CLOWNS AND CAPTIVES: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S IMAGES OF THE SELF

MICHAEL JOHN LEE

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation
https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/1210

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This was produced from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure you of complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark it is an indication that the film inspector noticed either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, or duplicate copy. Unless we meant to delete copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed, you will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed the photographer has followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. For any illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and tipped into your xerographic copy. Requests can be made to our Dissertations Customer Services Department.

5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases we have filmed the best available copy.
CLOWNS AND CAPTIVES:
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S IMAGES OF THE SELF

by

MICHAEL JOHN LEE
B.A., Seton Hall University, 1968
M.A., Northeastern University, 1972

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

September, 1978
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Gary W. Lindberg
Disertation director, Gary Lindberg, Associate Professor of English

Lester Fisher, Assistant Professor of English

Jean Kennard, Professor of English

Darrett Rutten, Professor of History

Murray Straw, Professor of Sociology

Aug. 17, 1978
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following people for their assistance in completing this work: Gary Lindberg, for his critical judgments and editorial suggestions which I have found invaluable; Kathleen Berry-Lee and Jesse Lee, for their moral support; and Katherine Hughes, for her expert preparation of the manuscript.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. FINDING GOOD MEN AND WOMEN: OBJECTIVE IMAGES OF THE SELF</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THREE VIEWS OF THE WOODS: THE SELF AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE IN THE SECULAR CITY: THE SELF IN SOCIETY</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. REVELATIONS OF THE SELF: GRACE IN O'CONNOR'S WORLD</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. &quot;THE THREATENED INTIMACY OF CREATION&quot;: WISE BLOOD AND THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

CLOWNS AND CAPTIVES:
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S IMAGES OF THE SELF

by

MICHAEL JOHN LEE

This study seeks from Flannery O'Conor's fiction the author's implicit attitudes towards human nature. Specifically, it focuses upon what O'Connor felt to be the problem of finding and maintaining a human identity in a de-humanizing world. By examining the images O'Connor uses to describe her characters and the ways in which she has them perceive themselves and others, the study finds throughout her fiction a dominant theme. That theme is that people discover their own identity only when they see themselves or images of themselves reflected in the condition and experience of other human beings. The result is an approach to O'Connor's fiction which differs greatly from the theologically oriented approaches which have dominated O'Connor criticism.

In a variety of her works O'Connor uses objective descriptions of people as animals, machines, or inert objects. Chapter One shows how these images establish a world-view which reduces human behavior and identity to animal instinct or mechanical response. In this milieu characters must find human identities. Chapter Two discusses how O'Connor's characters participate in this de-humanizing process by seeing themselves
in terms of objects or positions which symbolize their social worth, rather than in human terms. Chapter Three shows characters failing to realize their humanity even in their social interactions. Most of them act out social roles not to relate to one another, but to define themselves as different from (i.e. better than) one another.

Chapter Four seeks to establish a working definition of "grace" in O'Connor's world. This chapter examines several of the epiphanies in her fiction, and finds that her characters become most fully human when they perceive images of their essential unity with other people—when they see their differences dissolve. In short, the grace they receive is not divinely infused. Rather, it is a human process, involving a person's relationships with others, rather than his or her position with God or in the cosmos. Finally, Chapter Five examines O'Connor's two novels, finding in them the images and themes discussed in the first four chapters, which deal mainly with the shorter fiction. Wise Blood is seen to be a novel whose hero fails to find a coherent human identity because he fails to seek that identity in his human relationships. The Violent Bear It Away, by contrast, allows its main character the chance to redeem himself, concluding as it does with young Tarwater on the verge of a return to the city with a new sense of himself as part of the human condition.

The bleakly inhuman imagery which dominates O'Connor's fiction does not indicate that she felt humans to be doomed to a bestial existence unless they shared her own vision of God. Rather, this imagery suggests what people make of themselves when they cut themselves off from their fellows for social, economic, or religious reasons. By undercutting these false visions of the self, and by implying that grace operates within a human context, O'Connor's fiction affirms the human spirit in a world
whose institutions she felt to be inimical to that spirit.
INTRODUCTION

"Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction." \(^1\)

In the little over thirty years since Flannery O'Connor published her first piece of fiction, her critics have found embodied in her works an array of beliefs ranging from nihilism to orthodoxy, from Southern Agrarianism to Christian Humanism. \(^2\) But to appraise her work on the basis of an abstract dogmatic content does an injustice to her skill as a writer, and critics who see in her work an "ism" of some kind ignore what she saw as the fundamental aim of fiction. As she herself stated, "the least common denominator of all fiction" is its concreteness. The good writer "appeals through the senses," and "you cannot appeal to the


senses with abstractions." While O'Connor's own emphasis was usually upon the concrete which embodies the abstract, her critics have tended to emphasize the abstractions which they find embodied in the concrete particulars of her stories. This study will focus upon the concrete imagery of O'Connor's fiction. From these images I will seek patterns which are repeated often enough to be considered as a primary source of meaning in her fictional world. The patterns of imagery I will discuss do not reveal a religious system to which she may have subscribed. Rather, they reflect an attitude toward human nature which may have derived more from the writer's sub-conscious than from her consciously held religious faith.

In examining the details of O'Connor's fictional world, I will be isolating for study a particular kind of imagery used by all fiction writers, the imagery of the self. By this I mean simply the ways in which the writer projects physical and psychological pictures of characters, and the ways in which she has characters picture themselves, other people, and the outside world. By examining this kind of imagery we can arrive at an idea of the writer's concept of the self; we can know from the fiction what she feels about human nature and its possibilities in the natural world and in society. A very brief use of this approach can be found in David Eggenschwiler's *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*, when he sees in one passage from "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" an authorial attitude toward human nature implicit in the mere description of an aged nun's smothering embrace of a reluctant child:

The nun's actions come from affection and goodness, but they are still comically tinged by the physical and emotional clumsiness of being human. The slight ambivalence toward such characters shows that the author believes man to be an amphibious creature; on the

---

one hand, an image of God, the temple of the Holy Ghost, an infinite and divine being; on the other, a defaced image, a ruined temple, a grotesque freak, continuously mutilating the divine image through his pride and feelings of self-sufficiency.

But Eggenschwiler's reading does not always derive from the text, and his overall assessment of the story is that it is a religious allegory presented in the form of a symbolic, not actual, initiation:

The central theme of the story is Paul's teaching that man is a temple of the living God. No matter how deformed in body or soul, he is a habitation of the Spirit. The theme is developed primarily through the discoveries of a twelve-year-old girl who, in a symbolic initiation into adulthood, learns that this lesson applies even to a sideshow hermaphrodite, who becomes associated with the sacramental presence of Christ in the Host.

This critic's close consideration of one paragraph of the story is more illuminating than his large statement about O'Connor's theme and intent. To share in O'Connor's vision of human nature as somehow "amphibious" is more rewarding than to speculate that she may have agreed with St. Paul that man is "a temple of the Holy Ghost." If the distinction seems a bit forced with this example, it becomes clearer and more compelling when one considers the story's sexual imagery. In Chapter Three I will discuss in detail the sexual references of this story, to show that the girl fails to be initiated into an adult reality characterized by a distorted and ambiguous sexual standard, and that her "epiphany" at the story's end is in fact a mock-epiphany predicated upon the girl's retreat to the safe and abstract symbolism of the Incarnation, rather than a sustaining insight into her own sexual identity. Seen this way, the story concerns the teachings of St. Paul only in so far as they have filtered down through the ages to further confuse a young girl's con-

\[^4\]Eggenschwiler, p. 21.
\[^5\]Ibid., p. 20.
cept of her own body. Throughout this study I intend to use this em-
pirical approach to O'Connor's fiction, to find in her imagery her ans-
wer to the rhetorical question posed by one of her characters: "what is
a man?"  

O'Connor was, of course, an avowedly Christian writer, one who
felt that fiction could carry a message to an audience. But to inter-
pret her work by connecting the specifics of a story with her known or
assumed religious belief is to make a tremendous leap from the certain
to the possible. O'Connor knew that the modern writer has no universally
recognized symbology to connect the here with the There, and that her
readers were for the most part "hard of hearing" and "almost blind" to
her religious vision. Her prescription for a writer who wants to com-
municate with such an audience is to find "one image that will connect
or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and
the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by
him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees."7
One reason for much of the discrepancy of interpretation of O'Connor's
work is that her readers tend to focus on points not visible to the naked
eye, namely her belief, rather than on the givens of her fictional world.
The tendency has been to stress the symbolic import of characters, events,
and objects in her fiction, to find what Carter Martin calls "the final
meaning" of her stories in "a plane above the natural."8 Such criticism
assumes that her representations of extreme human behavior and physical,


7Ibid., p. 42.

social, or psychological aberrations are metaphors for particular religious inversions. Thus, her fiction is commonly called "sacramental," and the term too often means that the stories are mechanical allegories. As a result, critics often neglect the sign itself in pursuit of the higher (or lower) reality signified. But if O'Connor's own critical standards are to be taken seriously it must be granted that the experience of her fiction has as much to do with the perceived details of a work as with the work's extractable meaning, if in fact there can be a division between the two. This study will consider the "meanings" of O'Connor's stories, but only to the extent that meaning derives from the given details, and not to the extent that meaning can be imposed upon them from a world outside the fiction.

In an attempt to counter the thrust toward the extreme symbol-reading of O'Connor's critics, Josephine Hendin goes to the other extreme when she implies that O'Connor's work is objectivist or imagist in nature. Hendin fails to see how objects and events affect people in O'Connor's world when she states that "She created an art that is, in many instances, as emotionally flat as Robbe-Grillet's, an art where object and gesture simply are. In Flannery O'Connor's most powerful fiction, to paraphrase William Carlos Williams, there are no ideas about things, there are only the things themselves." True, O'Connor rarely interjects direct authorial remarks about her characters; but it is equally clear that throughout her works we have much more than "the things themselves." In "Greenleaf," for instance, we have the bull itself, and then some. The bull may not, as one critic has suggested, "metaphorical-

---

ly stand for God as surely as Zeus is himself when he appears to Europa in the same form;" but O'Connor does describe the bull chewing its cud "calmly, like an uncouth country suitor." Through her imagery, O'Connor makes herself felt in her fiction, more so than Hendin would allow when she uses the epithet "emotionally flat." What we have is a fiction largely made up of concrete details, but one which shapes those details into a peculiar vision of the world as author, objects, and characters constantly interact. The particular details of this interaction convey her message, her vision; and they define her fiction as her own, different from that of any writer, Southern or Northern, Catholic or non-Catholic.

One problem which results from attempts to link religious abstractions with O'Connor's fictional expression is that there is an inevitable gap between the theological language and the reality of the narrative events. If a term normally used to describe a religious concept is applied to a given moment in a story in which that term is not used, the term can easily violate the writer's conception of the story and misdirect the reader's understanding of it. In short, critics who use this ploy begin to re-write the fiction. In O'Connor's stories there are many moments when characters experience change of heart or mind, usually all of a sudden. Given the author's avowed Catholic orthodoxy, critics have not hesitated to label these moments as the working of "grace" in men's hearts. But to borrow this theological concept without a close definition within the framework of individual stories oversimpli-

10 Martin, p. 148.

fies an important issue. Such a loose application of terminology gives a pat supernatural explanation to the question of what makes a person's consciousness of self and others change and develop. Because the problem looms so large in O'Connor's fiction, I have devoted an entire chapter (Chapter Four) to an examination of those moments when her characters experience what has traditionally been seen as an infusion of grace. This chapter is the focal point of my study, for it addresses the most important question about a character in fiction and about a person in life: how does one find an identity as a human? Chapters One through Three prepare the groundwork for this central discussion by examining the various ways in which O'Connor's characters fail to find a human identity. In Chapter One I show how her objective descriptions of characters establish a world-view which reduces human behavior to animal instinct or mechanical impulse. Chapter Two shows how characters participate in this de-humanizing process by seeing themselves in terms of symbolic objects or stances rather than in human terms. Chapter Three shows how characters fail to become human even in their social interactions, for they play social roles not to relate to one another, but to define themselves as different from (i.e., better than) one another. Chapter Four will then aim toward a working definition of "grace" in O'Connor's world, showing that characters become most fully human, most fully themselves, when they see images of their essential unity with other people, when they see their differences dissolve. Finally, Chapter Five is devoted to extended readings of O'Connor's two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away. This chapter offers a glimpse into O'Connor's world on a more comprehensive scale, showing how themes and patterns of imagery which she used throughout her stories are developed in unified visions of a world which tends to deny humans their goal of maintaining
a human identity.

Because my study focuses upon clusters and patterns of imagery, I will not for the most part be offering close readings of particular stories as separate units. Instead, I will consider particular stories and parts of stories as they relate to the larger clusters of images being considered in a given chapter. My readings of O'Connor's stories will show them to be human-centered, and thus I will be departing from the mainstream of O'Connor criticism, which sees her work as theocentric.

As I will show, the primary failure of most of her characters is not a failure to relate to God or to the cosmos, but rather a failure to discover themselves in their relations with one another. In describing the patterns of imagery I find in O'Connor's work, and in discussing their human implications, I will be using a terminology which the writer herself might have found objectionable. When I discuss such concepts as self-realization and self-image I am suggesting that a new set of abstractions can be derived from the concrete images she created, a set of abstractions which conforms to the logic of her world more closely than do theological abstractions of previous critics. Although the particular terms of my own abstractions might seem nothing more than a contemporary construct imposed upon the vision of an older writer, I would suggest that O'Connor was a writer whose work lends itself to new and different modes of describing human experience. If her work could be understood only within the framework of orthodox Christianity—that is, only through the language and experience of a particular religious system—then her work would be severely limited. But I will show in this study that her work deals with human experience in fundamental and universal ways. And thus, a connection can well be made between the human experience contained in the fiction and a terminology which describes that
human experience, even if the terminology was not accessible to the writer.
In Flannery O'Connor's fiction there exists a very close relationship between objective and subjective modes of narrative presentation, particularly in the rendering of images. The sum of those images of the self which are recorded by a non-dramatized narrator constitutes a peculiar vision of humanity, which in turn can be seen as her fictional world's standard for human behavior. Taken together, these images are an extended metaphor for the expectations the world has for human nature. The expectations are low: the people described by the bulk of O'Connor's objectively rendered images of the self resemble machines and animals more than people. When they do resemble humans they appear more like children than adults, more dead than alive. The extent to which her characters are described in non-human or barely human terms might suggest that O'Connor herself denies that these characters can attain human identity. Her world seems to be the end-product of some vast de-humanizing process which has left its inhabitants trapped, driven, chased, and able to act only out of animal instinct, mechanical impulse, or childish whim. There seems to be no possibility for human growth or development.

But I think these images suggest more that O'Connor saw in the
modern world and its institutions a pervasive tendency toward a denial of human identity. The images her narrators use indicate a reductive identity the world would impose upon all her characters. I say this because the absence of human identity in her fiction is only apparent. In fact, her world is not static, and characters are not presented as pre-formed entities who have no power to determine the kinds of people they will become. There is a dynamic relationship between the ways in which they see themselves and others, and the degree to which they realize a human potential by transcending the limitations of a world whose tendency it is to deny the human element, even in the most fundamentally human relationships. This correlation is mirrored in the way in which subjective images of the self relate to objective images. When characters see themselves and others in less than fully human terms they lose their claim to human selfhood by acceding to the expectations of a de-humanizing milieu, by accepting the animal-like or machine-like identity their world would impose upon them. Most of O'Connor's characters do fail in this way. But there are in her fiction enough exceptions to the rule to suggest that failure is not inevitable, that her objective images of the self do not preclude human identity. Rather, these images underscore the difficulty of attaining and maintaining human selfhood in a world which responds only to animal, mechanical, or childish behavior.

In this chapter I will focus upon those objectively rendered images which I think constitute the de-humanized norm, or more precisely the negative model for the self which O'Connor's world works to impose upon individual characters. These images fall into three main categories: images of people as machines, animals, or inert objects; images
of adults as children; and images of living people as dead or dying things. In each case I will show that a particular character fails to become human because he or she fails to find a human medium through which he or she can establish an identity which transcends the reductive identity the world would impose.

2

O'Connor's fiction renders human identity tenuous more through its repeated use of animal and mechanical images to describe characters than through the extreme acts those characters perform. Donald Lee Gregory notes that in Wise Blood O'Connor presents virtually all her characters "in imagery which strongly suggests that they are inescapably trapped in their roles, indeed that they resemble animals in this entrapment."¹ The point is true not only of her first novel, but of most of her subsequent fiction as well. Perhaps because of her later interest in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, a few of O'Connor's critics have seen the animal imagery in these works as an indication of her own thinking about the subject of human evolution. Dorothy Walters, for instance, writes that "the all-pervasive references to the animal kingdom suggest that man must either transcend the human level or fall back to some earlier stage in the evolutionary process."² Aside from the fact that belief in a reverse evolution is inconsistent with Chardin's focal theme -- that mankind is continually progressing toward an "Omega


Point" -- this reading is questionable because of the very extent of the animal and mechanical imagery. O'Connor's fiction posits no either/or proposition; none of her characters is given the opportunity to "transcend the human level." On the contrary, those characters who consciously attempt to transcend their humanity by rising above their human identities or by denying that identity to others become the most animal-like or the most mechanical. In a sense what her characters must do is evolve toward human status, beyond the non-human condition imposed upon them by a world which has lost its capacity to respond to the human.

A point Louis Rubin makes about Enoch Emery (Wise Blood) offers a valid insight into the purpose of O'Connor's animal and mechanical imagery of the self. Rubin says that "it is only when Enoch steals the gorilla suit and comes out to frighten the spooning couple that he is able to evoke any sort of human response to his existence." Typically, characters in this fictional world see themselves and others as animals or machines, and the objectively rendered imagery of the stories underscores this reductive and dehumanizing vision. Because people invariably expect others to act as animals, or treat one another as though they were inanimate objects or irrational forces, humans are inevitably trapped into fixed roles or behavior patterns, with many finding a true breakthrough only with death or through a violently irrational response to a world which has grown blind to basic human gestures. Death and violence, though, are not the only outlets. Some of O'Connor's characters do struggle to become human, rejecting the bestial or mechanistic

---

behavior which is the norm. Few succeed, and most who do survive the struggle do so in the face of a shattering realization that they have in the past maintained no recognizably human identity. But the failures and the reasons for failure are revealing, for they imply the possibility of success and they suggest the means to attain balanced selfhood despite the odds.

Two of the stories, "The River" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," use non-human images of the self to show that one means of breaking out of the de-humanizing patterns of existence is to embrace death as the ultimate sign that one's life has mattered. Both stories have children commit suicide rather than continue to live in a world which denies them what they need to become individualized selves. Early in the first story, Harry Ashfield is described as an animal destined for the slaughter: he seems "mute and patient like an old sheep waiting to be let out." Addressed by his father, "he jumped as if he had been shot." The image of the child as passive victim echoes the opening paragraph's description of the passive boy being manipulated by his parents:

The child stood glum and limp in the middle of the dark living room while his father pulled him into a plaid coat. His right arm was hung in the sleeve but the father buttoned the coat anyway and pushed him forward toward a pale spotted hand that stuck through the half-open door.

"He ain't fixed right," a loud voice said from the hall.
"Well then for Christ's sake fix him," the father muttered.
(p. 157)

Treated like an animal, Harry expects to find kinship with animals. When he is invited to see some pigs, he imagines them to be "small fat pink animals with curly tails and round grinning faces and bow ties" (p. 161).

\[t^4\]Hendin, p. 49 mistakenly suggests that O'Connor sees human nature to be bestial because there is so much animal imagery in her works.
But the harsh reality of the pigs traumatizes him; and when Mrs. Connin makes a connection between the pig with the torn ear and Mr. Paradise, Harry begins to believe literally in a relationship between animals and people. This belief is bolstered by the picture-book illustration of Jesus driving the pigs out of the possessed man, an image which suggests to the boy that Jesus is the antithesis of the human/bestial life he has known.

Harry's subjective images of people as animals are reinforced by the story's objective images of people as animals, machines, and inert objects. Mrs. Connin is repeatedly described as a walking skeleton, the preacher as being all bone and as looking like the red clay around him, and Mr. Paradise as a stone. Harry, in short, lives in a world which would deny him a human identity. At Mrs. Connin's house he sees two pictures which represent the choices he is given in his quest for an identity. One of the pictures is "of a man whose eyebrows dashed out of two bushes of hair and clashed in a heap on the bridge of his nose; the rest of his face stuck out like a bare cliff to fall from" (p. 160). This hardly human visage is contrasted with the surrealistic version of a human being captured in the picture of Christ: "Bevel turned from Mr. Connin to a colored picture over the bed of a man wearing a white sheet. He had long hair and a gold circle around his head and he was sawing on a board while some children stood watching him" (p. 161). The picture of Christ appeals to Harry; this being who drives pigs out of people also seems to accept children. Thus when he returns to the river for good, he is seeking the less threatening identity of the images of Christ he has seen, an identity which he simplistically believes is to be found in a better world beneath the waters. Inspired by the preach-
er's assertion that immersion will make him "count," and repelled by the porcine image of Mr. Paradise, Harry enters the river to drive the pig out of himself and to alter the sub-human identity imposed upon him by his family.

Harry's discarding of his old identity to seek a new one, his loss of the self to find a self, is a futile and extreme gesture in response to the rejection he feels from his debauched parents and the sadistic children who torment him. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," another child, Norton, loses his life in an attempt to gain something life has denied him, namely a sense of his own worth as a human being. The situation is similar: the child is denied the basic nurturing necessary to sustain human identity. The child kills himself, not to flee his human existence, but rather to search desperately for some token that his existence matters.

Norton is frequently described in non-human terms. Sitting alone in the house, "He squatted motionless like a large pale frog in the midst of this potential garden" (p. 452). When confronted by Johnson, a more powerful animal figure, Norton is rendered totally passive: "He [Johnson] stood there like an irate drenched crow. His look went through the child like a pin and paralyzed him" (p. 453). Ordered about by Johnson, the child moves "like a mechanical toy, pushed in the right direction" (p. 453). Finally, Norton is shown to have regressed to the level of a most primitive life-form when he hides in the womb-like closet, wrapped in his dead mother's coat: "He [Sheppard] pulled it open roughly and winced as if he had seen the larva inside a cocoon. Norton stood in it, his face swollen and pale, with a drugged look of misery on it" (p. 457). These images, in conjunction with Norton's characteristic gestures,
hoarding and counting money and stuffing food down his throat only to spit it up undigested, suggest his complete lack of human growth. Because of his mother's death and his father's inability to supply the love she gave, Norton is powerless to become the self he could have been. Because he cannot find a human identity separate from that of his mother, Norton searches through the telescope and finally flies "into space," not to find theological or scientific truths, but rather to regain the only human identity he has ever known. In his instinctive struggle to become human, the passive child's only means is to join his lost mother in death.

Rufus Johnson also lacks a mother, but the lack of human love in his life has a different effect upon him than upon Norton: Rufus establishes and maintains an identity by objectifying his self in his most identifiable member, his club foot. He sees the foot "as if it were a sacred object" (p. 459), and allows that object to define the self he will project to the world. Sheppard wrongly ascribes Rufus's mischief to "compensation for the foot." Rather, the behavior is a realization of what the foot symbolizes to Rufus himself, his own kinship with Satan, and of what it comes to symbolize to the reader, an animal aspect of the human self. The foot is described as though it were a grotesque animal adjunct of the boy: "The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head" (p. 450); "he removed the old shoe as if he were skinning an animal still half alive" (p. 470). Sheppard would alter the self the boy has created by replacing the tattered shoe with one that will better disguise the foot's grotesque deformity. The shoe he offers would transform the animal into the mechanical: "It was a black slick shapeless
object, shining hideously. It looked like a blunt weapon, highly polished" (p. 170). But Rufus rejects the new shoe, and thus rejects what Sheppard sees as his human potential. His preferred deviant and animalistic behavior defies the artificial and mechanical identity offered by Sheppard and symbolized by the brace shop wherein the social worker seeks to remake the already distorted self of the boy:

The brace shop was a small concrete warehouse lined and stacked with the equipment of affliction. Wheel chairs and walkers covered most of the floor. The walls were hung with every kind of crutch and brace. Artificial limbs were stacked on the shelves, legs and arms and hands, claws and hooks, straps and human harnesses and unidentifiable instruments for unnamed deformities. (p. 169)

If social institutions offer no more than mechanical devices to "correct" human deformities and by inference, human behavior, Rufus will have no part of them. He sees extreme behavior, animal-like and satanic, as a viable response to a world which will recognize the identities only of those whose gestures shock it into recognition.

In its portrayal of Sheppard, the central character, the story's animal and mechanical imagery works most fully to convey the theme of the de-humanized self. Throughout the story, Sheppard is associated with things mechanical: the telescope, the microscope, and the prosthetic device. He is repelled by Norton's animal functions and by his human responses, and he seeks to transform Rufus's animalistic behavior into its quantitative potential, for he is most impressed with Rufus's I.Q. of 140. Sheppard's repeated response to Norton is to distance himself from the boy's needs by exercising machine-like control over the very process of looking at him: "He appeared so far away that Sheppard might have been looking at him through the wrong end of the telescope" (p. 160); "Norton sat up and beckoned to him. He saw the child but after the first
instant, he did not let his eyes focus directly on him" (p. 169). Finally, he is described as being unable to control external conditions, as being buffeted by forces he seeks to contain through understanding, but cannot: "Sheppard sat helpless and miserable, like a man lashed by some elemental force of nature" (p. 147); "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" (p. 150); "He had a sensation of driving a car without brakes" (p. 162). These images are followed by two which suggest that Sheppard has failed miserably in his attempt to change Rufus, and that Rufus has in fact changed Sheppard: "He turned and jerked his arm at Sheppard and Sheppard jumped up and followed him as if the boy had yanked an invisible leash" (p. 166); "Sheppard pretended not to notice but one look told him what he already knew, that he was trapped" (p. 174). In short, Sheppard has been animalized by the boy he had attempted to mechanize. The imagery suggests that his fundamental human error is one common to many of Nathaniel Hawthorne's characters: he attempts to alter human nature by trying to transform both Norton and Rufus into mechanical processes rather than recognizing and accepting their human potential for good and evil. Furthermore, the imagery emphasizes his inevitable frustration, his total inability to impose his form of order upon the dual human responses embodied in the two boys.

In the final four paragraphs O'Connor uses imagery patterns already established throughout the story to embody Sheppard's realization that he has failed, and to suggest the reasons why. His realization comes in response to Johnson's final threat, that the world is controlled by animal forces rather than by intellectual or mechanical functions: "The
lame'll carry off the prey." Sheppard's initial response is rational and legalistic. Three times he repeats his defense: "I have nothing to reproach myself with... I did more for him than I did for my own child" (p. 481). The defense, though, is in fact the prosecution, "the voice of his accuser;" and Sheppard accedes to the verdict of his own guilt, with the image of a fully humanized Norton providing the final thread of damning evidence: "Norton's face rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief" (p. 481). Sheppard had previously been repelled by a vision of himself reflected in Rufus's gaze: "The boy's eyes were like distorting mirrors in which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque" (p. 474). He had been able to suppress that image of himself as an animal; but the present image of Norton's human face causes Sheppard to see himself as having acted animalistically. He now applies the metaphor of feeding to himself: "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (p. 481). The vision alters Sheppard's perceptions of himself, allowing him to begin to become human. The abstract mystical language of the penultimate paragraph is linked with concrete terms of human experience. Concepts like "transfusion of life," "salvation," and transformation are defined within the human contexts of "agonizing love," of Sheppard's groaning with joy, and of his becoming mother and father to the child. Sheppard's resolve to kiss the child he has ignored for so long indicates that he has begun to overthrow his animal and mechanical responses, that he is ready to be "redeemed" into the human self he has until now obscured.

