy of the Displaced Person's probable prosperity and her own fear of being 'displaced' from her farm reflects Pontius Pilate's vacillation in determining the fate of Jesus Christ. The priest's pleading for mercy reminds one of Pilate's wife's entreaty: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (Matt. 27, 15-26). Mrs. McIntyre's decision to give the Pole his notice completes the comparison as she acts like Pilate who had chosen to yield to the mob's pressure rather than lose his position.

The Displaced Person's 'death' is presented as a sacrifice modelled after the slaughter of the Sacrificial Lamb. The place where the sacrifice takes place is itself portrayed as participating in this great event: "There was a heavy frost on the ground that made the fields look like the rough backs of sheep; the sun was almost silver and the woods stuck up like dry bristles on the
sky line” (*CW* 324-25). The sheep-like appearance of the frost-covered ground with its sylvan bristles made bright by the morning sun suggests the universal significance of the incident that is to take place. The machine shed with the three farmhands—Mr. Guizac, the coloured boy and Mr. Shortley—and Mrs. McIntyre herself who is clad in her ‘ominous’ “heavy black coat and a red head-kerchief” (*CW* 325) in it provides the scene of the sacrifice. The Displaced Person’s posture at the time of his death—“he turned over on his back on the icy ground and reached up under the machine” (*CW* 325)—recalls Christ lying on the cross during his crucifixion.5

Mr. Shortley’s ‘calculated’ act of leading the large tractor toward the small one under which the Displaced Person is lying, and leaving it there with its brake “on a slight incline” effects the ‘accident’:

Mrs. McIntyre . . . heard the brake on the large tractor slip and . . . saw it move forward, calculating its own path. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way . . . Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness . . . and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. (*CW* 325)

Their share in the ‘murder’ is evident from their inaction while the ‘accident’ takes its desired course, and in the ‘collusion’ suggested by the union of their looks: “She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley’s eyes and the Negro’s eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever” (*CW* 325-26). The Displaced Person’s sacrifice, thus, becomes the expiation for the sluggishness and egoism of the farm owner and her lazy workers.

The death of the Displaced Person provides his executioners with the true experience of being displaced. Looking at the ambulance bearing away Mr. Guizac’s body attended by his

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5 Matt. 27, 32-44.
family and the priest, Mrs. McIntyre feels herself totally displaced: “She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance” (CW 326). The reversal of roles experienced by Mrs. McIntyre reveals the extent of transformation effected in her proud and self-conscious attitude to life. There being only Mr. Shortley and the young Negro, and Astor, the old man, to manage the farm, Mrs. McIntyre sells her cows and retires to live with what she has. She is even ‘displaced’ from her physical fitness and is confined to “bed all the time with only a colored woman to wait on her” (CW 326). In her affliction only the old priest cares for her and her peacock: “He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church” (CW 327). If the regular visits of the old priest with ‘breadcrumbs’ for the bird and spiritual advice for Mrs. McIntyre suggest that all hope is not lost for her, the presence of the peacock in spite of the loss of her past glory indicates the possibility of spiritual upliftment through suffering. Paradoxically, her complete displacement from all she has claimed as her own becomes for her the moment of salvation in the true sense of the term.

The resistance to the Displaced Person which permeates the whole story becomes paradigmatic of the ironic hostility of the self-righteous man towards his Saviour as recounted in the Bible. Mr. Guizac who comes as the ‘savior’ of the badly managed farm is hated alike by the existing farmhands and the owner of the farm herself. Mrs. Shortley who triggers the opposition takes upon herself the role of the prophet of doom denouncing the Displaced Person and leaves the scene herself as totally displaced from life itself. Mr. Shortley, who continues the fight appealing to the petty nationalistic sentiments of their society, makes it impossible for the owner of the farm to ignore his cause. Mrs. McIntyre herself turns against her ‘savior’ when she finds
his charity admits no limits—a situation that would shake the very basis of her segregated so-
ciety. Further, she fears the Displaced Person will buy her out of the farm if he is allowed to
thrive. Since she too connives tacitly in the cleverly managed ‘accident’ that kills the Pole, she
experiences the pangs of displacement, perhaps more than her fellow plotters. This experience
of displacement occasioned by the ‘mediation’ of her ‘savior’ makes her conscious of the vul-
nerability of human existence and exposes her to the ‘redemptive’ work of God, which she had
unwittingly acknowledged in calling the Displaced Person her ‘savior.’ The transformation
effected in her understanding of the word ‘savior’ from the merely physical to the spiritual is
effectively conveyed by the successful handling of the realistic and allegoric dimensions of ‘the
Displaced Person’ in the narrative. This narrative technique is illustrated further in the story
“The Artificial Nigger” in which the suffering Christ is unambiguously encountered in the
descriptions of those who suffer most in America, the blacks.

In “The Artificial Nigger” the6 intertextual references and allusions to the Bible constitute
an inseparable part of the mode and conduct of the narrative. Mr. Head is modelled as an erring
but redeemable prophet. This is the role that he gives himself and the narrative empathetically
echoes this through references to prophets and saints. However, he is shocked to discover that
underneath his prophet’s mantle lurks a sinner who is capable of denying his own grandson in
full view of a crowd. This shocking discovery transforms him from the position of the privi-
leged bearer of the look and the gaze to the humiliating object of scornful looking. This pun-
ishing experience prepares him for an experience of redemption through communion, trust and

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6 O’Connor considers “The Artificial Nigger” as her “best” story. See The Habit of Being: Letters of
Flannery O’Connor 209.
humility; it enables him once more to be the interpreter and messenger of God. Thus, he ‘discovers’ the suffering Son of Man in the figure of the ostracized Negro. By implication, the text itself begins to take on the role of the prophet. The sinner-artist has a vatic function that enables the representation of the possibility of grace to be authentic and legitimate.

The narrative starts with a description of Mr. Head whose vision is conditioned by his claim to prophethood. He awakens to see his room and furniture ‘transformed’ by the influx of moonlight: “He sat up and stared at the floor boards—the color of silver—and then at the ticking on his pillow, which might have been brocade, and after a second, he saw half of the moon five feet away in his shaving mirror, paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter” (CW 210). The ordinary objects are perceived in an exalted way. Thus the floor boards get the ‘color of silver’ and the pillow becomes ‘brocade.’ Even the moon appears to be ‘waiting for his permission to enter.’ This background prepares us for the next move of the text which evokes his assumed prophethood: “The straight chair . . . looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr. Head’s trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant” (CW 210). The apparent portrait of the loyal servant with some great man’s garment flung on him suggests the Biblical scene of prophet Elijah anointing Elisha as prophet by throwing his cloak over him: “Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him” (1 Kings 19,19). Despite these parallels, the text also maintains an ironic stance which questions the genuineness of Mr. Head’s prophetic stature. Thus, instead of the cloak it is his ‘trousers that are seen’ hanging on the back of his chair.’ This aspect is also brought out by the profusion of words and expressions that indicate a difference between appearance and reality. Hence, the ‘floor boards’ only ‘seem’ to have the colour of silver, the pillow ‘might have been’ brocade, the straight chair ‘looked’ stiff and attentive ‘as if’ it were
awaiting an order. Thus, right from the beginning Mr. Head’s claim to prophethood is contra-
dicted at the narrative level.

Mr. Head’s assumed prophetic role has its basis in his association of old age with wisdom
and the charisma for guidance. This is evident in his condescending attitude towards the moon
whose light has facilitated his exalted view of things:

The face on the moon was a grave one. It . . . appeared to contemplate itself with
the look of a young man who sees his old age before him.

Mr. Head could have said to it that age was a choice blessing and that only
with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a
suitable guide for the young. This, at least, had been his own experience. (CW
210)

He interprets the apparent gravity on the moon’s face as a consequence of its contemplation on
its impending old age—a fact suggested in the narrative by its reference to the proximity of
dawn. The moon’s ‘look of a young man’ which suggestively reflects Mr. Head’s own appear-
ance implicitly questions the old man’s presumed maturity and wisdom. This uncertainty is
sustained in his suggested attempt to correct the moon’s attitude to life with his own experience
of old age as a privileged position. The improbable connotations contained in the expression
‘could have said’ leaves Mr. Head’s identification as humanity’s guide a mere dream with little
potential to actualize.

Mr. Head is presented as a man of epic stature in the tradition of Vergil or Raphael. His
physical reactions and moral faculty are alike guided by his “will and strong character” to the
tune of the ancient prophets and saints. His bodily features are themselves seen as attesting to
his vatic claim:
He had a long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose. His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men. He might have been Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante, or better, Raphael, awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to the side of Tobias. (CW 210)

The repeated use of the epithet 'long' with its sustained quiet musical resonance itself introduces us to the contemplative look exhibited by the old man in the suggestively 'miraculous moonlight.' But the narrative strategy employed portrays him in parts rather than as a whole—'long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose'—and the latent suggestion contained in the description of his 'look of composure and of ancient wisdom' in the 'miraculous moonlight' seems to deny his assumed prophetic stature. Ironically, his 'composure' and 'wisdom' will desert him when he is taken out of the protection of his moonlit room to the broad sunlight in the city of Atlanta. The suggested comparison with Vergil and Raphael assumes significance when viewed against his self-imposed role of taking Nelson through the 'perilous' city as Vergil had done for Dante in the Divine Comedy or Raphael for Tobias in the book of Tobith. But the narrative counters his distorted self-image with a set of expressions of improbable connotation: his eyes had only a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men, and he might have been Vergil, or, better, Raphael. Thus, Mr. Head's claim to epic stature is constantly undercut by such textual constructions.

Nelson is introduced as an innocent child awaiting initiation into the world of his grandfather. The very first reference to the boy alludes to his 'darkness,' and, therefore, his need for illumination:
The only dark spot in the room was Nelson’s pallet. . . . Nelson was hunched over on his side, his knees under his chin and his heels under his bottom. His new suit and hat were in the boxes. . . . The slop jar, out of the shadow and made snow-white in the moonlight, appeared to stand guard over him like a small personal angel. (CW 210-11)

The description of Nelson’s pallet as the ‘only dark spot in the room’ is significant since it suggests the boy’s basic innocence compared to the old man’s experience of the sinful world on the one hand, and the fundamental sinfulness of the boy as a partaker in the original sin of humanity on the other. The baptism imagery thus introduced is continued in the description of the child’s foetal position, baptism being rebirth into new life with the risen Christ. The narrative mode, which portrays him in parts, as in the case of his grandfather, also alludes to his ignorance and immaturity. The new suit and hat bring the imagery to its fulness as the new dress worn following baptism is symbolic of being “clothed” in Christ himself (Gal. 3, 26-27). The slop jar, despite the menial purpose it serves, assumes the status of a guardian angel in the tradition of Raphael, the angel who accompanied Tobias during his journey to Media and back home. This inversion of roles will be justified when Mr. Head becomes the initiator and the guardian angel, roles he is too prejudiced and tainted to enact. Nelson’s initiation thus foreshadows an introduction into the sinful world of Mr. Head’s society.

The journey to Atlanta had been planned by Mr. Head as a means of initiating his grandson into the stark realities of life. He wants to create an awareness in the boy that the city which he claims as his birthplace is not an ideal place. The boy’s relationship with the city starts with

7 Rom. 6, 4-6.

8 Tobit 5-12 (The New Jerusalem Bible).
his mother's escapade: "Mr. Head had once had a wife and daughter and when his wife died, the
daughter ran away and returned after an interval with Nelson... He had made the mistake of
telling Nelson that he had been born in Atlanta" (CW212). Nelson's birth in Atlanta invites
comparison to Christ's own birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, where Mary had gone to reg-
ister her name in accordance with the decree of Caesar Augustus. Mr. Head who knows the
city as an abode of the Negroes does not therefore attach any worth to the boy's urban birth.
He tries in vain to convince the boy that his predilection for the city is due to his ignorance
about the real nature of city life. Mr. Head had tried to point out to him that when he was born
he didn't have the intelligence to determine his whereabouts. With his shrewd retorts Nelson
counters Mr. Head's claim for superior 'knowledge' of the city:

'If you ain't been there in fifteen years, how you know you'll be able to find
your way about?' Nelson had asked. 'How you know it hasn't changed some?'

'Have you ever,' Mr. Head had asked, 'seen me lost?'

Nelson certainly had not but he... had given an impudent answer... 'It's
nowhere around here to get lost at.'

