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 ludi-
crous 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’ incomp-
etence 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 sword¹ 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 hermaphrodite² 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 ways³ 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:


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.’ (CW207)

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 hit. 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).
bread in the monstrance as Christ's body. This Eucharistic vision of God being bodied reveals to her the possibility of her salvation despite her being a sinner. She associates the Host with the hermaphrodite, who, because of its unquestioning acceptance of God's ways, stands a better chance of salvation and becomes an efficacious sign of God's grace. Hence, too, she identifies the setting sun with the Host in apparent vindication of her newly acquired vision. The mysterious ways in which God's grace manifests itself in nature is the theme of yet another story “The Enduring Chill.”

In “The Enduring Chill” the young aspiring artist Asbury encounters God's saving grace in a casual mark etched by the seepage of water on the ceiling. As a young boy he had been able to sense figures in these watermarks; one of them he had identified as a fierce bird with an icicle put crosswise in its beak. Very often he had the illusion that the 'bird' was in 'motion' and would come down to place the icicle on his head. During a persistent illness, he is visited by a Jesuit priest who talks to him about the love of God signified by the Holy Ghost. This experience turns out to be his initiation into the mystery of God's love for man. Consequently, he is disposed to see the 'fierce bird' of the watermark as the Holy Spirit whose descent becomes salvific to him. The apparently random mark on the ceiling, thus, becomes a privileged signifier which bears the meaning and significance of salvation for Asbury.

Asbury had been prepared from his childhood days for the reception of salvific grace through the blossoming of his imaginative faculty. Even as a little boy he had sensed definite shapes in the water stains on the gray walls of his room: “Descending from the top molding, long icicle shapes had been etched by leaks and, directly over his bed on the ceiling, another

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6 Like the girl in the story, O'Connor, too, affirms the mystery of the Eucharist: “the Host is actually the body and blood of Christ, not a symbol.” In her Letter to ‘A’ (16 December 1955) she recalls her violent outburst at a dinner party: “Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it” (CW 975-78).
leak had made a fierce bird with spread wings. It had an icicle crosswise in its beak and there were smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail" (CW 555). Asbury’s identification in the leak drawn shapes of the ‘fierce bird with spread wings’ holding an ‘icicle crosswise in its beak’ offers the appropriate context of observation and imagination for the mystery of the faith to be made manifest. The transfiguration of nature in Asbury’s vision is given a realistic basis in his natural propensity to imaginative interpretation of facts: “He had often had the illusion that it was in motion and about to descend mysteriously and set the icicle on his head” (CW 555-56). His illusion about the bird’s mysterious descent to set the icicle on his head adumbrates his later identification of the bird with the Holy Ghost.

The discourse with Father Finn prepares Asbury to intuitively perceive the ‘fierce bird’ as a sacramental sign which represents the Holy Ghost. Even though his motive behind the invitation of the Jesuit was to talk to a “man of culture” before death (CW 561), and to “irritate” his mother who is a Methodist (CW 562), their meeting actually helps Asbury’s introduction to the spiritual import of the descent of the Holy Ghost. Father Finn brings in the Holy Ghost in answer to Asbury’s questions about James Joyce and the myth of the dying god: “God does not send the Holy Ghost to those who don’t ask for Him. Ask Him to send the Holy Ghost” (CW 566). The old Jesuit’s insistence that Asbury should pray for the descent of the Holy Ghost is significant since He alone can provide the ultimate answer to Asbury’s baffling and unresolved questions about life. While Asbury dismisses the Holy Ghost as the last thing he is looking for, the priest retorts almost prophetically that “He may be the last thing you get” (CW 567). And the Holy Ghost happens to be the last thing that he gets before his regeneration. The priest prepares Asbury for the reception of the Holy Ghost by laying bare his soul: “The Holy ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are—a lazy ignorant conceited youth!” (CW 567).
This shocking revelation prepares Asbury with a clearer vision which is capable of perceiving the symbolic significance of the casual marks which he has already identified as meaningful signs.

Asbury’s imaginative perception of the ‘fierce bird’ in motion becomes a moment of illumination revealing to him the salvific efficacy of the random mark. Disillusioned by the doctor’s diagnosis that his illness will not bring him the desired death, Asbury resigns himself to the new life of enduring chill. This acceptance of his ‘fate’ effects a change in his vision. His eyes “looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him” (CW 572). The identification of physical vision with spiritual discernment thus suggested prepares him for the final epiphany, which dispels completely the distinction between the material and the spiritual, the signifier and the signified:

The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. . . . But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable to descend. (CW 572)

His recognition of the ‘implacable’ descent of the Holy Ghost in the vision of the fierce bird in motion shows the transformation the ‘sign’ has undergone for Asbury from a random mark etched by the seepage of leak through the ‘fierce bird’ to the efficacious ‘sacramental sign’ that is capable of granting what it signifies.

“The Lame Shall Enter First” is another story of redemption which, in carrying forward its soteriological motif, makes clear the significance of worldly values and judgements in relation to the divine criteria of salvation. Mr. Sheppard is a moralist who is inclined to judge others
in terms of his own self-image as a virtuous person. He thinks of his own son Norton as a lost soul, spoiled and selfish. He brings Rufus Johnson, a boy whom he has been counselling at the penitentiary, into the house in order to teach his son a lesson. But little does he realize that it is he who is in need of instruction. He neither understands nor cares for his son’s grief for his dead mother. He dismisses the grief as mere sentimental fuss and self-pity. He thinks that Rufus’s acts of violence and vandalism have their origin in his clubbed foot. In spite of Rufus’s protestations, he clings to his own interpretation only to lose both Rufus and Norton. Contrary to his expectation, Rufus and Norton grow fond of each other and are better able to communicate between themselves than with the self-appointed reformer. It is under the influence of Rufus that the little boy acquires the notion that his mother is in heaven. He uses the telescope that his father has brought for Rufus to look at the stars in order to locate his mother in heaven. The boy’s intense longing to be united with his mother fires his imagination. While trying to jump up to her and reach her he falls off the roof and dies. It is only then that the father understands the nature of the love that bound son and mother together. His son had experienced grace, but he himself had been unable to understand love, and to reach out to his own son in his bereavement. In dying, Norton is able to become one with the idea and the experience of love. His physical death is the suffering that he is able to accept as the price of his love.

Sheppard is introduced as a self-righteous, patronizing fellow who entertains low opinion of his son’s moral character. Mechanically eating his breakfast, Sheppard concentrates his gaze on Norton, passing unspoken judgement on the child:

The boy’s future was written in his face. He would be a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company. All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely. Sheppard was a young man whose
hair was already white. It stood up like a narrow brush halo over his pink sensitive face. (CW 595)

With his exaggerated notion of himself as a ‘humanitarian,’ he considers his son a failure in moral terms. He applies his pet psychological theories and rates the boy’s IQ very low. Similarly, he is doubtful about his son’s ability to follow in his footsteps as a ‘good shepherd’ (‘good and unselfish’ as he himself is), a claim which is apparently vindicated by his mature (‘white’ hair) and saintly look (‘narrow brush halo’). But in his preoccupation with the son’s moral formation, he ignores his grief over the death of his mother which accounts for the boy’s peculiar behaviour. The falsity of his judgement will be made clear when Norton is recognized for what he is in his grief-stricken situation.

In order to initiate his ‘selfish’ son into the world of his ‘charity,’ he introduces him to the pitiable plight of Rufus Johnson, a juvenile delinquent whom he has been trying to reform and rehabilitate: “‘Norton,’ Sheppard said, ‘I saw Rufus Johnson yesterday. . . . He. . . . had his hand in a garbage can. He was trying to get something to eat out of it.’ He paused to let this soak in. ‘He was hungry,’ he finished, and tried to pierce the child’s conscience with his gaze” (CW 595). His ‘moral’ indignation at the subhuman condition of Johnson is made to serve the purpose of appealing to ‘the child’s conscience’ which, he thinks, is frozen with selfishness. It does not occur to him to doubt whether Norton has reached the moral age to take in the lesson. Nor does he take into account the emotional bloc created by his bereavement. This inability to understand the little boy’s peculiar situation is also evident in his tirade against his son’s ‘selfishness’: “‘Norton,’ Sheppard said, ‘do you have any idea what it means to share?’ A flicker of attention. ‘Some of it’s yours,’ Norton said. ‘Some of it’s his,’ Sheppard said heavily. It was hopeless” (CW 595-96, emphasis as in the text). Sheppard’s discourse on the universal
ownership of property is unintelligible to the child. Hence his innocent but pertinent retort to his father's provocative statement that Johnson is not eating breakfast with cake and peanut butter: "It's stale... That's why I have to put stuff on it" (CW 596). He seems to suggest that Johnson's life is better than his monotonous life with a condescending, sermonising father. His dissatisfaction with his father and his longing for his dead mother are revealed in his tearful response to Sheppard's complacent remark that unlike Johnson he is a fortunate child with good health, a good house, and a caring father, and that his mother is not in the penitentiary: "If she was in the penitentiary... I could go to seeeeeee her" (CW 597). Evidently, the child prefers his dead mother's love to the comforts provided by his father. But Sheppard is unable to understand the love that bound the son and his dead mother and dismisses the boy's grief as part of his selfishness.