The story's final paragraph underscores the dangers of becoming
human, of defying the world's sub-human expectations. Sheppard has just seen that his human mission is to absolve Norton's grief over his mother's death. With the death of Norton, Sheppard must now experience his own grief. Animal forces still characterize the world the boy has left behind: the survivor faces "the edge of a pit" and "a jungle of shadows." The fallen tripod and telescope, kicked over by the boy in his quest for a human identity, symbolize the ineffectiveness of scientific and mechanical means of ordering the chaos of the jungle. The question of how Sheppard will confront the fullest test of his humanity is left unanswered; but we do know that his old answers, the pat formulas he had offered his son to deal with human grief, will no longer suffice for Sheppard. His path to "salvation" must lead him into the pit of humanity, and not around the jungle of human sorrow. One critic assesses the story as "a stern indictment of a society which locates its values within a strictly human matrix;" and another states that "Sheppard's misguided estrangement from his own child is symbolic of his greater estrangement from God." But I think these views ignore the story's basic theme as it is conveyed through the imagery we have examined. That theme is that one must locate one's values "within a human matrix," making certain that those values are genuinely human. To reach for the stars, either scientifically or metaphysically, to answer the problems posed by human grief and sorrow, is to extend that grief, to widen the gap between the "jungle of shadows" we know and the order of the heavens we imagine.

In "The Displaced Person" O'Connor uses her imagery to locate

---

5 Walters, p. 104.

further the effects of the kind of dehumanizing vision which alienates Harry and Norton. The story is a study of victimization, and the effect of the imagery is to show that the essence of the victim's lot is to be denied human identity by one's fellow humans. Guizac's selfhood is displaced by the reductive mentalities of Mrs. Shortley, who stamps all foreigners as "bugs" (p. 195), as "rats with typhoid fleas" (p. 196), and as carcasses (p. 197); and of Mrs. McIntyre, whose strictly economic sensibility causes her to see the hired man as an extension of the machines he operates so well. Guizac's humanity is also denied by the priest's other-worldly vision. Totally absorbed by the symbolic presence of the peacock, the priest has only the most abstract and distorted sense of economic and class realities; and thus he plays at least a passive role in the displacement of Guizac's humanity. When the story's objective descriptions of the Pole reduce his human stature (e.g.: "he jumped on the tractor like a monkey"), this kind of imagery simply supports the ways in which the other characters view him. Thus, the final expression of Guizac's victimization, his death, comes at the point when the others most literally see him as a machine, and not as a human entity at all: "She could not see his face, only his feet and legs and trunk sticking impudently out from the side of the tractor . . . She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever" (p. 234).

But the imagery of "The Displaced Person" cuts two ways, and the story shows that in denying one man his humanity, each of the other characters becomes a displaced person. Mrs. Shortley's superior attitude toward the Guizacs is undercut by descriptions which show her to look like a mountain, a buzzard, a volcano, and an animal aboard "some over-
freighted leaking ark* (p. 213). Similarly, Mrs. McIntyre is described as though she were inanimate: "She had a little doll's mouth and eyes that were a soft blue when she opened them wide but more like steel or granite when she narrowed them" (p. 196); "She got up and followed him, a deep vertical pit appearing suddenly in the center of her forehead" (p. 217); "Her eyebrows, thin and fierce as a spider's leg, had drawn together ominously and the deep vertical pit had plunged down from under the red bangs into the bridge of her nose" (p. 222). The priest is shown to be "cinnamon-colored with eyes that were so blurred with age that they seemed to be hung behind cobwebs" (p. 215). Finally, there is Mr. Shortley, whose shadow glides "like a snake" (p. 231), and whose human responses are shown to be incongruous with the mechanical instincts he has assumed: "Whenever he thought of Mrs. Shortley he felt his heart go down like an old bucket into a dry well" (p. 229). At the end, when the three American characters silently witness the death of the intruder, the story's imagery suggests that it is they, and not he, who have in fact become adjuncts of the machine: Mr. Shortley, and by inference those in "collusion" with him, "got on the large tractor and was backing it out from under the shed. He seemed to be warmed by it as if its heat and strength sent impulses up through him that he obeyed instantly" (p. 234). In displacing the personhood of one man, Guizac's victimizers ultimately victimize themselves as well. In their denial of his human status they mechanize or animalize their potentially human gestures and fail to transcend the sub-human condition their world would impose upon them. Mrs. McIntyre's ultimate physical state, like that of some worn out machine, is an image of the self breaking down part by part when there is no human spirit to make the self more than the sum of
its parts: "A numbness developed in one of her legs and her hands and head began to jiggle . . . Her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice altogether" (p. 235). The extent of these images of the self as non-human suggests that people collaborate in their own de-personalization. They fail to become human when they refuse to recognize a tie of humanity between themselves and another.

In a number of stories this double-edged imagery suggests that people who see others as sub-human deny their own humanity in the process. Mrs. May ("Greenleaf") sees others as "trash," as so much vermin, only to have her own humanity rendered questionable by the scrub bull's metaphoric courting of her favors. Thomas ("The Comforts of Home") sees his relationship with the girl to be that of "an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat" (p. 384), only to have the story image him as a turtle hiding in its shell, and to have the sheriff's brain work "like a calculating machine" to indict him as a matricide. Mr. Fortune ("A View of the Woods"), after killing the only other human being he could relate to, is left alone to die with the suddenly monstrous image of the machine he has worshipped. Elsewhere, O'Connor uses animal imagery in a less damning way, to show the extent to which people are vulnerable, and to elicit compassion for that vulnerability. Human frailty, and not human depravity, is the trademark of a number of characters: of Lucynell ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own"), as she is repeatedly associated with the birds; of Mr. Head, who "lowers his head into his collar like a turtle's" (p. 265); and of the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," who "raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water" (p. 132). With a mixture of respect and affection both for himself and for his aged friend, Tanner, in "Judgement Day," muses that each
of them has at one time resembled a monkey and a bear. Similarly, O'Connor shows an occasional note of affection for characters by describing them with images of helpless, non-aggressive animals. But these instances are rare, for they occur only with characters who allow themselves to be vulnerable. Most often her characters deny this human condition, and in the process they assume the shapes of machines or of less appealing animal forms. Thus, when Mr. Shiflet thinks he can define humanity for himself, and thereby escape the pitfalls of human experience by seeing the self in mechanistic terms ("the spirit, lady, is like an automobile"), O'Connor describes him as a buzzard and as a snake. At the end of the story, Shiflet discovers his own vulnerability when the hitchhiker denies the humanity of his mother: "My old woman is a fleabag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" (p. 156). By abandoning Lucynell, Shiflet had cut himself off from humanity; and when he himself is abandoned, left to face the ugliness of his deeds, his isolation is heightened by the inability of his suddenly human spirit to find kinship with the automobile he now possesses.

O'Connor's imagery of the self as non-human or sub-human establishes a need for characters to find a human identity, to attain human status, before they can begin to determine the exact nature of their individual selfhood. In short, before one can hope to become a healthy self in her world, one must defy a world which militates against human identity. Another series of images, that of the child in the adult, suggests that the human identity many of her characters do attain is limited: many of these characters are blocked in their development into adult selves. Furthermore, these images suggest the paradox that an im-
important component of adult identity is a necessary acceptance of a lasting child-like quality of the self. Often she employs objective images of an adult as a child to contrast with the character's self-evaluation as an independent, rational adult. The resulting irony suggests not only that reason and independence are tenuous bases for self-identity, but that to strive to be overly rational and to claim absolute independence is to deny oneself the basic tenets of the human condition.

The Violent Bear It Away explicitly develops the theme of the child-in-the-adult. References to children and images of adults relating to children lend the novel a degree of unity. This unity is enhanced by the way in which characters are made to image one another to the extent that they can be seen as four aspects of a single self. Each of the characters represents a stage of development and a corresponding function of the self. Thus, Old Tarwater represents a post-adult stage, wherein the only means of control over events is a perpetual shouting of one's will, without the ability to enact that will effectively. Rayber has reached an adult level of development, wherein the self attempts to use reason to order the chaos of events from without and impulses from within. Young Tarwater is the questing and questioning adolescent, an emotionally mobile character, caught up in a search for a viable mode of action to define the adult self he is about to become. Finally, Bishop is the perennial child, marked by his dependence, passivity, and vulnerability. As each of the other characters relates to him, so they relate to the non-rational components of their own personalities.

The novel focuses upon Tarwater's impending entry into adulthood and the choice he must make between two adult models: will his adult self be as rigidly limited as Rayber's, or as open to the inscrutability
of a chaotic world as Old Tarwater's? The pivotal issue is the way he will relate to Bishop. Rayber makes of the boy a symbol of human weakness and suffering, and is consequently split by his dual impulse to drown him as a means of erasing that suffering and to preserve him intact because the symbol "contains" the evil. The old man, on the other hand, sees in the boy "an unspeakable mystery," and is comfortable with that mystery without seeking to decipher it. Tarwater's conflict is unresolved when he simultaneously drowns and baptizes the child. Like Rayber, he has made of Bishop a symbol, not of human vulnerability, but of man's bestial nature: "The only difference between me and you and a hog is me and you can calculate, but there ain't any difference between him and one." But the old man's sway is great; the seeds of his "madness," of his willing acceptance of mystery, have been sown in Tarwater's blood. Hence, his conscious act of drowning the boy to erase the symbol of his own bestiality is neutralized by the unconsciously motivated act of baptizing him, an act which by definition recognizes the possibility that human nature is not unalterably bestial.

The extreme action of drowning the child, by inference the child in himself, makes Tarwater think of himself as having become an adult:

His throat and eyes burned with dryness as if they belonged to a person older than himself and with much experience; and when he considered it -- his experience -- it was apparent to him that since his great-uncle's death, he had lived the lifetime of a man. It was as no boy that he returned. (p. 434)

This self-appraisal echoes that of Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, whose entry into the adult world is dubious. O'Connor carries her character

---

7 Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* in Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 374. All quotations from this novel are from this edition, and will hereafter be identified within the text.
a step beyond Crane's, as Tarwater's easy victimization by the travelling salesman shows him to have retained his innocence and his vulnerability, his child-like qualities. Only after he is sexually molested is he ready for adulthood; and the adult self he will become is defined by the terms of the prophetic commission he receives: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (p. 447). As Tarwater leaves Powderhead for the second time, he is "redeemed" in the sense that he now has a clear self-concept. He has submitted to the will of his great-uncle and is prepared to embark this time upon a clearly defined course of action. Like Old Tarwater, who had sought out in their turn Rayber, Tarwater, and Bishop, the new Tarwater will realize his adult self by seeking out and accepting the children of a corrupt world. His chances of maintaining a balanced self are greater than were Rayber's, who had fantasized saving the children of the world:

Rayber saw himself fleeing with the child to some enclosed garden where he would teach her the truth, where he would gather all the exploited children of the world and let the sunshine flood their minds ... Come away with me! he silently implored, and I'll teach you the truth, I'll save you, beautiful child! ... He felt that in the space between them, their spirits had broken the bonds of age and ignorance and were mingling in some unheard of knowledge of each other. (pp. 384-85)

But Rayber is incapable of translating fantasy into action. Immediately after his experience with the girl, he rebuffs the real children in his life: Tarwater, who "lingered for a moment at the threshold of his door as if waiting for an invitation to enter" (p. 386); and Bishop, who in the ensuing scene climbs onto his father's lap, only to be denied any expression of love or relationship: "Without warning his hated love gripped him like a vise. He should have known better than to let the child onto his lap" (p. 388).
In her introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann* O'Connor quotes at length an incident Hawthorne recorded in his notebooks about a sickly, underwitted child who takes to him "just as if it were a child of my own." Although not drawn to the child, Hawthorne holds it in his lap, commenting that "there was this same child waiting for me, with a sickly smile around its defaced mouth, and in its dim-red eyes... I should never have forgiven myself if I had repelled its advances." Like Hawthorne's real child, the fictional child, Bishop, will not be repelled with impunity. In rejecting Bishop Rayber loses more than a son, as our last glimpse shows him to have lost his struggle to become fully human. Bishop's final bellow penetrates Rayber's mechanical defenses, echoing the emptiness of Rayber's hollow selfhood:

He remained absolutely still, wooden, expressionless, as the machine picked up the sounds of some fierce sustained struggle in the distance. The bellow stopped and came again, then it began steadily, swelling. The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free... The bellow rose and fell, then it blared out one last time, rising out of its own momentum as if it were escaping finally, after centuries of waiting, into silence... What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle. (p. 422)

Because the Bishop within himself has "ceased to struggle," Rayber is left incapable of selfhood: "He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized that there would be no pain that he collapsed" (p. 423).

---

O'Connor's theme that one must be a child in order to have an adult self is further supported by the imagery of "Everything That Rises Must Converge." The story concerns a power struggle between an adult and her grown child, but the imagery suggests that the real struggle is between an adult and a child within the selves of the two characters.

When Mrs. Chestny is first described by the omniscient narrator, images of age and youth clash, suggesting that her identity as an adult is ambiguous:

Two wings of grey hair protruded on either side of her florid face, but her eyes, sky-blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten. Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school, and who was supporting him still 'until he got on his feet,' she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town. (p. 106)

The reader's sense of Mrs. Chestny as an overgrown child is reinforced by her son's way of seeing her and of defining their parent/child relationship:

He studied her coldly. Her feet in little pumps dangled like a child's and did not quite reach the floor. She was training on him an exaggerated look of reproach. He felt completely detached from her. At that moment he could with pleasure have slapped her as he would have slapped a particularly obnoxious child in his charge. (p. 114)

The image of a little girl in an oversized chair is clearly inconsistent with that of a reproachful parent. The clash is consistent, though, with Julian's contorted sense of the role he plays with his mother, and ultimately with himself. Is he a child or an adult? Is the diminutive view of his mother merely a function of his own inflated ego? And is the reproach in her glance a function of his subconscious need to have a reproachful parent? These questions are partially answered as Mrs.
Chestny un-selfconsciously plays peek-a-boo with the child; is herself severely "reproached" by an all-powerful parent figure; and dies seeking the lost security of a nurturing mammy. Her final glance at her little boy is one which expresses neither reproach nor acceptance, but rather non-recognition: there are no ties left between parent and child, as Mrs. Chestny has regressed to a point in the distant past, to a place where Julian has no role to play. A child herself, she recognizes no child of her own. And as a child she chooses the nurturer, Caroline, to negate Julian's usurpation of the role of admonishing parent.

Since Mrs. Chestny has been partly willing to act out the child-like components of her own personality, her dying allows her a moment of self-awareness, as she yearns at that moment to express an aspect of her self which once actually existed. Her child-like call for the warmth of her mammy's embrace is less pathetic than Julian's empty discovery that life will be harsh because he never allowed himself the chance to have a mother-figure. The story contrasts the mother's occasional acceptance of the child in herself with Julian's denial that he is a child, for in his mind to be a child is to be morally impoverished. Hence, when he is described as a child, the image is satirically pointed: "Julian walked with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with the determination to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure" (p. 406). Throughout the story, Julian's self-identity is clouded by his failure to resolve his parent/child role conflict. He feels responsible for her welfare, and thus sees himself as the controlling figure in both their lives. But he also feels tied to her, a trapped victim of her illusions.
and whims. The martyr complex he has developed becomes his defining characteristic, and it renders him unable to grow, unable to assert himself apart from her. When she dies he realizes that he has, in fact, no separate self; and his three final calls to her are three abortive attempts to re-enact three different roles he had played with her: "Mother!" (that of adult child and adult parent); "Darling, Sweetheart" (that of adult parent and child); and finally, "Mama! Mama!" (that of helpless child and protective parent). Each of these calls is greeted with the same non-recognition; and Julian is left, literally as helpless as a child, because he has never allowed himself to be a child, thereby precluding his growth as an adult.

The final scene of "Everything" blends concrete imagery with abstract statement to reinforce the story's idea that Julian has been paralyzed all along by his refusal to accept in himself the need for nurturing. As his mother dies, her empty gaze reveals to him that which he has needed but rejected all his life: a mother's unconditional acceptance. Because he has cut off at its source the love she might have offered him, he will enter the adult world, "the world of guilt and sorrow," without the strength that that love would have supplied. His growth, then, is retarded, as his sense of having lost something he can now never gain forces him to "postpone" advancement to another stage of human development. Up to a certain point in this final scene, O'Connor allows the imagery to convey the sense:

'Wait here, wait here!' he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. 'Help, help!' he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. (p. 420)
Seen in terms of the rest of the story, the imagery of these three sentences works to convey a sense of child-like helplessness in the face of uncontrollable forces. Through its syntax, especially its use of the triple compound, the first sentence suggests irrational, uncontrolled response. The second sentence contrasts an intended act, shouting, with the result, "scarcely a thread of sound," to enforce the reader's sense of Julian's helplessness, his inability to assert himself even in the most primitive manner. Finally, the third sentence projects a subjective image, that of the receding lights, to suggest a nightmare world in which, try as he might, the character can never attain a goal because it is mobile and he is paralyzed. Given the overt child imagery of the rest of the story, these last images underscore Julian's inability to become an adult. The story's last sentence, then, is not only an abstract statement in the form of a concrete image, but it is a gratuitous one as well, for the point has already been made: "The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow."

Like Julian, Asbury, in "The Enduring Chill," fails to incorporate any child-like sense of wonder with his jaded intellectualism. To undercut Asbury's sense of his own maturity and sophistication, O'Connor describes him as having "large childish shocked eyes," and as looking like "one of those dying children who must have Christmas early" (p. 37). These two characters conform to a pattern repeated throughout O'Connor's fiction, that of an adult character, living with a parent figure, who continually refuses to recognize his own dependence upon the parent and denies the need for nurturing. Each of these characters attempts to act out a parental role without having allowed his own childhood needs to be
resolved, and O'Connor makes clear her judgment of them by imaging them as children. In "Good Country People," for instance, Hulga's ultimate shock is her realization that the Bible salesman is in fact "older" than she. The story's imagery suggests that the struggle between the two is not a purely sexual one, but one of identity as well. For Hulga to maintain her self-concept, she must establish herself in the role of protective, nurturing mother toward the naive Pointer:

His breath was clear and sweet like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's. He mumbled about loving her and about knowing when he first seen her that he loved her, but the mumbling was like the sleepy fretting of a child being put to sleep by his mother. Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings... 'You poor baby,' she murmured. (p. 287)

Hulga defines herself as one who has no feelings; and she is able to control the first feelings she has for Pointer, for they are consistent with the adult identity she projects: she will teach him, lead him, nurture him, seduce him. When Pointer suggests that she remove her wooden leg, this identity is threatened, and she responds as a child: "the girl uttered a sharp little cry." To Hulga, the leg represents independence and adult identity; and when Pointer grants her this ("It's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody else."), she becomes for the first time willing and able to give up those qualities for another:

---

Preston Browning, p. 50, calls Hulga's wooden leg "an objective correlative of the pretended cynicism which is Hulga's self-protective response to adult reality," and her lost leg "an objective correlative of the lost unity of childhood." Browning is correct in seeing Hulga as having lost the "unity" of childhood, but incorrect in seeing her wooden leg as a defense against an adult reality which threatens that unity. Rather, Hulga uses the leg to deny her need to depend upon others, as a child does. It represents her attempt to define herself in terms of her own adult reality, one which is self-sufficient and, as Browning notes, cynical.
"It was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his" (p. 289).

By allowing Pointer control over her leg, Hulga allows him adult power over the child she has become. By becoming dependent upon another, Hulga is subjected to feelings which her brain "was not very good at," and her responses are child-like: "She gave a little cry of alarm;" "her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound;" "like one mesmerized, she did not move" (p. 290). Stripped of her leg and her glasses, she is also stripped of her artificially constructed adult identity and independence because, never having exercised her emotional capacities in her role as a child, she is easily victimized by an adult who knows how to manipulate those defenseless feelings. For all Hulga's learning, then, the story proves her mother's insight to be correct: "Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought this was funny; Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child" (p. 276).

Hulga's Ph. D. and Asbury's and Julian's literary pursuits are insufficient tokens of adulthood. So too are Sally Poker Sash's B. S. in education, Asbury's sister's job as a school principal, and Mary Grace's Wellesley schooling--the girl scout shoes they wear label them as overgrown children as surely as Hulga's sweat shirt marks her. The Misfit's life of crime allows him to pose as an adult (he has even killed his father), until the grandmother recognizes him for what he is: "one of my babies;" and the grandmother herself ultimately fails to maintain her fancied image as a lady, as O'Connor pictures her in death, sitting "in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and
her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (p. 132). Parker resolves his
marital and religious struggles by "crying like a baby" (p. 530) and
Hazel Mote's religious rebellion is seriously undercut by a final image
of him in his landlady's protective custody: "She had never observed
his face more composed and she grabbed his hand and held it to her heart.
It was resistless and dry." This image recalls an earlier one of
Hazel being mothered by another woman in his life: "Mrs. Watts eyed
him steadily with only a slight smirk. Then she put her other hand under
his face and tickled it in a motherly way. 'That's okay, son,' she said.
'Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher'' (p. 23). By repeatedly re-
versing the child/adult identities of her characters through the imagery
she uses to describe them, O'Connor suggests that there is a fundamental
ambiguity in the very process of human development. A peripheral char-
acter in Wise Blood speaks for the central characters in many of the stor-
ies when she complains that, "The way things happened, one thing after
another, it seems like time went by so fast you couldn't tell if you
were young or old" (p. 11). A central image in O'Connor's fiction, the
statue in "The Artificial Nigger," clearly embodies a condition shared
by many of these characters:

It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to
be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. He was
meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corn-
ers but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a
look of wild misery instead. (p. 268)

Typically, an O'Connor character wears this "look of wild misery" be-

10 Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood in Three By Flannery O'Connor
(New York: Signet, 1963), p. 126. All quotations from this novel are
from this edition, and will hereafter be identified within the text.
cause he eschews his child-like qualities and becomes warped as these potentially appealing characteristics are distorted into a repugnant childishness.

Josephine Hendin describes a number of O'Connor's characters as "resentful sons and daughters...who are frozen in an extended, rebellious adolescence where, in a perpetual dependency because of illness or fear, the price they ought to pay for being cared for is silence, acquiescence to an effective controlling, exasperatingly polite, and very removed mother."11 True, the characters she refers to are frozen, stunted, unable to grow out of the traps they have set for themselves. But I think that their problem is that they have denied parental love rather than that they have acquiesced to domineering mothers. That they remain adolescents is O'Connor's judgment of them, rendered ironically through the imagery. They think of themselves as adults and refuse to acknowledge that they are dependent upon their parents. Thus, when some traumatic event exposes their emotional needs, their self-proclaimed adult identities are destroyed, and they have no human resources to fill the remaining gap.

4

So far we have seen that O'Connor's imagery of the self locates characters at different stages in an on-going process of attaining, maintaining, or losing their identities as adults or even as human entities. The imagery stresses the need for recognition and acceptance of one's lasting childhood qualities as a pre-requisite for self-realization; and it also shows the tendency to de-humanize oneself by acceding to the expectations of a world which recognizes animal and mechanical behavior as

---

11 Hendin, p. 15.
a norm. The two kinds of imagery examined thus far have questioned the notion of human identity and growth, as they reduce many of the supposedly adult actions of characters to childish impulse, and much of their behavior to mechanical response or animal instinct. In short, adult self-identity is not a given in O'Conner's world. Rather, one's very identity as a human is something to struggle for, something one must find and maintain in the face of considerable odds. The third set of images of the self, that of death-in-life, forces the reader to recognize in characters the ultimate reality of the human self, namely that the ongoing struggle for self-realization may be moot in the face of human mortality. The imagery I will now examine conveys a strong sense that the attempt to become human and to maintain an adult self is inherently paradoxical, for to become an adult is to realize most fully one's own vulnerability; and to become fully human is to reach that point where one is most prepared to lose one's human existence, by ceasing to struggle against death.

The memento mori theme is common in O'Conner's stories. Her descriptive imagery often reminds us that characters are stamped with the mark of mortality. The Judge in "The Displaced Person," for instance, lived with the look of death in his face: "His teeth and hair were tobacco-colored and his face was a clay pink pitted and tracked with mysterious prehistoric-looking marks as if he had been unearthed among fossils" (p. 218). Throughout the story, the Judge's grave serves as a symbol of the final end of all the characters, while the author's reference to his interred body points to the folly of the human conflicts above: "The Judge lay grinning under his desecrated monument" (p. 224). Like the Judge, Hazel Motes and Mrs. Connnin are repeatedly described as
walking skeletons, and Enoch Emery's crumbling mummy is an emblem of the one condition we all share. But these images of death as a reminder to characters or to readers are not all that O'Connor has to say on the subject. The statement she makes about death is more radical than that we will all die. Her fiction gives us a sense that the processes of life and death are inextricably one; that to resist the death process is to restrict human growth; and that the most significant human passage, in fact the only one which has any real meaning, is the passage from life to death. This is not to suggest that O'Connor's fiction denies the validity of human experience. Nor would I hold that she presented Harry's and Norton's choices of an early death in a positive light. On the contrary, these two characters have been shown to have acted out of desperation and illusion, in a hopeless search for a life-defining reality in a life-denying world. I will show, though, that O'Connor's imagery of death suggests that the self is least complete when a character is fleeing death; and conversely, that the self is most fully realized when the character in question submits to the process of his own death.

The futility of attempting to resist death is stated most emphatically in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" and "A Late Encounter With the Enemy." The main characters in both these stories delude themselves into thinking that they have found some formula for living endlessly, some version of the fountain of youth. Ruby Hill associates her mother's death with her child-bearing, and hence determines not to bear any children herself. General Sash tries to stave off death by wearing the uniform of his vanished youth and by kissing pretty girls at every opportunity. She would deny the inevitability of the future, and he the reality of the past, both desperately wanting to preserve a present over
which they have the illusion of control. But the story's imagery shows Ruby's battle to be doomed from the outset; she is already pregnant, and her human form bears the stamp of death: she is "shaped nearly like a funeral urn" (p. 95). Like her mother, she will bear children, and she will "get deader with every one of them" (p. 97). Ruby's pregnancy means that life and death come at her simultaneously, and that to seek to preserve the one while denying the other is to fail to become human. It is to become "the big florid vegetable" she resembles. Similarly, there is a correlation between the General's attempt to deny the progression of history, particularly the coming of his own death, and the objective imagery which reduces his humanity to the level of an insect: "He was as frail as a spider" (p. 140). Because he has constructed his selfhood out of the materials of a dead past and an artificial present, Sash becomes a piece of museum furniture, and only the most mechanical functions differentiate between the corpse-like presence he maintains throughout the story and the corpse he becomes at the end.

Two other characters are shown to be involved in a life-long attempt to deny the reality of death in their lives. The Misfit ("A Good Man Is Hard To Find") describes himself as having been "buried alive," and he tries to break out of this death-in-life through pleasure, which he equates with meanness. He premises his identity upon the notion that in order to be good, one must be perfect, or Christ-like; and since he cannot be perfect, he will be the opposite of good. But when he recognizes that the Grandmother becomes "a good woman" by making a human gesture, and not a divine one, this identity is threatened: "It ain't no real pleasure in life" (p. 133). The Grandmother's human gesture comes at the very moment when she ceases to struggle against death, when
she lets down the defenses she has spent her life erecting. No longer concerned with appearing to be "a lady," she becomes a good woman by voicing her human feelings for the pathetic killer, in spite of the fatal consequences. The Misfit's terse comment that "She would of been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (p. 133) contains the story's basic point. That is that full realization of one's human potential comes only when one remains open to the inevitability of death. In short, to act as if each moment were one's last is to find an identity which is not distorted by flimsy attempts to defend against the indefensible.