'The day is going to come,' Mr. Head prophesied, 'when you'll find you
ain't as smart as you think you are.' (CW 211)

Mr. Head's quick repartee suggests that he has not duly considered the import of his grandson's
pertinent question regarding the authenticity of his knowledge of the city which must have
'changed some' within the previous fifteen years. Significantly, Nelson's doubts about his
grandfather's knowledge of the city will be vindicated later in the story and the old man will
realize that it is he, more than his grandson, who is not as smart as he thinks he is. Hence, a

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reversion of roles is suggested whereby Mr. Head is as much in need of initiation as his grandchild.

Mr. Head's failure to wake up before Nelson comes as a setback to his claim to absolute control over his physical responses. He is disturbed to find Nelson ahead of him in the kitchen preparing the lunch for their trip: "[Nelson's] pallet was empty and the clothes boxes had been thrown open... The boy had a corn pone on cooking and had fried the meat... He had on his new suit and his new gray hat pulled low over his eyes" (CW 212). The narration of his 'empty' pallet and 'open' boxes recalls the empty tomb of Christ following his resurrection from the dead. Nelson's awakening before Mr. Head, thus, suggests the precedence the boy enjoys over his grandfather in the matter of physical response. Mr. Head tries hard to overcome this experience of defeat by belittling the possible effect of their journey: "You'll get there soon enough and it's no guarantee you'll like it when you do neither" (CW 212). The boy's reaction to this suggestion accompanied by his "fiercely expressionless face, very much the same shape as the old man's" (CW 212) places him on a par with his grandfather. For in appearance and, by implication, in interests, too, they are convertible human beings: "They were grandfather and grandson but they looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age, for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it" (CW 212). Hence, the suggestion that Mr. Head will have a hard time to establish his superiority over his grandson who appears to have 'mastered' all possible knowledge as if by intuition, in addition to his 'smartness.'

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The discussion between Mr. Head and Nelson about the boy’s knowledge of the Negroes turns out to be a study in the epistemic question of seeing as against interpretation. Mr. Head’s contention that the boy has not seen a Negro is based on factual evidence: “There hasn’t been a nigger in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born” (CW 212). Thus the boy’s idea of a Negro is only a conceptual legacy handed over by Mr. Head whose prejudices go into the formation of the concept itself. The following discussion further explores the question in its deeper aspects:

‘How you know I never saw a nigger when I lived there before?’ Nelson asked. ‘I probably saw a lot of niggers.’

‘If you seen one you didn’t know what he was,’ Mr. Head said, completely exasperated. ‘A six-month-old child don’t know a nigger from anybody else.’

‘I reckon I’ll know a nigger if I see one,’ the boy said. (CW 213)

The boy’s inability to recognize the import of his grandfather’s argument indicates his lack of awareness of the complexities involved in the process of human knowledge. Mr. Head’s argument that a ‘six-month-old child don’t know a nigger from anybody else’ indicates the lack of interpretation that is necessary for the formation of human knowledge. Hence, the child is totally ‘ignorant’ since it lacks the social construct that distinguishes a white man from a Negro.

The anxiety exhibited by Mr. Head about his pre-planned trip to Atlanta also renders his claim to prophethood suspect. Even though he has made special arrangements with the ticket agent to get the train to stop for them at their county junction, Mr. Head “was secretly afraid it would not, in which case, he knew Nelson would say, ‘I never thought no train was going to stop for you’” (CW 213). What worries him most is the fact that he will lose face in front of his grandson. It is through the boy’s perspective that the text provides an ironic counterpart to
Mr. Head’s prophethood. His doubt continues even after the train is sighted: “There was a deep warning bleat and the train appeared, gliding very slowly. . . . Mr. Head was still not certain it would stop and he felt it would make an even bigger idiot of him if it went by slowly” (CW 213). His sceptical outlook which constantly negates the vatic role is further evident in his precautionary gesture of taking the lunch packet for their journey: “Mr. Head carried a paper sack with some biscuits and a can of sardines in it for their lunch” (CW 213). Significantly, the ‘biscuits’ (American version of tasty bread) and ‘sardines’ contained in his lunch packet are the counterparts of Christ’s miracle of feeding the multitudes by multiplying bread and fishes. But unlike Christ, Mr. Head has no faith in providence, a serious depravity that undercuts his identification with prophethood.

The scene that Mr. Head and Nelson witness as they board the train is presented with eschatological undertones. They enter the second coach as directed by the conductor and are confronted by rows of travellers sleeping in their seats: “Most of the travelers were still sleeping, some with their heads hanging off the chair arms, some stretched across two seats, and some sprawled out with their feet in the aisle” (CW 214). The posture of the sleeping passengers evokes the eschatological scene of judgement with the dead awaiting the angels’ trumpet announcing the coming of the Son of Man. The imagery is extended to include the newly boarded travellers also, as suggested by their shocked appearance at the sight of their own ghost-like reflections on the window glasses: “[Nelson] sat down and turned his head to the glass. There he saw a pale ghost-like face scowling at him beneath the brim of a pale ghost-like hat.

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11 The miracle of multiplying bread and fish is related in Matt. 14, 15-21; 15, 32-39; Mark 6, 30-44, Luke 9, 10-17 and John 6, 1-14.

His grandfather, looking quickly too, saw a different ghost, pale but grinning, under a black hat” (CW 214). Mr. Head’s gesture of reading aloud from his ticket also complements the already introduced eschatological overtones of the narrative: “Mr. Head sat down and settled himself and took out his ticket and started reading aloud everything that was printed on it. People began to stir. Several woke up” (CW 214). The scene reminds us of the Biblical narrative which describes the glorious appearance of the Son of Man seated on his throne for the Last Judgement: “Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it. . . . And I saw . . . books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books” (Rev. 20, 11-12). Hence, the sojourners are ‘prepared’ for the imminent apparition, the import of which is already suggested by the scene they have witnessed.

The majestic appearance of the Negro comes as a culmination of the narrative’s preparations for the ‘apparition.’ The text presents the Negro in heroic proportions, employing a different narrative strategy. If Mr. Head and Nelson are described in parts, the Negro is delineated in whole and positively as an imposing figure. Thus,

A huge coffee-colored man was coming slowly forward. He had on a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin in it. One of his hands rested on his stomach which rode majestically under his buttoned coat, and in the other he held the head of a black walking stick that he picked up and set down with a deliberate outward motion each time he took a step. He was proceeding very slowly, his large brown eyes gazing over the heads of the passengers. . . . Behind him there were two young women . . . and they chatted in low throaty voices as they followed him. (CW 215-16)
The qualifiers used in the delineation of the Negro—he is ‘huge’ and ‘tremendous’ with ‘large’ eyes; he wears a ‘light’ suit and a ‘yellow satin’ tie with a ‘ruby’ pin in it; he moves ‘majestically’ holding a ‘black walking’ stick—recall the Son of Man who is clad in a “scarlet robe,” and is holding “a reed in his right hand,” and is being mocked by the Roman soldiers saying “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Matt. 27, 28-29). The two young women who escort him and chat in ‘low throaty voices’ invite comparison to those “women who were beating their breasts and wailing for [Christ]” as they followed him towards Calvary (Luke 23, 27-31). Thus, Mr. Head and his grandson are offered an opportunity to rise above their prejudices and to have a vision of the Son of Man in the suggestive figure of the Negro.

The ‘negative’ responses elicited from Mr. Head and Nelson by the ‘apparition’ show their inability to recognize its significance in their lives. Mr. Head considers the Negro a target to try his grandson’s ‘smartness.’ Thus “he caught Nelson by the arm and pulled him forward. ‘Look,’ he said” (CW 215). It will be recalled that Pilate, too, invited the angry Jews to look at Jesus with the crown of thorns, but himself evading the responsibility for the tragic event. Mr. Head does not recognize the invitation suggested by the reflection in his eye of the light from the black man’s sapphire ring, and is himself ignored in turn: “As the procession passed them, the light from a sapphire ring on the brown hand that picked up the cane reflected in Mr. Head’s eye, but he did not look up nor did the tremendous man look at him” (CW 216). The ‘light from the sapphire ring on the brown hand’ evokes the messianic Jerusalem which has “the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev, 21, 10-11). Instead of recognizing the supernatural import of the vision Mr. Head attempts to embarrass his

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13 “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him” (John 19, 4-6).
grandson with his prejudiced notion of the Negro. Nelson’s responses to his repeated questions reveal the boy’s unprejudiced and ‘unqualified’ notion of humanity whether white or black:

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘A man,’ the boy said. . .

‘What kind of a man?’ Mr. Head persisted. . .

‘A fat man,’ Nelson said. . .

‘You don’t know what kind?’ Mr. Head said in a final tone.

‘An old man,’ the boy said and had a sudden foreboding that he was not going to enjoy the day.

‘That was a nigger,’ Mr. Head said and sat back. (CW 216)

Nelson’s repeated answers suggest that his vision is not yet tainted by his society’s prejudices. They also reveal his inability to see the supernatural through the natural. The apparition passes without its desired effect on Mr. Head and Nelson and the narrative continues its efforts to achieve its end.

The subsequent encounters Mr. Head and Nelson have with the black only confirm them in their prejudice against the Negroes. As a ‘true’ guide Mr. Head takes his grandson to the different parts of the train showing and explaining to him the “toilet,” “plumbing,” “ice-water cooler,” and the “bowl with the single spigot where the travelers brushed their teeth” (CW 217). They reach the diner which excels in elegance all the other cars, and remain as spectators. This particular car “was painted a rich egg-yellow and had a wine-colored carpet on the floor. . . . Three very black Negroes in white suits and aprons were running up and down . . . swinging trays and bowing and bending over the travelers” (CW 217). The description evokes the “large room upstairs, furnished and ready” (Mark 14, 15) where Christ ate the Last Supper with his
disciples. The Negroes who run about in ‘white suits and aprons’ suggest none other than Christ himself who behaved as a servant washing his disciples’ feet.\textsuperscript{14} The presence of the ‘coffee-colored man’ in the corner of the diner, which is separated for the black, eating his breakfast with the two ‘coffee-colored’ women completes the suggestiveness of the scene: “He was speaking in a soft voice to the two women while he buttered a muffin. He had a heavy sad face” (\textit{CW} 217). His ‘soft’ voice, ‘heavy face,’ and suggestive gesture of buttering the muffin recall Christ at the Last Supper table instituting the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{15} But the significance of the scene is lost upon Mr. Head who explains the presence of the Negro in the corner as part of the segregationist ethic: “They rope them off” (\textit{CW} 217). He even insults the Negro waiter who only does his duty in denying entrance to Mr. Head and his grandson to the kitchen: “And there’s good reason for that,” he shouted into the Negro’s chest, ‘because the cockroaches would run the passengers out!” (\textit{CW} 217). Instead of recognizing the latent message these scenes contain, Mr. Head transmits his prejudiced vision of the Negroes to his grandson, shutting himself and the boy against the ‘truth’ of life the black signify.

Their walk through the city lays bare the hollowness of Mr. Head’s claim to be a ‘proper guide’ for his grandson. Despite his boasting, Mr. Head is bewildered at the sight of the hurrying crowd of the city and fails to tell his grandson how to see “what all it is to see” (\textit{CW} 219). His suggestion to “walk” comes “as if the sight of people passing had given him the clue” (\textit{CW} 219). Ironically, the ‘guide’ is ‘guided’ by the casual behaviour of the mob! Mr. Head’s scepticism is further revealed in his decision to keep the “concrete dome” of the “putty-colored

\textsuperscript{14} John 13, 3-10.

\textsuperscript{15} The institution of the Eucharist is described in Matt. 26, 26-29; Mark 14, 22-26; Luke 22, 14-23 and 1 Cor. 11, 23-26.
terminal” (CW 219) in sight in order not to get lost in the city. His choice of this concrete monument of the modern materialistic civilization over the temple spires of old insinuates his sceptical outlook. It is significant that the dome does not hold them together any longer! The survey of the city is limited to window shopping only because of Mr. Head’s fear of getting lost in big shops. For “on his first trip here, he had got lost in a large one and had found his way out only after many people had insulted him” (CW 219). But he is enthusiastic to ‘explain’ scenes to his grandson. Thus, he invites Nelson’s “particular attention to where you walked in and sat on a chair with your feet upon two rests and let a Negro polish your shoes” (CW 219). Instead of recognizing the Biblical undertones of the scene (as befitting a prophet) which metaphorize the Negro who polishes shoes as a figure of Christ who had washed his disciples’ feet, Mr. Head uses the opportunity to ‘confirm’ his grandson in his already initiated bias against the Negroes.