Sheppard also represents Norton's childhood hobby as yet another sign of the boy's selfishness. His attempt to relieve the boy of the tension created by his serious moral lessons produces the opposite effect. He changes the subject of their conversation to the boy's pastime of selling seeds. But the boy's resolve to keep the money, which he expects as a prize for his sale infuriates Sheppard whose social sense seems to be threatened by such an 'inhuman' act. Hence, he resumes his 'moral' instruction: "Wouldn't you like to spend it on children less fortunate than yourself? Wouldn't you like to give some swings and trapezes to the orphanage? Wouldn't you like to buy poor Rufus Johnson a new shoe?" (CW 598). His 'love' of humanity recalls Judas's own indignation over anointing Christ with "costly perfume" which, he be-moaned, could have been "sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor" (John 12, 1-8), a circumstance that questions the genuineness of his 'charity.' If Norton's

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7 The incident occurs in Matt. 26, 6-13; and Mark 14, 3-9 also, but without any reference to Judas in particular.
proposal is not acceptable to his father, his father’s suggestion is equally unacceptable to Norton. He vomits whatever he has eaten and “waited with his mouth open over the plate as if he expected his heart to come up next” (CW 598). Norton’s vomiting of the food and his expectation to vomit ‘his heart’ would indicate the ‘contamination’ suffered by the food and his heart by his father’s ‘charity.’ Ironically, Sheppard, too, recognizes his son’s inability to ‘digest’ his ‘social’ teachings: “It’s all right . . . it’s all right. You couldn’t help it” (CW 598). But he does not acknowledge that it is he who is to be instructed in the lessons of proper charity.8

Sheppard experiences a trying time in his attempt to classify Johnson according to his pet theory. His acquaintance with the boy, which started at the penitentiary where he has been serving as a counsellor, has always been challenging. Having acknowledged the boy’s extraordinary intelligence, he categorizes the cause of his criminal nature at the very first meeting itself:

[Johnson] lifted a monstrous club foot to his knee. The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head. The case was clear to Sheppard instantly. His mischief was compensation for the foot. (CW 599-600)

This diagnosis that his criminal acts are a compensation for his clubbed foot is not acceptable to Johnson whose perception seems to penetrate deeper into the mystery of his own personality.

For he believes Satan has him “in his power” (CW 600). Nor did he say so for fun; he meant it. In spite of his atheism, this unusual encounter with Johnson seems to dwindle Sheppard’s faith

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8 Suzanne Morrow Paulson thinks that Sheppard’s charity is his way of hiding his grief, grief over the death of his wife. He represses his grief “by a plunge into the finite world and to aggrandize his own self as a martyred do-gooder” (Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988 23).
in his psychological theories: “He felt a momentary dull despair as if he were faced with some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now” (CW 600). The mystery of the boy’s personality appears to have baffled him and shaken his confidence. His outburst that “we’re living in the space age” does not have the desired force as he experiences a “glint of challenge” in the boy’s eyes (CW 601). Significantly, Sheppard continues to experience this ‘challenge’ whenever he tries to put Johnson into his ‘mould.’

Sheppard’s plans for Johnson’s future are also coloured by his scientific prejudices. In spite of the boy’s resistance, Sheppard tries hard to explain his nature with the help of his pet theories. The series of discourses he has with the boy which deal with simple psychology, astronomy and space capsules are intended to take Johnson out of the clutches of his petty world of theft and destruction to the larger horizons of responsible adulthood: “He wanted him to see the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated. He would have given anything to be able to put a telescope in Johnson’s hands” (CW 601, emphasis as in the text). The solution contemplated by Sheppard to change Johnson’s criminal instincts betrays his inability as a psychologist to ‘see’ the radical cause of the boy’s misbehaviour. The telescope is only another ‘escape’ for the boy. Paradoxically, the telescope that he buys to widen Johnson’s ‘vision’ will help his neglected son to experience the deprived love of his dead mother.

Johnson’s opposition to his ambitious proposals with the “club-foot raised always to his knee like a weapon ready for use” (CW 601) persuades Sheppard to cling to his theory on the clubbed foot. The apparent defeat he senses in the boy’s eyes is taken for the success of his psychological approach: “He watched his eyes and every week he saw something in them crumble” (CW 601). Ironically, Sheppard continues his misrepresentation of Johnson until the very end.
Johnson’s first encounter with Norton itself throws light upon his reservations about Sheppard’s ‘charity.’ As a privileged guest Johnson enters Sheppard’s house and makes deliberate intrusions into the privacy of the family. After surveying the kitchen and the hall he comes to the room where Norton meets him with his father’s sentiments: “He’s been expecting you, he’s going to give you a new shoe because you have to eat out of garbage cans!” (CW 603). Johnson takes the little boy’s innocent version of his father’s magnanimity as an affront on his personal matters. Hence his outrage: “I eat out of garbage cans . . . because I like to eat out of garbage cans. See? . . . And I got my own ways of getting my own shoe. See?” (CW 603). The violent response indicates the independence and volition that the boy claims for himself in spite of his poverty and physical deformity. The fact that he does not consider Sheppard’s offer as ‘charity’ is evident in his ‘authoritative’ order to Norton to serve him breakfast: “Go in the kitchen . . . and make me a sandwich with some of that rye bread and ham and bring me a glass of milk” (CW 603). Significantly, Norton is considered only as a waiter at Sheppard’s ‘charity hotel.’ As if satisfied by the boy’s service he confides to Norton his opinion about Sheppard: “He don’t know his left hand from his right” (CW 604). Norton’s intervention in his father’s favour that “He’s good. . . . He helps people” only provokes him further to come out with his prophetic pronouncement on Sheppard: “I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t right!” (CW 604, emphasis as in the text). Johnson’s intuitive knowledge of Sheppard’s motive is a fact to be proved later in the story. It is ironical that the various sessions that Sheppard had at the penitentiary have helped his client to ‘recognize’ the true nature of his mentor’s psyche.

Johnson’s leniency towards Norton is presented as a consequence of his growing awareness of Sheppard’s hypocrisy. Sheppard comes home to see Johnson “engrossed” in “a volume of Encyclopedia Britannica” (CW 606), a sight that encourages him to pursue his plans for the
boy. He makes a very cunning request to the boy as if he were badly in need of his help: “Norton here has never had to divide anything in his life. He doesn’t know what it means to share. And I need somebody to teach him. How about helping me out? Stay here for a while with us, Rufus. I need your help” (*CW*608). While the flattery employed in the request falls short of producing the desired effect on Johnson, Norton senses a threat to his security and comes up with his defence. He accuses Johnson of intruding into his mother’s room, and playing with her possessions, and making derogatory remarks about Sheppard. Johnson’s studied response to Sheppard’s entreaty and Norton’s accusations is significant: he seems to have recognized the insincerity of Sheppard’s ‘concern’ and the ‘shallowness’ of Norton’s ‘hostility.’ He shares his own feelings with Norton while they are left alone: “God, kid,” Johnson said in a cracked voice, ‘how do you stand it?’ His face was stiff with outrage. ‘He thinks he’s Jesus Christ!’ (*CW*609). Johnson’s ability to intuitively perceive the real state of human hearts leads him away from his counsellor/benefactor to his apparent enemy.

The telescope that Sheppard brings to enlarge Johnson’s vision of life becomes instrumental in instilling hope into Norton who uses it to locate his dead mother in heaven. Sheppard intends the instrument as a means of introducing the boys to the prospect of becoming spacemen: “Some day you may go to the moon. . . . In ten years men will probably be making round trips there on schedule. Why you boys may be spacemen. Astronauts!” (*CW*611). But as usual Johnson does not share Sheppard’s enthusiasm: he dismisses the proposal by distorting the term ‘astronauts’ into “Astro-nuts” (*CW*611). He is quite sure of the fate that awaits him: “When I die I’m going to hell” (*CW*611). The discussion that ensues between him and Sheppard reveals the boy’s unswerving faith in the existence of hell as taught by the Bible and Sheppard’s atheistic stance that hell is a nonentity: “It’s at least possible to get to the moon. . . . We can see
it. . . . Nobody has given any reliable evidence there’s a hell,’ [Sheppard said]. ‘The Bible has
give the evidence,’ Johnson said darkly, ‘and if you die and go there you burn forever. . . .
Satan runs it” (CW 611). Johnson’s absolute faith in the existence of hell is accepted as an
article of faith by Norton who is eager to know if his mother is “there burning up” (CW 611).
None of the boys acknowledges Sheppard’s contention that after her death Norton’s mother
“doesn’t exist” (CW 612). On the other hand, Johnson makes sure that the dead lady was not a
whore and that she believed in Jesus and pronounces his judgement in her favour: “She’s saved”
(CW 612). He tells the inquisitive child that she is “on high,” and that he must “be dead to get
there” (CW 612). But he cautions the child: “Right now you’d go where she is . . . but if you
live long enough, you’ll go to hell” (CW 613). Significantly, his prophetic words come true in
the case of Norton as he pursues his quest after his dead mother with the help of the telescope.

Johnson’s arrest by the police provides a trying situation for Sheppard, compelling his
introspection. Even though he has traced some secret understanding between Johnson and
Norton, Sheppard ignores it since, he thinks, “Norton was not bright enough to be damaged
much” (CW 613). But when he detects Johnson’s absence in the attic, he feels a sense of defeat.
He wants the boy to conform to his standards but is afraid to demand it. As he desperately de-
liberates the issue, Johnson is brought to him by the patrolling police. The boy has been caught
for breaking into a house. Amidst the policeman’s accusations Johnson pleads ‘innocence’ and
appeals to Sheppard’s mercy:

‘I didn’t have a thing to do with it! . . . I was walking along,’ he muttered,

but with no conviction in his voice.

‘Come on, bud,’ the policeman said.

‘You ain’t going to let him take me, are you?’ Johnson said. ‘You believe
me, don’t you?’ There was an appeal in his voice that Sheppard had not heard there before. (CW 615)

Despite his lack of conviction in the boy’s protestations, Sheppard is caught in a dilemma: he wants to convince the boy that he trusts him, but that he will not protect him when he is guilty. Hence, his decision to leave the boy to his fate in spite of his distressing question: “You made out like you had all this confidence in me,” the boy mumbled. ‘I did have,’ Sheppard said (CW 615). Sheppard is embarrassed to learn the following morning that Johnson’s confession was true. The police sergeant informs him that Johnson is innocent since they have “booked a nigger on that charge” (CW 616). As a culmination of this ‘drama’ comes Sheppard’s apology and Johnson’s warning: “I’m sorry. . . . Will you forget it, this time?” Sheppard said. ‘It won’t happen again.’ . . . ‘I’ll forget it,’ he said, “but you better remember it” (CW 616). Sheppard’s humiliating experience suggests the failure of his ‘charity,’ offering him an opportunity to assess the relevance of his stance.