More than any other of O'Connor's characters, Asbury, in "The Enduring Chill," is aware of his own death. Throughout the story, he feels "as if death were already playfully rattling his bones" (p. 377). But like the Misfit he assumes a death-defying stance: he will translate death into Death, and see his own dying as "a unique tragedy" (p. 360), an acting out of the Art he has been incapable of creating during his life: "He could have hastened his death but suicide would not have been a victory. Death was coming to him legitimately, as a justification, as a gift from life. This was his greatest triumph" (p. 370). In his dream-fantasy of his own burial, he sees "Art," the god he has worshipped, "come to wake him" from death. But the image of his would-be resurrection is immediately transformed into a nightmare of death, not as an art form, but as an unseemly reality: "All around him the cows were spread out grazing in the moonlight and one large white one, violently spotted, was softly licking his head as if it were a block of salt" (p. 374). Asbury's abortive attempt to communicate with the Jesuit priest, and his burlesque of a last communion with the hired hands, are
intended to be acts in this great tragedy of an artist dying young. But the actor is denied a meaningful death, as he is doomed to survive to play a lesser role in a life which is not the melodrama he had envisioned for himself, complete with a grand exit. Rather, his life is to be a steady decline, an anti-climactic process of succumbing to the limitations of his own mortality. Death will not liberate Asbury's imagination. Rather than being set "whirling off in a widening gyre" (p. 364), Asbury finds himself trapped like Leda, pinned down by the chilling revelation that life is to be endured. That the terror he experiences is described as "purifying" suggests that the new life he awaits will be one in which he is cleansed of his pretensions of removal from humanity. His new sense of life as submission to the fact of death will, the story suggests, enable him to develop into a new self to meet the terms of that new life.

The idea of returning home to die and be buried is, for Tanner in "Judgement Day," a liberating one. Unlike Asbury, Tanner longs to return to his native ground, and for him the fact of death is secondary to the more important fact of the return. The story's descriptions suggest that in one sense Tanner has already died before his removal to New York: "His eyes were trained on her like the eyes of an angry corpse" (p. 533); "Tanner had continued to look across the field as if his spirit had been sucked out of him into the woods and nothing was left on the chair but a shell" (p. 540). His fantasy of arriving in Corinth in a coffin, only to pop up alive to his friends' delight, is the story's central metaphor for death as the full realization of the self's potential. Death is not to be seen as an alienating, isolating event, as is Tanner's life in the city; but rather as an integrating experience. It is something which,
in the comic terms of the fantasy, one has in common with one's friends. Tanner's ability to be comfortable with the notion of his own death goes hand in hand with the strong sense of self he conveys. Although geographically disoriented in New York, and historically displaced by his archaic racial attitudes, his self-image is never in doubt, and his will is intact even when his perceptions are distorted.

Like Tanner, Old Tarwater is preoccupied with the image of himself in his coffin. His insistence that he be properly buried indicates that he accepts his own death as right. Sitting in his coffin, he lectures his nephew that "the world was made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are... There's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive" (p. 312). Old Tarwater is also like Tanner in his unequivocal sense of knowing who and what he is, and in his resistance of society's efforts to alter that self through its mental institutions, or to quantify it through educational testing. Both these characters are noteworthy because they are active and willful. They stand out in a fiction filled with self-doubters and with morally paralyzed characters. Their capacity to maintain a hold on their own identities, and to act decisively, albeit ineffectively, derives from their readiness to see death as a completion of life, and not as a threat to an artificially contrived sense of well being. To make of death an abstraction as Sheppard does is to set oneself up to be paralyzed by its concrete reality. And to deny its potency, as the grandmother does when she dresses "like a lady," is to be stung all the more effectively by its poison. Rather, the imagery of these stories would suggest, one is best off with one's own coffin within easy reach.
The images I have examined in this chapter suggest two things about O'Connor's conception of the self. The first is that she saw human identity to be a tenuous proposition, certainly not a given at birth. The world she projects through the eyes of her narrators is a radically reductive one, and characters must work against its de-personalizing tendencies by seeing in themselves and in others human forms and human functions which differ from the non-human forms and functions which threaten their identities. The capacity to see in oneself and others the stamp of a common human identity constitutes, as I will show in the coming chapters, the experience of grace in a world which is otherwise doomed to the chaos of animal and mechanical forces.

O'Connor's imagery also calls into question the notion that there is such a thing as a clearly defined adult self-identity, that human development means a linear passage from a child-like self (passive and dependent) into an adult self (active and independent). Rather, her fiction shows balanced selfhood to include a recognition of one's child-like needs for inter-dependence with others. Ultimately, this need derives from the fact of universal mortality, from the isolation all face in the grave. Hence the presence of so many images of death as a fact of life. If the identity a character embraces is too self-consciously "adult" (i.e., self-sufficient and rational), then that identity dissolves when the character is forced to confront the reality that the rational component of the self is not sufficient to stave off the fact of death.
CHAPTER II

THREE VIEWS OF THE WOODS:
THE SELF AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

O'Connor's well known religious viewpoint has led a number of her critics to describe her work as "sacramental," a term which suggests that natural objects in her stories are meant to be seen as signs of spiritual realities. Others go further, noting the influence of Mircea Eliade, and refer to her works as "hierophonic," which means that they convey a belief that natural objects embody spiritual forces.1 Certainly O'Connor's fiction lends itself to such views, as it abounds with images such as the following: "The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood" (p. 248). But this kind of terminology concerns itself with the writer's theology, largely ignoring the way in which such imagery works in her fiction. A more relevant and revealing approach to the fiction is to set aside the question of whether or not O'Connor herself believed in such forces in nature, and to focus upon the fact that her fictional world contains characters whose psyches are shaped by particular visions of nature and of the phenomenal world in general. In brief, I am

suggesting that we do not see as O'Connor's fictional material her own belief in symbols or sacraments, and that we focus upon something much more accessible to her readers, namely the extent to which her characters derive their self-identity from symbolic objects.

In Chapter One I focused on O'Connor's objectively rendered images of people as things or as animals, suggesting that these images reflect a process by which characters contribute to their own de-personalization. In this chapter I will look more closely at examples of characters finding a less than fully human identity by affiliating themselves with symbolic objects or non-human phenomena which they think will define them in a favorable light. Specifically I will examine three common stances her characters assume in relation to the phenomenal world: flight to, escape from, and possession of things as means of defining the self. Each of these postures becomes an obsession with the non-human, thereby precluding a search for identity within a human framework. And because the objects they use as bases for identity are static, fixed in their implications for the self, characters lose their projected identities when they find themselves subjected to the dynamics of social change.

In two stories O'Connor has characters fail to define themselves within the context of a real present situation when they retreat to a mental image of an identity with which they are more comfortable. For the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and for the Chestny's in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," reality is marked by screaming children, marred landscapes, gratuitous violence, squalid neighborhoods, and ambiguous class and racial identity. Thus, they escape the present by remembering the selves they had once known in different places and times.
symbols of these former identities are the Grandmother's plantation and the rural mansion the Chestnuts had once inhabited. Because economic realities have destroyed the houses and all they represent, the characters cannot sustain identities which derive solely from the private symbolic import of things which no longer mean anything to others. Their fixation upon the self-defining values contained in the images of their former class identities renders them unable to form present identities until they are forced to do so by the inevitably violent hand of social change. In "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," there is a direct clash between the grandmother's tendency to romanticize her surroundings and the inexorable encroachments of reality, ultimately embodied in the Misfit. Early on, the story establishes a sharp contrast between fact and fancy, with the grandmother continually transforming the minutiae of life into interesting details:

She sat in the middle of the back seat with John Wesley and June Star on either side of her. Bailey and the children's mother and the baby sat in front and they left Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890. The grandmother wrote this down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back. It took them twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the city. (p. 118)

Her roseate view transforms poverty into cuteness: "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (p. 119); and death into literary romance: "They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. 'Look at the graveyard!' the grandmother said, pointing it out. 'That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation . . . Gone With the Wind'" (pp. 119-20). At this point in the story, the narrator's descriptions of nature support the grandmother's optimism, as they juxtapose her vision with that of more myopic characters:
"The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled. The children were reading comic magazines and their mother had gone to sleep" (p. 119). Robert Fitzgerald sees this image of mean trees sparkling as an indication of O'Connor's own sense that the phenomenal world possesses worth simply because it exists. But clearly the image is more a reflection of the character's sensibility than of the author's, and the important point is that at this stage the narrative voice obviously favors the old woman's tendency to take note of the beauty of nature, in contrast to the children's meanness and the daughter-in-law's oblivion.

When the family stops at the restaurant, a change occurs in the grandmother's perspective, and with it a shift in narrative perspective. As Sammy Butts's repeated expressions of distrust of human nature appeal to the grandmother's fertile imagination, she slips irrevocably into a state of nostalgia, caught up in a longing for a past which may never have existed. The central symbol for that past is the Southern mythic image of nature tamed and ordered: "Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady. She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden" (p. 123). Denying the present, both factual and fanciful, the grandmother leads her children not to the non-existent Toombsboro but to the waiting tomb. And as the character ignores her phenomenal world, the narrative voice parts company with her, projecting images of nature which are dark and forbidding. The trees, which

---

once sparkled, are now "dust-coated," and the woods are "tall, dark, and deep." The road which leads to the past has "sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments" (p. 124). In her escape from the present the grandmother becomes disoriented in space and time. Wondering "if the twin arbors were still standing," she is blinded to the dangers lurking in the untamed woods of the present, oblivious until she hears "the wind move through the trees like a long satisfied insuck of breath" (p. 129).

It is important to the Grandmother's growth that she become lost like this. When the familiar images she had relied upon to define herself externally become alien, she is forced to define herself without visible tokens of status, sex, or race. Thus she can become, in the Misfit's words, "a good woman," only when she ceases to rely upon real and fancied badges which define her as "a lady." As I will show, the experience of being lost is a common one in O'Connor's fiction. She forces a number of her characters to lose their safe and easy indicators of self-worth in order to have them search for deeper and more pervasive human values. The experience is, of course, traumatizing, and often it is fatal. But the trauma is a first step toward human growth, and the instant of death can grant the moment of self-realization the character has failed to find in a lifetime.

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" uses as a central symbol a rural retreat similar to the one which diverted the Grandmother from a necessary concern with the present to a dooming fixation with the past. The lost Godhigh mansion tempts Julian and his mother to try to insulate themselves from their surroundings, thereby exposing themselves to the dangers of change, which they ignore. Their present surroundings are
shabby: "Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child" (p. 406). Against this reality, Julian places his dream of a more pastoral existence: "He visualized a place where the nearest neighbors would be three miles away on either side" (p. 406).

More specifically, he retreats, as does his mother, to the memory of a place which had accorded them a more important social position, namely the mansion which had once been owned by their wealthy ancestors:

But it remained in his mind as his mother had known it. It appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. . . . He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had ever lived in had been a torment to him. (pp. 408-09)

Because this image becomes a symbol of who they are, Julian and his mother have no identity in a world in which the image has no place. Like the Grandmother, these characters become alienated from a dynamic social nexus when they allow a fantasy of life in the past to intervene between the selves they are and the selves they would like to have become. Because of this dissociation, Mrs. Chestny's forced confrontation with the present—in the form of the black woman's pocketbook—leaves them both helpless, unable to find a point of contact with the world in which they live.

More so than any other of O'Connor's stories, this one makes an explicit connection between self-definition and location in place and time. Mrs. Chestny repeatedly insists that she knows who she is, while Julian denies her this self-knowledge, claiming that she is temporally and spatially disoriented and implying that it is he who knows who and where he is:

'They don't give a damn for your graciousness,' Julian said savagely. 'Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea who you are or where you stand now.'
... 'I most certainly do know who I am,' she said, 'and if you don't know who you are, I'm ashamed of you. ... Your great-grandfather was a governor of this state ... Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh.'

'Will you look around you,' he said tensely, 'and see where you are now?' And he swept his arm jerkily out to indicate the neighborhood, which the growing darkness at least made less dingy. (p. 207)

The story goes on to show that Julian's own dislocation is as great as his mother's. His trauma upon realizing this is great because his rigidly self-righteous judgments of her had formed the basis for his public self image. Rather than confront the social upheavals of a changing South or the personal trials of the failed writer, these characters try to use a private symbol of retreat to enable them to elude the present facts of their mean and petty existences. In so doing they fail to establish the personal qualities needed for survival in a world which, though shabby, is the only one they have. When the past, or a symbol of a happier past, becomes too compelling a means of self-definition, O'Connor's characters cease to live in the present. The result is the stunted growth of Julian and his mother, or the death-in-life of General Sash ("A Late Encounter With The Enemy") which I discussed in Chapter One. Only when some traumatic encounter forces the character into the present can he or she be ready to enter "the adult world" which Julian faces or the human condition which the Grandmother experiences, if only for an instant.

In the previous chapter it was shown that Harry Ashfield ("The River") and Norton ("The Lame Shall Enter First") lose their lives in misdirected attempts to become selves in a world which cuts them off from the human nourishing needed to sustain the self. In both their stories, the misdirection is presented as a naive belief in an image of nature as the embodiment of that nourishing force. In Harry's imagination, first the woods, and then the river itself, become places where he will "count,"
idyllic settings which he associates with the Christ picture and with the exorcism. Most importantly, the story's imagery sharply contrasts these places with the stultifying atmosphere of his home and with the city in which he knows only loneliness. The distinction between city and country is firmly established, as is the importance of this distinction to the child's self-image:

It occurred to him that he was lucky this time that they had found Mrs. Connin who would take you away for the day instead of an ordinary sitter who only sat where you lived or went to the park. You found out more when you left where you lived. (p. 163)

Across the river there was a low red and gold grove of sassafras with hills of dark blue trees behind it and an occasional pine jutting over the skyline. Behind, in the distance, the city rose like a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain. (p. 165)

'If I baptize you,' the preacher said, 'you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the river of life. Do you want that?' 'Yes,' the child said, and thought, 'I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river.' (p. 168)

To Harry, the woods and the river become a fantasy world; and the delight he takes in nature revives his very sense of being alive. The story's close and lengthy description of his first experience with nature conveys a sense of wonder the boy had been denied in his home life, and bears quotation in full because it provides an insight into the kind of life he ultimately seeks in his return to the river:

His mind was dreamy and serene as they walked along and when they turned off the highway onto a long red clay road winding between banks of honeysuckle, he began to make wild leaps and pull forward on her hand as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the sun which was rolling ahead of them now. They walked on the dirt road for a while and then crossed a field stripped with purple weeds and entered the shadows of a wood where the ground was covered with thick pine needles. He had never been in woods before and he walked carefully, looking from side to side as if he were entering a strange country. They moved along a bridle path that twisted downhill through crackling red leaves, and
once, catching at a branch to keep himself from slipping, he looked into two frozen green-gold eyes enclosed in the darkness of a treehole. At the bottom of the hill, the woods opened suddenly on a pasture dotted here and there with black and white cows and sloping down, tier after tier, to a broad orange stream where the reflection of the sun was set like a diamond. (pp. 163-64)

In the woods, Harry is unfettered, free to be and act the boy he is. The honeysuckle, the sunlight, the shadows and the clearing, even the strange green eyes: these are the elements of mystery and warmth that mark his entry into a world where alienation can lead to acceptance, and strangeness to familiarity.

When Harry leaves his drunken parents, his reality, he hastens "to get into the woods as fast as he could." Incapable of distinguishing between the symbolic "river of life" and the actual river, he seeks new life by literally trying to become a part of the river, to link himself with the natural setting he has come to see as the place where he belongs: "He saw only the river, shimmering reddish yellow, and bounded into it with his shoes and his coat on and took a gulp. He swallowed some and spit the rest out and then he stood there in water up to his chest and looked around him. The sky was a clear pale blue, all in one piece--except for the hole the sun made--and fringed around the bottom with tree-tops. His coat floated to the surface and surrounded him like a strange gay lily pad and he stood grinning in the sun" (p. 173). Here, the boy's image of nature as a seamless whole, and his quest for identity in that image, are rendered pathetic as his point of view is juxtaposed with the narrator's image of the child as some bizarre aquatic plant grinning in the sun. The effect of this clash of images, and of the story as a whole, is to warn against a literal belief in nature's regenerative power.

In underscoring the degree to which the self can become alienated in the
modern city and in the contemporary family, the story denies that nature, real or imagined, is a sufficient salve for the wounds inflicted upon the psyches of victims of social chaos.

Another part of nature, the stars, symbolize for Norton what the woods and the river represent to Harry. Another literal-minded child, he envisions a trip to the heavens as a return to the security and the clear sense of self he had known while his mother lived. As in "The River," there is a strong suggestion in "The Lame Shall Enter First" that to reach outside of the self and outside of the human community surrounding the self is not the way to realize one's own humanity. Norton's abortive flight, like Harry's underwater quest, is a pathetic attempt to evade reality by joining his self-concept with a symbol of a happier mode of existence. O'Connor repeats the pattern a third time when she has Powell, the adolescent in "A Circle in the Fire," seek to repair a broken sense of self by returning to the rural surroundings he had known in a happier time. As in the cases of Harry and Norton, regeneration is denied this third child. His response, though not literally suicidal, is equally symptomatic of a frustrated quest for self-definition. Denied the personal harmony he had sought in nature, he destroys the place he had loved most in life. The symbol of this unattainable harmony is, as the story makes clear, the boy's image of paradise: "He said when he died he wanted to come here" (p. 180). For each of these characters the journey to nature as a psychic paradise is motivated by an inability to find a sense of belonging in a human community. But their failures suggest that escape to nature is not the answer, and that to "count" the individual must find the terms for self-definition with a human context.
The above stories exhibit a pattern of characters seeking to retreat from the chaos of the present by linking their self-concepts to a symbolic place or time in which they are protected from whatever threatens them. The result is always catastrophic, for in evading the evil they sense surrounding them, O'Connor's characters expose an unprotected flank to the inevitable enemy. Nowhere is the theme, that retreat to an illusory place or time limits the self, more telling than in "The Artificial Nigger." The central characters of this story assume that evil can clearly be located and that they need only identify themselves with a place where there is no evil in order to maintain a coherent sense of who they are. The imagery which concludes the story seems to affirm that there can be a pastoral retreat for the self, as the final scene suggests that the Heads may have escaped the city's chaos and found a secure haven in their version of the Garden of Eden. Since the critical consensus is that this is the correct reading of the story's conclusion, the question of the Heads' return to a place uncomplicated by "the mystery of existence" will bear close scrutiny. What must be questioned are the story's tone, and the author's attitude toward her characters. Simply put, the problem reduces itself to the question of whether or not the Heads are, unlike characters anywhere else in O'Connor's fiction, in fact "safe" in their woods, and if so, whether their safety is a value which the story affirms.

The imagery itself is unambiguous in its suggestion that nature

---

is paradise. At the very instant when the Heads disembark from the train, the moon, as if it had been awaiting their arrival, "sprang from a cloud and flooded the clearing with light" (p. 269). As the next few sentences suggest, the moonlight creates a fantasy-world, much like that of the grandmother's sparkling trees and Harry Ashfield's "strange country:"

As they stepped off, the sage grass was shivering gently in shades of silver and the clinkers under their feet glittered with a fresh black light. The treetops, fencing the junction like the protecting walls of a garden, were darker than the sky which was hung with gigantic white clouds illuminated like lanterns. (p. 269)

Following this glowing description, the narrator presents an articulate version of Mr. Head's inchoate feeling that he has been saved, noting that the character "knew that there were no words in the world that could name it." Clearly the Edenic imagery of this passage and the sense that the train disappears "like a frightened serpent," reflect Mr. Head's feeling that he is "ready at that instant to enter paradise." What is not clear is that these images are the author's indication that he has already done so.

One critic has seen the references to moonlight as the author's attempt to represent a supernatural presence transforming the phenomenal world. But the early references to moonlight make it clear that O'Connor is projecting the country setting not as a place which is spiritually informed, but rather as a place which reflects the character's own egotistical sense of self-worth. The moonlight casts "a dignifying light upon everything;" it gives Mr. Head's trousers "an almost noble air;" and it miraculously transforms his rustic features into those of a Vergil or a Raphael. Certainly O'Connor is not describing a hierophony when her nar-

---

Footnote:

Feeley, pp. 123-25.
rator says of the slop-jar that it was "made snow-white in the moonlight, and appeared to stand guard over him like a personal angel" (p. 250). It is more likely that she is consciously placing these characters in a "Snow White" world, a fairy tale setting in which they can easily identify and ultimately control good and evil. This is further evidenced when the sun comes up, revealing a more real world in which clinkers will prove to be clinkers and where Mr. Head will show himself to be a petty liar, and not a Vergil: "A coarse looking orange colored sun coming up behind the east range of mountains was making the sky a dull red behind them, but in front of them it was still gray and they faced a gray transparent moon, hardly stronger than a thumbprint and completely without light... Under the useless morning moon the tracks looked white and fragile" (p. 252); "The sun shed a dull dry light on the narrow street; everything looked exactly like what it was" (p. 264). This deliberate contrast between moonlight and sunlight worlds concerns more than the story's setting. The division recalls Hawthorne's metaphoric distinction between the kinds of light shed upon the worlds of the romance writer and the realistic novelist:

Moonlight, ... so unlike a morning or noontide visibility, is a medium the most suitable for the romance writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests ... all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect.5

O'Connor's writing tends more toward romance than realism, but in one sense it is an amalgam of the two modes. She offers characters like the Heads a choice between two literary worlds by making them choose between two ways of seeing their world. By choosing the ephemeral world of na-

ture bathed in fancy and by seeing demonic forces even under the clear light of day, they become victims of their own romantic illusions, characters in their own nightmares.

In "The Artificial Nigger" the contrast between romance and reality coincides with the contrast between country and city, and the essential difference between the two is the presence of black people in the city. Mr. Head and Nelson become most hopelessly lost in the black section of the city, for it is here that they experience a reality they had been able to elude in the romanticized setting of their home. What Nelson experiences when he gazes into the black woman's eyes, and what both characters sense when they see the statue, is a stirring of a part of the self they had previously denied or ignored. In the real world, the daylight world of the city, the Heads cannot avoid the knowledge that the humanity they share with that woman, and with all people whose misery is captured in the statue's forlorn features, must be expressed in their own beings if they are to become complete selves. To isolate the self from the human impulses Nelson discovers in his primordial attraction to the woman's sexuality, and from the suffering read in the face of black plaster, is to lose touch with nature in a deeper sense of the word than that which limits itself to trees and rivers, to moonlight and stardust.

When the Heads re-enter their garden, with Nelson vowing never to return to the city, they are cutting themselves off from nature as it can be experienced only within a human context. In so doing they protect themselves from certain dangers to the self, best summarized in the thing they both fear the most: being lost. Mr. Head is literally, but not metaphorically, correct when he comments of their neck of the woods that, "It's nowhere around here to get lost at" (p. 250). Geographically, they are
safe; but psychologically they remain in danger of getting lost in the
same way that the grandmother gets lost in the very attempt to re-locate
the self she once knew in the safety of her former social and physical
environment. The stirrings of the psyche that make them both feel lost
in the city do not originate in the black woman or in the statue, but
rather in the characters themselves. To flee the symbols of the feel­
ings they fear in pursuit of a false haven is to flee important aspects
of themselves; and to do so is to allow those parts of themselves to
remain unknown territory into which they will always risk wandering,
il prepared to meet again the emotional pitfalls they would like to ig­
nore.

It is only because the Heads did become lost in the city that
they found themselves again as fuller persons than they had been. If
their resolve to avoid the city is a resolve to deny the experience of
being lost, to remain in their version of Melville's "insular Tahiti,"
they will preclude further growth. At the story's end, O'Connor allows
them a moonlight respite from the realities they have encountered. But
Mr. Head's insistence upon his redemption, based as it is upon the no­
tion that he has had his experience with the real world of human complex­
ities and can now go to his reward—a world insulated from those complex­
ities—is as transparently false as Mrs. Chestny's assertions of self-
knowledge. His claim echoes the hollow sound of Henry Fleming's thoughts
in The Red Badge of Courage that his battlefield experience has made a
man of him, and that he is now ready to seek a "separate peace." Because
O'Connor clearly has some affection for these naive characters, her irony
is less biting when aimed at them than when pointed toward more abrasive
characters. Consequently, readers have tended to see her tone less as
one of irony than as one of affirmation. But to do so is to mis-read the
story's imagery and tone, and to see in it an uncharacteristic endorse-
ment of a fairy-tale vision in which good and evil are neatly categorized
and easily embraced or avoided.

The evil which threatens each of the characters discussed in this
section is not something they could easily define. Nor do the stories
themselves define the evil for the reader. In general, the characters
experience a vague sense that their self-defining values are under as-
sault, and that nature or the past—or their own conception of these
things—will provide them with adequate protection. The stories do not
concern themselves with the source of this feeling; they are not socio-
logical or psychological analyses. Rather, they focus upon the ways in
which individuals respond to the feeling, and the effect of the response
upon the self. When the response is solipsistic or insulating, as all
these attempts to retreat are, the effect is that the self disintegrates
or at least ceases to grow.

3

In four stories O'Connor has characters look to the non-human
world, specifically to nature, not as a defense against an intangible
threat, but as the tangible source of that threat. Like miniature Ahab's,
Mrs. Cope ("A Circle in The Fire"), Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"), Old Gabriel
("Wildcat"), and Sheppard ("The Lame Shall Enter First") isolate a single
aspect of nature as a symbolic embodiment of all that ails them. Their
way of seeing phenomena is the inverse of that discussed above: for
them nature is more satanic than Edenic. Thinking to protect themselves,
they avoid or attack a symbol of their fear. As does Ahab, they err by
personalizing the impersonal, by projecting their consciousness of wrong
upon things devoid of moral consciousness. In one sense, these characters are as naive as Harry Ashfield and Norton, for they either confuse a symbol with a reality or mistake a part for a whole. Furthermore, because they try to locate evil in something clearly outside of themselves, their very selves crumble when they come to recognize their kinship with the evil which they had thought was contained in the symbol.

In one of her earliest stories, "Wildcat," O'Connor has a blind man exhibit an elemental ability to sense in nature an impending doom. His ability to smell the cat, and the memory of another old man killed by a wildcat years earlier, reduce Old Gabriel to the knowledge of his utter defenselessness. During his night of terror, Gabriel literally loses touch with himself, at one point forgetting who he is:

He began to remember the other wildcat and he remembered as if he had been in Hezuh's cabin instead of with the women. He wondered was he Hezuh. He was Gabriel. It won't gonna git him like Hezuh. He was gonna git it. He was gonna pull it off. He was gonna . . . how he gonna do all that? He hadn't been able to wring a chicken's neck for fo' years. It was gonna git him. Won't nothin' to do but wait. (p. 30)

Because he sees in the wildcat a malice directed solely at himself, Gabriel loses perspective on himself. In its concluding image the story underscores the extent to which fear threatens an individual's capacity to maintain a balanced sense of self: "The darkness was hollow around him and through its depth, animal cries wailed and mingled with the beats pounding in his throat" (p. 32). Here, fear is shown to engender fear. The demonic sounds Gabriel hears are the source of his terror; but the sounds originate as much in his imagination and in his own throat as in the hollow darkness which is all of nature to this blind man.

In "Wildcat" there is an actual threat to the safety of the char-
acter: there really is a wildcat in the woods. But his terror runs to an extreme when he imagines that the cat is somehow specifically stalking him. Elsewhere, O'Connor treats similar situations much more clearly, as she has characters see in the natural world threats which are almost wholly functions of their own imaginations. In "A Circle In The Fire," for instance, Mrs. Cope sees herself as a last defense against any number of evil encroachments, all vaguely defined, aimed at her personally, and best summed up by her sense of fleeing "whatever it was that pursued her." Her paranoid fantasies lead her to focus first upon something minute and to some extent manageable, as the source of her problems:

"She worked at the weeds and the nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (p. 175). The nut grass, though, soon becomes for her a metaphor for something larger; and she next turns to her hired help in her compulsion to locate the blame for her dissatisfaction: "Her Negroes were as destructive and impersonal as the nut grass" (p. 177). It becomes clear that she is suffering a progressive breakdown of the self when she begins to see her farm, and then nature in general, symbolized by the sun, as personal enemies:

"... and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (p. 177); "It (the sun) was swollen and flame colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through at any second and fall into the woods... The sun burned so fast that it seemed to be trying to set everything on fire" (p. 184).