Mr. Head’s approach to the predictions of the weighing machine also renders his vatic claims suspect. His strange interpretation of the contents on the tickets issued by the machine is indicative of his inability to recognize the significance of the signs:

Mr. Head’s ticket said, ‘You weigh 120 pounds. You are upright and brave and all your friends admire you. . . . He . . . [is] surprised that the machine should have got his character correct but his weight wrong, for he . . . knew he weighed 110. Nelson’s ticket said, ‘You weigh 98 pounds. You have a great destiny ahead of you but beware of dark women.’ Nelson did not know any women and he weighed only 68 pounds but Mr. Head pointed out that the machine had probably printed the number upside down, meaning the 9 for a 6. (CW 219-20)

16 John 13, 3-14.
Mr. Head fails to take the clue dropped by the tickets that if their predictions on the already known facts are wrong, their prophecy about the unknown is equally incredible. Instead, he unquestionably accepts that part of the prediction, which humours his pride and explains the disproportion in the boy’s weight as a mistake in printing. It is significant that he is silent about the boy’s ‘fate’ as if it appealed to his prejudices. This type of interpretation, which only caters to his whims, speaks against his assumed role as a visionary.

The responses of Mr. Head and Nelson to the city’s sewer system reveal their respective approaches to life. Nelson is enchanted by the glorious appearance of the city which he proudly claims as his birth place: “I was born here! . . . This is where I come from!” (CW 220). On the other hand Mr. Head is bewildered at this and painfully realizes that the very purpose of the trip is foiled by the city’s fascination for his grandson. His attempt to countermove Nelson’s growing appreciation of the city takes the form of a hellish description of the city’s sewer system.  

He gives a shiver to the boy when he asks him to squat down and stick his head in the sewer entrance. He exploits the boy’s embarrassment to further shock him out of his attachment to the city:

Mr. Head explained the sewer system, how the entire city was underlined with it, how it contained all the drainage and was full of rats and how a man could slide into it and be sucked along down endless pitchblack tunnels. . . . He described it so well that Nelson was for some seconds shaken. He connected the sewer passages with the entrance to hell. (CW 220)

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17 Sister M. Bernetta Quinn in her article “View from a Rock: the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor and J. F. Powers,” Critique 2. 2 (1958): 19-27 compares Mr. Head’s journey through the streets of Atlanta to Dante’s trip through the Inferno even though in the case of Mr. Head it is he who is changed at the end.
In spite of the shock Nelson does not want to avoid the city on account of the sewers. His approach is quite pragmatic: “Yes, but you can stay away from the holes... This is where I come from!” (CW 220). This observation reflects the boy’s basic innocence and humanistic approach to the world—that the world is not to be denounced because of the presence of evil in it, but that man can live meaningfully enduring the evil. Mr. Head, on the other hand, disclaims the world because of its ‘sinfulness’ and, like his Biblical archetype, prophet Jonah, is distressed to think of God’s mercy that overpowers the contrite man.

The continued survey of the city changes Mr. Head and Nelson’s position from the privileged observers to self-conscious objects of the Negroes’ scrutiny. The realization that they have been only circling the concrete dome instead of visiting the different parts of the city makes Mr. Head embarrassed and provides Nelson an opportunity to slight his proud grandfather: “‘We done been here!’ he shouted. ‘I don’t believe you know where you’re at!’ ‘The direction just slipped my mind for a minute,’ Mr. Head said” (CW 221). But the new direction they take leads them directly into temptation: “Mr. Head, glancing through one window, saw a woman lying on an iron bed, looking out, with a sheet pulled over her. Her knowing expression shook him” (CW 221). In his attempt to avoid the prostitute’s ‘knowing expression’ Mr. Head places himself in the path of a “fierce-looking boy on a bicycle” (CW 221) and makes only a narrow escape. Ironically, amidst his feelings of insecurity, he directs his grandson to “keep closer” (CW 221) to him as if he were still capable of enacting the role of the guide for the boy. They proceed to discover themselves in a Nigger street and, significantly, Nelson recognizes the

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18 Jonah is angry because God has relented from punishing the people of Nineveh following their conversion (Jonah 4, 1-11).
‘niggers’ in the coloured men they come across. Nelson comments: “Niggers live in these houses” (CW 221). This recognition, which marks his ‘initiation’ into the ‘values’ of his grandfather’s society, is followed by his uneasiness at the sight of the Negroes: “Nelson’s skin began to prickle and they stepped along at a faster pace in order to leave the neighborhood as soon as possible” (CW 221). Their attempt to escape the Negroes takes them further into the middle of the black and reduces them to the level of mere objects of the Negroes’ look: “Black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction” (CW 221). This reversal of position unsettles Mr. Head and he turns his desperate feelings against his own grandson even though both of them are in the same plight: “Yes . . . this is where you were born—right here with all these niggers” (CW 221). In his attempt to establish his grandson’s birth among the Negroes, Mr. Head unwittingly acknowledges his grandson also among the privileged observers in the changed order. The boy’s birth in the city recalls the comparison already made between Nelson and Christ in their birth. The experience of this reversal of positions is the beginning of Mr. Head’s painful recognition that he is no longer the privileged visionary he claims to be.

The encounter with the black woman intensifies Mr. Head’s experience of the reversal of positions. Disappointed by their discovery that they are drifting away from the concrete dome and that they have lost their lunch packet, Mr. Head and Nelson begin to hate each other. Even though they are stranded in the black street, none of them dare ask a Negro for direction. If Mr. Head would not do it because of his racial prejudice, Nelson was “afraid of the colored men and he didn’t want to be laughed at by the colored children” (CW 222). But Nelson is relieved to find a Negress who appears to him as extraordinary in stature but amicable in dealings: “He

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19 George Cheatham in “Jesus, O’Connor’s Artificial Nigger” Studies in Short Fiction 22. 4 (1985): 475-79 suggests that white colour is “associated consistently with coldness, with the head or conscious self, and thereby with pride. . . . Black on the other hand, is connected with warmth, emotions, humility, and suffering.”
saw a large colored woman. . . . Her hair stood straight out from her head for about four inches all around. . . . She had on a pink dress that showed her exact shape” (CW 222). The description of the woman with her “hair stood straight out from her head for about four inches all around” evokes the portrait of the Virgin Mother of Christ with her halo; and the pink dress suggests her claim to excellence as the divine mother. The sight of the black woman elicits mixed reaction from Nelson. He seems to associate her with his long lost mother, which accounts for his Oedipal feelings towards her: “He stood drinking in every detail of her. His eyes traveled up from her great knees to her forehead. . . . He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up . . . and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face” (CW 223). At the same time she represents for him the horrors of the city, an association his grandfather has bequeathed to him: “He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel” (CW 223). Added to this is the embarrassment engendered by the casualness the black woman adopts in issuing direction as to how to reach the railway station: “‘You can go a block down yonder and catch you a car take you to the railroad station, Sugarpie,’ she said” (CW 223). The superiority suggested by her appearance and the ridiculing tone insinuated in her words are so insufferable to Mr. Head that he walks away from her presence pulling Nelson with him.

Mr. Head’s anxiety to escape the ‘distressing’ neighbourhood of the blacks leads to his greatest sin of denying his own grandson. Tired and embittered, Nelson sleeps awhile with his grandfather to wait on him. Fear of his grandson’s taunting remarks persuades Mr. Head to

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20 Nelson’s infatuation with the black woman is seen as part of his “quest for origins.” For “knowledge of the city . . . amounts to knowledge of the mother he never knew.” See, for details, Suzanne Morrow Paulson, Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988) 78.

21 Suzanne Morrow Paulson thinks that the boy’s “confused response to the black mother figure” is due to his association of the “excremental vision of the city” (the sewer scene) with the Negroes as suggested by Mr. Head. Hence, the similarity of Nelson’s responses on both occasions (Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction 79).
teach the child “a lesson he won’t forget” (CW 225). He walks a few feet away to the corner of the street and sits on a garbage can hidden from the boy’s vision. He wakes the boy up from his sleep “by bashing his foot against the can” (CW 225). The boy’s violent dashing down the street in search of his grandfather results in knocking down an old lady who, presumably, has her ankle broken in the accident. Mr. Head moves reluctantly to the scene where the “child caught him around the hips and clung panting against him” (CW 226). But the threat of being accosted by the police and the prospect of paying the damages so freeze him that he denies his own grandson in full view of the crowd of angry women:

Mr. Head was trying to detach Nelson’s fingers from the flesh in the back of his legs. The old man’s head had lowered itself into his collar like a turtle’s; his eyes were glazed with fear and caution.

‘Your boy has broken my ankle!’ the old woman shouted. ‘Police!’

Mr. Head sensed the approach of the policemen. . . . ‘This is not my boy,’ he said. ‘I never seen him before.’ (CW 226)

The scene re-enacts Peter’s denial of his Master when he is confronted by the servants of the High Priest. The denial has its desired effect on Nelson and the angry women: “He felt Nelson’s fingers fall out of his flesh. The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him” (CW 226). The expression ‘his own image and likeness’ recalls Yahweh’s own deliberation to create man: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1, 26). The denial thus inflicts the final blow on Mr. Head’s claim to

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prophethood and reveals to him the wretched sinner that lurks underneath the ‘upright’ man he claims to be.

The unsettling effect that the ‘denial’ produces in Nelson and Mr. Head is presented as the beginning of their journey towards self-recognition and consequent illumination. Nelson and his grandfather look almost alike in their misery, following the denial:

The boy remained standing . . . his neck craned forward and his hands hanging by his sides. His hat was jammed on his head . . . The injured woman got up and shook her fist at him and the others gave him pitying looks . . . Mr. Head’s shoulders were sagging and his neck hung forward at such an angle that it was not visible from behind. (CW226-27)

Their postures evoke the portrait of Christ bearing the cross on his way to Calvary to be crucified. Nelson’s hat which is ‘jammed on his head’ recalls the crown of thorns placed on Christ’s head by the soldiers; the injured woman’s threatening look parallels the soldiers’ ill-treatment of Jesus. Their suffering is increased by their estrangement: they walk at a distance of twenty feet between them. Nelson’s refusal to accept the drink offered by Mr. Head indicates to the old man the “depth of his denial” (CW227).

Nelson’s refusal to drink water with his grandfather further reveals the extent of their estrangement and the insufficiency of the old man’s efforts to effect reconciliation. Disappointed and exasperated, Mr. Head becomes hopeful at the sight of a water spigot, which he sees as a means of getting reconciled with his grandson. Like his Biblical archetype, Jacob, he drinks from it and directs Nelson to do so only to be rejected by him: “He squatted down and . . . turned

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23 The placing of the crown of thorns on Jesus’ head by the Roman soldiers is narrated in Matt. 27, 29-30 and Mark 15, 17-18.
a cold stream of water into his throat. Then he called out in the high desperate voice, ‘Come on and getcher some water!’ This time the child stared through him for nearly sixty seconds. Mr. Head got up and walked on as if he had drunk poison (CW 227-28). The Biblical scene is inverted in that Mr. Head is unlike Jacob of the Old Testament who had drunk water from the well he had dug and given it to his children and his cattle, and unlike Christ who gives the “living water” to the Samaritan woman effecting her transformation (John 4, 5-30). The inversion is complete when Mr. Head feels that the water he has drunk turns out to be ‘poison’ for him. Thus, the total failure of Mr. Head’s efforts to effect reconciliation is suggested. He is so desperate that he “felt that if he saw a sewer entrance he would drop down into it and let himself be carried away” (CW 228). The gravity of the estrangement he experiences is indicated by his readiness to be ‘carried away’ by the sewer, which he has so far associated with the evil side of the city life. Out of this wretchedness comes the crucial recognition of his role in relation to his grandson.