Sheppard’s trust in Johnson erodes when the police continually chase the boy on some charge or other. In spite of the replacement of the telescope with the microscope, Sheppard fails to sustain the boy’s interest in science. Instead he comes home from a meeting, together with the boys, to be confronted by the cops who had arrived to apprehend Johnson because of his alleged involvement in smashing a house on the corner of Shelton and Mills: “It looks like a train run through it” (CW 617). Despite the cop’s sensible advice not to shield any “little bastard” like Johnson, Sheppard sends the police away taking the responsibility on himself: “I said I’d be responsible. . . . You people made a mistake the last time” (CW 617). Little does he know what Johnson had done when the boys had been left alone for the picture show while he had been attending the meeting. Still, to reassure himself, he questions Johnson only to be
insulted by the boy for his lack of trust in him: ‘‘You make out like you got all this confidence in me!’ a sudden outraged voice cried, ‘and you ain’t got any!’’ (CW 618). Sheppard’s belief that the boy did not have enough time to do the smashing is refuted by Johnson: ‘‘That’s why you believe me!’ the boy cried, ‘‘because you think I couldn’t have done it’’ (CW 618).

Johnson clarifies his contention, indicating the real motive behind these mischiefs: “And I could have broke in there if I’d wanted to in the time I had” (CW 619). But the point is lost on the man; nor is he bold enough to verify the truth of the incident with Norton who appears to have been let into the secret. Instead, he continues to remain sceptical of the boy’s motives.

Johnson’s refusal to accept the new shoe frustrates Sheppard’s ambitious plans for the boy. In his enthusiasm to change the boy’s character by changing the shoe, Sheppard takes Johnson to the brace shop. But the boy’s sensitivity over his clubbed foot is mysterious: “Johnson was as touchy about the foot as if it were a sacred object” (CW 610). This peculiar response seems to contradict Sheppard’s perception of Johnson’s clubbed foot as a provocation for his criminal deeds. Johnson’s arrest and Sheppard’s refusal to help him in his dire need increases the boy’s aversion to the new shoe offered by Sheppard. The boy accepts the mistake in the clerk’s measurement as providential: “The clerk had obviously made a mistake in the measurements but the boy insisted the foot had grown. He left the shop with a pleased expression, as if, in expanding, the foot had acted on some inspiration of its own” (CW 616). The ‘pleasure’ that Johnson experiences at the ‘expansion’ of his foot suggests the boy’s confirmed faith in providence that shapes his destiny. When he finally gets the shoe after another experience of Sheppard’s ‘betrayal’ of trust, he is determined to refuse it without any regret. He walks in the new shoe but abandons it as if guided by some intuition: “‘I don’t need no new shoe,’ Johnson said. ‘And when I do, I got ways of getting my own.’ His face was stony but there was
a glint of triumph in his eyes” (*CW* 621). In rejecting the shoe, Johnson makes his ultimate triumph over Sheppard’s ‘pseudo-charity.’

The discussion that follows the third chase of Johnson by the patrolling police unravels the hypocritical nature of Sheppard’s professed ‘trust’ and ‘charity.’ The policeman comes to Mr. Sheppard’s house on a trail left by the clubbed footprints of Johnson. Although Sheppard sends him away accusing him of “wasting . . . time” (*CW* 623), none of the three parties involved are convinced of the truth of his contention that Johnson is not the culprit. The patrol man leaves with a threat to catch the delinquent; Johnson provokes Sheppard with a sly “Thanks” and a derogatory remark “You ain’t such a bad liar yourself”; and Sheppard himself doubtfully turns to Johnson with the question “Did you leave? . . . I didn’t see you leave” (*CW* 623). Johnson’s answer reveals the mystery behind all the incidents of theft and smashing:

“You don’t believe in me. You ain’t got no confidence. . . . And you ain’t any smarter than that cop. All that about tracks—that was a trap. There wasn’t any tracks. That whole place is concreted in the back and my feet were dry” (*CW* 623-24). The revelation unsettles Sheppard who once again is bewildered at the phenomenon of the boy’s clubbed foot. As usual, he identifies the boy with his inscrutably mysterious foot. His ‘concern’ and ‘love’ give way to hatred: “He hated the shoe, hated the foot, hated the boy” (*CW* 6224). He makes a final desperate bid to overcome his hatred by challenging the boy’s statement, invoking his wrath further:

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘you looked in that window to embarrass me. . . . I’m stronger than you are and I’m going to save you. The good will triumph.’

‘Not when it ain’t true,’ the boy said. ‘Not when it ain’t right. . . . You ain’t going to save me. . . . Save yourself. . . . Nobody can save me but Jesus.’

(*CW* 624)
Sheppard’s ejaculatory repetitions of his resolve to ‘save’ the boy are countered by Johnson’s firm faith in the salvation offered by Jesus. Johnson’s admonition to ‘save yourself’ is unbearable to Sheppard so that he wishes the boy “would only leave now of his own accord” (CW 625). With the failure of his representation, Sheppard experiences defeat, a defeat that is too miserable for him to acknowledge.

The final discussion on Johnson’s fate is a critique of Sheppard’s ‘charity’ and Norton’s ‘selfishness.’ Even though Johnson was seen in his grandfather’s suit in the morning (a sign that he had decided to leave), Sheppard comes home in the evening to find the boys immersed in the Bible. Johnson has lifted the Bible from a “ten cent store,” and he justifies his theft: “It don’t make any difference about me. I’m going to hell anyway. . . . Unless . . . I repent” (CW 626). The reactions of Sheppard and Norton to Johnson’s assumed fate indicate a crucial difference in the conception of human nature and human destiny: “‘Repent, Rufus,’ Norton said in a pleading voice. ‘Repent, hear? You don’t want to go to hell.’ ‘Stop talking this nonsense,’ Sheppard said, looking sharply at the child” (CW 626). Sheppard, who considers that religion is ‘nonsense,’ and has substituted it with the telescope and the microscope, does not realize that he too has to believe in what these instruments tell him, and that microscopical and macroscopical phenomena are as far from the human being as the mystery of faith and redemption are. Norton, on the other hand, accepts the words of the Bible as true. This accounts for his concern for the salvation of Rufus, the intensity of which cannot be matched either in honesty or in sincerity of purpose by Sheppard’s desire to reform, educate and help Johnson.

The prophetic gesture of Johnson in eating the leaf of the Bible shows the boy’s absolute faith in the Word of God. The boy’s commitment to the divine word is revealed in his response to Norton’s sincere pleading for his repentance: “If I do repent, I’ll be a preacher,” Johnson
said. 'If you’re going to do it, it’s no sense in doing it half way' (CW 627). His total dedication is evident in his denunciation of the scientific achievements as a substitute for faith in Jesus: he does not appreciate Norton’s ambition to become a space man if it is devoid of his trust in the Lord: “Those space ships ain’t going to do you any good unless you believe in Jesus.” (CW 627). Johnson refutes Sheppard’s sceptical view of the Bible: “I believe it!” Johnson said. ‘You don’t know what I believe and what I don’t . . . Even if I didn’t believe it, it would still be true” (CW 627). Johnson’s ability to distinguish between one’s scepticism and the truth of the Bible is absent in Sheppard who denies the truth of the Word of God because of his unbelief. In order to vindicate his faith Johnson devours a page of the Bible: “I believe it!” Johnson said breathlessly. ‘I’ll show you I believe it!’ He opened the book in his lap and tore out a page of it and thrust it into his mouth. He fixed his eyes on Sheppard. His jaws worked furiously and the paper crackled as he chewed it” (CW 627). Johnson’s action recalls the vatic action of Ezekiel who ate the roll provided by the Lord as a mark of accepting God’s commission. Like Ezekiel he accepts God’s message, and goes out to preach against smug complacency and hypocrisy, his first target being Sheppard himself.

Rufus Johnson’s prophetic fury exposes the real nature and significance of his own depravity and Sheppard’s ‘charity.’ Sheppard’s premonition that the boy “would return and try to prove something” (CW 628) comes true when he sees Johnson handcuffed, and accompanied by two policemen and a reporter. Johnson counters the policeman’s claim that he has finally caught him in action with his contention that he would not have got him had he not wanted to get caught. He explains this further to satisfy the reporter, completely devastating Sheppard’s self-image: “To show up that big tin Jesus!” he hissed and kicked his leg out at Sheppard. ‘He thinks

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9 Ezek. 3, 1-3.
he's God. I'd rather be in the reformatory than in his house. . . . The Devil has him in his power. He don't know his left hand from his right. . . . He made suggestions to me!” (CW 630). While all other accusations had already been levelled against Sheppard earlier, the fresh one that he ‘made suggestions’ incites the reporter’s curiosity. Johnson clarifies the term ‘suggestions’ to mean “Immor’l” and elaborates them: “He’s a dirty atheist. . . . He said there wasn’t no hell” (CW 630). Sheppard’s attempt to explain this onslaught once again recalling his favourite theory that it is the boy’s reaction against his clubbed foot provokes Johnson’s final outburst: “I lie and steal because I’m good at it! My foot don’t have a thing to do with it! The lame shall enter first! The halt’ll be gathered together. When I get ready to be saved, Jesus’ll save me, not that lying stinking atheist” (CW 631). Johnson’s vatic outpourings identify his clubbed foot as part of the divine ordinance governing his life. ‘The lame shall enter first’ recalls Isaiah’s portrait of the glorious future of Zion when “the lame shall leap like a deer” (Isa. 35, 6). Similarly, ‘The halt’ll be gathered together’ reminds us of the parable of the great supper which accommodates “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” while the invited guests opt out of the dining hall (Luke 14, 15-24). This reversal of the human hierarchy in the event of salvation places Sheppard at the loser’s end. Johnson, on the other hand, has a possibility of salvation through repentance.