This paranoid and self-centered view of nature is embodied in a surrealistic nightmare image of nature, the very opposite of the fairy-tale fantasies seen above: "The white water tower was glazed pink and
the grass was an unnatural green as if it were turning to glass" (p. 185). This striking image, and the mentality it reflects, suggest that to see in nature or in parts of nature an evil agency is as debilitating to the self as it is to rely upon nature as a redemptive force. Mrs. Cope and her human nemesis, Powell, are both defeated in their struggle over ownership of the woods: she in her misdirected attack upon nature, he in his abortive escape to nature. The reason for these twin defeats is revealed in the insight given to Mrs. Cope's daughter at the story's end, an insight which recalls what the Heads saw in the statue which mirrored their own experience:

The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro, a European, or to Powell himself. The child turned her head quickly, and past the Negroes' ambling figures she could see the column of smoke rising unchecked inside the granite line of trees. (p. 193)

Human kinship, the girl learns, is at once the source of human misery and its solution. What had threatened Mrs. Cope was not nature, but the frustrated needs of a human whose significance she had denied. She herself is destroyed by an enemy she could never name, but the story leaves open the possibility that her daughter, whose defenses have been penetrated, will look to her fellow humans, and not to nature, for the basis for true self-definition.

Mrs. Cope's role in "A Circle In The Fire" is re-played by a variety of women in O'Connor's fiction. Widowed land owners, they see their farms as last vestiges of order in a world succumbing to the chaos of social change, precipitated by Blacks, Europeans, and "white trash." Feeling besieged in their fortresses of traditional values, they fight to pro-
tect their own against "whatever it is that pursues them." They are inevitably frustrated because they cannot name the whatever, and invariably defeated when they try. Just as Mrs. Cope focuses upon the weeds and nut grass, enemies of order, so too Mrs. May, in "Greenleaf," takes a stand against chaos by determining to protect her properly bred herd from the unbridled sexuality of the Greenleafs' scrub bull. The bull becomes her symbol of nature untamed; and she extends the symbolism consciously to include the Greenleafs themselves, and unconsciously to embrace all the natural world, here as elsewhere represented through images of an aggressive sun assaulting the defender of order.

There is more at stake here than Mrs. May's social values. Her very sense of who and what she is is explicitly related to the property she owns: "The pastures were enough to calm her. When she looked out any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character" (p. 321). For a long time, the story tells us, Mrs. May has seen her property, and by extension her self-concept, being eaten away by external forces:

She had been conscious in her sleep of a steady rhythmic chewing, as if something were eating one wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place. (pp. 311-12)

The story concerns Mrs. May's quest to find the "whatever" that is wronging her, and her attempt to maintain her sense of self by righting that wrong. In an early flashback, the story shows her involved in one such attempt. Seeking Mr. Greenleaf to upbraid him for one of his many mis-
takes—significantly this disseminator of bad seed has placed the wrong seeds in the grain drill—, she enters the woods apparently well armed against whatever nature may throw in her path: "hitting the ground methodically with a long stick she carried in case she saw a snake" (p. 316). What does appear on the ground is more repulsive to her than a snake, as she comes upon Mrs. Greenleaf groaning in the dirt: "The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her" (p. 316). The ensuing descriptions of Mrs. Greenleaf support Mrs. May's image of her as a natural force, something rising from the earth: "Her face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as composed as a bull-dog's" (p. 316); "... she fell back in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth" (p. 317). Repelled by the sight, Mrs. May can only console herself with the knowledge that the Greenleaf boys, much more successful than her own sons, are products of inferior breeding: "Well, no matter how far they go, they came from that" (p. 317). When in the next paragraph Mrs. May thinks of the Greenleafs as "scrub-human," the story has established a pattern of connection between breeding, nature, the Greenleafs, and the scrub bull, all things which Mrs. May must control if she is to defend her values against these agents of chaos.

Mrs. May's property becomes for her a battle-ground, an arena in which she will attempt to establish control over these forces. When she leaves the Greenleafs' shiny new barn, the story introduces the image of the sun as a destructive force: "The light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like
a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (p. 325). In a dream, she associates her farm with protection from the sun, with the story making a further association between the sun and the bull, whose chewing noises are causing the nightmare:

Half the night in her sleep she heard a sound as if some large stone were grinding a hole on the outside wall of her brain. She was walking on the inside, over a succession of beautiful rolling hills, planting her stick in front of each step. She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did, outside her property. When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull munching under her window. (p. 329)

This connection between sun and bull continues throughout the rest of the story, as they both prey, the one figuratively and the other literally, upon the woman's consciousness. After the dream, she resolves to take control of her life by killing the bull; and for the first time she feels in touch with nature, unthreatened by the sunlight: "The exhilaration of carrying her point had sharpened her senses. Birds were screaming everywhere, the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even piercing blue. 'Spring is here!,' she said gaily" (p. 330). But the feeling passes as the bull succeeds in eluding her, causing her to feel once more out of control of nature and out of touch with herself. Again, the sun becomes an aggressor, with the bull its ally: "Through her closed eyes, she could feel the sun, red-hot overhead. She opened her eyes slightly but the white light forced her to close them again" (p. 332); "She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a
world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (p. 332). At the moment of her death, Mrs. May’s physical wound is mirrored by the imagined wounding of the trees which rim her pasture, her last line of defense against the sun, against nature, against all the enemies of her order. Fatally molested by the bull of mixed breed, her "wild tormented lover," she is left a victim of her own misdirected attempts to fortify her feeble sense of who she is by taking the offensive against nature itself, which she in her paranoia sees as her personal nemesis.

Mrs. May’s feeling that Mrs. Greenleaf transmits “some violent unleashed force” which had “broken out of the ground” makes a connection between nature and those aspects of the human personality which polite society would repress. The very same feeling arises in Sheppard, when he witnesses his son’s uncontrolled expression of grief: “Sheppard sat helpless and miserable, like a man lashed by some elemental force of nature” (p. 447). He is so repelled by Norton’s displays of emotion and by the crude behavior which is caused by that emotion, that he looks to Rufus Johnson as a second son, one who, because he is more intelligent, may be more readily transformable into the finished product of an enlightened social vision. As we have seen, Sheppard focuses his attention upon one physical flaw, Johnson’s deformed foot, as his means of altering the boy’s nature, of shaping nature itself into a more civilized form. During the course of the story, Sheppard learns that the symbolic flaw does not contain the evil that is part of human nature, and that grief, a human experience, cannot be repressed. The individual, to be whole, must be prepared to enter “the jungle of shadows” which is the human experi-
ence, rather than try to approach humanity with protective, repressive, or ameliorating devices such as the microscope, the shiny black shoe, or facile notions of social reform.

When characters look to the non-human world either to find sanctuary or to locate an ill-defined sense of evil, they mistakenly impose upon things which are amoral a moral agency. They believe that in order to know themselves they must establish themselves in a relationship with a symbol of something which will protect them, or which contains whatever it is that threatens them. In either case characters remove themselves from human concerns and deny themselves human identity by staking their psychic fortunes upon the notion that in order to be saved they must simply embrace or ward off a particular image or object. A third way in which O'Connor has characters define themselves falsely is to have them see in the world not good or evil forces, but simply commodities to be appropriated for their own self-aggrandizement. Linking their self-concepts to a quest for economic gain, these characters also divorce themselves from the human community, and in the process suffer alienation from their true selves.

An early treatment of this theme occurs in "The Turkey," a story about a boy's attempt to define himself as a man by capturing a wounded turkey and thereby assuming a responsible role in his family. Before he captures the bird, Ruler fantasizes about himself in various roles: cowboy, jewel thief, and preacher. He eventually fixes upon the real possibility that he might give alms to a beggar, if only one will materialize. After he has captured the turkey he sees himself as an economic being, and his gift of the dime to a beggar is his public expression of
his new-found status. Once he has parted with the dime, thoughts of his goodness and worth—both predicated upon ownership of the turkey, which makes his largesse feasible—inflates his ego: "Slowly his heart calmed and he began to feel full of a new feeling—like being happy and embarrassed at the same time. Maybe, he thought, blushing, he would give all his money to her. He felt as if the ground did not need to be under him any more" (p. 52). When he loses the turkey, Ruller loses this new sense of himself, as his temporary economic status had been the sole basis for his positive self-image. At the end he is left empty-handed and empty-spirited, devoid of imaginary or real consciousness of himself. He is aware only of his physical presence, and of a vague feeling of having had the tables turned on him: he is now the pursued; he is the turkey: "He ran faster and faster, and as he turned up the road to his house, his heart was running as fast as his legs and he was certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch" (p. 53).

The character who stakes his reputation most directly upon an economic relationship with the world is Mr. Fortune in "A View of the Woods." He defines himself in terms of his ownership of land, his freedom to sell his land, and his faith in Progress, which means replacing cow pastures with gas stations. He and his less progressive son-in-law clash over the loyalties of Fortune's granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. Pitts wants to preserve a particular parcel of land which Mary loves simply because it exists as a place for the family to graze calves, as a place for the children to play, and as something for them to look at. The grandfather insists that the land be sold to become part of what he envisions as the town which will bear his name, Fortune, Georgia. Mary
must choose one or the other; she must proclaim her identity as Pitts or as Fortune. At stake for the old man is his very identity, for Mary is his chosen heir to the fortune of his values, his claim to immortality.

Mr. Fortune's infatuation with his granddaughter is clearly an extreme case of narcissism. He sees in her a physical and moral reflection of himself, and hates the others simply because they are so unlike himself. The old man sees dominion over the girl as an affirmation of his own identity, a perpetuation of his values in the face of Pitts' less pragmatic ideals. When Mary first shows a preference for the woods over her grandfather, he takes this as a repudiation of these values, and jealously seeks to regain her attention:

She stared across the lot where there was nothing but a profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds, and on across the red road, to the sullen line of black pine trees fringed on top with green. Beyond that line was a narrow gray-blue line of more distant woods and beyond that nothing but the sky, entirely blank except for one or two threadbare clouds. She looked into this scene as if it were a person she preferred to him.

"It's my lot, ain't it?" he asked. "Why are you so up-in-the-air about my selling my own lot?" (p. 347)

His first response is to try to see what there is in the woods that so captures the imagination of the girl. But because there is no economic value in looking at trees, he remains at a loss:

Every time he saw the same thing: woods—not a mountain, not a waterfall, not any kind of planted bush or flower, just woods. The sunlight was woven through them at that particular time of the afternoon so that every thin pine trunk stood out in all its nakedness. A pine trunk is a pine trunk, he said to himself, and anybody that wants to see one don't have to go far in this neighborhood. (p. 348)

Unable to understand the value of the trees to the Pitts', he resolves to win Mary back in the only way he knows how to deal with people, "by buying her something."
When Mr. Fortune views the woods with a final effort to apprehend the lure they have for the others, he is unsettled by a vision there of something he had previously failed to see. The afternoon sunlight causes him to see the trees as though they were bathed in blood, "as though someone were wounded behind the trees" (p. 348). His eyes behold an "unpleasant vision," "an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before." This image causes him to lose for a moment the sense of himself he had firmly held till that moment: "The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future . . ." (p. 349). What he senses here is a human presence in nature, and the human suffering he will cause by his decision to exploit this piece of the woods. This feeling is inimical to his economic view, causing a division within himself; and thus he immediately defines the vision as evil: "He returned to his bed and shut his eyes and against the closed lids hellish red trunks rose up in a black wood." That part of himself which sees in nature a value which cannot be bought and sold must be exorcised if he is to maintain his identity as "pure Fortune."

The actual battle between grandfather and granddaughter is Mr. Fortune's struggle to beat out of himself any such tendency to see in nature the "mystery" he had glimpsed. The description of the fight compares the girl first to "a small pack of demons" (p. 354), and then makes three references to Mary as an image of the old man: "He seemed to see his own face coming to bite him from several sides at once . . ."; "Pale identical eye looked into pale identical eye . . . The old man looked up into his own image"; "He continued to look at his conquered image . . ." (p. 355). As he kills her, Mr. Fortune answers Mary's assertion that she is "PURE Pitts" with his rejoinder that "There's not an ounce of Pitts in
me, " thereby settling the issue of his own identity once and for all. Having successfully repressed the "Pitts" in himself, the last vestige of human identity with nature, Mr. Fortune finds himself alienated from his surroundings, a lonely intruder in a place where he does not belong. Earlier, he had had an image of nature as a line of trees marching away from him, but was unmoved: "The red corrugated lake eased up to within fifty feet of the construction and was bordered on the other side by a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water and continue along the edge of the fields" (p. 355). But now, when the image recurs, he feels threatened and alone: "the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (p. 356). Cut off from nature by his own will, he now looks about "desperately for someone to help him." But his denial of Pitts identity, his repudiation of his human ties, leaves him irretrievably alone, to die contemplating the grotesque mechanical image of his own greed: "the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay" (p. 356).

Mr. Fortune is defeated because he has set himself apart from the humanity which is inescapably his. His devotion to an abstraction, Progress, is as self-destructive as other characters' fixations with edenic fantasies or demonic nightmares. Compelled to impose his identity upon nature by turning his woods into the town of Fortune, he loses the chance to find an identity in a more than nominal sense. At the end he has affirmed that he is a Fortune and that his piece of nature will some day become Fortune, Georgia. But the price he pays is the snuffing out of his last human tie, and with it life itself.
"The Partridge Festival" deals with an entire community's attempt to package nature, to establish a communal identity by selling its one natural resource, its azaleas. The result is catastrophic, as the town's commercial identity drives one of its members, Singleton, to a violent insistence upon his right not to wear the badge of its materialism, the azalea button. The story focuses upon Calhoun, a character in search of a mode of identity which transcends commercial values. Calhoun sees only two options for himself: to accede to the town's boosterism and his family's expectations of him as a salesman, or to place himself in judgment of the town's values by creating a self-identity as "rebel-artist-mystic."

Split within himself, he finds it necessary to repudiate the story's symbol of nature, the azaleas which the town is turning into cash. He first enters the town "as if he expected the profusion of azalea blossoms to have a lethal effect upon him" (p. 421). Alienated from nature, from the community, and from himself, he looks to Singleton as an inspiration and as the model for his own rebellion. Calhoun makes of the crazed murderer a martyr to be respected for having been "willing to suffer for the right to be himself" (p. 423). But while doing so he denies that his own real self is his salesman-self, and fails to recognize that his writing career is merely a pose he strikes to act out his feelings of being superior to his fellow townspeople.

Calhoun wants the town to recognize its communal guilt, to realize that its tradition of transforming a part of nature into "Our Money Crop" involves each of them in the murder of six citizens. But Calhoun's approach is to absolve himself of guilt by identifying with Singleton, whom he sees as the real victim of the town's commercial spirit. He makes of Singleton a symbol of his own rejection of the community's val-
ues, and hence thinks his affiliation with Singleton insures his innocence. But when he visits Singleton in the psychiatric ward and sees him for the unromantic and unheroic degenerate he is, Calhoun can no longer elude his own identity by borrowing an identity from the symbol of his rebellion. At the end, as Calhoun flees the image of his fallen hero, the story projects a picture of a de-humanized self facing a naked and uninviting landscape: "They scrambled into the car and the boy drove it away as if his heart were the motor and would never go fast enough. The sky was bone-white and the slick highway stretched before them like a piece of the earth's exposed nerve" (p. 143). This image suggests that once Calhoun has lost his symbolic alter-ego he is left naked and alone, ego-less. The starkness of the external world reflects the emptiness which is behind the eyes of the beholder. Thus, when he sees his own image mirrored in the "nakedness of the sky," it is the image of one who is not above the community, but rather one whose identity is very much determined by the group values he has failed to alter: "Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him" (p. 144).

Each of the stories discussed above concerns a character who loses his or her identity by becoming too closely affiliated with a symbol of an abstract value or condition. Rather than develop the self in relation to a community of fellow selves, these characters elude the human aspects of their own identity by seeing in a symbolic object or in an image of personal safety some quality with which they would like to identify. Thus,
false versions of the past, naive notions of individuality, romantic concepts of rural "goodness," and crass beliefs in purely monetary values obscure potentially redeeming family and community values. Because the things they seek or flee are fantasies or phantoms, such characters inevitably fail to achieve a balanced identity when their experience brings them into conflict with people whose fears and beliefs derive from a different set of symbols, whose images of goodness and evil differ, sometimes radically. In emphasizing the personal pitfalls of investing too much of oneself in symbolic quests or retreats, O'Connor's fiction suggests that safety and danger are to be sought and confronted in social settings. To be self-consciously associated with the non-human is to run the risk of compromising one's human identity, of becoming as dead as the things one loves or fears.
CHAPTER III

GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE IN THE SECULAR CITY:

THE SELF IN SOCIETY

In the last chapter I discussed what happens to characters who seek from the non-human world self-identifying symbols which allow them to elude important aspects of their true selves. Such characters become rigid symbolists; their fixed conceptions of the past, of nature, or of the objective world of the present become emblematic of the fears and beliefs which characterize the self. These characters suffer when it becomes apparent that the real world is not as single-faceted as their private symbology would have it. Furthermore, they are brought to a shattering realization that the search for the self in the non-human world is a mis-directed search, and their stories show that a pre-occupation with nature or with any objective emblem of identity which precludes involvement with a human community also precludes balanced selfhood for the individual. The implication is that self-realization means confronting one's identity within social contexts, that to know oneself is to know one's relations with other people rather than with nature or things.

The present chapter deals with self-identity in O'Connor's fiction as it is determined within social contexts. When her characters face the question of who they are in terms of the social roles they
play they come closer to confronting their true selves than when they focus upon symbols of their beliefs or fears. For the most part they still fail, as O'Connor's fiction is one of quest, of the search for the self. But when characters fail in social interactions they reveal more of what I see as the author's prescription for the healthy self. The gestures they make toward other people are reflected in the responses they evoke, and hence offer more insight than gestures made toward nature. Gilbert Muller states that O'Connor makes a connection between self-identity and society, but sees her emphasis to be upon society's effect on the individual: "Revealing the dilemmas in the quest for human identity, she shows how the lack of an integrated society—which for the author would be a Christian society—prevents the possibility of an integrated personality. All her grotesques eventually come to the realization that they are aspiring toward illusory points in a secular world."¹ I will show in this chapter that O'Connor's central concern is not so much with "a secular world," as with the individual's lack of balance in responding to the community, and with the necessity for such balance if there is to be such a thing as an integrated society. In her fiction we see characters playing social roles in four main areas of human interaction: race, class, sexuality, and family. Because their role playing is not a true expression of inner values, they lack coherence of personality, and find themselves in ambiguous relationships with others. As characters they come to resemble mosaics which have no bed of cement, no underlying means of preserving the illusion of unity they project. They choose a single aspect of the self, a single social role as an emblem of their total identity, and they in-

¹Gilbert Muller, Nightmares And Visions (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 46.
evitably suffer when they are called upon to enter a role which conflicts with the one which they think determines their identity.

Many of O'Connor's characters end up with this kind of one-dimensional identity, which by definition precludes human growth. And the reason for this is so common in her fiction that it becomes a kind of original sin all her characters commit, one which makes it impossible for them to attain self-insight through human interaction. They all begin with the basic assumption that the way to be themselves and to know themselves is to define themselves in terms of the "otherness" of those around them. In short, their social interactions are not geared toward bringing them into closer connection with others, but rather toward creating and solidifying distinctions between themselves and others. The basic strategy used to accomplish this end is to choose a single condition of one's existence, a condition with which one is happy, and to use that condition as the chief determinant of one's entire identity. Thus, to answer the question "who am I?" with the reply "I am white" can give an individual a degree of security in a society in which white skin brings with it a measure of privilege or power denied to those who are other than white. But in O'Connor's fiction this is false security; for the human condition is the essential condition, and will always take precedence over accidental conditions in an individual's search for identity.

In "The Artificial Nigger," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "Judgement Day" white characters have their basic assumptions about their positions in the social order shattered, in the last two cases violently, when they come face to face with black characters who refuse
to adapt themselves to a fixed racial order. In all three cases the white characters are shown to have predicated their very senses of self upon their racial identity, insisting that their "who-ness" be determined by their whiteness. They come to find that this identity is inadequate to sustain the self in a world where racial attitudes shift and where values based primarily upon race are transitory. Furthermore, and more significantly, each of the characters is forced to realize that the very concept of race is secondary to the larger issue of shared humanity; and that the experience of the black man in the South is intimately associated with the identity of all white people. In short, the main characters in these stories find that their proclamations of identity as white persons in a racist society are hollow, less compelling than the demands for human recognition of their black antagonists. Distinctions between white selves and black selves, these stories insist, are inessential distinctions; and the individual who seeks to fix upon racial stereotypes as modes of self-identification can only lose his or her identity when those stereotypes are challenged by the real humanity of others.

"Judgement Day," O'Connor's last story, is a revision of her earliest, "The Geranium." The revision is much more complicated than the original, both in form and in content. A comparison of the two stories shows that the author's consciousness of the relationship between social forms, particularly racial ones, and individual identity increased during the course of her writing career. In the earlier story this subject is treated peripherally, and geography is the primary determinant of the main character's identity. The revised version, though, explores directly and unequivocally the degree to which racial
identity influences the character's entire sense of self. The apocalyptic intensity of the latter version contrasts with the gently ironic tone of the original, showing that O'Connor came to realize that race has a more telling impact upon identity than region.

The basic situation is the same in both stories. Old Dudley and Tanner have both been uprooted from rural Southern locales, in the name of family unity, to live in New York City, a place they find confusing and alienating. Each has had to leave behind a long-standing relationship with a black friend to live with a daughter he no longer feels close to, both friendships having been predicated upon the willing subservience of the black man. Finally, each discovers living in the daughter's apartment building another black man; and each expects the Northern black to respond to him as would a black side-kick in Georgia. From here, the stories part company, as in "The Geranium" the Northern black is a kindly figure, to the point of seeming patronizing to the seemingly senile old man. His condescension disrupts Old Dudley's sense of identity; it is the ultimate sign that he is in foreign soil, and his anachronistic attitudes prevent him from being transplanted successfully. The story shows his racism to be obsolete, the harmless bickering of a cantankerous old man. But in "Judgement Day" there is an apocalyptic sense that when a racial attitude becomes the sole determinant of identity, the self can only shatter when that attitude is seriously challenged. This version of the story contains a third black figure, Foley, who represents a new role, less subservient, for a black in Southern society. Foley is as much a type as Parrum; but the type is so antithetical to that of the side-kick that Foley begins to unseat Tanner's self-image as he literally forces him to vacate his squatter's
hut. Another significant difference between the stories is that the
Northern black man in "Judgement Day" is actively hostile to Tanner's
racist advances, finally becoming the instrument of his violent death.

The strokes that both men suffer are fitting metaphors for their
moral maladies. Both are paralyzed, fossilized by the rigid identities
they insist upon. Whereas the first story allows its character the
geranium as a symbol of his displaced identity and of his inability to
be re-rooted in alien soil, "Judgement Day" forces Tanner to confront
his past and his own identity through a series of memories, all focusing
upon past interactions with blacks. His earliest such memory is of his
days as a foreman for a black lumber gang. There he was known as one
who knew how to "handle" blacks: his identity derived from his racial
power over others. That he has lost this power is the crisis of Tanner's
old age in a strange city. His daughter sums up his condition when she
uses the past tense in reference to Tanner's identity: "He was some­
body when he was somebody" (p. 532). That Tanner's power and consequent
identity derived purely from skin color and not from personal attributes
becomes apparent when he forces Parrum to acknowledge his superiority,
after having given him a pair of lensless glasses to wear as the badge
of his new way of seeing:

"What you see through those glasses?"
"See a man."
"What kind of a man?"
"See the man make theseyer glasses."
"Is he white or black?"
"He white!" The Negro said as if only at that moment was his
vision sufficiently improved to detect it. "Yessuh, he white!" he
said.
"Well, you treat him like he was white," Tanner said. (p. 539)

At this point Tanner's identity is established, and it is an artificial
mode of identification. Rather than his existence as a man or the actions he performs, the accident of his skin color becomes the badge of Tanner's selfhood.

Because the identity he asserts is purely emblematic, Tanner loses his power in his next two confrontations with blacks, each of whom insists upon seeing Tanner through the lens of his own racial vision. When Foley approaches the squatter's shack, Tanner knows he is defenseless: "Be prepared, because you ain't got a thing to hold up to him but the skin you come in, and that's no more use to you than what a snake would shed" (p. 535). And when the black man and woman in New York look at Tanner they do not see his skin at all, as they type him by other aspects of his appearance. He, meanwhile, is "feigning invisibility" because he now knows that the identity he had once established means nothing in a foreign place and time:  

The Negro did not take a step or answer. His eyes began to move. They moved from the top of his black hat, down to the collarless blue shirt, neatly buttoned at the neck, down the faded galluses to the gray trousers and the high-top shoes and up again, very slowly, while some unfathomable dead-cold rage seemed to stiffen and shrink him. (p. 544)

The phrase "feigning invisibility" is almost certainly an ironic reference to Ralph Ellison's notion that invisibility is both a condition imposed upon blacks by whites in a racially stratified society, and a mode of self-identification used by blacks to insure survival in a racist culture. Here, a white character is rendered invisible by blacks when they see only the clothes he wears. But his attempt to use invisibility backfires because his black antagonist refuses to play the complementary role, which would mean a denial of his identity as well as that of Tanner. Even if O'Connor was unfamiliar with Ellison's Invisible Man, the phrase is crucial to an understanding of Tanner's progressive loss of self. Having relied upon skin color as the sole basis for identity, he now has no recourse other than to become a non-entity when skin color is no longer the badge of a worthwhile self.
When the black man calls him a "wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard," Tanner is incredulous that the racial tables have turned so drastically. His response is to rely upon old racial realities as he sarcastically reminds his antagonist of their respective skin colors: "The old man felt his heart inside him hard and tough as an oak knot. 'And you ain't black,' he said, 'and I ain't white'" (p. 545). In his dealings with this stranger, Tanner seeks to re-establish his lost sense of self by renewing contact with a black man on the same terms as those of the relationship which had given him the strongest sense of self-worth, that which he had had with Parrum. With Parrum he had dictated the terms of the relationship by denying his own essential humanity. In New York he attempts to force the black man to deny his human identity, to fit into the mold of a "South Alabama Nigger."

Because he has not cultivated a fully human identity, Tanner is defeated when he is removed from the social and geographic contexts which had at one time allowed him personal power through racial identity. His initial failure occurs at the moment when he denies that Parrum has recognized in him a human identity:

The Negro reached for the glasses. He attached the bows carefully behind his ears and looked forth. He peered this way and that with exaggerated solemnity. And then he looked directly at Tanner and grinned, or grimaced, Tanner could not tell which, but he had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. This vision failed him before he could decipher it. (pp. 538-39)

By failing to decipher this image of himself reflected in the other, Tanner denies the "clownishness and captivity" that are an inescapable condition of being human. Rather, he chooses a self-identity based upon whatever power he has to render others clown-like and captive. What he
does not see is that by predicking his selfhood upon racial stereotypes he has become a captive of his own severely limited vision, and thus has rendered himself more clown-like than his black double. At the end he is left with no option but to wish that he were able to undo the effects of the racial pride he is now willing to swallow: "If he had known it was a question of this--sitting here looking out this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a nigger, he would have run the still for the nigger. He would have been a nigger's white nigger any day" (p. 540). Tanner, in short, learns that to be enslaved by one's own self-limiting world-view is worse than the kind of slavery he had once been able to force upon others. But his realization comes too late, and he is free only to struggle to return to the soil of Corinth, Georgia to regain in death the roots of the self he has lost in life.