Experience of helplessness and suffering enables Mr. Head to overcome his pride and to allow him to be guided by others. Instead of surrendering to despair, Mr. head acknowledges his inability to find his way back to the station and cries for help to a fat man who comes with two bulldogs: “He waved both arms like someone shipwrecked on a desert island. ‘I’m lost!’ he called. ‘I’m lost and I can’t find my way and me and this boy have got to catch this train and I can’t find the station. Oh, Gawd I’m lost! Oh hep me Gawd I’m lost!’ (CW 228). His appeal to the fat man is reminiscent of the apostles’ cry for help when they were caught in a thunderstorm. They prayed to Jesus “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Matt. 8, 25). Mr. Head’s acceptance

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24 Robert H. Brinkmeyer thinks that through the employment of “a distanced and supreme perspective, the narrator here is less cruel and harsh in his or her perspective on the limitations of Mr. Head and Nelson” (74).
of his pitiable condition helps him to seek direction from the passing stranger. Even though he
gets proper direction to reach the suburb stop in time for the train, the boy’s refusal to forgive
deprives him of even the joy provided by the prospects of returning home. For, Nelson “was
standing about ten feet away, his face bloodless... He was merely there... Home was
nothing to him” (CW 229). The distressing appearance of the child makes Mr. Head realize the
meaninglessness of even returning home. He recognizes for the first time the fundamental
depravity he has been trying to deny: “He felt he knew now what time would be like without
seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without
salvation” (CW 229). This painful awareness of his essential deprivation turns out to be the
moment of self-realization for Mr. Head.

The encounter with the ‘artificial nigger’ offers the moment of grace for Mr. Head and
the boy to come together once again. Their vision of the Negro’s statue which comes as the
culmination of many an ‘unsuccessful’ meeting with living Negroes carries with it the potential
to unfold the mystery of an all comprehending love that saves and forgives. Thus, the narrative
presents the plaster figure\(^{25}\) as an ‘icon’ suggestively representing the suffering Son of Man: “It
was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too
miserable to be either. He was meant to look happy... but the chipped eye and the angle he
was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead” (CW 229). A commonality of appear-
ance is suggested between the statue and the onlookers: if ‘it was not possible to tell if the
artificial Negro were meant to be young or old,’ Mr. Head, in spite of his old age, “had a

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\(^{25}\) Ruthann Knechel Johansen thinks that the ‘artificial nigger’ “derives its pure, albeit ironic, mediational
power from its inability to distort and its capacity to mirror the consequences.” See Ruthann Knechel Johansen, The
Narrative Secret of Flannery O’Connor: The Trickster as Interpreter (Tuscaloosa and London: The U of Alabama
youthful expression by daylight' and Nelson's 'look was ancient' (CW 212). The commonness thus suggested prepares us for a deeper understanding of the similarity between the 'artificial nigger' and the incarnated Word of God.26 The 'look of misery' that the statue exhibits thus becomes a sacramental representation of the suffering Son of Man.27 The almost ritualistic incantation of the spectators at the sight of the statue complements the implied suggestion: "The two of them stood there, Mr. Head breathed, 'An artificial nigger!' . . . 'An artificial nigger!' Nelson repeated in Mr. Head's exact tone" (CW 229). They assume the posture of some devotees who stand in reverential awe before divine presence:

The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets. . . . They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery. . . . They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. (CW 230)

The reconciliation thus effected between the grandfather and the grandson is suggested by the epithets used to describe their common gestures: 'almost the same' angle, 'almost exactly the same' way, 'trembling identically.' The communion established thus by this mysterious experience is followed by the contrite old man's elevation to the prophetic role. He explains to his grandson the significance of the artificial Negro: "Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an

26 "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1, 14).

27 O'Connor wrote to Griffith (4 May 1955) that what she had "in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (The Habit of Being 78).
artificial one” (CW 230). The narrative thus presents Mr. Head as a prophet\(^\text{28}\) by divine ordinance rather than by choice, as his prophetic pronouncement is evidently inspirational in nature.

Experience of divine mercy becomes salvific for Mr. Head and Nelson, and by analogy, for the narrative also. The sojourners alight from the train into a moonlit\(^\text{29}\) clearing (which lacks the surcharged atmosphere of the opening scene): “As they stepped off, the sage grass was shivering gently in shades of silver and the clinkers under their feet glittered with a fresh black light. The treetops, fencing the junction like the protecting walls of a garden, were darker than the sky which was hung with gigantic white clouds illuminated like lanterns” (CW 230). The scene with its ‘shivering’ sage grass and glittering ‘clinkers’ and fencing treetops is evocative of Gethsemane which became the trying place of God’s mercy to mankind because of Christ’s decisive prayer there before his crucifixion.\(^\text{30}\) The mercy of God which was made available to man through Christ’s suffering and death is extended to Mr. Head: “He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children” (CW 230). The agony he has experienced prepares him for the reception of God’s mercy which “covered his pride like a flame and consumed it” (CW 231). He gratefully acknowledges the inscrutable mystery of God’s plan, which has providentially hidden the gravity of his sin from him as a precaution against his possible despair. By implication, he realizes the hollowness of

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\(^{28}\) Though he is not a prophet in the Hebraic tradition, Mr. Head belongs to the category of prophets who “through their grotesqueries . . . inform human beings about the ambiguities and complexities of identity” (Ruthann Knechel Johansen 30-31).

\(^{29}\) “While the moon arches over the story, the train is the moving center that binds the inner tensions of the story together. First, it is the mechanical means by which grandfather and grandson shuttle between country securities and the baffling city. Second, the train station is the center on which Mr. Head focuses his attention when they venture into the city streets” (Ruthann Knechel Johansen 59).

\(^{30}\) Jesus’ agonizing prayer before his persecution is recorded in Matt. 26, 36-46; Mark 14, 32-42 and Luke 22, 39-46.
his claim to prophethood, which in turn was built on his unawareness of his real vocation.

God’s mercy which is an expression of His forgiving love—“God loved in proportion as He forgave”—touches Nelson also, and he, too, acknowledges the salvific effect of the journey: “I’m glad I’ve went once, but I’ll never go back again!” (CW.231). As the sinner prophet is redeemed by the mercy of God, the sinner artist also attains salvation by presenting the redemptive work of God’s mercy in his/her work of art.

Mr. Head’s journey along with his grandson from his white county through the Negro-dominated parts of the city to the ‘artificial nigger’ is recounted as a pilgrimage of regeneration. He is prepared for this transformation through a series of encounters with living Negroes whose representation evidently carries hints of supernatural import which is fully realized only in the figure of the ‘artificial nigger.’ His sinfulness which has stood in the way of his proper vision is revealed to him with all its horror when he disowns his grandson in full view of an angry crowd of women who have been clamouring for his blood! This awareness coupled with the experience of God’s forgiving love enables him to recognize the Negro as the representation for his times of the suffering Son of Man. This re-interpretation of the phenomenon of the black becomes a redeeming gesture for Mr. Head who has been trying to initiate the boy into the deep-rooted prejudices of a racist society. By analogy, the narrative also redeems itself by foregrounding the motif of salvation which comes about through encounter with the ‘artificial nigger,’ itself a work of art. The adventure of narrative continues in “Greenleaf” where the bull takes on the full dimensions of a Christ-figure.

In “Greenleaf,” O’Connor cleverly nests the allegorical and the realistic within each other. On the physical plane, it is the story of a stray bull that encroaches upon Mrs. May’s farm and brings havoc. Since it belongs to the sons of Mrs. May’s farmhand, the latter ignores
Mrs. May’s orders to pen it securely. In desperation, she orders him to shoot the bull after a
dead line. The bull charges at Mrs. May and kills her before being shot dead by the farmhand.
But this apparent farm tragedy is invested with a metaphoric force that successfully renders the
working of a mysterious power through the actions of both the beast and its victim. This sub-
terranean life of the text is, in fact, significant and powerful enough to transform what reads on
the surface like a tragedy into the joyous celebration of salvation. The story of the bull that
strayed into the farm is punctuated at intervals with references which seem to equate the animal
with Christ in his Passion as the Victim who pays for the sins of others, as the Saviour who
brings Salvation, and as the Celestial Bridegroom who brings the freedom of Love. Readings
of the story often do recognize the references to Christ, but fail to make clear the dovetailing
of these three aspects in a single powerful religious symbol. The salvific dimension cannot be
divorced from the sexual overtones and both, in turn, must be understood in the context of the
references to Christ’s Passion. The bull is represented very much as the Christ of the Gospels
who urges his followers to renounce everything and follow him. The Biblical characterization
of the relationship between the human soul and God and between the Church and Christ is
echoed throughout the story.

The bull is introduced as a ‘saviour’ who appears at Mrs. May’s window on a moonlit
night. The suggestive expressions employed in his delineation indicate the allegorical burden of
the story right from the start. Thus “Mrs. May’s bedroom window . . . faced on the east and the

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31 A. R. Coulthard sees the bull as “a Christ figure.” For details, see his article “Flannery O’Connor’s
Deadly Conversions” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 13 (1984): 87-98. Kristen Meek sees the bull as “representative
of Christ” and Mrs. May’s death as redemptive (“Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf’ and the Holy Hunt of the
Unicorn” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 19 1990: 30-37. Sister Kathleen Feeley also recognizes the similarity be-
tween the bull and Christ, especially “at the hour of his passion and death.” See The Voice of the Peacock (New
Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1972) 95.
bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient
god32 come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room” (CW 501). The bull who is waiting at
Mrs. May’s window reminds us of the Son of Man’s message to the church in Laodicea: “Listen!
I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to
you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3, 20). The direction chosen by the bull for his
appearance also is significant since the Son of Man is expected to come “from the east” at the
eschatological times (Matt. 24, 27). The Biblical parallel is continued in the description of the
bull’s crowned head: “He appeared . . . with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself
caught in the tips of his horns” (CW 501). The bull’s wreathed head reminds us of Christ’s head
with a crown of thorns when he was mocked by the Roman soldiers saying “Hail, King of the
Jews” before his crucifixion (Matt. 27, 29). This regal aspect of the bull is reiterated by the
repeated use of his ‘crowned head’ in the narrative. Thus the bull “lowered his head as if to
show the wreath across his horns” and “he raised his crowned head again” (CW 501). The
association between the bull and Christ33 becomes clearer with the description of the bull’s
wreath slipping “down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown”
(CW 502). Mrs. May’s confused reactions to what appear as the bull’s ‘advances’ complement
this allegorical dimension of the narrative. Even though she dismisses the bull as if he were “a
dog” (inversion of ‘god’), her reverential posture as she waits at her window—“Mrs. May,

32 Bulls were worshipped by many as symbols of potency. See Hans Biedermann, Dictionary of Symbolism:
mythology Zeus assumes the guise of a bull in order to court Europa and abduct her. See, “Europa,” The Oxford

33 Nancy Ann Gidden in “Classical Agents of Christian Grace in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf’” Studies
in Short Fiction 23. 2 (Spring 1986): 201-02 notices the employment in this story of classical myth in “the service of
Christian conversion.”
standing bent forward behind the blind"—and her youthful appearance—"her face . . . smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept" (*CW* 501)—are evocative of her bridal role. Hence, a parallel is suggested between the bull and Christ and between May and the Celestial Bride (the Church), which develops further the allegorical possibilities latent in the story.

Mrs. May’s unusual dream following her encounter with the bull and her strange interpretations forebode her forthcoming experience of dispossession to be effected by the bull. In sleep she is transported to the dream-world, the rhythmic chewing of the bull ministering to her fancy in her brooding on her ‘extermination.’ She dreams:

> Whatever it was had been eating . . . was eating the house . . . eating her and the boys . . . eating everything but the Greenleafs . . . When the munching reached her elbow, she jumped up and found herself . . . standing in the middle of her room. She identified the sound at once: a cow was tearing at the shrubbery . . . The bull, gaunt and long-legged, was standing . . . like an uncouth country suitor.

(*CW* 501-02)

Her vision parallels the dream of the Egyptian Pharaoh described in the Bible. Like the seven lean and wretched cows that ate the seven fat and sleek ones in the Pharaoh’s dream, Mrs. May and her boys and everything she has are eaten by this imagined creature. The dream echoes her apprehension of the Greenleafs’ growing prosperity and her own declining position as a farm owner. Contrary to her interpretation it is not the cow, but the bull who is identified as the imagined creature. The bull’s continued presence at her window assisting her ironically

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34 Gen. 41, 1-4.
‘complacent’ dream of total annihilation anticipates the ambivalence in the story’s climax, the violent death becoming also the occasion of a blinding insight such as occurred to St. Paul on the way to Damascus. If the dream had been a warning to the Pharaoh against the coming years of famine, Mrs. May’s dream warns her against her inordinate attachment to her possessions, a serious hindrance to her salvation.