Norton’s salvation is presented as a result of his imaginative blossoming assisted by the telescope. With Johnson gone, Sheppard turns to Norton who is completely absorbed in the ‘vision’ of his mother with the help of the telescope. Sheppard senses a change in the boy’s vision: “There was an unnatural brightness about his eyes” (CW 629). This ‘unnatural brightness’ seems to be engendered by the ‘vision’ of his mother. He tells Sheppard: “‘I’ve found her!’ he said breathlessly. . . . Mamma!” (CW 629). Assisted by the faith imparted to him by Johnson, Norton identifies his mother in heaven amidst the stars. He even invites Sheppard to
share this vision: "Come and look!" (CW 629). Sheppard’s rationalization of the event has no effect on the boy who even discloses the communication that has been established between him and his mother: "She’s there! . . . She waved at me!" (CW 629). When Sheppard comes again with a contrite heart to compensate for his lapses, the image of the boy has already undergone a transformation in his imagination and in reality. Vanquished as he is, Sheppard ‘sees’ the little boy shooting up his arm and waving frantically. The change in his attitude towards his child is reflected in his perception of the boy, too: “The little boy’s face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light” (CW 632). The transformation, which he imaginatively perceives in the boy, coincides with the ‘real’ change effected in the boy’s life also: Sheppard dashes up the attic stairs to see “the tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space” (CW 632). The child’s identification of his ‘vision’ with reality persuades him to jump up to his mother, which in turn leads to his death. Death becomes the price he pays for his ‘union’ with his mother. Absolute and unswerving faith in the Word of God, a legacy that has been bequeathed by Johnson, transforms his apparently tragic death into a daring affirmation of faith and hope.

Sheppard’s recognition of the mysterious ways in which God’s saving grace operates has cost him everything he cherished in life: a reformed son, an erudite Johnson, and himself as a benefactor of humanity. The imaginative world he has created for himself by representing himself as a ‘Good Shepherd’ and others as unworthy subjects of his ‘charity’ has begun to crumble with his attempt to ‘transform’ the juvenile delinquent whom he proudly accepted as the target of his ‘redemptive’ mission. Paradoxically, Johnson becomes his ‘mentor’ as he gradually shakes the man out of his smug complacency and self-righteousness. He also shares his
unwavering faith in the Word of God with Norton, the ‘selfish,’ ‘spoilt’ child of Sheppard. The mutual love and understanding that is established between Johnson and Norton develops into a spiritual communion which takes the boys out of the atheistic influence of Sheppard into the world of the Bible. Neither the telescope nor the microscope hampers their vision or ties them down to the materialistic world of Sheppard. Instead, the telescope helps Norton’s communion with his dead mother in heaven, a communion that transforms his earthly life into a celestial one. If death becomes salvific to Norton, ‘prophethood’ becomes redemptive for Johnson who willingly accepts the suffering in the pen as the price for his vocation. The self-righteous ‘charitable’ Sheppard is left to lament his fate while his ‘selfish’ son and his ‘criminal’ ward are ‘justified.’ All these themes converge in “Parker’s Back,” a story of brilliant insight and mystery.

“Parker’s Back” is a story about representation where the signifier participates in the life of the signified and vice versa. Parker’s transformation in life starts with his exposure to a man in a fair who is tattooed from head to foot. The arabesque of men and beasts and flowers that come to ‘life’ at the flexing of his muscles fills Parker with such emotion that he goes on filling his skin with tattoos until his back alone is left. The tattoos on his body are the tablet on which the world has inscribed its desires and confusions, hopes and despairs. When he finally gets the figure of Christ tattooed on his back and returns to his iconoclastic wife, his identification with the suffering Christ becomes total just as Christ’s own identification with the sorrows of the world had been. The icon on his back thus becomes not just a mere physical sign but the indication of Christ’s own participation in the agonies of his life. At the narrative level it is a story that successfully employs the device of narrative participation in the trials and tribulations of the human being in quest of salvation.
Parker's bewilderment at his own predicament is presented as a mystery that defies explanation. Parker is married to a woman who is not his choice either in appearance or in temperament: "She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks" (CW 655). If her thin and bony physique suggests the temperance that she advocates in life, her 'gray' and 'sharp' eyes which appear like the 'points of two icepicks' indicate the penetrating 'vision' she claims in matters of faith and morals. Parker concedes that he married her because she would not have sex with him without the sanction of marriage, but he is baffled at the rationale of staying with her now. For "she was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind. Nevertheless, he stayed as if she had him conjured" (CW 655). The charm that binds him still to his disagreeable wife appears to him to be quite intriguing. This experience of mystery suggests the inexplicable divine ordinance that shapes Parker's life, his wife being a powerful instrument in his formation.

Parker's wife is a foil to her husband with her extraordinary aversion to the pleasures of life. Puritanical in her tastes, she disapproves of the modern amenities of life: "One of the things she did not approve of was automobiles. In addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face, and God knew some paint would have improved it, Parker thought" (CW 655). Her obsession with sin places her in the Biblical tradition of the Pharisees whose harping on sin made life insufferable for the ordinary Israelites (Matt. 23, 1-36).  

Her refusal to have anything to do with artificial make-up only complements this pharisaic attitude. Parker's sarcastic remark that God would appreciate her use of some paint to improve her ugly face reminds us of God's own

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10 In Mark 12, 38-40 and Luke 20, 45-47, also, we see Jesus' denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees.
attitude to everything He has created: “God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1, 3-25). Significantly, her hostility to paint, which contrasts sharply with Parker’s infatuation with colour that is profusely used in his tattoos, suggests her role in the transformation of Parker as a negative influence. Despite his recognition of these apparent traits in her nature, Parker is confused about the real ‘motivation’ in her life: “Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn’t” (CW 655). Even though Parker has an explanation for her ‘strange’ behaviour he is astounded at the irrationality of his own behaviour: “He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand” (CW 655).

Parker’s wife’s pharisaic attitude is further revealed in her apprehension about his contacts with his employer. To tease her, Parker had introduced his employer as “a hefty young blonde” (CW 655). But he is disappointed to realize that instead of becoming jealous of his suggested romance with the ‘young blonde’ his wife is worried about the possibility of the sin involved in such a relationship: “‘It’s no reason you can’t work for a man. It don’t have to be a woman.’ . . . If he had been certain she was jealous of the woman he worked for he would have been pleased but more likely she as concerned with the sin that would result if he and the woman took a liking to each other” (CW 655). Paradoxically, Parker does not derive any pleasure either from his married life or from his attempted taunting of his wife. In fact, his employer is a lady of nearly seventy whose only interest in Parker is to get “as much work out of him as she could” (CW 655). She looks at Parker merely as a useful machine like her tractor. Moreover, he has incurred her displeasure by breaking her tractor as soon as he started to work on it; and he irritates her by not wearing his shirt while he is working. Parker’s representation of her as a charming woman thus produces only the opposite effect, ministering to his wife’s
pharisaic attitude.

Parker’s very first acquaintance with his future wife is itself presented as quite providential. While he is examining the motor of his truck which broke down on the highway, Parker feels the presence of a woman nearby secretly watching him: “Parker had an extra sense that told him when there was a woman nearby watching him. After he had leaned over the motor a few minutes, his neck began to prickle. . . . A woman he could not see was either nearby . . . or in the house, watching him out the window” (CW 656). This strange intuition persists as he proceeds to taunt this unseen presence with blasphemous speech: “‘God dammit!’ he hollered, ‘Jesus Christ in hell! Jesus God Almighty damn!’” (CW 656). His swearings amount to a blatant flouting of the divine law issued through Moses: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name” (Exod. 20, 7). The woman who listens to Parker’s swearings is infuriated and assumes the role of God’s angel to mete out justice: “Without warning a terrible bristly claw slammed the side of his face and he fell backwards on the hood of the truck” (CW 656). The blow that Parker receives for his unusual ‘romantic’ appeal places him alongside Saul who was struck blind by divine light on his way to Damascus. Parker’s intuition of “some creature from above, a giant hawk-eyed angel wielding a hoary weapon” in the “tall raw-boned girl with a broom” (CW 656) completes the Biblical parallel already suggested. Even though he succeeds in eliciting the girl’s sympathy by his false statement that he has hurt his hand, the girl does not rise to the bait: “I don’t want nothing to do with this one, he thought” (CW 657). The combination of mystery and violence that encompasses the relation between Parker and his future wife from the start is symptomatic of the course of their troubled marital life.

11 Acts, 9, 1-19.
The girl’s disapproval of the tattoos on Parker’s body suggests her iconoclastic attitude to all sorts of representations. While examining the presumed injury on Parker’s hand the girl is confused by a series of tattoos on his arm:

There emblazoned in red and blue was a tattooed eagle perched on a cannon. Parker’s sleeve was rolled to the elbow. Above the eagle a serpent was coiled about a shield and in the spaces between the eagle and the serpent there were hearts, some with arrows through them. Above the serpent there was a spread hand of cards. (CW 657)

The tattoo of the eagle perched on a cannon seems to represent the pride and superiority claimed by warlike America in the world community; the serpent coiled on the shield indicates the excessive sexual pervasiveness of the American society; the hearts pierced with arrows through them suggest the romantic aspiration of a youth like Parker; and the spread hand of cards symbolizes the Americans’ perception of life as a gambling. The fact that these tattoos represent the peculiarly American aspirations and mentality is evident from Parker’s own statement: “I got most of my other ones in foreign parts. . . . These here I mostly got in the United States” (CW 657). Contrary to his expectation, the girl shows no interest in the tattoos; she dismisses even the prospect of a discussion on them: “Don’t tell me,’ the girl said, ‘I don’t like it. I ain’t got any use for it” (CW 657). The difference in attitudes suggested between Parker and his future wife in matters of representation slowly develops into a conflict of beliefs and practices, ending in the break-up of their relationship.