Tanner's failure to decipher the vision of self he sees reflected in Parrum's face is reminiscent of Mrs. Chestny's fleeting vision of herself in her black antagonist. When this black woman appears on the bus wearing the same absurd hat which Mrs. Chestny has claimed as the badge of her own identity, Julian correctly calls the woman his mother's "black double." Mrs. Chestny fails to see herself in the other, just as Julian fails to see the woman's little boy as his black double. In all three cases the failure to see the self mirrored in the black image leads to a personal apocalypse for the white character, as each is thrust violently from the false security of an identity which was based upon a racial stereotype. Because they have denied their "clownishness and captivity" by projecting these qualities upon black figures and hence defining them as "other," the white characters in these stories are unable to cope with
these conditions when they are thrust upon them by forces they cannot control. All three respond by looking to a lost past for the roots of an identity to help them face the uncertainties of a world they had thought was ordered along racial lines, but whose racial order is in fact constantly in flux. Thus, Tanner's vision of himself popping out of his coffin to Parrum's delight, and Mrs. Chestny's hallucination that she is in the arms of her black mammy both indicate the need for the self to have relationships which derive from mutual recognition of human worth, just as does Julian's plaintive call to his "mamma." But because for Tanner and Mrs. Chestny the "model" relationship had been based upon the accidentals of racial identity, because it had derived more from social role than from underlying human values, the characters suffer breakdowns of the self when they discover that the roles are no longer being played, that they can no longer deny their own clownishness and captivity by projecting them on to others.

The story which deals most explicitly with racial identity and the quest for the self is "The Artificial Nigger." In an earlier discussion of this story I showed how its ironic treatment of the characters and of their return home rendered dubious their claims to salvation. Despite the story's title and central events, critics have failed to stress that the essence of the characters' urban experience is self-exploration through racial confrontation. Because of his failure to

3 Preston Browning, Flannery O'Connor (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 65-67, is an exception. He discusses the importance of the symbolic role blacks play in this story. However, he sees blacks more as representatives of all that is "incalculable and mysterious" than as people whose race renders them socially different from the Heads. Similarly, Martin (pp. 113-15) sees the Heads' encounter with blacks to be important because the encounter deflates the false humility of Mr. Head.
reach a new stage of racial awareness and subsequent self-awareness Mr. Head's "redemption" is problematic. In his theology the essential condition for redemption is humility, and the humility he feels at the end of the story is highly qualified: it does not alter his sense of racial superiority. Because Nelson fails to transcend his grandfather's myopic racial vision he fails to grow into an independent adult self. When he returns home he has not learned that the wisdom of the older man is limited; but rather he sees their trip to the city as a justification of that wisdom.

The avowed purpose for the Heads' trip to Atlanta is for Nelson to develop a moral sense, which Mr. Head would call humility. In short, Nelson is to grow into an adult self by learning in the city who he is in relation to the rest of creation. For both characters the meaning of the city, the knowledge it contains that can turn children into adults, is closely related to the fact that black people live there. When Nelson claims that he has probably seen blacks when he lived in the city as an infant, Mr. Head rebukes him: "If you had seen one you didn't know what he was . . . A six-month old child don't know a nigger from anybody else" (p. 252). The moral sense that the old man would teach the boy is in fact the prevailing racial vision of his time and place. Paradoxically, Mr. Head would see racial superiority as the basis for humility. To become an adult, Nelson must learn to distinguish "a nigger from anybody else;" and their first encounter with a black man impresses upon him society's mode of determining identity. Like Parrum in "Judgement Day," Nelson first sees in the man on the train his essential humanity, but is corrected and told to see first an accidental, the man's race:
'What was that?' he asked.
'A man,' the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted.
'What kind of a man?' Mr. Head persisted...
'A fat man,' Nelson said. He was beginning to feel that he had better be cautious.
'You don't know what kind?' Mr. Head said in a final tone.
'An old man,' the boy said and had a sudden foreboding that he was not going to enjoy the day.
'That was a nigger,' Mr. Head said and sat back.
Nelson jumped up on the seat and stood looking backward to the end of the car but the Negro had gone. (p. 255)

After this encounter, Nelson accedes to his grandfather's attitude toward blacks, failing to grow beyond the limitations the old man would impose upon him.

This initial encounter leaves Nelson disoriented, but it has no effect on the grandfather, whose ignorance of social forms leaves him happily unaware of the absurd figure he strikes when they enter the alien world of the dining car. It is the Heads who are out of place in this socially stratified world, but Mr. Head's oblique moral vision allows him to maintain his superior self-image because of his racial identity. Thus, when he comments of the black section of the car that "They rope them off," he is unaware that he is being roped out. And when the Heads are excluded from the forbidden world of the kitchen (by a black man), the old man responds by disguising his displacement and trying to exercise control over an increasingly complicated social situation by making a joke of the whole matter. Again Nelson fails to grow, as he continues to revert to his appointed role of ignorant youth being guided by wise old man: "He realized that the old man would be his only support in the strange place they were approaching. He would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever lost from his grandfather. A terrible excitement shook him and he wanted to take hold of Mr. Head's coat and
hold on like a child" (p. 257).

Since being lost is Mr. Head's greatest fear, the experience of losing one's way becomes his metaphor for hell. Thus, he teaches Nelson to think of the city sewer system as "the entrance to hell" (p. 259). The sewer is made up of "endless pitchblack tunnels," and is to be feared because a man might "slide into it" unawares and "be sucked down" against his will. When the two do become lost in the black section of the city, Nelson feels a powerful attraction toward that which he had been taught to fear. His wanting to be embraced by the black woman, to enter the "pitchblack tunnel" of her being, is a momentary repudiation of the old man's simplistic and repressive lesson that being lost in blackness is the equivalent of being in hell. The sensual experience he unconsciously longs for but has been denied in the safe and celibate world of their home, would certainly render him lost. But at the same time, the experience of physical contact with a being whom the grandfather's morality has labeled as "other" clearly would have filled a primal need, one which the grandfather's intervening presence leaves unfilled: "Nelson would have collapsed at her feet if Mr. Head had not pulled him roughly away. 'You act like you don't have any sense!' the old man growled" (p. 262). To have "sense," to be "saved," means to protect the self against the foreign, in this case the black and the female. The wisdom and the moral intelligence of Mr. Head are neatly summed up on the fortune card from the penny weighing machine: "Beware of dark women."

The entire section of the story which deals with the black community contrasts the sense of kinship shared by the blacks with the alienation felt by the white intruders. The poverty of the people and
the shabbiness of their houses are vividly described; but the streets
teen with life and exude a sense of shared humanity from which the Heads
are excluded by their sense of superiority:

'Well come on and we'll go somewheres else,' Mr. Head said. 'We
didn't come to look at niggers,' and they turned down another street
but they continued to see Negroes everywhere. Nelson's skin began
to prickle and they stepped along at a faster pace in order to leave
the neighborhood as soon as possible. There were colored men in
their undershirts standing in the doors and colored women rocking
on the sagging porches. Colored children played in the gutters and
stopped what they were doing to look at them. Before long they
passed rows of stores with colored customers in them but they didn't
pause at the entrances of these. Black eyes in black faces were
watching them from every direction. 'Yes,' Mr. Head said, 'this is
where you were born—right here with all these niggers.' (p. 260)

When Mr. Head characterizes this neighborhood as a "nigger heaven" he is
associating it with the hell of the sewer tunnel. It is this hell which
Nelson longs to enter through the woman's black eyes and through her
imagined embrace, and from which he is saved by the old man's interven-
tion. Nelson's failure to recognize and accept affinity with this human
community means that he recognizes and accepts white society's definition
of order and, by inference, its concept of heaven. Unlike Huck Finn,
who was able in spite of himself to repudiate a societal dictum that the
received racial mores were the means to personal salvation, Nelson can-
not grow beyond his grandfather's limited notions of order and of re-
demption.

In stark contrast to the black community is the white suburb in-
to which they wander after Mr. Head has denied his kinship with Nelson.
The description of the place as cold and dehumanized makes it seem much
more hellish than the black section of town:

The sun dropped down behind a row of houses and hardly noticing,
they passed into an elegant suburban section where mansions were
set back from the road by lawns with birdbaths on them. Here ev-
erything was entirely deserted. For blocks they didn't even pass
a dog. The big white houses were like partially submerged icebergs
in the distance. There were no sidewalks, only drives, and these
wound around and around in ridiculous endless circles. Nelson made
no move to come nearer to Mr. Head. The old man felt that if he
saw a sewer entrance he would drop down into it and let himself be
carried away. (p. 267)

The impersonality and coldness of the area mirror the feelings of both
characters. Mr. Head feels that his perfidy has made him worthy of
damnation: "He knew now that he was wandering into a black strange
place where nothing was like it had ever been before." And Nelson feels
that his grandfather has denied him the warmth and nourishment needed
to sustain him in a strange and lonely world: "As for Nelson, his mind
had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to
preserve it intact to present at the final judgment. He walked without
looking to one side or the other, but every now and then his mouth would
twitch and this was when he felt, from some remote place inside himself,
a black mysterious form reach up as if it would melt his frozen vision
in one hot grasp." The black mysterious form can only represent the
feelings Nelson experienced with the black woman: feelings which would
have him deny differences between himself and another, emotions which
would melt the barriers the self erects to protect against the danger
of close contact with other selves. But Nelson has learned to repress
this feeling and he is unprepared to thaw the ice of human isolation by
forgiving the old man's deed: "The child was standing about ten feet
away, his face bloodless under the gray hat. His eyes were triumphant-
ly cold. There was no light in them, no feeling, no interest. He was
merely there, a small figure, waiting" (p. 268).

In the midst of this upper-middle class suburb, this white man's
heaven which is in fact hell for Mr. Head, the characters confront once again an image of blackness and are given a final chance to break the barriers separating them from one another and from others. What they see in the statue of the black man is the perfect image of "clownishness and captivity," of absurdity and tragedy: "the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence that curved around a wide lawn. The Negro was about Nelson's size and he was pitched forward at an unsteady angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon" (p. 268). The statue is, of course, an image of themselves, and ultimately of all humans. This they only partially decipher. Like Tanner and Mrs. Chestny, they see without fully understanding what they see; and it is left to the narrative voice to insure that the reader will capture what the characters miss: "Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man. They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (p. 269). That their vision dissolves the differences between them indicates that they "decipher" more than Tanner and Mrs. Chestny; and thus the lesson is partially redemptive, in so far as it re-unites the old man and the boy. But it fails to give them a larger sense of their common identity with other defeated humans, in particular with the impoverished blacks whose neighborhood they have just left. Mr. Head's characteristic use of humor ("They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.") and his egotistic feeling that he has been saved outweigh the minor feeling of humiliation
he has, indicating that he has in fact failed to grow into a more balanced self. Mr. Head's pithy comment indicates that he is still held captive by his racial stereotypes. The fact that they confront an artificial black man, an image which fulfills their own racial expectations, allows the Heads to deny the importance of the ambiguous experiences they had with real black people in the city. Through the image they revert to their earlier sense of racial superiority and to the false security which was based upon their racial otherness. Thus they return home with their family unit intact, but without the larger sense of family which the story suggests is the basis for a full sense of self.

Each attempt by an individual to attain self-identity or to project a self-image through a social form is in fact an attempt to fit the self into a pre-existing order to derive some degree of power or control from that order. O'Connor's characters are usually outsiders, either because they actually exist on the periphery of social respectability and power or because they sense that the respectability and power they possess are being threatened by social change, which they define as chaos. Characters who see their socio-economic class as the primary determinant of personal identity take comfort from the thought that their niche on the social ladder allows them some insight into who they are, if only indirectly, by showing themselves and the world who they are not. But the order which is imaged in the concept of a social ladder is in fact chaos, for it is always subjectively determined. There are as many versions of the social ladder as there are potential climbers. This is clearly shown in "Revelation," when Mrs. Turpin is knocked off of her imagined ladder, only to have the character she most despises
ape her self-gratifying feeling that she is not the lowest of humanity: "I thank Gawd," the white-trash woman said fervently, 'I ain't a lunatic.' Like Mrs. Turpin, many characters assume that social stratification is a true form of order, one that can provide an adequate basis for self-identification. When a character becomes too committed to this illusion, he or she loses a coherent sense of self, for social structure in O'Connor's world is always a mere attempt at order, and not an absolute form of order.

"Revelation" contains O'Connor's fullest and most direct treatment of social class as it affects personal identity. Hendin correctly characterizes this story as being "about structure—about ways of relating the self to the world around it and even of looking into the nature of the self." The main character, Mrs. Turpin, suffers a shocking jolt to her ego when her concept of a class-ordered human society is called into doubt by the suggestion that true Christian belief, which she also professes, is in fact antithetical to a rigid class structure. Her sense of self has been predicated upon the notion that religion and social class are interconnected, and that she is among the elect, both spiritually and socially. Her mental discussions with Jesus about her class status show how closely related are her Calvinistic religious vision and her neo-aristocratic social views. Social elitism becomes her metaphor for a simplistic and self-centered eschatology when the radio blares out one of her favorite hymns and she fills in the last line: "And wona these days I know I'll we-era crown" (p. 490). Later, the radio plays a more egalitarian song, and although she doesn't know the words, she allows its message to bolster her sense of noblesse oblige:

[Hendin, p. 121.]
"Mrs. Turpin didn't catch every word but she caught enough to agree with the spirit of the song and it turned her thoughts sober. To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent" (p. 497). This self-appraisal is in stark contrast to her sneering attitude toward the poorer people actually present with her in the room. It also contrasts with her attempts to visualize the precise nature of an elitist social order she implicitly accepts. Unable to account for such anomalies as black dentists and land owners, she resolves the dilemma by resorting to the ultimate fascist solution to social disorder: "Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and rolling around in her head, and she would dream they were all cramped in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (p. 492).

When Mrs. Turpin's implicit belief in social order is shattered by the college girl's irrational behavior, she is forced to find another source of order to determine her self-identity. That she is incapable of falling back upon an inner order is clear from her response, which is to look around the room rather than into herself. After the attack, the story abounds in images of seeing, as Mrs. Turpin's self-displacement is reflected in her microscopic and telescopic vision. Her inner state is further mirrored in the surrealistic metaphor of a dream of paralysis, which indicates that she is losing all capacity to cope with the outside world even in the most basic way, by making physical contact with objects and people around her: "she felt like some one trying to catch a train in a dream, when everything moves in slow motion and the faster you try to run the slower you go" (p. 500). She is out of touch
with her own body: "Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh" (p. 500); and she cannot reach out to Claud because her attention is drawn irresistibly to the girl. That Hendin is correct in calling the girl Mrs. Turpin's "demonic double" is supported by the fact that the girl "knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" (p. 500). Time, place, and especially condition are the very cornerstones of Mrs. Turpin's self-image, the facade she uses to insulate her real self from the chaos of the outside world. That the girl's message appeals to Mrs. Turpin on a plane beyond these things indicates that the message has attacked her from within, and thus her efforts to elude her real self are of no avail. The message, that Mrs. Turpin is "an old wart hog" from hell, repudiates her feeling that she has been saved both spiritually and socially, thereby crushing the ego which had been projected on the basis of this dual election.

When the Turpins leave the doctor's office Mrs. Turpin continues to look outside of herself for some means of countering the self-displacement caused by the girl's message. Her inability to find external order is reflected in the way in which she now views the domesticated landscape:

The land sloped gracefully down through a field dotted with lavender weeds and at the start of the rise their small yellow frame house, with its little flower beds spread out around it like a fancy apron, sat primly in its accustomed place between two giant hickory trees. She would not have been startled to see a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys. (p. 502)

---

5 Hendin, p. 127.
Wounded within herself, Mrs. Turpin projects her hurt, her disorder, onto the outside world. At home, she attempts to sleep (p. 502); she looks to her husband for solace (p. 503); and she tries to establish meaningful contact with the black hands (p. 504). But each attempt to re-order the world is a failure, because each deals with things outside the self, while the problem is within. Finally Mrs. Turpin resolves to meet the enemy on his own grounds, visiting the pig parlour to find out the answers to the questions about who and what she is: "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (p. 506). The very terms of the questions indicate that she still maintains rigid and extreme options for the self: either she is the respectable and decent Mrs. Turpin or she is a pig; she is either saved or satanic. Her image of social order is cast in the same terms as always; she still believes there is a ladder, a hierarchy, even if she must occupy the bottom rung: "Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom" (p. 507).

Mrs. Turpin's final vision of earthly order is in fact one of chaos only partially ordered. The story carefully prepares the way for the vision, as it shows the character to be suffering a gradual breakdown of her old rigid pre-conceptions. Mrs. Turpin's deteriorating emotional state is paralleled by the rapidly encroaching dusk, as the sunlight's intensity brings about a heightened intensity of consciousness and of vision (pp. 507-08). The character, who has been on the verge of hallucination, is now ready to discard her view of the world as fundamentally dichotomous as she addresses the divine in the porcine, demanding of God some sign of power and identity: "A final surge of fury shook
her and she roared, 'Who do you think you are?" (p. 507). But the next line reverses the question to a more important consideration, as the words echo back to the questioner: "The question ... returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood" (pp. 507-08). Who Mrs. Turpin thinks she is is the story's central concern; and it is only when she ceases to think in terms of divine justification for her social elitism that she can begin to know who and what she is.

The crucial passage about the answer coming to Mrs. Turpin from beyond the woods has led critics to see the story as an explicit statement about the workings of grace in nature. Ignoring the wording of the phrase "the question ... returned to her clearly like an answer," most critics have considered "the answer" to be Mrs. Turpin's ensuing vision. But the vision comes only after the character perceives two images from the real world, and these images are crucial to an understanding of Mrs. Turpin's imagined version of social and eschatological order. The first image is that of her husband's truck, which becomes for her a symbol of human frailty and vulnerability: "A tiny truck, Claud's, appeared on the highway, heading rapidly out of sight. Its gears scraped thinly. It looked like a child's toy. At any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road" (p. 508). This sense of human smallness echoes an earlier image of the sun overlooking the scene "like a farmer inspecting his hogs" (p. 507). In the larger scheme of things, these images suggest, the human social order is insignificant, for Claud, the blacks, the pigs, and Mrs. Turpin are all equally minute. For every

---

6 See Eggenschwiler, p. 144; Feeley, p. 153; Walters, p. 112; and Driskell and Brittain, pp. 131-32.
person, object, and creature, there is another around the next bend waiting to scatter its brains.

Threatened by this image of frailty, Mrs. Turpin next faces another when she looks at the pigs she has been tormenting. Looking "as if through the very heart of mystery," as if "she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge," she finds in the pig pen the antithesis of the earlier image of weakness and isolation: "They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life" (p. 508). What she sees is a group of creatures gathered in a common bond of mutual protection and comfort from an outside threat, herself. The pigs have no consciousness of order or hierarchy, of election or damnation; only an instinct for kinship and survival. These qualities are lost when the social order is rigidly determined by class status; and the individual cannot survive whose self is predicated upon this artificial order.

Prepared by these images of weakness through isolation, and of strength through community, Mrs. Turpin receives her ultimate vision of social order. Not a ladder, the central image is that of a swinging bridge, ever in motion. The heaven to which it reaches accepts all comers, including "whole companies of white-trash, . . . bands of black niggers, . . . and battalions of freaks and lunatics," and finally "the tribe of people" to which she and Claud belong. This startling image shows humanity freed from the repressive forces of the super-ego, of "good order and common sense and respectable behavior," as they proceed "shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs." It is the antithesis of the image of the boxcar of people rolling toward the ovens of fascism.
in the name of social order. It presents Mrs. Turpin with a new es-
chatology, and by inference with a new sociology: "election" is a myth;
all are called and all are chosen. The purgatorial fires of the vision
burn away only the accidentals of class status, not the essentials of
the human condition. Thus, the "virtues" of the white protestant elect,
the social and cultural differences which set them apart from the masses,
are burned away.

In Chapter Two I showed how the main characters of "Greenleaf,"
"The Displaced Person," and "A Circle In The Fire" suffer breakdowns of
the self because they fail to relate on a human level with less fortun-
ate characters. Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope, and Mrs. McIntyre are all widowed
farm owners with black and white help to oversee, and all are disoriented
when larger forces impinge upon their concepts of social order. Each
of these stories contains the image of the cattle-car of humanity as a
character's metaphor for the chaos which results from the lack of a
clearly defined social and racial class structure, and in each story
the main character is defeated when her rigid acceptance of class iden-
tity leads to a denial of deeper human values and impulses. They define
themselves by what they own and not by who they are. Thus, their iden-
tity forces them to cut themselves off from those who lack what they have
by identifying those others as "trash," as "niggers," or as foreigners.
But by labelling others as outsiders, they are in fact placing themselves
outside a human sphere of values, thereby committing what is in O'Connor's

7Eggenschwiler (p. 42) notes the recurrence of this image, but
mistakenly sees it as an indication that what these characters fear is
that a fascist order will be imposed upon society. I think the real
fear the image reveals is that which the fascist had, namely that racial
and class disorganization will lead to social chaos.
world the ultimate sin. That the sin of denying another's humanity harms the self more than the other is illustrated by Mrs. Shortley's stroke and by Mrs. McIntyre's paralysis. Neither can cope with the knowledge that Guizac's innate ability is more integral to his identity than his ethnic origin. Similarly, the irrepressible vitality of the Greenleafs and the undeniable longing for home of the Powell boy destroy the very foundations of Mrs. May's and Mrs. Cope's psyches. This, these stories suggest, is inevitable, for the social ladder is an image of illusory order. It is never fixed, but shifts with the forces of social change and crumbles when it conflicts with compelling human needs. Thus, when the self becomes rigid by fixing upon this image as though it were permanent, the ensuing conflict fragments the characters who have no deeper self-defining values.

One of the more noticeable features of O'Connor's fictional world is its total lack of anything resembling a satisfying sexual relationship. Of her sexually aware characters two are nymphomaniacs, one a dirty old man, one a compulsive fornicator, one a failed seductress, and one a victim of homosexual rape. When sexual interactions are dealt with explicitly, and they rarely are, human sexuality is reduced at its best to the clumsy motions of an adolescent, and at its worst to the level of a dirty joke. Because so many of her characters are afflicted with twisted bodies, and because her fiction seems to treat sexuality as though it were a debasement of humanity, some critics have referred to her vision as Jansenistic, and others as Manichean. But there is

---

8Miles Orvell, Invisible Parade (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 22, 59, notes that O'Connor had a "temperamental af-
a tremendous risk of confusing the fictional world with the writer's world-view. The fact is that O'Connor was writing about a world imbued with Manichean principles. There is a duality of body and spirit in her works because her characters see such a duality, and not necessarily because she did. Indeed, it can be said that the fundamental task of the typical O'Connor character is to achieve unity of self in the face of tremendous odds: he or she must go against the grain of the entire tradition of Calvinistic Protestantism or Jansenistic Catholicism if he or she is to see the self as an integral whole, and not as a collection of conflicting parts. Because she deals so often with characters whose world-views are essentially Manichean, one would have to grant that O'Connor's own vision was affected by the Jansenistic bias of her Irish Catholicism. However, the struggles she has her characters experience in their various quests to become whole suggest that she herself was unwilling to maintain a strictly dualistic view of human identity.

Because characters accept an implicit division of the self into good and bad parts or tendencies, the problem of human sexuality and its implications for the self is treated most commonly in these stories in terms of characters' repression of the sexual drive. Mrs. May and Nelson are two cases in point. Her denial of the creative life forces represented by the bull's overt sexuality is her attempt to preserve her fast-fading order from the potential chaos of procreation. Similarly, Nelson's resistance to the temptation to embrace the black woman and his resolve to stay out of the city are victories of the super-ego in

finity with Jansenism." See also Hendin (pp. 62-96), who sees throughout A Good Man Is Hard To Find strong Manichean tendencies. Eggenschwiler (p. 112) applies the term, although in a qualified sense.
its attempt to protect the self from getting "lost" in the dark tunnels of the libido. This kind of continued emphasis upon the repression of the sex drive accounts to a large degree for the characters' inability to develop into balanced adult selves. Denying that they are sexual beings, or unable to find appropriate outlets for their sexual energies, they remain only partially human, or become grotesquely distorted into caricatures of humanity.

An early work, "The Crop," deals with a would-be writer of gothic romance fiction whose lack of sexual expression has doomed her to an existence in which the only real vitality is that which she imagines. The character has two selves: that of the real Miss Willerton, a forty-one year old spinster whose life ventures are to clean the table and to shop for groceries; and that of the fictional "Willie," earthmother and wife of a nobly savage share-cropper. As a writer, Miss Willerton is clearly drawn to male characters who embody the sexual energy she lacks: "great tall fellows" (p. 34), "the Irish! . . . full of spirit—red-haired, with broad shoulders and great, drooping mustaches" (p. 41), and especially Lot Mottum, who becomes her imaginary lover:

Lot would be tall, stooped, and shaggy but with sad eyes that made him look like a gentleman in spite of his red neck and big fumbling hands. He'd have straight teeth and, to indicate he had some spirit, red hair. His clothes would hang on him but he'd wear them nonchalantly like they were part of his skin. (p. 37)

But the super ego is strong and firmly implanted, and Miss Willerton is sexually constrained even in her writing: "She liked to write passionate scenes best of all, but when she came to write them, she always began to feel peculiar and to wonder what the family would say when they read them" (p. 36).
The story contrasts the images of fertility from Miss Willerton's story within a story (rain, crop, baby, flowers), with the crumbs on the kitchen table and the pullet eggs at the grocer's, images of the sterility of her real life. But the narrative makes it clear that the sterility of the real world is as much a function of the character's imagination as is the fertility of her fictional world. Because she has invested all her vitality in an imagined existence, an unattainable ideal, she is incapable of finding any vitality in the real world. The dull, orderly, and sterile family with which she lives causes her to see dullness and sterility even in a world which in fact teems with life:

All around her it was the same—sidewalks full of people scurrying about with their hands full of little packages and their minds full of little packages—that woman there with the child on the leash, pulling him, jerking him, dragging him away from a window with a jack-o-lantern in it; she would probably be pulling and jerking him the rest of her life. And there was another, dropping a shopping bag all over the street, and another wiping a child's nose, and up the street an old woman was coming with three grandchildren jumping all over her, and behind them was a couple walking too close for refinement. (p. 41)

Because they fall short of her romantic ideal she perceives these generations of people as stupid, inane, sickly, and ugly. Ironicaly, the man she sees is a real-life version of the idealized Lot she loves:

"The man was long and wasted and shaggy. His shoulders were stooped and there were yellow knots along the side of his large, red neck. His hands fumbled stupidly with the girl's as they slumped along and once or twice he smiled sickly at her and Miss Willerton could see that he had straight teeth and sad eyes and a rash over his forehead" (p. 41). Miss Willerton cannot accept the yellow knot and the rash, the inevitable imperfections of the human body. Consequently she represses her sexual attrac-
tions, channeling them into her fiction. Imagining herself to be Lot's wife, she turns herself into a virtual pillar of salt by leading a life devoid of human contact.

In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" O'Connor returns to the issue of bodily imperfection and its impact upon the self. Dealing as it does with an adolescent Catholic girl's initiation into the world of sexual knowledge, this story serves to illustrate the author's sense of the self at a stage of development when sexuality is at once a most important determinant of personal identity and the source of much ambivalence about that identity. This character's religion is another important source of self-identity; and the conflict between religious training and sexual awareness is great, as she attempts to order the chaos of her sexual awakening through the abstract symbolism of the Catholic Church's teachings about the Incarnation. The standard critical reading of the story sees the girl's final vision of the sun as an elevated Host drenched in blood as O'Connor's affirmation of the church's teaching that the human body is "a temple of the Holy Ghost" and that Christ's Incarnation restored to the human body the sacredness it had.