Mr. Greenleaf’s disowning of the bull accelerates the process leading to the victimization of the animal. The cold indifference that he shows in executing Mrs. May’s direction to pen the bull and his incredible response to her query regarding the ownership of the creature infuriate her. His deliberate attempt to shirk the responsibility of safeguarding his sons’ bull is evident from his shrewd reply to Mrs. May’s pertinent questions: “‘Whose bull is he?’ [Mrs. May asked]. For a moment Mr. Greenleaf seemed to hesitate between silence and speech. . . . ‘He must be somebody’s bull,’ he said after a while. ‘Yes, he must!’ she said and shut the door with a precise little slam” (CW 504, emphases added). Mr. Greenleaf’s calculated reply that ‘he must be somebody’s bull’ provokes Mrs. May beyond endurance. His apparently incredulous reaction even after her disclosure to Mr. Greenleaf about the ownership of the bull enrages her further: “You needn’t think . . . that I don’t know exactly whose bull that is. . . . I might as well feed O. T. and E. T.’s bull. . . .’ Mr. Greenleaf paused. . . . ‘Is that them boys’ bull?’ he asked in an incredulous tone. She did not say a word. She merely looked away with her mouth taut.” (CW 512). His excuse that he has not identified the stray bull as his sons’ own is not convincing to her; nor does she approve of his contention that the bull “likes to bust loose. . . . This gentleman is a sport” (CW 513). His belated decision to “drive him home” (CW 518) to his sons is not

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35 Gen. 41, 27-32.
acceptable to Mrs. May since she is not ready to take chances. She considers the bull as an incarnation of the Greenleafs’ disloyalty and greed.

Mrs. Greenleaf who is too busy praying for the sinners of the world at large does not care for the bull. In her preoccupation to save the sinful world

she cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper--the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars. She took these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them... and groaned for an hour or so. (CW 505)

She is so earnest in her prayer that she craves to be identified with Jesus in his affliction: “Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!” (CW 506). Significantly, this prayer of Mrs. Greenleaf which recalls the pierced heart of Jesus (brimming with love for mankind) is granted in the case of Mrs. May at the end of the story. Behind her apparent disinterestedness in the affairs of the farm lies her ardent desire to participate in the salvific death of her Saviour which is sacramentally realized in the mistress’s death.

The indifference shown by Mrs. May’s own sons to the affairs of the farm also leads to the tragedy. Mrs. May’s hesitation to drive down to Mr. Greenleaf following her discovery of the bull at her window is caused by her fear of being ridiculed in her helplessness. She imagines Mr. Greenleaf mocking her: “Hit looks to me like one or both of them boys would not make their maw ride out in the middle of the night thisaway. If hit was my boys, they would have got

36 Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer reminds us of Jesus’ heart which was pierced by the Roman soldier (John 19, 30-35).

37 The pierced heart of Jesus stands for his “powerful, hidden and mysterious love” for mankind. See Notes on John 19, 31 in Christian Community Bible 3rd ed. (Quezon City: Bernardo Hurault, 1988).
thet bull up theirself" (CW 502). Her sons’ strange reactions at her disclosure that a bull is let loose on the farm and that Mr. Greenleaf pleads ignorance of his ownership further reveal their indifference: “Wesley continued to read the newspaper folded beside his plate but Scofield interrupted his eating from time to time to look at her and laugh” (CW 504). Scofield exasperates her with his distressing revelation of the bull’s owners: “‘You want to know, Sugarpie?’ he asked. . . . ‘That’s O. T. and E. T.’s bull,’ he said. ‘I collected from their nigger yesterday’” (CW 510). The tone employed in his statement insinuates his total disinterestedness in the affairs of the farm. Instead of helping his mother to restrain the stray bull he only increases her agony with his disconcerting remarks: “Why Mamma, ain’t you ashamed to shoot an old bull that ain’t done nothing but give you a little scrub strain in your herd?” (CW 517). This apparently ‘charitable’ observation which is not followed by his efforts to pen the bull provokes his mother to decide against the bull’s encroachments.

The bull is abandoned to his fate by his own owners. Mr. O. T. and Mr. E. T. have already discarded the bull as a nuisance. Mr. Greenleaf recalls their plan for the animal: “They was just going to beef him . . . but he got loose and run his head into their pickup truck. . . . They had a time getting his horn out the fender and when they finally got him loose, he took off and they was too tired to run after him” (CW 512). Mrs. May’s threat of shooting the bull herself has little impact on the negro servant working for Mr. O. T. and Mr. E. T.: “If I knows Mist O. T. and Mist E. T. . . . they goin to say you go ahead on and shoot him” (CW 515). This attitude accounts for their inaction even after being served an ultimatum to shoot the bull. Their failure to respond to her threat is interpreted by Mrs. May as a personal affront considering the favours she has done them: “I’m surprised at O. T. and E. T. to treat me this way. I thought they’d have more gratitude. Those boys spent some mighty happy days on this place” (CW 518).
She considers herself a victim of her neighbour’s greed and indifference: “I’m the victim. I’ve always been the victim” (CW 516). Their indifference to Mrs. May’s warning leaves her no choice but to set about destroying the bull herself.

Mrs. May’s growing resentment towards the bull is presented as a reflection of her jealousy at the Greenleaf boys’ advancement in life. Even though she underrates the Greeneleaf boys’ achievement as an award of the Second World War, she painfully acknowledges her own son’s failure to advance in life in spite of his participation in the same war. While Mr. O. T. and Mr. E. T. became “sergeants,” Scofield was only a “Private First Class” (CW 508). Unlike her sons they have married “nice” (CW 508) French girls and have established a barn for themselves “according to the latest specifications” (CW 514). She recalls jealously the Greenleafs’ calm and contented life: “They lived like the lilies of the field” (CW 509). The Biblical expression38 employed in the description suggests their absolute trust in divine providence, a virtue that is totally absent in Mrs. May who is eaten up by her concerns and anxieties. She does not recognize the significance of her son Wesley’s almost prophetic outburst: “Well, why don’t you do something practical, Woman? Why don’t you pray for me like Mrs. Greenleaf would?” (CW 509-10). His admonition has no effect upon her since she prefers to live in her fanciful world nostalgically longing for the Greenleaf boys as her own: “O. T. and E. T. are fine boys. . . . They ought to have been my sons” (CW 511). Her mixed feelings of jealousy and appreciation of the Greenleaf boys transform themselves into hatred and antipathy towards the stray bull, whom she identifies as a symbol of the Greenleaf threat to her farm life.

38 “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these (Matt. 6, 28-29). See also Luke 12, 27-28.
The implicit association of the sun with the bull in Mrs. May's unconscious mind helps develop the allegorical life of the narrative further. The sun is first introduced as a frightening phenomenon: "The sun, moving over the black and white grazing cows, was just a little brighter than the rest of the sky. Looking down, she saw a darker shape that might have been its shadow cast at an angle, moving among them. She uttered a sharp cry and turned and marched out of the house" (*CW* 511-12). Mrs. May's fear of the sun, who is moving over her black and white grazing cows, suggests her association of the sun with the bull who has been posing a threat to her herd's breeding schedule. The 'darker shape' which is seen by her as 'moving among them' confirms this association. It is this identification of the sun and the bull that accounts for her 'sharp cry' at this unusual phenomenon. She encounters the sun again at the Greenleafs' milking parlour. She comes out of their parlour greatly disturbed by their unexpected achievement to the purview of the bright sun: "The light outside was . . . directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (*CW* 515). The haunting sun who has already been identified as Christ is now clearly suggested as the celestial bridegroom, and by analogy, Mrs. May assumes the role of the celestial bride, the Church. The violence she envisages in her meeting with the sun indicates the suffering involved in her union with Christ to be effected with the help of grace. On the eve of the tragedy, as she goes out to communicate her final decision about the bull to Mr. Greenleaf, she meets the sun again: "The sky was crossed with thin red and purple bars and behind them the sun was moving down slowly as if it were descending a ladder" (*CW* 518). If the image of the sky 'crossed with thin red and purple bars' reminds us of the Son of Man hanging on the cross, the sun's suggested movement down the

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ladder indicates the ladder of Jacob’s dream.\textsuperscript{40} The supernatural import of the sun imagery is, thus, clearly suggested and by association that of the bull, too.

Mrs. May’s last dream is represented as a foretaste of her ‘fatal’ encounter with the bull the following day. Defeated and neglected by the indifference of the Greenleafs and her own sons, she retires to sleep to enter the dream world. She interprets the rhythmic chewing of the bull who is waiting outside her window and of whose presence there she is quite unaware, as the sound made by a large stone “grinding a hole on the outside wall of her brain” (\textit{CW} 519). As she contentedly observes through her windows the “succession of beautiful rolling hills,” the large stone undergoes a ‘change’ in her fancy:

\begin{quote}
She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn’t, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property. When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. (\textit{CW} 519)
\end{quote}

The sun is irresistible even in her dream and her attempt to defy his encroachment upon her woods by appealing to reason becomes ineffectual. The transformation of the sun into a racing bullet anticipates her goring by the bull the following day. She wakes up from her dream to see the bull moving away from the hedge. This facilitates the association of the sun of the dream with the bull, and the sun’s threat with the bull’s.

Mrs. May’s ultimate encounter with the bull is set in a green countryside which evokes the suggestiveness latent in her name. Following her disconcerting dream Mrs. May is

\textsuperscript{40} Gen. 28, 12-15.
determined to do away with the bull: “This is the last night I am going to put up with this” (CW 519). Ironically, it turns out to be her last night, indeed! As she drives to the field in the dry and clear morning along with Mr. Greenleaf, who reluctantly carries the gun, she is overjoyed at the prospect of implementing her decision to kill the bull: “The exhilaration of carrying her point had sharpened her senses. Birds were screaming everywhere, the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even piercing blue. ‘Spring is here!’ [she exclaimed]” (CW 520). The sparkling grassy fields and the screaming birds minister to the blossoming of her name ‘May’ in her fancy into the gay season of Spring. This experience of spring with its attendant associations serves as a fitting background to her decisive encounter with ‘her lover-saviour.’

Mrs. May’s ‘tragic’ death is presented as an act of conjugal consummation with eschatological overtones. While Mr. Greenleaf is sent to hunt for the bull in the woods, Mrs. May is impatiently sitting on the bump of her car fondling her unusual exhaustion: “Before any kind of Judgement seat, she would be able to say: I’ve worked, I have not wallowed” (CW 522). Her exhaustion becomes significant when it is viewed against the ‘ladder of love’ described by Saint John of the Cross in The Dark Night of the Soul where he speaks of the sickness experienced by the soul during its first encounter with the Lord. The self-righteous attitude adopted by her to explain her lethargy tempts her to further ponder gratifyingly on the prospect of Mr. Greenleaf being “gored” (CW 523) to death by the furious bull, and his sons suing her for it. It would be, she contends, the culmination of her fifteen years of dealings with the Greenleafs. But she drops

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41 Richard Giannone dwells at length on Mrs. May’s blossoming into the signification of her evocative name by her union with the bull in death (“Greenleaf: A Story of Lent” Studies in Short Fiction 22. 4 1985: 421-29).

42 Martha Stephens thinks that the emotions Mrs. May’s death elicits are “those of horror, surprise, and pain” (The Question of Flannery O’Connor Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1973 16).

these maliciously complacent thoughts because Mr. Greenleaf has a gun and she has her insurance. Paradoxically, her ‘fear’ is realized when the bull appears from the woods and charges at her: “Something emerged from the tree line, a black heavy shadow that tossed its head several times and then bounded forward. . . . He was crossing the pasture toward her . . . as if he were overjoyed to find her again” (CW 523). The appearance of the bull as ‘a black heavy shadow’ recalls her former identification of the bull as the sun’s shade (CW 512), an association that evokes the supernatural dimension of the incident. His ‘overjoyed’ advances ‘elevate’ him to the status of the ‘bridegroom.’ Mrs. May’s death is cast in terms that connote sexual union: “She remained perfectly still . . . and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip” (CW 523). That she should make no effort to defend herself is the first direct hint of possibilities of meaning beyond the superficial literal level. The phallic connotation of the piercing horn develops the suggestion further, as does the curving horn. The suffering involved in piercing the heart gives a new dimension to the act: in her violent death Mrs. May becomes a symbol of the celestial bride of Christ; and their union represents the heavenly marriage of the Son of Man and the Church. 46

The bull’s ‘slaughter’ is pictured as a sacrifice of salvific significance. Seen from Mrs. May’s altered point of view, consequent upon her goring, the event acquires universal significance: “She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had

44 Albert Sonnenfeld sees in the sinking of the bull’s horn into Mrs. May’s heart the fulfilment of Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer “Jesus, stab me in the heart!” See his article “Flannery O’Connor: The Catholic Writer as Baptist” Contemporary Literature 13 (1972): 445-57.