Parker’s introduction to the tattoos unsettles him, shaking him out of his lethargic and uneventful life. As a boy of twelve, Parker comes across a man in the fair, who is tattooed from head to foot: “The man . . . moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the
arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own. Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes” (CW 657-58). Parker’s vision of the tattooed men and beasts and flowers as alive suggests his ability to perceive the efficacy of the signifiers. The impression the tattooed man leaves on the boy is one of “wonder” and “unease” (CW 658). Despite his inability to intellectually recognize the difference brought about by this experience on his personality, Parker has an inexplicable feeling of being unsettled: “It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed” (CW 658). Significantly, these reactions of wonder and unease prepare the boy for greater revelations in the course of his life.

The change in Parker’s life is attributed to his identification with the signification of the tattoos he gets on his skin. He considers tattooing seriously and is ready to suffer for the tattoos of his choice. Thus his first tattoo—the eagle perched on the cannon—hurts him “enough to make it appear to Parker to be worth doing” (CW 658). He is so earnest about getting more tattoos that he quits school at the age of sixteen and works in a garage in order to “pay for more tattoos” (CW 658). The tattoos effect tangible changes in his personality: “He found out that the tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before” (CW 658). This change is suggestive of his acceptance of the qualities signified by the tattoos. The tattoos are no longer mere decorations but are an integral part of his very being. His ‘tattooed’ nature (which he has substituted for his lethargic and unattractive personality) accounts for the licentious life he is given to: “He began to drink beer and get in fights” (CW 658). He lives up to the signification of the tattoos on his skin. The assumption of this new nature is so complete that he remains incorrigible to his mother’s reformative efforts. She took him to “a revival with her, not telling him where they were going. When he saw the big lighted church, he jerked out of her
grasp and ran" (CW 658). Parker’s commitment to the ‘new’ life envisaged by the purely ‘mundane’ tattoos looks forward to his absolute identification with the ‘supernatural’ tattoo.

Parker’s escape to the navy exposes him more and more to the ‘tattooed vices’ of the world. He flees from the ‘revival,’ to end up with the navy: “The next day he lied about his age and joined the navy” (CW 658). His flight is reminiscent of Jonah’s escape from Yahweh who had commissioned him to go to Nineveh and preach against the wickedness of the people of the city. The correspondence with the Biblical narrative is suggested by the ship motif—Jonah had escaped into the ship bound for Tarshish, and Parker joins the navy to go around the wider world in the naval ship. Life in the navy matures him into a ‘man,’ developing in him the vices associated with each new tattoo he acquires: “Everywhere he went he picked up more tattoos” (CW 659). Because of his identification with the tattoos, each additional tattoo takes him further into the wickedness of the world. Thus “he had a tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, hawks on his thighs, Elizabeth II and Philip over where his stomach and liver were respectively . . . on his abdomen he had a few obscenities but only because that seemed the proper place for them” (CW 659). Among the tattooed beasts and men he begins with a tiger and a panther which are known for their fierce predatory instincts, and passes through the cobra coiled about the torch on his chest which suggests the crushing dominance of emotion over reason, hawks on the thighs which indicate the predatory sexual assault, Elizabeth and Philip who stand for power and marital harmony, and the obscenities on the abdomen that insinuate his secret but unavoidable indulgence in sex.

The growing dissatisfaction that Parker experiences in himself represents the conflict of interests signified by the various tattoos he has on his skin. The tattoos that he has acquired do

12 Jonah 1, 1-3.
not provide a harmonious look nor do they satisfy Parker: “Whenever a decent-sized mirror was available, he would get in front of it and study his overall look. The effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched” (CW 659). His failure to derive aesthetic or psychological contentment from the tattoos persuades him to try more tattoos only to increase his dissatisfaction in turn. Consequently, he stays away from the navy without the sanction of the authorities and gives himself up to alcohol and drunken brawl. The disharmony he thus experiences assumes the role of a warfare that he feels is fought among the various tattoos with their mutually contradictory representations: “His dissatisfaction, from being chronic and latent, had suddenly become acute and raged in him. It was as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare” (CW 659). The appropriation of the instincts, emotions and aberrations signified by the various tattoos makes Parker’s life the arena of conflicting vices. The conflict leads to the termination of his service in the navy, exposing him further to the tribulations of the world represented by the tattoos.

The discussion between Parker and his future wife on the relative merit of the tattoos on his arm is a study of the relevance of tattoos themselves. The girl contemptuously refers to them as the work of uncouth people: “All that there . . . is no better than what a fool Indian would do. It’s a heap of vanity . . . Vanity of vanities” (CW 659-60). She considers the colourful tattoos of animate and inanimate objects on Parker’s arm as a mark of his ‘vanity.’ The expression ‘Vanity of vanities’ which she borrows from the Bible13 connotes the “transitory nature of all that is human.”14 Hence, her disapproval of Parker’s tattoos. Even though he recognizes the

13 Ecc. 1, 2.

14 Notes on Ecclesiastes 1, 2 in The New Jerusalem Bible 1015.
girl’s difference in perception he continues to get her intrigued, compelling her to grade his tattoos: “He thrust the arm back at her. ‘Which you like best?’ ‘None of them,’ she said, ‘but the chicken is not as bad as the rest.’” (CW 660). The negative construction employed to deliver her verdict in favour of the ‘chicken’ (her version of the ‘eagle’) further reveals her indignation at the tattoos. In justifying her ‘mistake’ she dismisses the tattoos as altogether utterly foolish: “‘That’s an eagle,’ Parker said. ‘What fool would waste their time having a chicken put on themself?’ ‘What fool would have any of it?’ the girl said and turned away” (CW 660). While Parker’s selection of tattoos shows his predilection for their signification, the girl identifies them as representations of the vices and foolishness of the world, and thus avoids them.

The courting that Parker continues amidst his aversion to the girl indicates that they have been thrown together by a power they cannot quite comprehend. In spite of the initial violence and the indifference experienced at his first meeting, Parker returns to the girl the following day with a “bushel of apples” (CW 660) in order to overcome her arrogance. The girl’s disagreeable physical features and the presence of children stand in the way of his tempting the girl to submission: “He liked women with meat on them, so you didn’t feel their muscles, much less their old bones. . . . He hated to be making up to a woman when there were children around” (CW 660). He manages to disperse the children giving each child an apple with the injunction “to get lost” (CW 660). But Parker himself feels defeated by the apathetic attitude of the girl: “The girl did nothing to acknowledge his presence. He might have been a stray pig or goat that had wandered into the yard and she too tired to take up the broom and send it off” (CW 660). The simile used to represent the girl’s precarious situation brings out her apparent submission to the desecrating advances of Parker. Strangely, she finds herself quite without the power to drive away
the agent of evil suggested by the synonyms 'pig' and 'goat' attributed to Parker.\textsuperscript{15} The girl’s ‘culpable’ indifference to the ‘corrupting’ presence of Parker facilitates the blossoming of their relationship, a fact that is intriguing to both Parker and the girl because of their inability to recognize its significance in their lives.

Parker’s bewilderment at his own strange relation with the girl grows as they know each other more closely. Her poverty which is exhibited in the manner of grabbing the apple disgusts him: “She took an apple quickly as if the basket might disappear if she didn’t make haste. Hungry people made Parker nervous” \textit{(CW 660)}. The girl appears to be incompatible with his standards to such an extent that he questions the very rationale of his courtship: “He could not think now why he had come” \textit{(CW 661)}. Even the view from her porch which “stretched off across a long incline” is unsettling to him because of his association of long views with the fear that “someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion” \textit{(CW 661)}. Mention of religion among the hostile forces makes Parker’s choice of Christ for a tattoo and subsequent conversion all the more mysterious when it comes. His disgust for the girl is so great that he wonders “who in God’s name would marry her?” \textit{(CW 661)}. In spite of these disparaging thoughts he turns up the following day with a bushel of peaches as he had promised her: “Parker had no intention of taking any basket of peaches back there but the next day he found himself doing it” \textit{(CW 661)}. The absence of volition that he experiences in his actions causes him to doubt his sanity: “Parker thought he was losing his mind. He could not believe for a minute that he was attracted to a woman like this” \textit{(CW 661)}. Obscurely, in the depth of his soul, Parker must feel that he is being guided in his choices and decisions by some inscrutable power.

\textsuperscript{15} The pig is considered an unclean animal by the Jews: “Every animal that has divided hoofs but is not cleft-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean for you” \textit{(Lev. 11, 26)}. The goat is used to symbolically represent the wicked in the Last Judgement scene where the Son of Man “will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left” \textit{(Matt. 25, 33)}. 

Prepared by BeeHive Digital Concepts Cochin for Mahatma Gandhi University Kottayam
The assurance that Parker obtains from the girl before the disclosure of his name suggests the extraordinary representative quality of his name itself. The girl whose interest in Parker is aroused only on his third visit demands his name. Parker’s partial revelation of his name as “O. E. Parker” (CW 662) serves only to increase her curiosity to ask for the expansion of the initials ‘O. E.’ She withholds her name from Parker in order to extort the explanation: “‘I’ll tell you when you tell me what them letters are the short of,’ she said. There was just a hint of flirtatiousness in her tone and it went rapidly to Parker’s head” (CW 662). The long awaited hint of ‘flirtatiousness’ shakes Parker’s resolve and he deliberates the issue seriously, convincing her of the supernatural import of his name:

He had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only to the files of the navy and the government. . . . When the name leaked out of the navy files, Parker narrowly missed killing the man who used it.