The girl's ambivalence about the human body reflects a split between the official Catholic teaching that the body is in fact "a temple of the Holy Ghost" because Christ assumed human form to expiate the sin of Adam, and the more pervasive traditional belief that concupiscence renders the body a pitfall and a trap, a prison which hinders the self from attaining its true destiny, salvation through the soul's escape from the body. A religious sensibility derived from the first view would see the Incarnation as the central event of Christianity, while that which derives from the latter would see the Crucifixion and Resurrection as the central events. An individual whose personal identity derives from the first view would logically accept the body as an integral part of the self, while one who measures the self against the latter view will inevitably suffer from a split within the self, as he or she must struggle to defeat innately human forces and feelings. The girl of this story is such a person. Her iconography focuses upon martyrdom and the Crucifixion, while the incarnation remains for her an abstraction.
lost in Adam's fall. But the story's imagery indicates that this vision does not resolve for the character the problem of her own bodily identity and that of others. She fails to come to terms with the knowledge that her own body is neither sacred nor profane; and because her religious belief presents her with just these two options, she is left with no real means of determining how her new-found sexual awareness affects her identity as a human self. Her religious vision is abstract, and she cannot adapt it to the concrete reality of her own flawed body and of the bodily ugliness she sees.

The unnamed girl of the story is shown to be an outsider when her older cousins come to visit. Because they are two years further on in their development into sexually aware women, they condescend to her as a mere child. She in turn asserts her self-worth by viewing them and all the others as foolish and, more to the point, as ugly. Through her eyes the narrator describes each other member of the household, emphasizing their physical imperfections. Her own face is characterized by "fat cheeks" and braces which "glared like tin," but to compensate for her feelings of exclusion she fixes upon the ugliness of others, to the extent that physical flaws become for her a symbol of the profanity of the human body. Her need for acceptance causes her to embrace the phrase the girls have learned at school: "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if someone had given her a present" (p. 238). But the abstract religious concept is insufficient to meet her needs, and is incompatible with the reality of the marred "temples" she sees around her.

10See Eggenschwiler, pp. 23, 24; Walters, pp. 80, 81; Driskell and Britain, pp. 73, 74; and Feeley, pp. 135-138.
Thus, she day-dreams of herself, first as war hero and then as martyr (pp. 239, 240), giving herself the importance she lacks in real life and purging the body of its flaws. Significantly, part of her first dream has her rejecting the marital advances of the Wilkens boys: her ideal is to be wanted and to be celibate. Her fascination with the image of her own martyrdom, and her fixation upon the image of Christ "on the long journey to Calvary, crushed three times on the rough cross" (p. 244), are her imagined means of making sacred the human body, which she has found to be profane. Rather than accept the body as a "temple," as inherently good, she focuses her attention upon the imagined profanation of the temple, upon the bodily imperfection of others, and upon the symbolic means of purging the body of its flaws: torture and martyrdom. Thus, in her attempts to visualize Christ, she is more drawn to the crucifixion than to images of the Incarnation.

When the girl learns of the side-show freak and hears that the hermaphrodite has insisted upon acceptance of his condition because "God made me thisaway," she is forced to re-examine the "temple of the Holy Ghost" doctrine in the light of this new reality, this incarnate union of male and female identities. Her first response is to dream of the side-show as a Bible-belt version of the Benediction service she is to attend the following day. The mock-ritual she dreams of accomplishes what the real Benediction is supposed to do: it affirms the reality of bodily identity and calls for acceptance of that aspect of the human self, even if it is flawed. But in the dream the girl finds it difficult to visualize the freak, more easily picturing the dour-faced Protestant worshippers, the repressive forces who will eventually shut down the show. Thus, the dream permits the girl to resolve the issue of bodily identity in an
abstract manner, by couching it in terms of an extreme symbol of human bodily imperfection. She can accept the hermaphrodite as a "temple of the Holy Ghost," but has yet to test the doctrine against the ugly reality of people she can see. It is important that the girl never sees the freak, that she merely hears that it exists. She is forced to imagine what it is like, and in the process makes it into an abstraction, a symbol of all human imperfection. Thus, her treatment of the idea of the hermaphrodite reflects the way in which her religious training has taught her to deal with all of reality: between herself and reality she places an abstract symbology. She seeks to resolve the ambiguity of her own sexual identity by drawing a connection between herself, the freak, and the doctrine that the human body is a temple of the Holy Ghost. Her problem is that she cannot dwell upon the reality for long, for that would mean accepting Alonzo and her cousins as "temples" as well. Therefore she continually retreats to her imagined world, to a place where real imperfections are dissolved by imagined tortures, by painless martyrdom, and by symbolic crucifixion.

Before and during the actual Benediction service the girl confronts the problem once again. Before the service she finds herself annoyed by the physical presence of two other characters: Alonzo, whom she had hoped "would smell better on Sunday but did not" (p. 247), and "a big moon-faced nun" whose embrace she avoids although "they had a tendency to kiss even homely children." She is still bothered by the physical profanity of herself and others until after praying "mechanically" in church the girl joins in her mind the Church's symbol for human bodily perfection and chastity (the Host) and the embodiment of human imperfection and sexual ambiguity (the Hermaphrodite): "... when the
priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the
center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the
freak in it. The freak was saying, 'I don't dispute it. This is the
way He wanted me to be'" (p. 218). At this moment her feeling about the
human body most approaches affirmation, but it is still abstract, still
couched in terms of symbols. Therefore the feeling passes when they
leave the chapel and she is given a vivid reminder of the need for re-
demption through bodily torture, as a nun swoops down and engulfs her
in the robes of celibacy, "mashing the side of her face into the cruci-
fix hitched onto her belt" (p. 218). Her next contact with Alonzo shows
that she has not changed her habit of focusing upon the profanity of the
human body: "the child observed three folds of fat in the back of his
neck and noted that his ears were pointed almost like a pig's" (p. 218).
Finally, after fearing that the side-show has been shut down, that the
issue of human imperfection has been brushed aside by society's repres-
sion of its symbol, the girl imagines in nature another symbol, reverting
to an iconography of martyrdom to resolve for herself the issue of
bodily identity: "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" (p. 218).

This final image juxtaposes the Church's symbol of the Incarna-
tion with imagery of crucifixion. It suggests that the girl has yet to
attain a balance between sexual knowledge and self-acceptance. Through-
out, the story emphasizes her inability to visualize the freak, in short
her inability to come to terms with the union of male and female sexual-
ity. Her characteristic response is to fix her thoughts upon visions of
bodily torture, simultaneously denigrating the body as profane and ag-
grandizing the self by seeing martyrdom as a possible means of attaining sacredness. Thus, when she fuses a symbol of human bodily worth, the Host, with an image of purgation, she betrays a continuing ambivalence about her own bodily identity, and that of others. Her ambivalence stems from her need to see the body as either sacred or profane, and from her consequent inability to accept as "temples" the bodies of her cousins, Alonzo, Cheatam, and herself. Until she can develop a bodily self-concept which includes acceptance of physical flaws as human, rather than damnation of them as profanities, she has little chance of attaining a healthy and balanced selfhood. Her revulsion from the physical and her pious fixation upon the spiritual are manifestations of the same kind of dissociated view of world and self which were shown to have turned Miss Willerton's existence into a mean and sterile reality broken up only by occasional escapes into a fantasy world.

While "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" concerns itself with self-identity and the human body, "The Comforts of Home" deals with sexual identity in a different sense, its main concern being the impact of society's sexual role models upon the individual self. The main character, Thomas, is virtually paralyzed by his inability to be the kind of male his father was; and his entire world-view is threatened when he finds that there is more to female sexuality than his mother's domestic virtue. Thomas's repeated inaction throughout the story, and his irrational action at the end, are the effects of a lack of harmony and balance among the various components of his personality. This imbalance results from Thomas's inability to find a sexual identity based on anything other than his father's brute force, which he has rejected in favor of a brand of rationality which is so removed from the human sphere as to
be incompatible with any expression of sexuality.

The story opens with an image of the self under assault, beginning a motif which continues throughout: "Rage gathered throughout Thomas's large frame with a silent ominous intensity, like a mob assembling" (p. 383). Significantly, the "assault" is from within; and as the story unwinds it becomes clear that Sarah Ham's blatant sexuality threatens Thomas mainly because it strikes an inner chord: "Thomas felt a deep unbearable loathing for himself, as if he were turning slowly into the girl" (p. 385). He has established a certain order for his life, which he calls his moral stance; and when the girl's sexual allurements prove imical to that order he brands them as demonic forces, much as he sees his mother's emotions as devilish, because they lead her to an excess of virtue. Thomas's self-image depends upon his ability to order chaos, which is animalistic and satanic, and largely embodied in females. This self-image is aptly captured in the image of him backing the girl out of his bedroom, "holding the chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat," and in the next instant speaking with his mother, "the chair still lifted in front of him as if he were about to quell another beast" (p. 384). To combat the assault upon his morality, Thomas looks to what he sees as the two male principles of order, first his own rationality, and second his father's brute force. But Thomas's moral order is in fact a sham; what he possesses and wants to preserve are the comforts of his safe and celibate home, symbolized by the objects with which he insulates himself from human contact: the blanket, the typewriter, the den, and the house itself, all of which are "as personal as the shell of a turtle, and as necessary" (p. 395). When his rationality proves insufficient to save
these symbols of order, he resorts to his father's brand of order, objectified by the gun.

Each of the four characters in the story embodies a particular human capacity: reason (Thomas), compassion (his mother), power (his father), and libido (Sarah Ham). Thomas's reason fails him as an ordering principle because it is not integrated with these other human functions. Because he sees human capacities as sexual traits, Thomas cannot establish an equilibrium between his reason and the stirrings of the libido. The one is a male principle, the other female, and his selfhood is predicated upon this antithesis. Because his morality is purely rational, it allows no basis for action in human spheres which include emotional as well as intellectual impulses. Thus, the story abounds with images of inaction and of flight, the characteristic responses of the assaulted self when it lacks the strength to confront the demons of a fear-ridden imagination. Thomas is incapable even of flight; he cannot leave behind the security of his electric blanket. Thus he makes a last stand in the fortresses of masculine identity: the den and his inviolate bedroom. When the girl enters these two domains, trying to seduce him in the bedroom and stealing the gun from the den, Thomas is forced to choose between the two extreme options he has left himself: paralysis or violent action. In succumbing to the latter he literally loses himself by becoming an agent of his father's corrupt and amoral repression. Impotence or murder and symbolic rape (placing the gun in the girl's purse at the behest of his father's image): these become the sexual choices for the self when reason and compassion are artificially separated as male and female traits, thereby becoming so insubstantial as to be swept away by the stronger forces of unbridled power and libido.
The closing scene shows how a self-image is perceived by others when that image is blurred by a lack of focus within the self. The point of view shifts abruptly, limiting itself to that of the sheriff, whose perceptions are influenced by his lurid expectations and by his own self-image as a male power-wielder. Farebrother's analysis of the closing tableau types Thomas as immoral, much as Thomas's self-conceived moral stance had led him to type Sarah Ham as being amoral. Before Farebrother arrives, Thomas fires the gun at Sarah Ham, inadvertently killing that other source of female disorder, his mother. The story makes it clear that Thomas now sees the gun as the only source of order left to him: "Thomas fired. The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order" (p. 404). But instead of order, the gun brings true chaos, as Thomas's "morality" is seen by Farebrother as immoral:

The sheriff's brain worked instantly like a calculating machine. He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl. But Farebrother had been too quick for him. They were not yet aware of his head in the door. As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. (p. 404)

Thomas has attempted to impose a false order upon what he sees as the chaos of human impulses; and upon this order he has based his self-image. The true chaos of this last scene underscores the potential destructiveness of such an attempt, as it shows how reason alone, or compassion alone, are no match for unbridled power and sex drives. In a divided self, the rational faculty, isolated from a moral principle, can
provide only the illusion of order, an illusion that is easily shattered by some of the more forceful demands of the libido.

Thomas, Miss Willerton, and the girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" all have one thing in common: each wants to deny the self sexual response as a means of relating to others. In fact, each uses sexual identity as a means of retreat from others, as a way of determining not unity but division. But the loathing they feel at the bodily presence of others is symptomatic of a kind of self-loathing, a feeling that because the human self is embodied, it is to be escaped, through romance writing, through daydreams of martyrdom and heroism, or through historical research in the safety of a den of celibacy.

There are two moments in O'Connor's fiction which capture the best and the worst possibilities for the individual self in relation to other people. The first, the grandmother's free and spontaneous recognition of kinship with the Misfit, makes of her a "good woman," a fully realized self for the first and last time in her life. This fulness of self is marked, paradoxically, by an absence of self-consciousness. The self, in short, is not role-playing; but rather acting out its instincts and impulses without motive, ulterior or superior. The second event, Mr. Head's denial of kinship with Nelson, leaves him devoid of a sense of self. His action, totally self-conscious and manipulative of the other, undermines whatever family feeling had existed between the two. These examples show that in O'Connor's world self-realization is related to kinship with others; and self-loss to isolation from others. Throughout her fiction, in fact, the concept of family becomes a metaphor for all social interplay; and the degree to which characters attain a strong
sense of self-identity is determined by the degree to which they attain family identity.

In a number of stories, O'Connor has characters rely upon the external aspects of family identity to define their individual selfhood. In these cases, family is usually important as an indicator of class. Mrs. Chestny is the most obvious example; her sense of who she is is narrowly circumscribed by her nominal identity as one of the Godhighs, a once illustrious Georgia family. So too in varying degrees do Calhoun's aunts in "The Partridge Festival," Mrs. Tilman in "Why Do The Heathen Rage?" and Mr. Fortune in "A View of the Woods" have this notion that family name is a sufficient token of identity to sustain the self through social, historical, or personal upheavals. These stories have a built-in dramatic tension as such characters as Julian, Walter Tilman, Calhoun, and Mary Fortune Pitts seek to re-define themselves by disavowing the purely nominal family identity. Their misfortune is to find that they have nothing with which to replace family name; their rejection of the values which had characterized their families becomes a self-defining stance, and they have no individual values nor any sense of family which transcends the purely nominal.

O'Connor's fiction places selves in these two extreme positions in relation to the family: one can either hang on to an anachronistic sense of one's family name as a determinant of one's own identity, or one can reject family identity outright, and with it all sense of kinship with others. O'Connor reduces family relationships to empty formalities or to bitter power struggles; and the consequent self-identities are either cardboard masks or painfully won badges of isolation from others. The comic bickering between Mr. Head and Nelson is different only in de-
gree from the more destructive battles between Julian and his mother;
and these are both seminal versions of the ultimately fatal struggle be-
tween Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter. In all cases the self is some-
how threatened by assertions of identity by another family member. The
pattern of relationship which exists in The Violent Bear It Away between
older characters and younger family members becomes the commonest pat-
tern of family interaction in O'Connor's fiction: the older member
desperately needs the younger member to re-inforce his or her identity
by assuming to as great a degree as possible that very identity. Thus,
Old Tarwater insists that Young Tarwater define himself by assuming the
burden of the old man's prophetic mission; and Rayber's urge to drown
Bishop is partially inspired by Bishop's inability to become Rayber's
intellectual image and likeness, just as Mr. Fortune is driven to kill
Mary when she refuses to become his alter-ego. The concept of family,
then, becomes for many older characters a medium for narcissism; and
for many younger characters it is shown to be the ultimate nemesis as
they seek to define themselves as individuals.

But these options are not the only ones offered in O'Connor's
fiction. Such families as the Greenleafs, the Freemans, and the Pitts
are evidence that the individual can thrive within the context of the
family, and that the essence of the family experience need not be a power
struggle. These characters function as foils and as antagonists for the
main characters, who are usually on the brink of personality break-downs
and who, not by coincidence, are often in conflict with members of
their own families. For instance, Mrs. May's inability to find a co-
herent self-concept is both mirrored in and exacerbated by the constant
bickering between herself and her sons, Wesley and Scofield. The petti-
ness and sterility of the May family is contrasted with the ability of the Greenleafs to flourish, both individually and as a family. But rather than accept a white-trash family as a model for herself, Mrs. May sees their success as a result of her own efforts, and consequently as another example of the cosmic injustice being done to her: "Over the years they had been on her place, Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf had aged hardly at all. They had no worries, no responsibilities. They lived like the lilies of the field, off the fat that she struggled to put into the land" (p. 319). The striking contrast between O.T. and E.T. Greenleaf and Wesley and Scofield May is not, as Mrs. May would have it, the result of class distinctions; but rather it derives from the contrasting senses of kinship exhibited by the four sons. The same contrast exists elsewhere in O'Connor's fiction, most notably in "Good Country People," between Hulga and the healthy and happy daughters of Mrs. Freeman.

By having the grandmother attain self-realization in a moment of recognition of kinship with someone outside the family, indeed with a person who has just murdered her entire family and who is reputed to have killed his own father, O'Connor makes her most radical and most revealing statement about the self in relation to others. Simply put, her statement can reduce itself to a rather innocuous reiteration of the notion that all men are brothers, that the human race is in fact a family. But in the light of events throughout her fiction, this statement takes on substance, as a central theme of that fiction is that there is more than just a metaphorical meaning to the concept of the human family. Her fiction attacks the very notion of "otherness" as a basis for self-definition, and it undermines all the social and cultural forms individuals use, not to relate to others, but to retreat from others. For,
the grandmother's experience suggests, a retreat from others is ultimately a retreat from the self, with the converse being equally true. As the next chapter will show, virtually every moment of positive insight experienced by O'Connor's characters is in some sense a re-enactment of the grandmother's vision; and in these moments of insight O'Connor prescribes what is needed for balanced selfhood and for an integrated society.
CHAPTER IV

REVELATIONS OF THE SELF:

GRACE IN O'CONNOR'S WORLD

In the preceding chapters I have examined the ways in which O'Connor's characters fail to achieve their potential as human selves and some of the reasons for this collective failure. The very great extent to which her fiction deals with this fundamental human failure led her earliest critics to assess her work as pessimistic, if not misanthropic, but with time her critics have come to see in her work a moral, indeed a religious purpose. Thus the work is now commonly held to be optimistic, or at least to hold out some hope for the betterment of the bleak human condition she describes. The single concept most responsible for the about-face is that of grace, a term often used by the author in her commentaries, and even more often used by her critics. In virtually every story there occurs a moment of epiphany, a flash of insight to the reader, and often to the character, which somehow explains why things are so devastatingly wrong and in some cases suggests a course of action which will make them right. It has been assumed that these moments represent the workings of supernatural grace in a fallen world. Unfortunately, the term "grace" has never been defined by O'Connor or by her critics, and a sweeping use of the term suggests that the problems facing these characters are religious ones, and the solutions theo-
logical.¹ In this chapter I will examine a number of these moments in order to define the experience of grace as it affects the characters in O'Connor's fictional world. In so doing I will show that their problems and solutions are this-worldly, and that the most telling revelations direct characters to a fuller sense of themselves within a human context.

Commenting upon some of her own stories, O'Connor once made the following seemingly definitive remark about grace:

While predictable, predetermined actions have a comic interest for me, it is the free act, the acceptance of grace particularly, that I always have my eye on as the thing which will make the story work. In the story "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," it is the Grandmother's recognition that the Misfit is one of her children; in "The River," it is the child's peculiar desire to find the kingdom of Christ; in "The Artificial Nigger," it is what the artificial nigger does to reunite Mr. Head and Nelson. None of these things can be predicted. They represent the workings of grace for the characters.²

In my discussion of these three and other works, I will show that the motivating insights their characters receive are essentially different. Thus, lumping them together under the heading of grace can be deceptive. I will continue to use the term, but only as a metaphor for the way in which the writer imparts to the character, and finally to the reader, essential information about the wrongness of a particular moral stance or course of action. In this sense, "grace" is an extension of the artist-as-creator metaphor, with the writer assuming a "Providential" role toward her creatures. By stressing the metaphoric value of the term grace, I hope to underplay the traditional theological connotations of

¹See, for instance, Carter Martin, pp. 104-36, and Feeley, pp. 6, 22.
²O'Connor, Mystery And Manners, pp. 115-16.
the term, and show that the way in which grace is imparted in O'Connor's world is perfectly credible on a naturalistic plane.

If on one level the term grace merely describes a literary strategy, it should also have a specific meaning regarding the precise nature of the knowledge imparted. Certainly the Grandmother's realization that she has led her family down the wrong road in her search for an illusory past is not an example of grace in operation, although this realization does concern her relation to her physical and cultural surroundings, and it is a necessary step toward her reorientation in space and time. As I will show in this chapter, the experience of grace forces a character to have an insight into the essentials of his or her human condition, and not into the accidentals which are determined by physical and cultural variables. The last chapter concluded with a suggestion that O'Connor's fiction insists that the recognition of a radical bond among humans is a necessary first step toward balanced selfhood for individuals. In defining her notion of grace I will pursue this theme further, showing that the most compelling insights attained by her characters are those which reveal a positive model for human behavior rather than negative aspects of a character's particular experience. They reveal an existing human instinct, the instinct for community. Her stories show that this instinct becomes obscured when individuals seek to identify with symbols of culture, caste, religion, or intellect which differentiate rather than unite people. Thus, when a character's epiphany leads to self-knowledge or to knowledge of the self in relation to God or to the natural world, the experience is at best only partially redemptive. It is rarely effective in uniting the divided self, and often it destroys or severely limits the self. But when an epiphany leads to awareness of the self
in relation to others, the character is given the means to attain self-
realization in the fullest sense.

2

A condition shared by many of O'Connor's characters is that of
extreme self-consciousness, manifested in a variety of attitudes ranging
from self-pity to self-deprecation to self-aggrandizement. A curious
result of this pervasive self-consciousness is a concern with self-image
rather than attention to personal strengths or values. Typically, a
character will sense a weakness or a wrongness about himself; but rather
than confront the problem the character will construct a public self
which disguises the presence of the weakness. The immediate result is
the type of self-defining stance discussed in chapters two and three;
and the ultimate result is the annihilation of the self I talked about
in those chapters. But it often happens that before a character is
crushed, he or she will be offered an insight into the nature of the
real self. The insight strips away part of the character's self-image,
allowing self-consciousness to begin to lead to self-awareness. This
is a necessary step in the process of self-realization; and although
this kind of vision often has a negative impact upon the character, it
is the first level of grace operating in O'Connor's world.

When I discussed "The Partridge Festival" in Chapter Two, I noted
that the protagonist, Calhoun, exhibited an obsessive concern with his
public image as "rebel-artist-mystic." This concern alienates Calhoun
from the community and enables him for a time to elude his real self.
But when an obsession with being different from his townspeople leads
Calhoun to a confrontation with the living image of his rebellion, Sin-
gleton's utter depravity frightens him away from continuing the search
for an emblem of his difference. Calhoun, who has been told that he looks "very much like father" (p. 122), has sought to deny that family likeness, seeking kinship instead with the accused murderer: "Though his eyes were not mismatched, the shape of his face was broad like Singleton's; but the real likeness between them was interior" (p. 123). When the reality of Singleton's animalistic behavior shocks Calhoun and the girl out of their attempts to identify with him, they find that they cannot negate their kinship with depravity: "They sat silently, looking at nothing until finally they turned and looked at each other. There each saw at once the likeness of their kinsman and flinched. They looked away and then back, as if with concentration they might find a more tolerable image" (pp. 123, 124). At this point Calhoun sees another image of himself reflected in the girl's glasses; and it is the image of his father's son, an image of the self he has been eluding in his goal of becoming a Singleton:

In despair he leaned closer until he was stopped by a miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles and fixed him where he was. Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him. (p. 124)

By seeing himself as kin to both Singleton and his grandfather, the representative antithetical figures of the community, Calhoun is given the knowledge he needs to re-orient his alienated self. He sees within himself an affinity for the entire range of human values from nihilism to boosterism; and for him to embody the values he would choose as his own he must accept that dual affinity rather than pretend he is above the baser instincts of his townspeople. If the meaning of Calhoun's
experience is still unclear to the character himself, it is quite clear to the reader: kinship with the various forms of good and evil is an essential condition of human selfhood. And in one's attempt to be a good (i.e. fully realized) person, one can err dangerously if the attempt is in fact to appear to be "a good man," something which O'Connor insists is hard to find.

Calhoun finds at the end that by denying affinity with the people of his town he has left himself powerless to cope with evils he cannot elude because they are a part of himself. Traumatized by Singleton's depravity and by his attempted identification with it, he forsakes his attempt to bolster himself as one who is above the commercial instincts of the town. But he finds that he has no real self to project. This realization that the solitary self is impotent is the first level of grace in O'Connor's world; it is the author's negation of the character's attempts to assert a self-image which is somehow superior to the character's image of the collective self. This same sense of utter aloneness and powerlessness is felt by Hulga after she is abandoned by the bible salesman. His final message to her penetrates her facade of intellectual superiority, and impresses upon her the fact that she is really not so different from her countrypeople: "... you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born;" and that she is not unique, even in her victimization: "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way" (p. 291). Essentially the same thing happens to Hulga as happens to Calhoun: her self-image as an intellectual is altered by an experience with sheer depravity, and she is left with an insight into her true nature. She discovers that she is not immune to the evil around her. In spite of her rebellious stance, she can be victim-
ized by persons or by forces more powerful than the individual. Furthermore, both Hulga and Calhoun find their plights worsened because they have cut themselves off from whatever human aid they might have enlisted to relieve them of the burden of self-loathing they now must bear.

Mr. Fortune ("A View of the Woods"), Shiftlet ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own"), Julian ("Everything"), and Asbury ("The Enduring Chill") are all left with the same feeling that they exist in an emotional vacuum. For each the reason is the same: the inner self has been neglected to the extent that it has in fact become a moral vacuum. At the moment of greatest emotional distress each looks outside of himself for release from the awful knowledge of inner emptiness, Shiftlet to the clouds, Julian to the city lights, Mr. Fortune to the trees and the machine, and Asbury to the water stain on his bedroom ceiling. But as in the case of Mrs. Turpin, their search for external order to compensate for inner chaos is futile. The images they find are all surreal distortions of the phenomenal world, grotesque visions which mirror rather than order their emotional chaos. Having been concerned solely with images of themselves, with the ways in which others see them, they are awakened from their moral torpor when they find fundamental distortions in the way they now see once-familiar objects around them. In each of the above cases O'Connor's fictional strategy is the same. The character attains some fundamental bit of knowledge about himself, not through a sudden flash of insight into the abstract nature of the self, but by means of a quite tangible event: the seeing of the formerly ordered external world as now distorted, and thereby alienating or at least threatening to the character's former conception of himself. The experience brings the character to the point where he can be said to have no real sense of self, as the for-
mer means of self-definition and self-expression are no longer available. This first level of grace, then, forces the character to repudiate the old bases upon which he or she had built a self-image. And since image is all these characters have had, they are left with nothing. Only from this tabula rasa can one of O'Connor's characters begin the process of true self-realization.

To disguise the inadequacies of the solitary self, characters impose artificial limits upon their identities as humans. By repeating a pattern of self-loss through excessive concern with images of the self, O'Connor implies that individuals need to transcend these artificial limits. Julian and Hulga, for instance, are shown to need some larger mode of self-definition than their respective stances as writer-liberal and intellectual-materialist will allow. Neither of these stances has any more substance than a label, and the characters are defeated because there is nothing behind the labels they wear. But within these stories O'Connor offers no explicit statement as to the nature of the needed sense of transcendence. The commonest critical assumption is that the author's prescription for her characters' spiritual ills is a religious one, and that what they most lack is a proper sense of a relationship with God. Indeed, they lack any sense of relationship with God; but the pattern of epiphanic experiences throughout O'Connor's fiction suggests that their most debilitating lack is of a different sort, namely the lack of self-defining human relationships. This conclusion is based upon examples of two other levels of grace in her stories. First are

---

3This attitude pervades the body of criticism of Flannery O'Connor. Virtually the only critics who would not hold this to be true are Hendin (op. cit.) and John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Sewanee Review 70 (1962), 395-407.
the actual religious experiences seen in a few of the stories, those moments when characters have some kind of vision concerning their relationship with the cosmos or their identification with a religious symbol. Second is the kind of experience I referred to at the end of Chapter Three, the feeling that the individual self is actually linked in some fundamental way to other selves, and that the most salutary form of self-transcendence comes through recognition of universal kinship.