45 Claire Kahane identifies the scene as the only erotic one in O’Connor’s fiction (“Flannery O’Connor’s Rage of Vision” American Literature 46. 1 1974: 54-67).

46 Rev. 19, 6-9.
changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the
look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable”
(CW 523). The ‘dark wound’ formed by the tree line in a world of sky indicates the wound of
Christ which has become salvific for the world and for Mrs. May in particular because of her
participation in the suffering of Christ. This experience of suffering transports her to the new
dispensation where she is confronted with the celestial light which excels all earthly lights and
is, therefore, ‘unbearable.’ In her newly acquired vision, even the act of Mr. Greenleaf
shooting the bull now appears irrelevant: “She saw him approaching on the outside of some
invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet. He shot the bull four
times through the eye. She . . . seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whis-
pering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (CW 524). While the ‘invisible circle’ sug-
gests the kingdom of God won by the Saviour’s Passion and Death, the phantom-like emergence
of Mr. Greenleaf from the gaping tree line indicates the interference of the eternal tempter who
had tried in vain to thwart the Saviour’s efforts by tempting him away from his divinely
ordained suffering and crucifixion. In the bull’s sacrifice the allegorical life of the narrative
comes to its natural conclusion since it seals his union with Mrs. May with his own blood, a
union that re-enacts the celestial marriage of the Son of Man and his bride the Church. This

47 Michel Gresset locates the beginning of “revelation” here “with fertilization in a highly sexualized
setting,” and ending “in a vision whose light the protagonist finds unbearable.” See his article “The Audacity of
Flannery O’Connor” Critical Essays on Flannery O’Connor ed. Melvin J. Friedman (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.,
1985) 106.

48 Mark S. Sexton suggests in this gesture the possibility of Mrs. May overcoming “the stupor of spiritual
complacency” (“‘Blessed Insurance’: An Examination of Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf’” Flannery O’Connor

death is salvific at the mundane plane also since it liberates the farm and its associates from the pesterling presence of Mrs. May and the bull.

The realistic and metaphorical dimensions of the apparently ‘tragic’ encounter between Mrs. May and the bull are presented in the text without prejudice to either. The stray bull, which threatens Mrs. May’s herd’s breeding schedule questions the very foundations of her own priorities as well. The supernatural aspect of the bull’s interference thus suggested is developed by Mrs. May’s dreams and visions which make the association between the bull and the sun possible, and by analogy, between the sun and Christ. Mrs. May’s own fears of dispossession and the indifference shown by her sons and the Greenleafs precipitate the bull’s sacrifice which becomes salvific for the owner of the farm and for the farm itself. Mrs. May’s participation in this redemptive death of her saviour elevates her death to the level of her union with her saviour. Their death thus becomes a celebration of the celestial marriage of the Son of Man and the Church. The narrative experiment takes a different turn in “The Partridge Festival” where the problem of representation itself becomes the central issue.

In “The Partridge Festival” Flannery O’Connor’s text self-consciously examines and lays bare its own priorities in narrative. There is an element of self-parody in the fact that both Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth try to represent Singleton as a Christ-figure and fail. They are theoretically well equipped to handle the case of Singleton but reality itself proves to be stronger and stranger than theory. In spite of all their attempts to see Christ in Singleton their experience with the man proves to be a disorienting one. There is a difference, the story seems to suggest, between being able to glimpse the nature of Christ’s sacrifice in the sufferings of human beings, and mechanically representing those who suffer as Christ-figures. The experiment results in
Calhoun’s realization of the lexity of the artist’s task, one which he is ill-equipped to take up as his vocation.

Calhoun’s literary adventure itself is closely linked with his perception of Singleton as a suffering saviour. He gets to know the Singleton affair from newspaper reports which, he thinks, delineate the murderer as an extraordinary personality. Consequently, Singleton’s face “began to burn in his imagination like a dark reproachful liberating star” (CW 777). This imaginative identification of Singleton as the ‘dark reproachful liberating star,’ which invites comparison to the star of Jesus that had initiated the magi’s journey to Jerusalem,50 marks the beginning of Calhoun’s literary journey, too. During one of the various interviews he conducts at Partridge in order to gather material for his proposed exposé on Singleton he engages in a heated argument with a barber. In his enthusiasm to force upon the barber his view of Singleton, he qualifies the murderer as “the scapegoat” who is “laden with the sins of the community” and is “sacrificed for the guilt of others” (CW 783). Identification with the biblical scapegoat that was sent to the desert with the guilt of the Israelites elevates Singleton from being a mad murderer of Partridge to a vicarious sufferer. Thus, his punishment assumes the status of a ‘sacrifice’ recalling the slaughter of the sacrificial lamb of Israel.51 This association is further developed by his counterpart Mary Elizabeth who describes Singleton as a “Christ-figure” (CW 787). She sees in his suffering a re-enactment of Christ’s own suffering: “He was the scapegoat. While Partridge flings itself about selecting Miss Partridge Azalea, Singleton suffers at Quincy. He expiates” (CW 787). Both Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth resort to a literary rendering of the

51 Levi. 14, 10-12.
Singleton incident as a means of vindicating the mad prisoner who is ‘victimized’ by the ruthless community.

The would-be writers’ identification of Singleton with Christ is challenged at the narrative level by exposing their horror at the prospect of meeting the mad prisoner at Quincy Mental Hospital. Calhoun is so horrified that he even forgets about his literary project altogether: “He did not wish to go to Quincy. . . . His desire to write a novel had gone down overnight like a defective tire” (CW 789). As he proceeds to Quincy at the instance of Mary Elizabeth, he desperately tries to create Singleton’s face in his imagination: “Calhoun tried to concentrate on Singleton. Feature by feature, he brought the face together in his mind and each time he had it almost constructed, it fell apart and he was left with nothing.” This failure is symptomatic of his misrepresentation of the mad prisoner as a Christ-figure. His concealed fear of the encounter is continually betrayed by his eagerness to drive back whenever Mary Elizabeth exhibits the very same fear: “‘If a truck were to come out of that,’ she said with a gawkish laugh, ‘that would be the end of us.’ Calhoun stopped the car. ‘I’ll be glad to take you back and go on by myself,’ he said” (CW 790). Mary Elizabeth’s insistence on continuing the journey seems to be based on her acceptance of Calhoun’s proposition that a personal encounter with Singleton is beneficial to her literary composition: “You have to prove to yourself that you can stand there and watch a man be crucified. . . . You have to go through it with him” (CW 790). She betrays a certain shallowness of judgement when she places Singleton’s suffering above his archetype’s: “Christ only had to take it three hours . . . but he’ll be in this place the rest of his life!” (CW 791). She fails to distinguish between the motivations of the two sufferers. The theological dimension of Christ’s suffering which becomes meritorious because of his willingness to suffer for humanity is absent in the suffering of Singleton who only atones
for his criminal deeds. This distorted perception makes it impossible for her, like her counterpart, to continue the pursuit: “I can’t take it,” she confesses to Calhoun (CW 793). Instead of empathetic understanding, Singleton’s suffering evokes only horror in them, a reaction quite untenable in genuine artists.

The long awaited/dreaded encounter with Singleton disillusions Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, and facilitates their self-realization. The disparity that they experience between their idea of Singleton as a suffering saviour and the sexually perverted criminal who is brought to them by the attendants of the Hospital exasperates them. They see Singleton holding his feet high up off the floor so that the attendants had to carry him. . . .

‘Whadaya want with me?’ he shrilled. ‘Speak up! My time is valuable. . . .

Lemme sit with her,’ Singleton said and jerked his arm away from the attendant who caught it again at once. . . . As Mary Elizabeth crouched against Calhoun, the old man jumped nimbly over the sofa and began to speed around the room.

(CW 794-95)

If Singleton’s appearance and speech vindicate the opinions of the people of Partridge, his sexual advances and attempted rape of Mary Elizabeth reveal his moral degeneration. This recognition accounts for their horror at the sight of their ‘saviour.’ Devastated by this unexpected turn of events Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth flee from the Hospital. Clearly, they have abandoned their literary projects the complexity of which is revealed to them through this encounter. Calhoun’s realization of his inability to pursue literary artistry coincides with his recognition that he is a businessman by vocation in the tradition of his great ancestor. He looks into the eyes of Mary Elizabeth to see his own reflection which he identifies as not different from his great grandfather’s: “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” (CW 796). This realization comes as the culmination of his long and arduous search for his true ‘self.’ In another story “Revelation,” Mrs. Turpin also comes to the realization of her true self through the defeat of a series of false representations she has made of herself and of others.

“Revelation” is a story about labels, descriptions and designations. It is also about the gap between the name and the thing, the representation and what is represented. Salvation or emancipation comes in a blinding moment of struggle in which one learns to identify oneself by one’s true but hurtful description and thereby to transcend such descriptions. Mrs. Turpin is surprised and discomfited when a girl in a doctor’s waiting room describes her as a wart hog from hell. This label, which is thoroughly hateful to Mrs. Turpin, nevertheless, starts her on a journey of self-discovery in which she recognizes the truth of the description. Mrs. Turpin is much given to classifying people, and her descriptions invariably privilege her own class and social position. Her utter contempt for the rest of humanity is evident in all the silent mental comments that she makes while she responds in conversation to the people she meets. Her expressed thoughts and unexpressed thoughts are diametrically opposed, and the tension between them proves to be the battle in which her own soul and salvation are at stake. It is in fact this division between what she represents to the world and what she really feels within the privacy of her own thoughts that manifests itself in her irrational and violent response to the girl’s description of her as a wart hog from hell. In her own judgement she has been kind to others, hard working, and regular in church. The girl’s description, therefore, challenges and hostilely interrogates this smug complacent attitude. It pursues her all the time on her way back home and afterwards. She turns the metaphor implicit in the girl’s description into actuality by confronting the pigs on her farm. It is her turn now to fight the description. Her long, angry,
hurtful and complaining colloquy with God dares God to affirm that He had made her no better than a pig. This turns out to be a moment of self-revelation for Mrs. Turpin.

The description of Mrs. Turpin’s appearance in the doctor’s waiting room is calculated to heighten the impression of her vanity and self-righteousness. The waiting room being too small, there is evident disproportion between Mrs. Turpin’s portentous physique and the crowd of smaller visitors squeezed into the narrow space. Her claim to superiority is suggested at the very outset, making everybody and everything else look ‘inferior’ compared to her. She is annoyed by the doctor’s failure to provide seats for the waiting patients: “She could not understand why a doctor—with as much money as they made charging five dollars a day to just stick their head in the hospital door and look at you—couldn’t afford a decent-sized waiting room” (CW 634). Her disapproval of the doctor’s lack of concern for his clients is the first of a series of disparaging thoughts she will be entertaining in the course of the story. She is also much put out by the poor maintenance and furnishings of the room: “The table was cluttered with limp-looking magazines and at one end of it there was a big green glass ash tray full of cigarette butts. If she had anything to do with the running of the place, that would have been emptied every so often. There were no chairs against the wall” (CW 634). Her annoyance over the lack of space and amenities contains more than a hint of her self-conscious superiority and complacency.

Mrs. Turpin’s pretentiousness and complacency are further revealed in her estimate of the people she meets in the waiting room. Except for the pleasant lady who wins her favour by her appearance and by flattery all others are disagreeable to her. She is disgusted at the sight of the boy who is “slumped down in the seat, his arms idle at his sides and his eyes idle in his head” (CW 633). More than his unprepossessing figure, it is his refusal to move over and accommodate the lady that irritates her so much. But the fat girl whose “face was blue with acne”
and who is “scowling into a thick blue book . . . entitled Human Development” (interestingly, she is to assist in Mrs. Turpin’s self-realization later in the story by throwing the very same book at her head) elicits her pity: “Mrs. Turpin thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. . . . Mrs. Turpin herself was fat but she had always had good skin” (CW 635).