‘You’ll go blab it around,’ he said.

‘I’ll swear I’ll never tell nobody,’ she said. ‘On God’s holy word I swear it.’ (CW 662)

Parker has kept his name a secret because of his latent awareness of its sanctity, grudgingly divulging it only to the files of the navy and the government. His anxiety to secure an assurance from the girl also shows the significance he attaches to his name. Even though he is unworthy, the name he bears is a worthy one, the misuse of which amounts to the misuse of God’s own name. Hence his fury at the man who used it in the navy. This highly ‘serious’ conversation, which is quite unusual between people engaged in courting, prepares the girl for the reception of his extraordinary name with its supernatural significance.

The very process of the revelation of Parker’s name is depicted as something mysterious
as the name itself. The posture and manner at the time of the revelation subscribe to the supernatural dimension of the event: "Parker sat for a few minutes in silence. Then he reached for the girl’s neck, drew her ear close to his mouth and revealed the name in a low voice" (CW 662). Parker’s contemplation that precedes the revelation suggests the mysterious nature of his name, the significance of which can be communicated only in such a manner. In revealing his name in a low voice he prevents it from being leaked out and thereby contaminated. The girl’s response to the revelation is equally reverential as befits the significance of the name itself: “‘Obadiah,’ she whispered. Her face slowly brightened as if the name came as a sign to her. ‘Obadiah,’ she said. The name still stank in Parker’s estimation. ‘Obadiah Elihue,’ she said in a reverent voice” (CW 662). Obadiah is one of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament who prophesied against the Edomites (Obad. 1-21). The word in Hebrew means ‘servant of Yahweh,’ a term that has traditionally been associated with the prophets. Being authentic interpreters of the word of God, they represent God to the faithful in their existential situation. Elihue whose name signifies in Hebrew ‘my God is he’ is a younger friend of Job who interferes in the debate between Job and his senior friends rejecting “both the Friends’ argument that suffering is always the result of sin and Job’s contention that God is unjust.” The biblical signification confers a divine status to Parker’s name, which accounts for his insistence not to misuse his name. The scriptural undertones of Parker’s name are matched by those of the girl’s name too: she is “Sarah Ruth Cates” (CW 662). She represents in herself two important women in Christ’s genealogy.


18 Job 32-37.

Sarah (Gen. 17, 15), and Ruth (Ruth 4, 1-22), a coincidence that suggests her role in the salvation of Parker through representation. The biblical significance of their names\(^{20}\) imparts to their union the roles played by the prophets and the biblical women in the salvific work of God.

Parker’s marriage with Sarah Ruth is presented as a union of opposites effected by the inexplicable providence of God. The growth in their relationship from revulsion to tolerance and love defies explanation: “She liked him even though she insisted that pictures on the skin were vanity of vanities and even after hearing him curse, and even after she had asked him if he was saved and he had replied that he didn’t see it was anything in particular to save him from” (\(CW\) 662-63). Significantly Parker is accepted for what he is with his infatuation with tattoos and unholy swearing, his presumptuousness and disregard of his salvation. She even agrees to have a ride with him even though she refuses to have sex with him: “She agreed to take a ride in his truck. Parker parked it on a deserted road and suggested to her that they lie down together in the back of it. ‘Not until after we’re married,’ she said—just like that” (\(CW\) 663). The force of her resistance becomes evident from the fact that Parker is thrown out of the truck when he reaches for her, necessitating his resolve “to have nothing further to do with her” (\(CW\) 663). But as Providence would have it “They were married in the County Ordinary’s office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous” (\(CW\) 663). The choice of the Ordinary’s office for their marriage shows the prevalence of Sarah Ruth’s antagonism to representations over Parker’s fondness for the same. Her concept of God reflects the biblical prohibition of images: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20, 4). A strict

application of this biblical injunction against representations is seen in Sarah Ruth’s avoidance of churches as ‘idolatrous.’ This conflict in their respective concepts of representation is continued in their married life, facilitating the work of God’s grace through suffering.

The dissatisfaction that prevails in his married life also helps sustain Parker’s unquenchable thirst for new tattoos. Since their marital union has not effected any reconciliation between their mutually contradictory views on representation, Parker finds life insufferable with Sarah Ruth. At the same time his attempt to liberate himself from the ‘bondage’ of marriage falls through: “Every morning he decided he had had enough and would not return that night; every night he returned” (CW 663). This inexplicable inevitability of living together persuades Parker to find an outlet in more and more tattoos: “Whenever Parker couldn’t stand the way he felt, he would have another tattoo, but the only surface left on him now was his back” (CW 663). The possibility of getting a tattoo on his back appears foolish to him since he cannot see it in ordinary circumstances nor is his wife interested in it. Sarah Ruth abhors tattoos so much that she would not even look at the other ones: “Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down” (CW 663). Even Parker’s suggestion to have “an open book with HOLY BIBLE tattooed under it and an actual verse printed on the page” (CW 664) would not be acceptable to her since she has already a Bible and would not like to read the same verse every day. Strangely, her opposition to even such a suggestion betrays her blind antagonism to representations of which the Bible she uses is one. Parker’s desire to find a better one is so absorbing that he loses his sleep; he fears he would have the same fate as his “granddaddy who had ended in the state mental hospital” (CW 664). The intensity of his worry becomes externalized when his eyes “took on a hollow preoccupied expression” (CW 665). His preoccupation with the prospect of a new tattoo is so complete that he fails in his service at the old lady’s, facing
ouster from employment. The tension is such that he cannot stop short of another tattoo.

The accident on the old lady’s farm is described in theophanic terms preparing Parker for his decisive tattoo on his back. The locale of the accident is the old lady’s farm with an “enormous old tree standing in the middle,” where Parker is engaged in baling hay with the assistance of the old lady’s “sorry baler and her broken tractor” (CW 665). The ‘tree’, which becomes instrumental in the accident, assumes significance because of its biblical associations. Like “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2, 17) of the creation account, the ‘old tree’ facilitates Parker’s illumination in the ensuing accident. The event takes place when Parker’s mind is engaged by the sun:

As he circled the field his mind was on a suitable design for his back. The sun, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front to behind him, but he appeared to see it both places as if he had eyes in the back of his head. All at once he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him. A ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, ‘GOD ABOVE!’ (CW 665)

The regular switching of the sun from ‘in front to behind him’ with its suggestive role of the all-seeing God implicitly indicates to Parker the type of tattoo that he needs on his back, the full implications of which will be unfolded to him at the artist’s office. Similarly, Parker’s vision of the tree ‘reaching out to grasp him’ complements the biblical association already hinted. Like its archetype, the old tree occasions a ‘revelation’ to Parker. The echo of Parker’s outburst ‘GOD ABOVE’ also indicates the manner of the final revelation, which is to come from within himself in the choice of the tattoo. The burning of the old tree and Parker’s shoes following the crash continues the theophanic atmosphere: “He landed on his back while the tractor crashed
upside-down into the tree and burnt into flame. The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire... He was not in them" (CW 665). The scene reminds us of the burning bush where Moses encountered Yahweh; he was asked to put off his shoes since the place where he stood was holy.21 The experience has almost transformed him so that he feels like praying: “He scrambled backwards... and if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it” (CW 665). The accident thus becomes salvific in the life of Parker because of the unprecedented change it has effected in his attitude towards God and religion.

Parker’s journey to the tattooist is narrated with soteriological undertones. Following the accident, Parker makes strenuous efforts to reach his truck which is parked at the edge of the field: “He moved toward it, still sitting, still backwards, but faster and faster; half way to it he got up and began a kind of forward-bent run from which he collapsed on his knees twice” (CW 665). The apparently paradoxical effects experienced by Parker during his backward movement22 which is ‘faster and faster’ and his ‘forward run’ which is intertwined with repeated collapses on his knees suggest the efficacy of divine grace which ordains his life. Through the collapse on his knees, he participates in the redemptive sufferings of the Servant of Yahweh.23 His experience of total inability to reach his destination on his own initiative complements this divine intervention in his life: “His legs felt like two old rusted rain gutters. He reached the truck finally and took off in it, zigzagging up the road” (CW 665-66). Despite his incapacity and the zigzagging movement of his truck, Parker is rightly on his way to the tattooist in the city. He

21 Exod. 3, 2-5.

22 Alice Hall Petry analyzes Parker’s backward movements as signifying his spiritual advancement (“O’Connor’s Parker’s Back”” Explicator 46. 2 1988: 38-43).

23 Isaiah foretells the vicarious sufferings of the Servant of Yahweh: “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53, 4-5).
surrenders totally to divine providence: “Parker did not allow himself to think on the way to the city” (CW 666). He perceives that he is no more his old self, however inscrutable the transformation appears to him: “there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished” (CW 666). Parker’s recognition of his own transformation as an accomplished fact places him directly in the path of his salvation.

The conversation with the tattooist lays bare the utterly devastated state of Parker’s soul consequent upon his inner transformation. In spite of previous acquaintance the artist does not recognize Parker and dismisses him as a drunkard: “I don’t put tattoos on drunks” (CW 666). Parker’s protestations of their earlier contracts further provoke the artist to denounce him as a moral wreck: “You’ve fallen off some. . . . You must have been in jail” (CW 666). The artist intuitively perceives Parker’s broken appearance as indicative of his moral degeneration. Parker desperately tries to explain his miserable plight as a consequence of his marriage: “‘Married,’ Parker said” (CW 666). Little does he realize that his wife Sarah Ruth is only instrumental in effecting his reformation, the painful process of which accounts for his present plight. His choice of the tattoo of God reveals the real nature of his depravity. Let us look at the dialogue between the artist and Parker:

‘Who are you interested in?’ he said, ‘saints, angels, Christs or what?’

‘God,’ Parker said.