3

When I discuss religious experience, vision, and belief in O'Connor's work I do not intend to make a statement regarding her own belief or her fictional intent. A surprisingly large number of her critics have taken at face value her remarks about belief and fiction writing, using these statements as vehicles for their interpretation of her stories. One such often-quoted remark is the following from "The Fiction Writer and his Country":

I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction.

But rather than concern myself with O'Connor's ill-defined notions about orthodoxy, Redemption, and grace being made transparent in fiction, I will follow her own advice to writers and readers of fiction:

What the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all, is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will

\[4\]

O'Connor, Mystery And Manners, p. 32.
realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.\(^5\)

When I examine religious belief and religious vision, then, I will be concerned only with the discernible effect of these things upon her characters, and with the ways in which these effects fit into a larger pattern, namely that of the emerging self as it is manifested throughout her fiction. In short, I will assume that the question of O'Connor's supernatuarlist world-view is not the central question to be addressed about her fiction. She, as did Hawthorne, used for subject matter a world which is imbued with religious consciousness. And, like Hawthorne, she was interested primarily in the impact of the collective consciousness upon the individual psyche.

Probably the most explicitly religious vision or experience in O'Connor's fiction is seen in "The Displaced Person," when the aged Father Flynn gazes at the peacock's unfolding feathers and likens the sight to the second coming of Christ:

The priest let his eyes wander toward the birds. They had reached the middle of the lawn. The cock stopped suddenly and curving his neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had ever seen such an idiotic old man. "Christ will come like that!" he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping. (p. 226)

This scene is followed by a disjointed dialogue between the two characters, heavily laden with irony, in which Mrs. McIntyre refers to Guizac's coming and the preoccupied priest refers to Christ's coming: "'He didn't have to come in the first place,' she said, giving him a hard look . . . 'He came to redeem us,' he said and blandly reached for her hand and

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 145.
shook it and said he must go" (p. 226). When the Public Broadcasting System dramatized this story for its "American Short Story" series, its rendering of this scene incorporated the standard critical interpretation of the symbolism of the peacock and of the most obvious object of the dialogue's irony, namely Mrs. McIntyre's self-serving narrowmindedness. The film focused on the glory of the apparition, imposed heavenly music, and gave the priest's voice a clearly definitive tone of strength and clarity. Thus it supported the idea that the peacock is a living symbol of a divine presence in a fallen world, that Guizac is a Christ-figure, and that the priest speaks words of wisdom to a community of myopic fools. Seen another way, though, the irony of the dialogue might well be double-edged, cutting priest and woman alike. Father Flynn's slack jaw, his gaping mouth, and his bland handshake suggest that his continued interest in the bird as a divine symbol might well be seen as a form of stupidity as destructive in its effect as Mrs. McIntyre's greed and Mrs. Shortley's xenophobia. In fact, his concern with the abstract does the victim, Guizac, no more good than the Shortleys' fear of another kind of abstraction, the spectre of wholesale foreign immigration.

Although he is not meant to be a fully rounded character, Father Flynn does represent one of the extreme moral stances offered Mrs. McIntyre in her attempt to deal with the D.P. The opposite stance is that taken by Mrs. Shortley, whose fear of all things foreign leads her to confuse the effects of fascism with the cause, the victims with the perpetrators: "This was the kind of thing that was happening every day in Europe where they had not advanced as in this country, and watching from her vantage point, Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those
murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place" (p. 196). The priest is astute enough to see genocide as an effect of moral and social aberration, but sees the cure in only the most unrealistic and facile terms: "Dear lady, I know your tender heart won't suffer you to turn the porrrrr man out. Think of the thousands of them, think of the ovens and the boxcars and the camps and the sick children and Christ our Lord" (p. 231). As I showed in Chapter One, the priest's way of seeing things reduces Guizac's humanity. By repeatedly allowing his attention to drift to "some private oratory," he can offer only the most otherworldly solutions to this world's problems, thereby making an abstraction of the human victim. When Mrs. McIntyre fails to find a middle course of action to balance out the obsessive fear of the Shortleys and the sentimental piety of the priest, she fails to realize her human potential by choosing one of the extreme positions, namely that of the Shortleys.

The paralysis Mrs. McIntyre suffers is the story's metaphor for her failure to become a full self; and her punishment is a peculiar kind of hell, forced indoctrination at the hands of a priest whose religion is from another country and whose ties with the real world are at best tenuous: "Not many remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. He came regularly once a week with a bag of bread-crumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the church" (p. 235). She, then, has assumed the role of displaced person, and the priest's divided attention has no more relevance to her condition than it had to that of Guizac. The story lacks a metaphor for effective grace; it contains only a visual representation of the kind of religious vision which limits the self's potential for full realization of
the human experience. The kind of grace which would be an antidote to the evil so well embodied in the images of boxcars filled with human victims is to be found elsewhere in O'Connor's fiction.

Similar to Father Flynn's vision of the peacock as transfigured Christ is the vision of the sun as sacramental host experienced by the girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." I have already shown that a disjunction between abstract belief and concrete reality undermines the girl's attempt to realize herself in terms of her sexual identity. In each of these stories the character has a vivid sense of the transcendent; each moves beyond a pre-occupation with the self; and each sees the self to be inconsequential in relation to a larger spiritual presence. But the experiences of these characters suggest that their ways of viewing the transcendent are not effective means of attaining self-realization. The problem is that their religious conceptualizations are too abstract to be acted out in human contexts. The dangers of such attempts are those warned against by Melville's Ishmael when he finds himself gazing too intently into the sea-drenched horizon:

There is no life in thee now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through the transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!^6

When their spiritual vision becomes too abstract, O'Connor's characters

---

^6 None of O'Connor's characters is exactly a Pantheist. Many see symbols of the divine, rather than the divine presence itself, around them. They are, though, absorbed in their religious visions in much the same way as Melville's water-gazer. As a result, their perceptions of reality are at best cloudy, and their involvement with humanity negligible.
suffer this same loss of the self. Although they focus upon an object, they do so because of the purely symbolic value of the object. And when the symbolism is subjective, as it too often is, the characters become incapable of effective action in their relationships with others.

An overly vague religious vision often leads to a fundamental confusion in the mind of a character, namely the confusion between symbol and reality. Father Flynn discerns no effective difference between the peacock and Christ, and thus sees no difference between revering the symbol and following a Christian ethic. O'Connor's most extreme example of this kind of confusion is that of Harry Ashfield in "The River," a character whose search for the kingdom of Christ leads him to a watery grave. O'Connor's own commentary notwithstanding, Harry's course can hardly be said to stem from the "workings of grace," at least not in the same sense that the Grandmother's insight can be so characterized. The very descriptions of their vision differs radically: while her head "clears," his vision is distorted by the water he enters. Harry's most pervasive feeling is one of incompleteness, and he attempts to complete himself by transcending himself. But his search for himself is misdirected. Like all searches on a religious plane which circumvents human needs and concerns, this one leads the character away from the humanity which would complete his selfhood. Characters who adhere to purely religious symbols or visions are never given the sense that they are thereby complete, or that they now have the means to find the completeness they have been missing. Rather, their stories indicate that what is needed is a different kind of religious sensibility altogether, one which takes into account the human experience as well as the spiritual possibilities suggested by symbolic manifestations of higher presences.
The story which most clearly repudiates the notion that a purely religious vision leads to full self-realization is "Parker's Back." Most criticism of the story offers just the opposite conclusion, namely that Parker's religious experience leads him to a needed acceptance of his part in the larger scheme of things. It is true that Parker does receive grace, i.e. a revelation of what is wrong with him and a suggestion as to how to right it; but he is unable to make that grace effective because he cannot translate the religious vision into human terms. Parker ends up one of the most pathetic characters in O'Connor's fiction because he has the knowledge he needs to fulfill himself, but remains frustrated by his inability to express his new found sense of who he is to another person.

Of all the characters O'Connor created, Parker is the most concerned with the image he projects to the public. He focuses his concern with self totally upon the external self, specifically upon the skin he so lavishly illustrates with tattoos. His initial impulse to have himself tattooed derives from his pervasive feeling of non-worth, and from a concomitant need to be recognized as unique. But the kind of identity he seeks from the tattoos is merely an attempt to disguise the real O.E. Parker, who is so unsure of himself that he hides even his nominal identity as Obadiah Elime Parker. Fearing the impersonal institutions which have dominated his life, "the navy or the government or religion" (p. 516), he seeks to defeat the colorlessness of the existence he seems destined for by coloring his skin. But the effort is in vain, and Parker's need to be seen as an individual remains unresolved:

After a month or two in the navy his mouth ceased to hang open. His features hardened into the features of a man. He stayed in the navy five years and seemed a natural part of the gray mechanical
ship, except for his eyes, which were the same pale-slate color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea. (pp. 513, 514)

If Parker has been de-humanized by his environment, he is also guilty of seeing others in de-humanizing ways. Thus he views his wife as a grotesque object: "The skin on her face was thin and drawn tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were grey and sharp like the points of two ice-picks" (p. 510). The story's repeated images of a de-personalized and de-personalizing universe make it clear that the grace Parker needs will come in the form of a new way of seeing himself and others, namely a way of recognizing and responding to what is human in himself and others, rather than succumbing to the world's tendency to deny the human.

Parker's continual dissatisfaction with himself is the story's metaphor for the first stirrings of grace, the author's way of indicating that the individual can have self-worth, even in an institutionalized world:

He was heavy and earnest, as ordinary as a loaf of bread . . . Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed, but a peculiar unease settled in him. 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. (p. 513)

But by focusing his energy upon his appearance, upon the picture of O.E. Parker he wants the world to see, he dooms himself to an unattainable goal as he seeks to complete himself by attending to one level of his identity. The knowledge that he must transcend himself to realize himself leads him to seek self-transcendence through identification with images of things he wants to incorporate into his personality. The on-
going process only engenders further dissatisfaction:

Parker would be satisfied with each tattoo about a month, then something about it that had attracted him would wear off. Whenever a decent-sized mirror was available, he would get in front of it and study his overall look. The effect was not one of intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up. (p. 514)

The point is clear: the "space" that needs filling is an inner space which no mirror can reflect. And as long as Parker is impelled to alter his outer self rather than confront his inner identity, the grace which prompts him to be somebody will only be the source of further frustration.

Parker's tattoos give him a false sense of identity in one important way, by making him feel sexually attractive: "He found that the tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (p. 513); "He had never yet met a woman who was not attracted to them" (p. 512). Parker's presumed sexual potency is a sham, another illusion he would perpetuate in his obsessive drive to appear different from what he is. Thus, he intimates to his wife that he is having a sexual liaison with his female employer, when in fact the relationship between him and the seventy-year-old woman is the antithesis of romance or sexuality: she forbids him to remove his shirt, forcing him to keep covered what he considers his most attractive feature. Whatever sexual prowess Parker had wanted to be symbolized by his eagle tattoo is undermined when Sarah Ruth thinks it is a chicken. And because she is interested in him for something other than his self-defining images, Parker becomes drawn into another obsession over which he has no control. He discovers a new source of wonder about himself when he finds that he is the object of this woman's attention.
After he has married Sarah Ruth, Parker defines himself in terms of a new goal, "bringing Sarah Ruth to heel." But her doggedness and her religious sensibility have the opposite effect, gradually conditioning him to see things through the light of her fundamentalism. This, combined with his continuing image-worship, leads to a curious project: to attain sexual mastery over his wife by having a religious symbol tattooed on his back. He wants to "complete" himself by deriving from a religious image the power he needs to dominate the woman whose aloofness has become a major source of dissatisfaction. It is with this project on his mind that he has his accident with the tractor; and his confused mental state transforms the narration of the event into a parody of the theophanies experienced by Moses and St. Paul:

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 grab him. A ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, "GOD ABOVE!"

He landed on his back while the tractor crashed upside down into the tree and burst into flame. The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractor, the other was some distance away, burning by itself. He was not in them. He could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face. He scrambled backwards, still sitting, his eyes cavernous, and if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it. (p. 520)

This scene suggests the extent to which Parker's new-found religious sensibility has disoriented him in the real world. The gently ironic tone deflates any facile notion of conversion through a miraculous infusion of grace, and the distance between narrator and character makes it clear that the religious aspects of this event are an effect of Parker's obsession to win over Sarah Ruth by appealing to her religious expectations. The most important feature of this scene is the sense of
self-transcendence Parker feels. As he is knocked out of his shoes, so too Parker is removed from his old way of seeing himself. He is now ready to find himself, if he can find an effective medium through which to continue to transcend the limits of his bodily identity in order to find a fuller human identity.

This mock conversion is but a prelude to Parker's real moment of grace, the moment in which he attains an insight which suggests the answer to the problem of his chronic uneasiness. After having the picture of the Byzantine Christ outlined on his back, a picture with strangely penetrating eyes, Parker spends a night in the Haven of Light Christian Mission. Here he has a vision followed by a clearly defined longing for human comfort from Sarah Ruth:

All night he lay awake in the long dormitory of cots with lumpy figures on them. The only light was from the phosphorescent cross glowing at the end of the room. The tree reached out to grasp him again; 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. He wished that he were not in this city, not in this Haven of Light Mission, not in a bed by himself. 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 to the eyes in the book, for even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly. (p. 524)

Transparency is what Parker has been eluding all along, heaping image after image on his naked flesh. And because Sarah Ruth was the one woman who saw through his facade he had seen her eyes as icepicks. Now, in contrast to the eyes of the "all demanding" Christ, hers seem human, and her ability to penetrate his self-image in a human way his only salvation.

The next morning finds Parker alone in an alley doing something
unusual for him, "examining his soul." Through the eyes of the Christ
image he peers inward, and sees 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" (p. 527). He discovers that he has a feeling for his
wife which is not motivated by a power drive, but by a more human need:
"The thought of her brought him slowly to his feet. She would know
what he had to do. She would clear up the rest of it, and she would
at last be pleased. It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he
had wanted, to please her" (p. 527). No longer compelled to define him-
self by "bringing to heel" a woman he would impress with the sum of his
self-images, Parker feels like "a stranger to himself" because he is in
fact discovering the real self he has eluded all along. In short, grace
has entered his life, opening him to the possibility of a full human re-
lationship with his wife.

Parker's new-found awareness of self comes too late. Even now,
he presents to his wife not the self he is, but the new image of the
self he has become. He uses the Christ-picture to intervene between
himself and Sarah Ruth, thinking that it will translate into a symbol
of his conversion as he had at one time wanted his other tattoos to be
seen as images of sexual potency. Before she sees him, she demands that
he identify himself, and his assertion of who he is brings a feeling
of inner completeness he has been lacking:

Parker bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole. "Ob-
badiah," 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 El-
huel" he whispered. (p. 528)

Unself-conscious at last, Parker feels the last bit of peace he will know,
as Sarah Ruth responds to him as she had to the old Parker. She rejects
the image on his back because she has become as obsessive about her ha-
tred of images as he had been about his fascination with them. Although
Parker now admits that his tattoos are "just pictures," and that the
transformation of the self is an inner affair, there is no effective
communication between the two, as she now denies his human presence,
seeing in him only the sinfulness of his idolatry. Like so many of O'Connor's
caracters, Parker has tried unsuccessfully to replace self-image
with true selfhood. He has learned that image isolates humans, obstruc-
ting human interaction, but the knowledge is ineffective, because Parker
lacks the means of making a gesture which will effectively communicate
his new sense of self. His final position of defeat underscores the
limitations of the religious experience as a grace-giving event, and
establishes the need for a union between persons for grace to be effec-
tive.

A third kind of epiphanic experience seen in O'Connor's stories
is a sudden feeling that the individual character is vitally linked to
some other person or to a group of persons and, through the intermediary,
to all of humankind. In many cases the central character feels a new
sense of kinship with an actual family member with whom he or she has
been trying to deny relationship. Rayber and Sheppard are two such char-
acters, each seeking a surrogate son to replace his own intellectually
inferior son. Both realize too late that their very destinies as per-
sons are contingent upon their acceptance of their own flesh and blood.
Their defeats and their revelations are the model for other characters
who fail to see or to accept their fundamental relationship with their
fellow humans. Throughout O'Connor's fiction, grace is recognizable as
the realization that intellectual, religious, or social posturing is wrong because it obscures human oneness and thereby denies the one source of self-definition people have, namely human kinship.

I have already discussed the discoveries of various characters that they are in some way a part of a larger social fabric. To the extent that a character makes this discovery and performs some gesture of response to the knowledge, that character becomes a recipient of grace. Conversely, characters who receive the insight, but do not act accordingly, deny the possibility of grace operating in their lives. Thus, when Tanner sees but does not "decipher" the image of Parrum as his black double, he denies their communality of experience, and is ultimately defeated because he continues to seek self-definition as a racial being rather than as a human being. Like Tanner, a number of characters see without deciphering images of themselves in others. Shiftlet remains powerless because his sight is limited to a knowledge of shared depravity with the hitchhiker. Were he to see beyond the guilt he carries, he would see that the violation of any human bond is as mean as the violation of a mother's love. Similarly, Asbury's vision of the water stain as a vengeful deity reflects the narrowness of his insight and the limitations of the grace he receives. Given fuller insight he would realize that the mock-gestures of communion he had made toward the farm hands were unsatisfying only because of his own aloofness, and not because such gestures are inherently impossible. So too, Julian fails to read the image of the black boy on the bus as his black double, and likewise fails to accept his kinship with his mother until it is too late.

In "A Good Man I am Hard To Find," O'Connor most clearly ties together the concepts of grace and kinship. Throughout the story, both the Grandmother and the Misfit are concerned with denying the clownish-
ness and captivity which are part of the human condition in O'Connor's world. She, through her clothing, her geographic chauvinism, and her sense of class status, would project the image of being a "lady," one who possesses power and prestige denied less gifted classes of people. He, through his gratuitous violence, would deny kinship with Christ, the archetypal human victim. By becoming the antithesis of Christ, the Misfit thinks he can attain power to the same extent that Christ gave up power. Thus, he defines himself in terms of having "fun," which means being the very opposite of good. But in a single instant, when the Grandmother's head clears, she sees herself without the trappings of her class and her sex, thereby recognizing the essential fact of her relationship with the man who is about to end her life: he is "one of her babies." This statement of unself-conscious honesty threatens the Misfit's entire basis for self-definition; it means that he is not a misfit at all. Thus, he responds instinctively, denying the relationship as forcefully as he can. His denial is, though, a rather thin covering up of the fact that in the future he will be a very ineffectual misfit. The story's ending makes it clear that the grace the Grandmother responded to has touched the Misfit as well, and that until he can make the kind of human gesture she made, there will in fact be no "real fun in life."

Because this story has two central characters, each affected in different ways by the knowledge of human kinship, it is an important story to use in determining the nature of grace in O'Connor's world. Each character reaches a different stage of awareness about the self in relation to the other; and the interaction between the two shows the dynamic nature of grace in operation. A key fact about the interaction is that it is entirely credible on a naturalistic plane: neither char-
acter has a religious experience, and neither is miraculously altered.

What happens is that the Misfit finds himself drawn into a self-revealing conversation with the Grandmother, until he finally admits to self-doubt and weakness: "'Listen lady,' he said in a high voice, 'if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now!'" (p. 132). Since he is no longer an aggressor, she responds to his weakness, and her gesture is neither defensive nor self-serving: "His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder" (p. 132). The Grandmother is ready to forsake her posture as other, and thus finds herself as "a good woman." But the Misfit is threatened by his own weakness and fears the Grandmother's love because his need for it is a sign of weakness. The grace which for an instant unites the two allows her to realize her human potential; in that instant she fully embodies grandmotherhood. But the grace has the opposite effect upon him: it repudiates the notion that there are misfits, and thus defeats his attempt to define himself as one who has no human ties.

One story in which a character's moment of grace provides the story with an otherwise non-existent unity is "A Circle In The Fire." The role of the adolescent girl who observes much of the story's action is problematic until the very end, when it becomes clear that her experience is central to the story's theme. The girl's position shifts from that of aloof observer to that of a tangential participant to that of main character; and this shift mirrors the movement of the individual whose life becomes affected by grace. Throughout most of the story the girl literally looks down on the action from her second story window,
using her physical position to cut herself off from the visiting boys, whom she despises, and from her mother, whom she disdains. Her manner of looking at the world is well captured in the series of images of trees as lines of defense, which I mentioned in Chapter Two. The story makes it clear that this removal from the arena of human action is the result of her self-righteous and self-pitying mother's insistence upon her own bettleness:

... she began to tell the child how much they had to be thankful for, for she said they might have had to live in a development themselves or they might have been Negroes or they might have been in iron lungs or they might have been Europeans ridden in boxcars like cattle, and she began a litany of her blessings ... (p. 190)

When the girl fails to live up to her mother's expectations of what she should look like, the mother taunts her with the suggestion that she does not look like the girl she was raised to be, that she looks more like the offspring of "trash": "I look at you and I want to cry! Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!" (p. 190).

The girl has learned her lesson well, and turns around her mother's doctrine of difference. "I ain't you," she shouts at her mother as she takes the offensive by denying kinship even with her closest relative. When she enters the woods to fight off the invading boys she seeks to establish her identity as a single integer, self-reliant and no longer in need of the defenses she had set up in her mind. But when the irrational behavior of the boys proves too much for her, she loses all sense of herself as a potent force: "She turned and tried to run across the field but her legs were too heavy and she stood there, weighted down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before" (p. 193). Returning to enlist the aid of her mother, she finds that her own weakness and that of her mother are the same, and that she is after all a part of
her mother and, through her mother, a part of the human race she had learned to scorn: "The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European, or to Powell himself" (p. 193). This is the quintessential moment of self-awareness in O'Connor's world. The character attains the basis for self-realization by looking square into the naked face of another and seeing in it a reflection of herself and the embodiment of all human experience which she had been trying to deny as a part of herself.

This insight into the commonality of the human experience is the moment of grace in O'Connor's fiction. It differs from the more traditional notion of grace as an infusion of supernatural assistance from above. O'Connor's grace always comes from this world and deals with a character's relationship with this world. But, like the theological conception of grace, it is meant to be an antidote to evil, both social and personal. As we have seen, O'Connor chooses the spectre of fascism to embody the ultimate social evil; and the grace she, as the creator of a fictive world, prescribes, is a universal recognition of human oneness. In personal terms, this grace is a basic human instinct for community, for kinship. The self must recognize this instinct, and allow it freedom of expression. Otherwise, the character will become the captive of his own emblems of self-worth, enslaved by his own obsession with being different, with being an individual, or with being a member of a social elite.
Flannery O'Connor is known more for her ability as a short story writer than as a novelist. Probably this is justified—her two novels are flawed by a disunity which does not exist in her shorter works. But no one would suggest that either of her novels lacks the power or the intensity of even the best of her stories. Neither *Wise Blood* nor *The Violent Bear It Away* diminishes the feeling that hers is a world of extremes: extreme imagery, extreme action, and extreme moral choices characterize both books. Furthermore, each deals in a more comprehensive way than does any single story with the theme that the process of becoming human is an ongoing struggle, one which is lessened only when people find in each other the grace they need to determine their individual identities. Because the two novels offer a wider view of O'Connor's world, I will consider them apart from the stories. In this chapter I will show how the theme of grace and its impact upon the self, which I have already isolated from the stories, is used on a larger scale to project a vision of humans seeking and finding in others the bases for their own identity. The standard interpretations of these books hold that Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater are both "saved" because they submit to their destined roles as preacher and as prophet.¹ But I

¹Typical of the critical assessment of Hazel Motes is this remark
will show that Motes fails to attain full human selfhood because he embraces a religious vision which isolates him from human contact; and that Tarwater succeeds, not because he becomes a prophet, but because the prophecy he embarks upon is man-centered and not predicated upon his own superiority to the masses of people he would save by purging them with the fire of his vision.

2

The characters of Wise Blood repeatedly fail to find in one another the grace they need to realize their human potential in a world which tends to de-humanize its inhabitants. Time and again characters gaze into one another's eyes without perceiving a sense of shared humanity, and thus they fail to assist each other as they try to become coherent selves. Hazel Motes sets out to undo the effects of his mother's de-humanizing religion, but fails when he directs his course first toward a sexual goal, then toward a materialistic end, symbolized by his car, and finally toward an abstract spiritual state, represented by his self-inflicted blindness. Throughout the novel he dooms himself to failure by isolating himself from the human contact which is his only hope for

by Martha Stephens, in The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 55: "Moving through the sick, blasted, animalistic world of the novel is a hero whose virtue, however queerly manifested, is meant to blaze from this barren ground all the more wonderfully forth—one who finally succeeds in delivering himself from the tyranny of his own blood and finding his way 'backwards,' as O'Connor puts it, 'to Bethlehem.'" For similar interpretations of Hazel's final stance, see Robert Rechnitz, "Passionate Pilgrim: Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Georgia Review, 19 (1965), 310-16; and the discussions of the novel in Feeley, Martin, Walters, and Driskell and Brittain.

salvation. By refusing to see his own condition reflected in the people around him, he fails to achieve even the most primitive form of self-knowledge.

Early in the novel O'Connor describes a universe in which there is no connection between the cosmic and the human. The universe above exists on a scale which is entirely beyond the ken of the humans below:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky. (p. 24)

One critic sees this passage as an indication of the book's central problem: its characters are too unconcerned with the transcendant, too wrapped up in the petty concerns of this world. But I think the mechanical image of the cosmos as "some vast construction work" is intended more to indicate the impersonality of the universe. The individual below cannot relate to the order above. The implication is that humanity must establish its own order, must find meaning in this world. When Hazel finally begins to gaze at the sky, the connection he makes between himself and the cosmos has been seen as a sign of his conversion from a worldly quest to a divine one, and his subsequent self-blinding the act of a redeemed man:

Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over at the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space ... His face didn't change and he didn't turn it toward the patrolman. It seemed to be concentrated on space. (pp. 113, 114) To her (the landlady), the blind man had the look of seeing something. His face had a peculiar pushing look, as if it were going forward

---

2 Martin, p. 48.
after something it could just distinguish in the distance. (p. 116)

True, Haze's worldly quest has ended. But his self-blinding I will show to be the ultimate act of isolation, his final failure to open himself to the possibility of grace, and the admission of defeat of a character in his struggle to become a coherent self.

The opening scene of Wise Blood is a microcosm of the entire book; the action here is repeated again and again, with different characters playing the important roles. Sitting across from Haze on a train to the city, a woman tries to assess him, first by looking at his clothing: "He didn't look, to her, much over twenty, but he had a stiff black broad-brimmed hat on his lap, a hat that an elderly country preacher would wear. His suit was a glaring blue and the price tag was still stapled on the sleeve of it" (p. 9). When she is satisfied that Haze is her social inferior, she seeks to know him on a deeper level, but is frustrated when she gazes into his eyes:

The suit had cost him $11.98. She felt that that placed him and looked at his face again as if she were fortified against it now. . . . His eyes were what held her attention longest. Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere and she leaned halfway across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them. He turned toward the window suddenly and then almost as quickly turned back again to where his stare had been fixed. (pp. 9, 10)

Because she finds no human core below the surface she can see ("the outline of a skull," eyes the color of "pecan shells," and "a nose like a shrike's bill"), Haze remains an object to her. There is no point of contact between them, beyond her knowledge of his economic status and her surmisal that he is a country preacher. He, meanwhile, has seen her as an object: "She was a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs and pear-shaped legs that slanted off the train seat and didn't reach the floor"
(p. 9); "It was Mrs. Hitchcock in a pink wrapper, with her hair in knots around her head. She looked at him with her eyes squinted nearly shut. The knobs framed her face like dark toadstools" (p. 14). Hazel also sees other people on the train in terms of what they look like. For instance, he responds to the porter as he would to a rural black man, because he looks like someone he knew in Eastrod. Thus, the opening chapter establishes an important pattern: characters deal with one another on the basis of surface appearances, without ever being certain that their impressions are accurate. This kind of interaction becomes peculiar to this novel in so far as characters commit themselves to particular assessments of one another, and thereby blunder when they act as though their impressions are in fact accurate.