Suggestively, this sympathy which arises out of her exaggerated self-esteem is only a disguise of her usual reaction of disgust. But she is annoyed when the girl resents her hypocritical sympathy: “The girl . . . directed her scowl at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks” (CW 635). Their antagonism will be taken up later on in the story, this time to reveal its power to change character and attitude. The old woman who wears the “cotton print dress” (CW 635) reminds Mrs. Turpin of her chicken feed sacks with the same print. This association causes Mrs. Turpin to categorize her as a “white-trashy” (CW 635) woman and to identify her as the grandmother of the hostile and ugly boy. Similarly, she discovers the woman in “yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks” as the boy’s mother because of her appearance as “worse than niggers” (CW 635). In Mrs. Turpin’s world, not only the style of dress, but also the shoes people wear could be a reliable guide to the wearers’ character and social position. Thus, the “well-dressed lady had on red and grey suede shoes to match her dress. Mrs. Turpin had on her good black patent leather pumps. The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes. . . . The old woman had on tennis shoes and the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers” (CW 635). Her critical scrutiny of dress and appearance culminates in the recital of the last line of the gospel hymn played on the radio: “And wona these days I know I’ll we-era crown” (CW 635).52 She arrives at this attitude and maintains it by her description of others as contemptible

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52 Josephine Hendin thinks that the “song initiates a stream of thoughts” about Mrs. Turpin herself, which culminates in obtaining the ‘crown’ when she is hit by the book Human Development. See The World of Flannery O’Connor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 125.
and inferior.

Mrs. Turpn's classification of people into social classes is a means of representing herself among the privileged class. In the past she often wondered what she would have preferred had she been given an option by Jesus to be either a “nigger” or a “white-trash”: “All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one” (CW 636). Her imaginative extravagance would find good sport in the naming of the different classes of people, as well. She would divide them into different strata beginning at the bottom with the ordinary ‘colored people’ and the ‘white-trash,’ both placed side by side. Significantly, she does not include herself among this ‘kind’ of coloured people whom she throws together with the despicable white trash. Her place comes above the “home-owners” since she and Claud are “home-and-land owners” (CW 636). She considers her ‘place’ the ideal one because some people who have “a lot of money and much bigger houses” are either common without “good blood,” and thus below her in social status, or are “colored” (CW 636). Paradoxically, she does not recognize the contradiction involved in identifying herself with the decent Negro woman and her denunciation of the wealthy and influential Negroes as not ideal types. Her ‘illusory’ world crumbles when she passes from fantasy to dream: “Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (CW 636). The distinctions she loves to make vanish when ‘all the classes’ are ‘crammed in together’ and are ‘ridden off to be put in a gas oven.’ The dream is suggestive of the vulnerability of her imagined security built on class distinctions.

The white-trash woman’s representation of the hog as an ugly creature proves disquieting to Mrs. Turpin in her complacency. Her gratifying conversation with the pleasant lady about her
successful farming with “a little of everything” (CW 638) is disrupted by the white-trashy woman’s reference to the hogs as disgusting creatures to be avoided at all costs. Thus,

‘We got a couple of acres of cotton and a few hogs and chickens . . . that Claud can look after them himself,’ [Mrs. Turpin said].

‘One thang I don’t want,’ the white-trash woman said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘Hogs. Nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place.’ (CW 638)

The hog, which, to Mrs. Turpin, is a sign of prosperity, is an insufferable nuisance to the white-trashy woman. The apparent rhyme contained in the nauseating sound of ‘a-gruntin’ and ‘a-rootin’ is powerful enough to disturb the confident judgement of Mrs. Turpin. Desperately, she clings to her categorization: “Our hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink,’ she said. . . . Cleaner by far than that child right there, she thought” (CW 638). It is as if this unspoken comparison between her hog and the ‘ugly’ boy enables her to ‘preserve’ her fantastic world of power and prestige in spite of the white-trashy woman’s almost mechanical refrain “A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin” (CW 638). Her exposure to this ‘transformed’ concept of the hog suggestively initiates her into a real and larger world whose benignant threat is capable of effecting her own transformation.

Mrs. Turpin’s imaginative identification with the Negro woman is challenged by the white-trashy woman’s uncharitable representation of the coloured race as loathsome and socially unacceptable. The white trashy woman feels for the Negroes the same contempt she feels for the ugly hog: “One thang I know. . . . Two thangs I ain’t going to do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose” (CW 639). She exploits the coloured boy’s appearance at
the door bringing medicine from the drugstore to initiate a discussion upon the fate of the Negroes:

‘They ought to send all them niggers back to Africa,’ the white-trash woman said. ‘That’s wher they come from in the first place.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t do without my good colored friends,’ the pleasant lady said.

‘There’s a heap of things worse than a nigger,’ Mrs. Turpin agreed. (CW 640)

The pleasant lady and Mrs. Turpin react differently at the ‘illogicality’ of the white-trashy woman’s argument. For the pleasant lady the ‘colored friends’ are an integral part of the establishment and share the white man’s own predicament in that both are necessarily immigrants. For Mrs. Turpin, the Negro is better than the white trash, even though she stops short of pronouncing the gradation. Further, she feels the attack on the Negroes affects her personally because of her imaginative identification with the decent Negro woman.

Mrs. Turpin’s return to her imaginary world of contentment by the mediation of the radio hymn places her in the most vulnerable position. Refreshed by a hearty laugh at the expense of the Negroes’ suggested attempt at improving their colour by interracial marriage, Mrs. Turpin and company feel elated by the “nasal chorus on the radio” which extols co-operation:

You go to blank blank

And I’ll go to mine

..................

And all along the blank

We’ll hep eachother out
Smile-ling in any kind of

Weather! (CW 641)

Even though she fails to pick up every word of the hymn, Mrs. Turpin agrees with the spirit of the song since it appears to celebrate her own philosophy of life. For “she never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent” (CW 642). This universality of her own charity appears to her so ennobling that she would make some alterations in her former wistful choice of social position in life, even if it meant she had to become a trashy one: “If Jesus had said, ‘You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can’t be a good woman with it,’ she would have had to say, ‘Well don’t make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don’t matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!’” (CW 642). The hollowness of this ‘imaginary’ willingness to accept even the meanest position in life in exchange for the virtue of being a good woman is suggested by her evident satisfaction in the thought that “He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself” (CW 642). Her complacency would not admit of any actual degradation from her present social status despite her imaginative excursions into all possible ‘humiliations.’ Hence, the precariousness of her situation in the event of disillusionment.

The ‘ugly’ girl’s penetrating gaze offers Mrs. Turpin an opportunity for introspection. The girl’s antipathy to Mrs. Turpin reveals itself as soon as they look at each other: “The girl raised her head and directed her scowl at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks” (CW 635). In spite of pitying the ‘fat’ girl on account of her unattractive looks, Mrs. Turpin experiences some hostility in the girl’s gaze. She reciprocates this attitude by changing the designation of the girl in her mind from ‘fat’ to ‘ugly’; from now onwards she thinks of the girl only as ‘ugly.’
The girl is annoyed at the gratifying conversation Mrs. Turpin has with her mother and warns them against it: "The daughter slammed her book shut. She looked straight in front of her, directly through Mrs. Turpin. . . . There was no reason the girl should single her out for her ugly looks" (*CW* 637). Mrs. Turpin ignores the message contained in the angry look as altogether strange and continues her pleasant discussion. But she feels that the girl's eyes are irresistible and that they can penetrate the brittle walls of her self-defence: "Every time Mrs. Turpin exchanged a look with the lady, she was aware that the ugly girl's peculiar eyes were still on her, and she had trouble bringing her attention back to the conversation" (*CW* 639). Even her 'magnanimous' approach to the Negroes only helps increase the girl's wrath as if she has examined even the inner recesses of Mrs. Turpin's mind: "She was looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life—all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all the girl's life" (*CW* 640). The girl's gaze thus persuades Mrs. Turpin to look into her own soul and find out what lurks behind her apparently virtuous nature. But she fails in this because she has unwittingly associated her imagined self with her true self.

In the end, Mrs. Turpin has her true nature revealed to her by the agency of the ugly girl. The girl's violent reaction coincides with Mrs. Turpin's ecstatic praise of Jesus for fashioning everything as she wants:

> When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! . . . Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!' she cried aloud.

The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. (*CW* 644)
Mrs. Turpin is grateful to Jesus because he has provided her with everything according to her satisfaction, and not according to her imaginary ‘choice.’ This is clear from her reaction to the girl’s attack, which, ironically, she fails to accept as part of divine providence. The shock provided by this incident is similar to the situation that precedes a revelation: “There was an instant when she was certain that she was about to be in an earthquake” (CW 644). The earthquake that she foresees is indicative of the violent turbulence that she will experience following the girl’s revelation. As if impelled by some premonition Mrs. Turpin approaches the girl before she is carried away to the hospital and extorts the revelation:

There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. ‘What you got to say to me?’ she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. ‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,’ she whispered. (CW 645-46)

Mrs. Turpin’s foreboding that the girl might be gifted with prophetic insight gives the revelation a supernatural dimension. This is also corroborated by her posture: she ‘held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.’ The girl’s stigmatization of Mrs. Turpin as a ‘wart hog’ from ‘hell’ is shocking to her especially because the hog has undergone degradation in her imagination due to the white-trashy woman’s disgusting portrait of the animal. Hence, the ‘ugly’ girl’s description unsettles her altogether.

Mrs. Turpin’s uneasiness following the girl’s ‘revelation’ leads her a long way along the path of self-realization. As she retires to bed the girl’s description haunts her: “The instant she was flat on her back, the image of a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head” (CW 647). The new label appears to her as real as her...
former imaginative representation of herself as a good white lady. Hence her struggle for self-
defence becomes totally ineffectual: "‘I am not,’ she said tearfully, ‘a wart hog. From hell.’ But the denial had no force” (*CW*647). She is infuriated over the incident since there were trashy people in the waiting room who, she thinks, ‘really’ deserved the title better. She is bewildered to know why she has been deliberately targeted for this humiliating experience in spite of her ‘worthy’ life: "The message had been given to Ruby Turpin,53 a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman” (*CW*648). The mysterious import of the incident is further ‘revealed’ to her when she lies on her back and looks at the ceiling: “She was looking straight up as if there were unintelligible handwriting on the ceiling” (*CW*648). Like King Belshazzar of Babylon who saw a hand on the plaster of the palace but could not read or explain the writing,54 Mrs. Turpin also is puzzled at the unintelligible handwriting on the ceiling. Her bewilderment suggests that she has not yet acquired the vision granted to Daniel55 which might enable her to decipher the hidden meaning of the apparently inscrutable message. This awareness of her inability to recognize the meaning of the revelation itself is the first step towards self-realization.

The debilitating effect of the revelation on Mrs. Turpin is also evident from her ‘confidential’ talk with the Negro servants. Away from Claud and alone with her ‘sympathetic’ black farmhands she relates emotionally her distressing experience with the fat girl at the doctor’s waiting room. When she comes to the ‘tragic’ part of the story, she relives the experience in

53 W. R. Martin comments on the significance of Mrs. Turpin’s Christin name ‘Ruby’: “Since the ruby is a dark and purplish red, as a name it suggests that Mrs. Turpin’s sinful red blood has been ‘burned away’ in the fires of sin and suffering.” See “A Note on Ruby and Revelation,” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 16 (1987): 23-25.

54 Dan. 5, 5-8.

such intensity that she is almost choked: "You know what she said to me? . . . She said," Mrs. Turpin began, and stopped, her face very dark and heavy. . . . She could not bring forth the words. 'Something real ugly,' she muttered. . . . 'She said,' she began again and finished this time with a fierce rush of breath, 'that I was an old wart hog from hell'" (CW 650). The difficulty that she exhibits in representing her experience itself indicates her inability to acknowledge the truth of the revelation. At the same time, she is conscious "how much Negro flattery was worth" (CW 650). Her scepticism in this regard is confirmed by their spontaneous reaction of "astounded silence"(CW 650) at her heart-rending narration of the climactic 'revelation.' They seem to have recognized the latent truth of the 'label' in spite of their repeated and enthusiastic denial of the same. Her sharing of experience thus leaves her still 'confounded,' a state that is not far away from resolution.