‘Father, Son or Spirit?’

‘Just God,’ Parker said impatiently. ‘Christ. I don’t care. Just so it’s God.’

(CW 666)

Parker’s insistence on a divine portrait suggests that God alone is capable of filling the void that
he experiences in life. Despite his nonchalant attitude regarding the different persons of the Trinity as suggested by the artist, Parker’s determination to have a picture of God tattooed on his back is significant since it elevates his choice to the ontological level.

Parker’s choice of the Byzantine Christ is also a mark of providence. He peruses the artist’s book from the reverse side following the tattooist’s revelation that the “up-to-date ones are in the back” (CW 667). Paradoxically, these latest pictures have no fascination for Parker who turns the leaves quickly glancing at the “less reassuring” (CW 667) ones. The urgency that he experiences in discovering the proper tattoo is suggested by the extraordinary beating of his heart. “Parker’s heart began to beat faster and faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a great generator” (CW 667). Even in the selection of this most important picture, he surrenders himself completely to the working of supernatural forces: “He flipped the pages quickly, feeling that when he reached the one ordained, a sign would come” (CW 667). Parker’s absolute trust is rewarded when the ordained picture appears with a corresponding sign: “On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off, there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK” (CW 667). The miraculous nature of God’s intervention in the life of Parker becomes evident by the apparent stoppage of his heart; a parallel can be seen in the Bible when Yahweh stopped the sun until Joshua and his men defeated the Amorites.²⁴ The absolute silence that follows the vision of the glancing pair of eyes is deemed as efficacious as language itself commanding him to GO BACK to the leaf which contains the decisive picture. When Parker obeys the order, his heart resumes its function as if the inevitable has already happened. “Parker returned to the picture—the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes.

²⁴ Joshua 10, 12-14.
He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power" (CW 667). The infinity that is suggested by the Byzantine icon of the haloed head of Christ with all-demanding eyes is capable of quenching Parker’s insatiable thirst for a suitable picture on his back. The icon becomes for Parker the power that ordains his life itself.

Parker’s insistence upon a true replica of the Byzantine Christ on his back indicates his unquestioning acceptance of the divine plan that fashions his life. He agrees to the artist’s harsh conditions in order to have the picture tattooed as such:

‘You don’t want all those little blocks though, just the outline and some better features.’

‘Just like it is,’ Parker said, ‘just like it is or nothing.’

‘It’s your funeral,’ the artist said, ‘but I don’t do that kind of work for nothing.’

‘How much?’ Parker asked. . . .

‘Ten down and ten for every day it takes,’ the artist said.

Parker drew ten dollar bills out of his wallet; he had three left in. (CW 668)

His readiness to pay the enormous amount as demanded by the artist shows Parker’s acceptance of the tattoo as if God decreed it. The urgency of the situation is suggested by his threatening posture when the artist asks him to wait until the next morning: ‘“No no!” Parker said. ‘Trace it now or gimme my money back,’ and his eyes blared as if he were ready for a fight” (CW 668).

The artist, on the other hand, agrees to Parker’s stubbornness because of his scepticism about his customer’s perseverance in such a foolish decision: “Any one stupid enough to want a Christ on

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his back . . . would be just as likely as not to change his mind the next minute” (CW 668). But even his commercial urge serves the divine plan since he also becomes instrumental in making Parker a bearer of the Christ icon.

Parker’s active participation in the artist’s work prepares him to relive the redemptive suffering signified by the icon that is being tattooed on his back. Contrary to his previous experiences Parker is unusually nervous at the artist’s workshop. While the artist is tracing, the picture out of the book Parker paces “back and forth across the room, nervously flexing his shoulders” (CW 668). Despite his awareness of the supernatural involvement in its selection he is perplexed by the phenomenon of the picture: “He wanted to go look at the picture again but at the same time he did not want to” (CW 668). The natural curiosity that he feels about the picture is countered by the awe that accompanies his very thought about the same. This supernatural association of the icon makes its tattooing a different experience for Parker: “Parker was usually so relaxed and easy under the hand of the artist that he often went to sleep, but this time he remained awake, every muscle taut” (CW 668). His anxiety and tension indicate the mental suffering that is involved in assimilating the signification of the picture that is painted on his back. When he is allowed to take a temporary respite at midnight, he is still anxious to examine his back with the help of two mirrors. To his surprise it was almost completely covered with little red and blue and ivory and saffron squares; from them he made out the lineaments of the face—a mouth, the beginning of heavy brows, a straight nose, but the face was empty; the eyes had not yet been put in. The impression for the moment was almost as if the artist had tricked him. (CW 668)

Since the artist follows the rules of iconography and thus tattoos the picture dexterously drawing...
blocks together, Parker recognizes only squares of different colours on his back. And the lineaments of the face that he makes out of them do not contain any trace of the eyes, the captivating look of which has been the inspiration for the choice of the picture. Parker feels deceived and leaves the workshop only after getting an assurance from the artist that they will “come . . . in due time” (CW 668). The anguish betrayed by Parker indicates the depth of his identification with the tattooed Christ whom he has accepted as his guiding principle.

Parker’s stay at the Haven of Light Christian Mission helps him to relive his transforming experiences in all their intensity. The poverty that induces him to spend the night between the two sessions at the artist’s workshop in the charity house becomes providential since it enables him to assimilate the working of divine grace in his life. Even though he occupies the last available cot he cannot sleep with the haunting memory of the day’s experiences: “he was still shocked from all that had happened to him. All night he lay awake in the long dormitory of cots” (CW 669). The only consolation to his distressed soul is the light from the “phosphorescent cross glowing at the end of the room” (CW 669). As if inspired by the vision of the cross the experiences of the day are re-enacted in his imagination: “The tree reached out to grasp him again, then burst into flame; the shoe burned quietly by itself; the eyes in the book said to him distinctly GO BACK and at the same time did not utter a sound” (CW 669). The imaginative juxtaposition of the scene of the accident and the miraculous picture of the Byzantine Christ against the background of the phosphorescent cross suggests the mutually complementary nature of these experiences. The tree motif re-enacts for Parker what the archetypal tree of the knowledge of good and evil had done to the fall of the first parents, and the burning bush had done.

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26 Gen. 3, 1-7.
for man's salvation, the completion of which had been attained by the wooden cross of Christ (which had been made of another tree). The silent but irresistible command to GO BACK comes as the culmination of his experience reminding Parker of the necessity of going back to Christ in order to attain his salvation. The insufferableness of his experience is indicated by his strange longing for the company of his 'hostile' wife: "He longed miserably for Sarah Ruth. Her sharp tongue and icepick eyes were the only comfort he could bring to mind. He decided he was losing it. Her eyes appeared soft and dilatory compared with the eyes in the book. . . . He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly" (CW 669). The penetrating look of the Byzantine Christ is so irresistible that Sarah Ruth's ‘sharp tongue and icepick eyes’ appear to undergo a change to become ‘soft and dilatory.’ The simile of the fly’s wing plainly conveys the transparency that is achieved by Parker’s soul due to his encounter with the Byzantine Christ. This imaginative reliving of the experience enables Parker to live the life signified by the icon in all its intensity.

The supernatural dimension of the tattoo is hidden from the artist himself by Parker’s casual but pertinent denial of his saviour. After his restless stay at the Haven, Parker returns to the artist’s workshop before the appointed time. He is anxious to resume his normal life with the completion of the tattoo: "He had decided upon getting up that, once the tattoo is on him, he would not look at it, that all his sensations of the day and night before were those of a crazy man and that he would return to doing things according to his own sound judgement" (CW 669). If his decision not to look at the completed tattoo suggests his identification of the picture with God Himself, his hope to resume his activity according to his own sound judgement indicates his confidence in the newly acquired personality consequent upon this identification. However,

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27 God appears to Moses at the burning bush with the promise of salvation to the Israelites (Exod. 3:1-12)
he does not acknowledge the truth about his transformation even before the artist who himself is instrumental in the process. Thus we see him denying Christ in response to the artist’s question whether he has embraced religion: “Naw. . . . I ain’t got no use for none of that. A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he don’t deserve none of my sympathy.” These words seemed to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them (CW 669). Parker’s apparent scepticism reminds us of the attitude of the persecutors of Christ who challenge his role as the saviour: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (Luke 23, 37). But the absence of conviction that his utterance betrays indicates the lack of his volition. This apparent denunciation saves the mystery of the tattoo from desecration. Parker avoids further discussion on the topic by blaming his wife for all his problems: “I married this woman that’s saved. . . . I never should have done it. I ought to leave her. She’s done gone and got preg-nant” (CW 669-70). The tattoo is intended to shut her mouth since it contains God’s own looks: “She can’t say she don’t like the looks of God” (CW 670). Thus, Parker preserves for himself the real motive for the tattoo as well as its significance, a decision that befits the mysterious nature of the picture.

The second phase of the tattooing represents the mutually exclusive and conflicting planes of meaning engendered by the picture in the minds of Parker and the artist. Notwithstanding his efforts to sleep on the artist’s table, Parker is kept awake by disturbing thoughts: “He lay there, imagining how Sarah Ruth would be struck speechless by the face on his back and every now and then this would be interrupted by a vision of the tree of fire and his empty shoe burning beneath it” (CW 670). If the tattoo is intended to shock and thus quieten his pharisaic wife, it in fact leads him to an experience of God as Moses had been enabled by the burning bush. The vision of his empty shoe burning beneath it completes the parallel suggested
between Parker and Moses in their encounter with God. Since Parker has already decided not to look at the finished picture, the artist has to use force to prevail upon him:

The artist took him roughly by the arm and propelled him between the two mirrors. ‘Now _look_,’ he said, angry at having his work ignored.