Because surface appearances are so important in this world, the process of self-definition often becomes a question of choosing the right costume. Haze, although he has determined not to be a preacher, must struggle against the image he projects. Told by a taxi driver that "a look in your face somewheres" pegs him as a preacher, he visits a prostitute to destroy that image, but fails: "Her eyes took in everything whole, like quicksand. 'That Jesus-seeing hat!' she said" (p. 37). This way of seeing others negates the element of individual human identity, and people become objects: "He was like something washed ashore on her" (p. 37); "Mrs. Watts's grin was as sharp and curved as the blade of a sickle" (p. 37). The novel's most extreme example of the way in which self-identification through costume leads to loss of the human self is the portrayal of the confidence man, Onnie Jay Holy:

The man was plumpish, and he had curly blond hair that was cut with showy sideburns. He wore a black suit with a silver stripe in it and a wide-brimmed white hat pushed onto the back of his head, and
he had on tight-fitting black shoes and no socks. He looked like an ex-preacher turned cowboy, or an ex-cowboy turned mortician. He was not handsome but under his smile, there was an honest look that fitted into his face like a set of false teeth. (p. 81)

Haze sees two ways to break out of this de-humanizing scheme of things. The first is to see himself through the lenses of his mother's fundamentalist faith: she has left him her bible and her glasses to guide him through life. But these glasses give him a distorted image of himself: "The little silver-rimmed glasses gave him a look of deflected sharpness, as if they were hiding some dishonest plan that would show in his naked eyes. His fingers began to snap nervously and he forgot what he had been going to do. He saw his mother's face in his, looking at the face in the mirror" (p. 102). His mother's religion has indeed taught him that the external man does not determine the real self, but it has also taught him that the inner self is innately corrupt, giving him "a nameless unplaced guilt" (p. 39) for being himself. This guilt is as de-humanizing as the secular world's way of seeing him: "She hit him across the legs with a stick, but he was like part of the tree. 'Jesus died to redeem you,' she said" (p. 39).

Haze's other option is to throw off the burden of guilt his mother's Christianity has given him and to defy the world's tendency to take away his individual identity, by asserting that he is a worthy person and a self-sufficient being:

'Nothing outside you can give you any place,' he said. 'You needn't to look at the sky because it's not goin to open up and show no place behind it. You needn't to search for no hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else. You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. In yourself now is all the place you've got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgement, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and your body can they be?' (p. 90)
This doctrine of self-sufficiency derives from his prior assertion that individual existence per se, and not the condition of Christian redemption, determines one's worth: "I AM clean . . . If Jesus existed I wouldn't be clean" (p. 53). But Haze's doctrine is a self-deceptive one. In fact he has come to rely upon something outside of himself as the vehicle for self-definition. That something is not a person or an idea, but an object, his car: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (p. 64). And when the car is lost to him, Haze becomes lost to himself. In seeking to negate the effects of other de-humanizing processes, Haze has objectified himself in his car, he has discarded other badges of identity for a symbol of mobility, only to lose his identity when the symbol vanishes.

In his search for an identity which affirms the self rather than denigrates it like his mother's religion or denies it like the secular world, Haze encounters three male characters who act as his doubles, and three female characters who threaten his adult independence from his mother. I have shown that O'Connor's characters must work out their salvation through other characters, and it is in his dealings with these six people that Haze must find or lose the self he can become. By discussing each separately, I will show how each relates to the main character's failure to receive the grace he needs to define himself in the world he inhabits.

Asa Hawks, the religious charlatan, is a character-type O'Connor was later to resurrect in the person of Manley Pointer, the sham bible salesman of "Good Country People." As Hulga determines to expose the inadequacy of Christian belief by seducing Pointer, Haze seeks to negate Hawks's apparent act of self-abnegation by seducing his daughter. But when Haze removes the dark glasses of Hawks's deception, and when he is
himself seduced by the wanton Sabbath Lily, he is forced to re-define himself in terms of a new mission. Until this point Haze has been focusing his energy on the antics of a petty old faker who has fooled no one but himself. Like Hulga, he has predicated his disbelief, and with it his identity, upon the supposed innocence of one who is in fact more depraved than himself. When he stares into the face of this false prophet, he finds reflected there an image of his own "blankness," of his need for a positive basis for self-definition:

Haze squatted down by him and struck a match close to his face and he opened his eyes. The two sets of eyes looked at each other as long as the match lasted; Haze's expression seemed to open onto a deeper blankness and reflect something and then close again. (p. 89)

Since there is now no effective Christian presence in the book, Haze can rely no longer upon negation as a self-defining stance. No longer will a Church without Christ be sufficient. Haze must now become a prophet in his own right; he must now find and preach a doctrine which is positive as well as true.

Hazel also unmasks Solace Layfield, another false prophet, who has been hired by Hoover Shoats to ape Haze's appearance and doctrines. When Hazel knocks Layfield's car off the road and forces him to remove the suit and hat which mock his own, he strips him of the trappings of a self-identity which he had assumed only for its cash value. Layfield is reduced to his essential human identity, and becomes totally dependent upon Hazel: "The man didn't look so much like Haze, lying on the ground on his face without his hat or suit on. A lot of blood was coming out of him and forming a puddle around his head" (p. 110). Haze responds by casting judgment on the man, preaching his own self-righteous doctrine of absolute honesty: "Two things I can't stand, . . . a man that ain't
true and one that mocks what is" (p. 111); and by denying Layfield any human solace as the dying man confesses his sins. But Hazel's repudiation of Layfield also exposes his own position, for he himself has yet to determine what is "true." He is still caught up in a world of surface appearances, unmasking the false without finding the basis for a genuine self of his own. He has no sense of place, only a need for mobility. As he has pushed Layfield's car off the road, so too his own is destroyed, and with it the material trappings of his self-identity. His unmasking of Layfield unmasks his own lack of a core of human identity.

The chapters of Wise Blood which deal with Enoch Emery are generally considered the book's major source of disunity. This is clearly the case: Enoch's presence in the book can be defended only on thematic grounds, not in terms of plot. But when seen in terms of the theme of failed grace, Enoch's mis-adventures make perfect sense. Enoch's search is the search for the self within a human context, when the self finds no human counterpart, no other to help complete what cannot be completed in isolation. The world he inhabits is one of awe-inspiring machines, animals, and objects, with fellow humans always at a distance. Enoch's position in the world is aptly summed up in a description of him standing in front of a drug store window: "... he appeared to be working his way across the glass by his muscles, against a background of alarm clocks, toilet waters, candies, sanitary pads, fountain pens, and pocket flashlights, displayed in all colors to twice his height" (p. 75). But the animals, machines, and objects of the city are not the cause of Enoch's distress; they merely constitute the backdrop which heightens his alienation. Enoch is victimized by the human, not by the inhuman; and Hazel Motes is most responsible for his defeat.

Enoch Emery is reduced to a sub-human condition when he dons the
gorilla suit in search of a friendly hand in an unfriendly city. The pathos of his search is compromised by the comedic aspects of his encounter with the jaded Gonga, but it exists nonetheless:

It was the first hand that had been extended to Enoch since he had come to the city. It was warm and soft... For a second he only stood there, clasping it. Then he began to stammer. "My name is Enoch Emery," he mumbled... The star leaned slightly forward and a change came in his eyes: an ugly pair of human ones squinted at Enoch from behind the celluloid pair. "You go to hell," a surly voice inside the ape-suit said, low but distinctly, and the hand was jerked away.

Enoch's humiliation was so sharp and painful that he turned around three times before he realized what direction he wanted to go in. Then he ran off into the rain as fast as he could. (pp. 98, 99)

Although Enoch's search leads him away from Hazel Motes, their fates are closely linked. Because Hazel has denied Enoch his friendship, the one ends up a monkey, and the other ends up even less of a person. Because Enoch fails to find the human counterpart he seeks in the city, grace does not enter his life and enable him to realize his humanity. And because Hazel refuses to become the human friend Enoch seeks, he likewise fails to attain this grace. Enoch's role in the book, then, is to underscore one of the effects upon the self when grace is lacking: his animal-like identity is the extreme opposite of Hazel's final identity as an abstraction.³

Enoch's early attempts to reach Hazel are frustrated because Hazel has come to the city not to find human contact, but to deny that people need to rely upon anything, including other people. Enoch is obsessed with his need for a friend, and thus he incurs Hazel's utter disdain.

³Louis Rubin is unique in that he sees Enoch as a human being, and not as the butt of O'Connor's judgment that a search for a purely human identity inevitably renders one an animal. See his "Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt" in The Added Dimension (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 12-79.
To fill the void in his life, to order his experience in the unfriendly city, Enoch establishes a mock-ritual which focuses upon the non-human: the zoo animals, the "Frosty-Bottle," the MUSEUM, and the mummy. But these things bring him no salvation. He is doomed to loneliness, not because his "religion" lacks a divine focus, but because it lacks a human element. So too, Haze's anti-religion fails to free him from his needs because it is as impersonal as Enoch's pseudo-religion. The relationship between the two is an important instance of O'Connor's people denying that they are fellow humans, and thereby denying that they are human at all. Enoch begins to see that they share a common fate: "I think I seen you sommers before . . . You look like you had a kind of familiar face" (p. 35). But Haze's response is deadening, and it denies them both the humanity they seek: "Hazel Motes's face might have been cut out of the side of a rock" (p. 51). This thwarted relationship is indicative of the nature of human interaction in a graceless world. Haze and Enoch act toward one another out of superficial impulse or obsessive response, and both remain one-dimensional because they lack depth of motivation. That they fail to become human is not a measure of O'Connor's failure as a novelist, but rather of her success in creating a world in which people deny themselves and others the humanity they might attain.

As Hazel's missed connection with Enoch interferes with grace in his life, so too his interactions with women bring him no adult selfhood. Through a series of flashbacks, the book shows that Hazel associates his mother with sexuality and death. Haze comes to see sexual encounters with women as one means of keeping the coffin lid from closing upon himself. Thus he recalls his father's comment about the sideshow's naked woman in a coffin: "'Had one of themther built into ever'
casket,' his father, up toward the front, said, 'be a heap ready to go sooner!'" (p. 38). But Haze had been soundly beaten by his mother for his sexual interests, and he carries with him a life-long conflict between impulse and guilt. Because Haze has been taught that his concupiscence makes him unclean, his search for an adult self-identity becomes a struggle to assert that he is clean in spite of his bodily wants. The adult self he would become must resolve the conflict between guilt and instinct, allowing him to have a sexual relationship without the memory of his mother's repressive doctrine of uncleanness interfering. Clearly, this does not happen during his visits to Leonora Watts, who sees him as a child: "That's okay son, ... Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher" (p. 23); and whose sexual favors do not make him feel clean: "When he finished, he was like something washed ashore on her, and she had made obscene comments about him which he remembered off and on during the day. He was uneasy in the thought of going to her again" (p. 37).

Haze has another sexual encounter, this time with Sabbath Lily, herself a child; but it is hardly one in which he has any degree of adult control. Furthermore, this encounter is shown to be a parody of human sexuality when the next morning Sabbath Lily appears with the crumbling mummy before Haze, who has donned his mother's glasses: "He saw his mother's face in his, looking at the face in the mirror. He moved back quickly to take off the glasses but the door opened and two more faces floated into his line of vision; one of them said, 'Call me Momma now!'" (p. 102). The fruit of this sexual union is the dust-filled mummy, a symbol of the sterility of the characters involved. Haze finds himself with yet another mother-figure who will impede his task of self-definition on his own terms.

After his encounter with Sabbath Lily, Haze regresses further
in his next relationship with a woman. Mrs. Flood, his landlady, assumes
the role of doting and manipulative mother after Haze has denied the pos-
sibility of human interaction by blinding himself. His final admission
of defeat comes when he asserts to her what his real mother had instilled
in him long ago, and what he had been struggling to deny in his quest
to become a self: "I'm not clean" (p. 122). During the final chapter
of the book, Haze becomes more and more passive, allowing his identity
to dissolve by degrees until he becomes as faceless and as ineffective
as the mummy which was his symbolic offspring. In the last scene, Mrs.
Flood makes a final attempt to see who he is, to decipher a human iden-
tity in a human form. She fails because Haze's self-blinding and self-
flagellation are symptoms of his final failure to find a coherent basis
for human selfhood. By blinding himself he has retreated from the world
of surface identities which has caused him only confusion. But he has
also denied himself the chance to see in people like Enoch, Sabbath
Lily, Hawks, Layfield, and even the mummy, images of what he is: a
clown-like captive of a human form in a de-humanizing universe. By tor-
turing his body, he succumbs to the repressive Manichean doctrine that
he had been trying to refute. He chooses, in short, to seek an identity
as a spirit in a world which knows only bodily identities:

She had never observed his face more composed and she grabbed his
hand and held it to her heart. It was resistless and dry. The out-
line of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye
sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared.
She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them,
trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but
she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point
of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her
mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of some-
thing. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt
as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she could-
not begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther
and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light.
(p. 126)
This last futile attempt to read humanity in the face of another is the book's ultimate sign that grace operates only when there exists a human medium for its transmission. Mrs. Flood sees in Hazel first the same object-like identity the woman on the train had noticed earlier, the outline of a skull on his face. Looking deeper, the most she can find is the abstraction, the enigma which is symbolized by the pin point of light.

Because Hazel Motes abstracts himself from humanity in his thwarted quest to become human, all his would-be human counterparts are "blocked" in their attempts to reach his soul. As a result, he ends up as deadened as Enoch's dried mummy, the new jesus who is Hazel's symbolic offspring. The mummy becomes the story's central symbol, the ultimate image of the human self when concern for the outer layers of identity obscures the development of the inner self:

Two days out of the glass case had not improved the new jesus' condition. One side of his face had been partly mashed in and on the other side, his eyelid had split and a pale dust was seeping out of it. For a while her face had an empty look, as if she didn't know what she thought about him or didn't think anything. She might have sat there for ten minutes, without a thought, held by whatever it was that was familiar about him. She had never known anyone who looked like him before, but there was something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried. (p. 100)

But this image, grotesque as it is, does not mean that O'Connor predicates Wise Blood upon the absurdity of human existence. The world of Wise Blood is grotesque without becoming absurdist, for the grotesque is shown to be an effect of human failure, and not a cause of human powerlessness to act. Grace is absent from this world only because the characters fail to make it work by failing to find in one another the means for their own salvation, and the bases for their own identities.
In Chapter One I showed how *The Violent Bear It Away* uses a pattern of child/adult images to convey the paradoxical theme that in order to become an adult self the individual must recognize and accept the "child" which is inescapably a part of the adult.\(^4\) The character of Bishop, the idiot-child, is central to this theme, as through him the other characters come to terms with the child-like components of their own psyches. At this point I will further consider this novel, showing how Bishop, although an incomplete self, serves as a medium through whom the other characters are given the opportunity to receive the kind of grace I discussed in Chapter Four, namely the sense of shared humanity which the individual must experience in order to attain balanced selfhood. The presence of Bishop, and not the memory of Old Tarwater, impels Rayber and Tarwater to see through the masks they use to disguise the selves they are afraid to encounter. Thus, the book does not call for a definition of the self within Old Tarwater's strictly religious sphere of values or within Rayber's strictly humanistic context. Rather, it insists that there is a third course of action, one which counters the two modes of removal from humanity, the righteous indignation of the prophet and the clinical sterility of the social worker. This third course embraces the flawed and unself-conscious humanity of a Bishop, tempering religious vision with human instinct.

The problem of the self and of identity is crucial to both Rayber and Tarwater. Tarwater is, as I have mentioned, at a pivotal point in his life: he is on the verge of determining what kind of adult he will be. Rayber has already made his choice, to remove himself from di-

\(^4\) Cf. Chapter One, p. 11.
rect contact with people and things by intellectualizing all experience, by translating the concrete into the abstract. In both cases the strategies for self-expression are presented in terms of relationships with other people; and they are embodied in images of seeing, not through modes of action. Tarwater, after his great-uncle has died, thinks he can preserve his integrity as a self by seeing things only on the surface:

He tried when possible to pass over these thoughts, to keep his vision located on an even level, to see no more than what was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something—a spade, a hoe, a mule's hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him—that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all that he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation. (p. 316)

Rayber is even further out of touch with the world of solid presences, as he chooses not to see existing things at all, ignoring what is, in order to visualize what might be: "He gazed through the actual insignificant boy before him to an image of him that he held fully developed in his mind" (p. 357). In order to preserve his self-imposed distance from the created world, Tarwater chooses as a symbol for the self he would be one of the prophetic elements, fire, while rejecting the water of baptism and the earth of burial. Rayber, meanwhile, dissociates himself from all the elements by transforming his world into so many formulas and numbers: "... in the schoolteacher's head, he would be laid out in parts and numbers ... The old man had not known that when he went to live there that every living thing that passed through the nephew's eyes into his head was turned by his brain into a book or a paper or a chart" (p. 314). Tarwater's fire and Rayber's numbers serve the
same function: they intervene between the self and direct human experience. In so doing they deny the characters the chance to complete their own humanity by receiving the grace which comes only when the gap between people is bridged, only when differences are dissolved.

Rayber and Tarwater both have their strategies tested, and each finds his means of divorcing the self from human encounters to be unavailing. The test comes not from the old man, whose influence would impel them in a religious direction, but from Bishop, whose presence pulls them irresistibly into a confrontation with their own essential selves. For Rayber this confrontation is shown to be a spontaneous welling up of irrational feelings of unity with the concrete world, a sense of the "threatened intimacy of creation":

For the most part Rayber lived with him without being painfully aware of his presence but the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity. ... Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man's walk of a startling crossing the sidewalk. If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would suddenly feel a morbid surge of the love that terrified him. (p. 373)

For Tarwater the confrontation is even more startling: it reveals the very kind of self-identity he must accept if he is to succeed in his quest for the self. His destined role, he learns, is to be one of the masses, and not to become a better-than-thou purifying prophet of the masses. Looking at Bishop, he sees "a child who had been a child for centuries" (p. 357), and the effect is painfully unambiguous:

Tarwater clenched his fists. He stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a cer-
tainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance, in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf. (p. 357)

Each sees in the eyes of Bishop the stark truth about himself that cannot be forever eluded: the self is not remarkable, nor can one distance the self from the rest of the world by translating people and things into abstract integers which can be contained by the rational mind.

Rayber clearly knows that his salvation lies in his being able to confront the face of Bishop. He disdains his former wife because "she had not been able to live with Bishop's face" (p. 410), and he notes with approval when Tarwater's attitude toward the boy shifts perceptibly: "I notice that you've begun to be able to look Bishop in the eye. That's good" (p. 416). But he himself fails to deal with his son in human terms, instead seeing him as a symbol, "... as an x signifying the general hideousness of fate" (p. 372). Thus, Bishop's presence protects him from the knowledge that this hideous fate is his own as well. Through Bishop he displaces the shortcomings of the real self which are disguised by his mask of intellectualism, liberalism, and humanitarianism. But Bishop's face, the old man's, and Tarwater's are all versions of the same face, and each reflects Rayber to himself:

When Rayber had first opened the door in the middle of the night he had seen Tarwater's face—white, drawn by some unfathomable hunger and pride—he had remained for an instant frozen before what might have been a mirror thrust toward him in a nightmare. The face before him was his own, but the eyes were not his own. (p. 364)

Rayber refuses to see himself in these others; he fails to look into
Bishop's eyes, or into Tarwater's, to "decipher" the humanity which is there demanding a fellow humanity from him. The result is a failure to receive grace, and a blocking of the characters' drives to become human:

When they reached the house he went in and straight to bed without turning to look at the boy's white face which, drained but expectant, lingered a moment at the threshold of his door as if waiting for an invitation to enter.

The next day, too late, he had the sense of opportunity missed. Tarwater's face had hardened again and the steely gleam in his eye was like the glint of a metal door sealed against an intruder. (pp. 386, 387) Rayber's face had the wooden look it wore when his hearing aid was off. He did not see the boy's expression at all. . . . Through his fury he could not discern that for the first time the boy's eyes were submissive. (p. 385)

Immediately before this rejection, Rayber had been rejected himself. After gazing at the beautiful young girl at the revival, and imagining himself as her savior, he had felt "as if he had been struck by an invisible bolt" (p. 385) when the girl accused him of being deaf to the word of the Lord. His response had been to shut off his hearing aid, to retreat into himself: "A silent dark relief enclosed him like shelter after a tormenting wind" (p. 385). Because he so isolates himself, Rayber is left with nothing when Bishop, his link with humanity, is taken from him.

Unlike Rayber, Tarwater finds the humanity he has been eluding in his desire to become a prophet of wrath and righteousness. After he does his best to deny his own humanity by drowning Bishop, Tarwater finds that he is very much subject to human perils when he is defiled by the traveling salesman. After his traumatic experience he has his second vision of the feeding of the multitudes, and this time he accepts the part he must play: he is one of the masses. Thus, he is prepared to return to the city, to his fellow "children of God," to warn them of the "terrible speed of mercy." Wearing on his face the dirt from his great-
uncle's grave—a symbol that he has accepted his own human condition, he will not go to burn clean the eyes of others. For Tarwater has had his own eyes burned, and the cleansing fire will now permit him to see himself and others as part of the same scheme, in need of the same mercy.

The novel's positive development of Tarwater is qualified by the fact that his new-found human identity remains untested. A major flaw of the book lies in its failure to bridge the gap between the symbolic and the concrete, to embody in narrative form the altered vision of this character who sees reality in the symbols of his prophetic mission. Thus, Rayber's failure is more graphically portrayed than Tarwater's success, as the central narrative merely prepares the boy to find his human identity by submitting him to a series of experiences which cause him to see that he is not destined to sit in judgment of humanity. Rayber's defeat is final: his overreliance upon his rational faculty and his repression of his emotions makes of him an automaton. The book suggests that the danger of this kind of de-personalization exists not only in pursuit of a facile philanthropy, but in religious misanthropy as well. But by allowing Tarwater to be purged of his misanthropy, O'Connor clearly shows that it is safer to err on the side of mystery than of fact. Tarwater's religious sensibility can be tailored to meet the needs of the self in a human fashion. However, since the book focuses upon the undoing of Rayber and the negation of Tarwater's earlier impulses, the terms of this new sensibility remain abstract. In this sense The Violent Bear It Away is a less successful novel than Wise Blood. It attempts to move its main character beyond the futility of action without grace, but fails to provide a mode of action through which the reader will be able to identify the character as one who has been "saved."
Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater are both involved in obsessive quests to find an identity in terms of two central facts of life in O'Connor's world. The first is that that world is a visibly de-humanizing place. This fact I have established throughout my study. The second fact of life in O'Connor's world is something I have dealt with less directly, namely the pervasive influence of religious vision in that world. Virtually all of O'Connor's characters are forced to determine their identities on the basis of a religious stance, and often that stance assumes such extreme proportions as to become grotesque. Because the quest for, or the denial of, a religious identity becomes such a dominant part of the larger issue of self-identity for her characters, I will conclude my study by suggesting why O'Connor found religious vision to be such an integral part of the human experience.

O'Connor herself provides part of the reason when she says that her native region, and hence her fictional material, demands that she give religion an important role in her writing. She says that in the South the basic terms of existence are still theological, and that the Southerner, if not "Christ-centered," is inevitably "Christ-haunted." But this answer is only partially satisfying, for it raises the further question of why she chose this aspect of the Southern mentality as a major subject matter. Why, for instance, are not Faulkner's characters equally "Christ-haunted'? Clearly, the need to establish a religious identity is O'Connor's metaphor for one human response to the de-humanizing world she envisions. If the drug store window Enoch Emery sees and the brace shop of "The Lame Shall Enter First" are metaphors for

---

O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 44.
O'Connor's vision of the modern world, then the crazed religious visionaries she portraits represent a countering vision. Their gestures are non-rational responses to a world whose excessive reliance upon reason and logic threatens to turn people into automatons, or worse—to send them off in cattle-cars in the name of the extremely logical and coldly rational order of fascism. Such characters are misfits as much as is the Misfit himself, for they refuse to accept the givens of the modern world, the rational, economic, or social order sought by such characters as Rayber, Mrs. Greenleaf, and Mrs. Turpin. Thus, they become comic characters in a very real sense: their actions are laughably out of whack with the accepted behavior of their society. Because the religious impulse is instinctive and irrational, it allows for a fuller expression of the human spirit than do the more narrowly rational modes of ordering experience many of O'Connor's characters pursue. Her fiction implies that to become fully human one must transcend the limits of human institutional order and open the self to the possibilities of an existence without a discernible order. In O'Connor's world the element of mystery means the acceptance of an identity which derives not from visible and well-defined tokens of self-worth, but rather from a larger sense of one's place in the human nexus. And a character whose self is stamped with this element of mystery may well be clownish because his behavior and his values will tend to violate the standards of acceptability and normalcy of his social milieu.

The religious fanatic is not the only stock figure in O'Connor's fiction whose extreme behavior is an attempt to counter the de-humanizing influence of her world. Gratuitous violence and moral paralysis are two other extreme responses, and the criminal and the jaded intellectual assume these stances in vain attempts to find identity where otherwise
they would have none. Each of these three responses assumes the grotesque proportions of the world O'Connor portrays, and through them O'Connor deliberately tries to shock a complacent audience. Thus she says that "it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in our literature." By portraying extreme responses to what she sees as our world, she hoped to show the extent to which the essential selfhood of each of us is displaced by the grotesquery of that world, and by our acquiescence to it.

There is a sense in which her fiction offers three choices for human nature: to be held captive by a de-humanizing world, to break out of the de-humanizing patterns of existence through extreme violence, or to render the self clown-like by defying the mechanical order of the world, by seeking instead a human order and a human identity which is inherently comic because it accepts mystery as well as the fact which is the basis for the accepted order. Such prophet-figures in her stories as the Tarwaters and Parker, although they seek a divine order and not a human one, offer a more effective countering vision than the criminal or the cynic to the crass materialistic influences which threaten human identity.

Parker's instinctive need for Sarah Ruth, and young Tarwater's discovery that justice and wrath need to be tempered with mercy, both show that O'Connor sought a human order in the direction of the religious mystery both these characters experience.

In O'Connor's fictional world, then, characters employ a variety of strategies and assume a number of stances in their quests to find and maintain identities as individuals. Her world and its institutions work around an established order which is inimical to human needs and which

---

6O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 45.
thwarts human impulses. When characters rely upon images of themselves which are in fact badges of an identity based upon social, economic, or racial distinctions, the identity they achieve is not a human one, one which derives from recognizably human values. Rather, such an identity derives from the objects they embrace, the symbols of who they are. Thus they meet the expectations of a milieu which determines that they will interact as animals or as machines. They become, in short, as de-personalized as the symbols they revere. But some of her characters achieve a vision of the self as integrally related to, and not qualitatively different from, others. This is the experience of grace, the experience which gives an individual the means to negate the de-personalizing effects of his world. Because the operation of this grace is at the thematic center of O'Connor's fiction, her work is, in the last analysis, affirmative. As I have shown, much of the work focuses upon the animal, mechanical, and institutional forces which deny the human element. But throughout her fiction, she denies the tyranny of those forces by asserting that a human spirit can be expressed to repudiate the rigid dictates of an impersonal social order.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


---