Mrs. Turpin turns the metaphor implicit in the girl's description into actuality when she encounters the hogs on her farm. Her furious march to the sty to interrogate the truth of the description is contrasted with the sun's westward movement towards the hogs: "[Mrs. Turpin] started down the road to the pig parlor. She had the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle. The sun was a deep yellow now like a harvest moon and was riding westward very fast over the far tree line as if it meant to reach the hogs before she did" (CW 651). If the purpose of Mrs. Turpin's visit to the pig parlour is to fight single-handed the girl's contention that she is a wart hog from hell, the sun's speedy ride in order to 'reach the hogs before she did' seems to establish the truth of the description that man and beast are God's creations. This contrast is further developed when Mrs. Turpin's disparaging remarks on the hogs are placed side by side with the sun's apparent supervision of his hogs: "'How am I a hog and me both?' . . . The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of trees like
a farmer inspecting his own hogs” (*CW* 652). It will be noticed that the roles are reversed here: while Mrs. Turpin ‘abandons’ her hogs as despicable creatures, the sun treats them as his own. Paradoxically, Mrs. Turpin does not recognize the disparity between her representation of the hog as a clean animal (cleaner by far than the white trashy woman’s child) to others and as a disgusting one to herself. The hypocrisy involved in these conflicting representations is also evident in her tirade against God, challenging His wisdom: “‘How am I a hog?’ she demanded. ‘Exactly how am I like them? . . . You could have made me trash. Or a nigger. If trash is what you wanted why didn’t you make me a trash?’ She shook her fist with the hose in it and a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air” (*CW* 652). The insincerity of her imaginary excursions into the possibility of being born as a nigger or a trash is thus unequivocally vindicated. But as the bronze snake which Moses erected in the desert became salvific for the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents, the momentary appearance of the watery snake suggests the possibility of her salvation even in her miserable plight.

The final vision is presented as a vindication of the girl’s ‘revelation,’ which helps bring about Mrs. Turpin’s self-realization. In the background is the setting sun in whose “deepening light everything was taking on a mysterious hue” (*CW* 653). Her final assault on God which precedes the vision is delivered in such intensity that the response she gets also carries the same intensity: “A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, ‘Who do you think you are?’ . . . The question . . . returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood” (*CW* 653). The echo of her question comes as a fitting answer to her question, and she begins to experience her

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56 Num. 21, 6-9.

vulnerability more than ever. Thus she sees Claud’s truck as tiny one, and visualizes the possibility of a larger truck smashing it, scattering “Claud’s and the niggers’ brains all over the road” (CW 653). This sense of insecurity clarifies her vision enabling her to recognize for the first time the ‘glory’ of her pigs: “A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life” (CW 653). This recognition is complemented by the celestial vision\(^{58}\) of the purple streak in the sky carrying a horde of souls into heaven:

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping. . . . And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it. . . . They were marching behind the others. . . . Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (CW 654)

This inversion of ‘positions’ of the purified souls recalls Christ’s pronouncement that “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” in the Kingdom of God (Luke 13, 30). The least position awarded to people of her sort and their ‘shocked and altered faces’ which suggest that ‘even their virtues were being burned away’ shatter Mrs. Turpin’s last illusion and reveal to her the futility of her ‘virtues’\(^{59}\) in the Kingdom of Heaven. The difference that she

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\(^{58}\) In the opinion of Sura P. Rath, the “seemingly supernatural vision” takes its origin “in the palpable soil of Ruby’s own consciousness, and it sharpens in focus as O’Connor leads readers through her Thomistic reconciliation of the manners of men and the mystery of God.” See “Ruby Turpin’s Redemption: Thomistic Resolution in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation,’” Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 19 (1990): 1-8.

has always been maintaining between her representations to herself and to others vanishes and Mrs. Turpin is enabled to see ‘her’ as herself. It is in this moment of clarity and insight that she recognizes behind the “invisible cricket choruses” the “voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (CW 654). Thus, the defeat that she sustains in her combat with God becomes for her the beginning of her journey to heaven and God.

The process of Mrs. Turpin’s self-realization is presented as a story of conflicting representations. The complacent world she has created through favourable representations collides with the fat girl’s unfavourable label that she is a wart hog from hell. Her imaginative identification with the Negro or white trash does not mitigate the severity of this collision. Her inability to recognize the falsehood of her representations adds to the intensity of the conflict. In her attempt to disprove the new label she encounters her own hogs but comes up with the realization that she is no better than a hog in the divine ordinance. This awareness coincides with the reception of grace that is capable of granting her salvation, as though Christ drove out the wart hog from hell out of her system and freed her. Mrs. Turpin’s journey to self-realization becomes paradigmatic of the narrative’s redemptive journey through the deft handling of the allegorical framing devices in the story.
Chapter IV

Art and Salvation

The thematic engagement of O'Connor's fiction with the motif of salvation goes hand in hand with the search for a narrative practice that can sustain this theme. Thus, many of her stories can be characterized as being self-conscious or metafictional. The aesthetic ideal of transparent representation and the spiritual mystery of the incarnation are often parallel, simultaneous or even cognate preoccupations of her work. This is why it is difficult to maintain a distinction between theory and practice or between the spiritual and the material in her best works.

In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” O'Connor inscribes the human body itself as the dwelling place and representation of the Holy Spirit. To realize this is to be able to accept the world as it is without preconditions or judgements. Susan and Joanne are close relations of the little girl who is the main character in the story. One of the nuns at the convent where the girls study, Sr. Perpetua, once described the girls' bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost. This realization, according to the nun, would protect them from any bodily harm or violation. The girls giggle and make fun of this idea when they describe it to their hosts, but it has a profound influence on the little girl. They come back from the fair and describe the hermaphrodite freak that they have seen there. While displaying his very special and unique body he kept proclaiming that even his freakish body is the work of God and that God must have a purpose for making him the way he was. This incident also creates a very deep impression on the mind of the little girl. She can now accept God’s creatures as they are. Where she had only seen physical
deformity, she is now able to see the providential working of God. The body is no longer a mere physical structure, but is, in fact, the Temple of the Holy Ghost. The bread of the Eucharist is no longer physical bread, but the saving body of Christ. Having gained this Eucharistic vision as a result of her epiphanic knowledge of the freak, she is able to see in the blood-red setting sun the elevated Host of the Communion service.

The reference to the human body as the temple of the Holy Ghost introduces the story’s leitmotif. The two girls--Susan and Joanne--who come home to spend the weekend at their aunt’s call each other Temple One and Temple Two. These names have their origin in the words of Sister Perpetua of the Convent School where they study. They mimic the sister’s advice amidst giggling:

Sister Perpetua . . . had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should--here they laughed so hard they were not able to go on without going back to the beginning--on what to do if a young man should . . . ‘behave in an unmannerly manner with them in the back of an automobile.’ Sister Perpetua said they were to say, ‘Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!’ and that would put an end to it. (CW 199)

Even though the girls themselves make fun of the idea, the little girl and her mother recognize its significance. While the mother insists upon the truth of the title for the girls, the little girl is fascinated by the new designation: “I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present” (CW 199). The little girl’s grateful acceptance of the title is significant when it is viewed against her gradual transformation into what it signifies in the course of the story.

The little girl’s introduction to the new concept that she is a temple of the Holy Ghost
initiates a change in her attitude towards the freaks. Until then, the handicapped and the ludicrous were merely a source of amusement for her. Among them were her own cousins Susan and Joanne who, she thought, were “positively ugly” and “practically morons” (CW 197). She laughed to think of Mr. Cheat (their boarder Miss Kirby’s old admirer) who was “bald-headed except for a little fringe of rust-colored hair” and whose “face was nearly the same color as the unpaved roads and washed like them with ruts and gulleys” (CW 198). She also made fun of Alonzo, the “eighteen-year-old boy who weighed two hundred and fifty pounds” (CW 198). These ridiculous people are now seen in a new light and become, like herself, ‘temples of the Holy Ghost.’ Thus, Miss Kirby is “a Temple of the Holy Ghost too, the child reflected” (CW 200). She helps her mother find some reliable boys to keep the girls company: “I was thinking of those two Wilkinses, Wendell and Corry. . . . They wear pants. They’re sixteen and they got a car. Somebody said they were both going to be Church of God preachers because you don’t have to know nothing to be one” (CW 200). Despite the slighting reference to the boys’ incompetence for anything else but for being ‘Church of God preachers,’ there is a visible change in the girl’s attitude towards the physically deformed and the bizarre.

The little girl’s rehearsal of her martyrdom testifies to the imaginative blossoming of her newly accepted designation as the Temple of the Holy Ghost. Alone in her room she fancies what she will be when she grows up: since she has already ruled out the medical and engineering professions, there remain only the options of a saint and a martyr: “She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful. . . . She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride. . . . She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick” (CW 204). The honesty exhibited in her self-estimate—that she cannot persevere in the event of lasting persecution—is sustained in her fantasy of martyrdom also:
She began to prepare her martyrdom. The first lion charged forward and fell at her feet, converted. A whole series of lions did the same. The lions liked her so much... and finally the Romans were obliged to burn her but to their astonishment she would not burn down... they finally cut off her head very quickly with a sword and she went immediately to heaven. (CW 204)

While her fear of persistent suffering reveals itself in this imagined persecution as a refusal to die, her final surrender to a ‘sudden death’ testifies to her willingness to appropriate the new title even at the cost of her life.

The dream that re-enacts the hermaphrodite’s contentions suggests the little girl’s intuition into the mystery of human existence. She extorts from Susan and Joanne the details of their encounter with the hermaphrodite with a promise to reveal the secret of the rabbit’s reproductive process. The girls recall the freak’s words: “God made me thisaway... and I ain’t disputing His way... I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it” (CW 206). The hermaphrodite’s unquestioning acceptance of God’s ways makes a deep impression upon the little girl. She appropriates its words as the “answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself” (CW 206). This recognition of the inscrutability of God’s ways coupled with her acknowledgement of the human beings as temples of the Holy Ghost inspires a dream that represents almost liturgically the mystery of God’s creation:

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2. O’Connor wrote to Beverly Brunson on 13 September 1954 that the hermaphrodite in the story is drawn from life, the source being an account given by a girl of the performance of a hermaphrodite at the fair during the previous summer (CW 925).

She could hear the freak saying, 'God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit,' and the people saying, 'Amen. Amen.' ...

"He could strike you thisaway."

'Amen. Amen.'

'But he has not.'

'Amen.'

'Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? . . . If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin. . . . I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." (CW 207)

The dream further builds upon the hermaphrodite's attitude from accepting himself as God's creation to his recognition of himself as a 'temple of the Holy Ghost.' This suggests the development in the girl's perception, which enables her to recognize God's grace in anyone, any time, anywhere.

The identification in the little girl's imagination of the natural with the supernatural signifies a 'sacramental' vision of the universe. As she accompanies her cousins to the Convent School, she witnesses the sun as if it were an apparition unbearable to her naked eyes: "With her hair blowing over her face she could look directly into the ivory sun which was framed in the middle of the blue afternoon but when she pulled it away from her eyes she had to squint" (CW 208). The description of the veiled vision of the 'ivory sun' recalls the theophanies in the Old Testament whose radiance could not be borne by mortal eyes.4 This experience serves as a prelude to her subsequent exposure to the Eucharist in the Convent chapel. Kneeling in front of

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4 Yahweh tells Moses: "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen," (Exod. 33, 21-23). For similar narratives of theophany see, Exod. 16, 10 and Ezek. 43, 1-5.
the monstrance, she identifies the bread in the monstrance as the body of Christ and feels herself standing in the presence of God: "When the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, ‘I don’t dispute it. This is the way He wanted me to be’ (CW 208-09). The association between the Eucharist and the freak suggests her sacramental perception of the world and its beings as imbued with the spirit of God, whether whole or freakish, good-looking or ludicrous. Thus as the bread in the monstrance is the body of Christ, the freak in the tent is the temple of the Holy Ghost, a phenomenon not to be detested but to be endured and loved.

The common epithet, ‘ivory’ used to refer to the sun and the Host prepares the way for her identification of the setting sun with the elevated Host: “The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees” (CW 209). In this sacramental vision, the sun is an efficacious sign of Christ himself and the ‘red clay road hanging over the trees’ suggests the difficult and unattractive path of salvation opened up by Christ by his death on a cross made of tree trunks. Thus, for her the difference between the signifier and the signified is erased totally and spiritual salvation is possible through the acceptance of the physical as infused with the spirit of God.

To the little girl, the entire world now appears as imbued with the Spirit of God. She no longer speaks disparagingly of the ludicrous and the handicapped but respectfully accepts them as the work of God. In her changed outlook, there is no difference between a word and its meaning, between the signifier and the signified. Thus, she unquestioningly acknowledges the

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5 Maurice Bassan reads “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” as a “symbolic story tracing the progress of the martyr-saint through a world of brutality and outrage and denial of salvation to ‘the red clay road,’ the road of this world which inevitably leads to God (‘Flannery O’Connor’s Way: Shock with Moral Intent’ Renascence 15. 4 Summer 1963: 195-99, 211).