Parker looked, turned white and moved away. The eyes in the reflected face continued to look at him—still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence.


cite CW670, emphasis as in the text

While the artist is angry because his achievement is not recognized, Parker desists from looking at the picture because of his identification of the tattoo with God Himself. The command ‘look’ with its biblical undertone—Pontius Pilate invites the angry Jews to look at Christ\(^{28}\) who appears with a crown of thorns—adds a supernatural dimension to the picture, which is a true representation of God Himself to him. On the other hand, the true significance of the tattoo is lost upon the artist who, unlike Parker, fails to identify the signifier with the signified.

The pool hall incident re-enacts the ship motif, leaving hints to Parker about the inescapable nature of his vocation. In order to relieve the tension experienced during the tattooing Parker drinks a pint of whiskey and proceeds to the pool hall. To his annoyance, there he is greeted by an old friend who slaps him on his back. Parker is infuriated at the gesture: “Parker was not yet ready to be struck on the back. ‘Lay off,’ he said, ‘I got a fresh tattoo there’” \cite CW671. The seriousness that Parker attributes to the tattoo is countered by his friend’s curiosity to know what the fresh tattoo is. Hence his invitation to his friends to have a look at Parker’s back: “‘Come on . . . let’s have a look at O. E.’s tattoo,’ and while Parker squirmed in their hands, they pulled up his shirts” \cite CW671. But the sight of the new picture evokes a very strange response

\(^{28}\) “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him. So Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns” (John 19, 4-5).
from the spectators: “Parker felt all the hands drop away instantly and his shirt fell again like a veil over the face” (CW 671). The spectator’s reaction recalls the awful look of those who witness God in His glory. The simile of the veil complements the comparison already suggested. The awed silence that follows the vision of the picture confirms the supernatural dimension of the incident: “There was a silence in the pool room which seemed to Parker to grow from the circle around him until it extended to the foundations under the building and upward through the beams in the roof” (CW 671). The all-encompassing silence indicates the recognition of divine presence by man and mansion alike. The silence is broken ultimately when someone identifies the picture: “Finally some one said, ‘Christ!’ Then they all broke into noise at once” (CW 671). When the noisy discussion turns mockingly towards Parker’s ingenuity to witness his newly embraced religion, the scene becomes riotous: “Parker lunged into the midst of them and like a whirlwind on a summer’s day there began a fight that raged amid overturned tables and swinging fists until two of them grabbed him and . . . threw him out” (CW 672). Parker’s presence in the pool hall causes as much commotion as Jonah’s presence had done in the ship to Tarshish.

The comparison between Jonah and Parker becomes explicit with the outcome of Parker’s ouster: “Then a calm descended on the pool hall as nerve shattering as if the long barn-like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea” (CW 672). The re-enactment of the Jonah motif unequivocally suggests the inescapable nature of divine grace that pursues Parker closely.

The Jonah motif is continued in Parker’s examination of his soul also. When he is left alone, Parker gets an opportunity for introspection: “Parker sat for a long time on the ground in

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29 Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exod. 3, 6).

30 “The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up” (Jonah 1, 4).
the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion" (CW 672). As Jonah had done inside the belly of the fish Parker spends the night in the alley behind the pool hall ‘examining his soul.’ Like his archetype Parker recognizes the coexistence of facts and lies in life—that they are necessary in the divine economy of salvation whether he considers them important or not. He also realizes the significance of the new tattoo in his life:

The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything. Throughout his life . . . Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth. (CW 672)

Parker’s submission to his impulses is seen as a preparation to accept the divine plan, which is decisively revealed to him through the tattoo on his back. Hence his intention to obey the eyes on his back, a decision that is capable of changing his life fundamentally.²¹

Parker’s recognition of substantial change in his self coincides with his return to his wife for consolation and guidance. The very thought of Sarah Ruth is consoling to his distressed soul. She appears to be the proper guide in his confusion: “She would know what he had to do. She would clear up the rest of it, and she would at least be pleased. It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her” (CW 672). Parker’s attempt to please his iconoclastic wife with the icon of Christ tattooed on his back appears paradoxical, the significance of

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³¹ Parker’s “experience at the fair and all the subsequent tattoos are like rituals that have preserved him and have prepared him for the awe-full encounter with the living God, made possible through the penetrating eyes of the Byzantine Christ imprinted on his back.” For details see Ruthann Knechel Johansen, The Narrative Secret of Flannery O’Connor: The Artist as Trickster (Tuscaloosa and London: The U of Alabama P, 1994) 91.

³² James A. Grimshaw Jr. thinks “Parker is reborn after the tattoo on his back is complete; physically, it is the death of his relationship with Sarah Ruth.”
which will be made clear by the end of the story. As he proceeds to his house on the embankment Parker experiences a radical change in his self: “His head was almost clear of liquor and he observed that his dissatisfaction was gone, but he felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night” (CW 672). Even though the dissatisfaction that has been vexing him so far is gone with the acquisition of the new tattoo, Parker’s experience of transformation recalls the transubstantiation effected in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist which retain their physical form and qualities in spite of their substantial change. Thus, Parker is no more the old self that he had been despite his apparent similitude.

Parker’s final entry into his own house is presented as an act of soteriological import. Back home with the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ on his back Parker makes every effort to establish his authority over the place: “He made as much noise as possible to assert that he was still in charge here, that his leaving her for a night without word meant nothing except it was the way he did things” (CW 672). But neither his shouting nor his beating on the door has any impact on his stubborn wife who in turn demands the identity of the disturber. She is not satisfied with the disclosure of his initials; she even disclaims any knowledge of “O. E. Parker” (CW 673). As usual, Parker hopes some supernatural assistance can solve the crisis: “Parker turned his head as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer. The sky had lightened slightly and there were two or three streaks of yellow floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline” (CW 673). Parker’s expectation of someone

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33 “By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of His blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly named transubstantiation.” See J. Neuner, ed., The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973) 392-94.
to give him the answer is reciprocated by the sign of the tree of light, an image that has been haunting him all through his experiences. As though inspired by this revelation Parker once again discloses his biblical name to the satisfaction of his wife:

‘Obadiah,’ he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.

‘Obadiah Elihuel’ he whispered.

The door opened and he stumbled in. (*CW* 673)

The very pronouncement of the name transforms Parker into his tattooed personality, which is ‘a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.’ Suggestively, he becomes what his tattoos represent—a perfect mixture of the mundane and spiritual aspirations of man. This awareness of his newly acquired personality enables him to live up to the expectations of the final tattoo on his back.

Parker’s final discourse with his wife is recounted as a study in the development of the biblical concept of representation itself. His very presence in the house is resented by Sarah Ruth who meets him with her misgivings about his employer whose identity has hitherto been hidden from her: “That was no hefty blonde woman you was working for and you’ll have to pay her every penny on her tractor you busted up. She don’t keep insurance on it” (*CW* 673-74). The exposure of his employer’s identity and the old lady’s demand for compensation set the background for the wordy battle between the two on the legitimacy of representation itself. The following dialogue reveals their disparate views on depicting God:

‘Another picture,’ Sarah Ruth growled.

Parker’s knees went hollow under him. He wheeled around and cried,
'Look at it! Don't just say that! Look at it! ... Don't you know who it is?'...

'No.... It ain't anybody I know.'...

'God!' Parker cried.

'God? God don't look like that!'

'What do you know how he looks?' Parker moaned. 'You ain't seen him.'

'He don't look,' Sarah Ruth said. 'He's a spirit. No man shall see his face.'

(CW 674, Emphases as in the text)

Parker's enthusiasm to quieten his wife with the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ fails miserably since she rejects altogether the possibility of representing God in any form whatsoever. Their contrasting attitudes suggest the basic difference between the Old Testament injunction against making any images of God and the New Testament proclamation of Jesus Christ as God incarnate.

Parker's ouster from his own house is suggestively related as his participation in the crucifixion of his saviour. His revelation of the picture on his back as that of God provokes his iconoclastic wife into fury: "'Idolatry!' Sarah Ruth screamed. 'Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!' and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it" (CW 674). Sarah Ruth considers the portrait of God on his back a blatant violation of the biblical teaching on representation. Hence her thrashing him with the broom. But Parker's response to the ill treatment makes him participate in the suffering of his saviour: "Parker was [too] stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ" (CW 674). The large welts formed on the face of the tattooed Christ effect Parker's participation in the suffering of
Christ and Christ’s identification with the suffering Parker. Sarah Ruth’s reaction when Parker staggers out of the house is also significant: “She stamped the broom two or three times on the floor and went to the window and shook it out to get the taint of him off it” (CW 674-5). Her enthusiasm to get the taint of him off the broom reminds us of the urgency of the gospel message whose discard will be treated with such a suggestive gesture: “If any place will not welcome you and they refused to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (Mark 6, 11). At the same time Parker’s plight places him along with his redeemer: “There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby” (CW 675). His leaning against the tree with the welted face of the tattooed Christ on his back completes his identification with the signification of the portrait on his back. It is a natural conclusion to Parker’s salvific journey initiated by the vision of the beckoning tree.

O. E. Parker’s transformation from a purely mundane being to an active participant in the passion of his saviour is related against the background of his continuous acquisition of tattoos of all sorts beginning from inanimate objects through beasts and men to the divine picture. His infatuation for representation takes a salvific turn when it is violently resented by his iconoclastic wife whose unswerving faith in the transcendental and ‘indepictable’ God provokes her to punish her ‘idolatrous’ husband. Parker thus becomes a veritable instrument in repeating the incarnation of the Word in all intensity especially when large welts are formed on the face of the tattooed Christ on his back. And “Parker’s Back,” O’Connor’s climactic story, becomes the apotheosis of her incarnational art.34

34 Irwin Howard Streight also (“Is There a Text in This Man? A Semiotic Reading of ‘Parker’s Back,’ Flannery O’Connor Bulletin 22 1993-94: 1-11) analyzes the story as a sublime example of O’Connor’s own definition of fiction as an ‘incarnational art.’