

SPIRITUAL EPIPHANIES:
THE ROLE OF DISABILITY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S SHORT STORIES

by

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Abstract

My analysis will show that disability and spirituality join together to reveal the autonomy disabled characters possess. These characters, deemed “disabled” in society because of genetics, choices, accidents, and illnesses, are both transformed themselves and serve as the catalyst in transforming others. To better understand the content chapters of my analysis, the introduction outlines O’Connor’s personal experience as a disabled woman, the terminology of disability, the American movement of Eugenics, and the importance of key elements of the short fiction genre.

I explore how the characters in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories manifest their spiritual shortcomings through their physical disabilities. In some cases, the limitations of the disabled are not indicators of their own spiritual disabilities, but rather the catalyst for the reader to understand the spiritual lack of the able-bodied foil. In “Good Country People,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “The Enduring Chill,” “The Turkey,” “The Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and “The Lame Shall Enter First,” the dynamic focusing character in the narrative will have a moment of epiphany catalyzed by disability – either their own as in Chapter 2, or of another as in Chapter 3. For each example, I highlight the moment of epiphany and comment on the possible enlightenment the character achieves while addressing O’Connor’s methods of combating the Eugenics Movement.

By exploring three of O’Connor’s short stories – “Good Country People” (1955), “The Life You Save May be Your Own” (1955), and “The Enduring Chill” (1958) – in Chapter 2, a similar redemptive trajectory will appear for each of the disabled protagonists. Though not all of the characters complete their arc of enlightenment, each

comes to a revelation that links their body and spirit, allowing them to view the world they have created for themselves from a new perspective. Far from presenting the disabled body in a poor light or in jest, O'Connor instead proves to the reader that all men and women are equalized through a disabled spirit.

In the three stories of Chapter 2, circumstances acted as the catalysts for the revelations. However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, in other O'Connor stories, the disabled character acts as the catalyst for the abled-bodied character's epiphany. By examining "The Turkey," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and "The Lame Shall Enter First," the trend of a disabled catalyst will be revealed. In these stories, the focus is on the abled-bodied epiphany, rather than the disability. In other words, showing the protagonist's journey of transformation, as catalyzed by a disabled character, is the main goal of the analysis.

O'Connor wrote stories that gave disabled characters a voice in the midst of the pervasive social approval of the eugenics movement. But beyond giving disabled characters a voice, she wrote about autonomous characters who were catalysts for change, both in themselves and in others. Though the dynamic characters in each of these six stories ended their journey at a different stage, each experienced a moment of epiphany at the crossroads of physical and spiritual disability.

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Preface: A Reflection

“Revelation” was the first story by Flannery O’Connor that I ever read. As I sat in my undergraduate “American Literature: Modernism and Beyond” course, I knew I would like whatever story followed an opening scene of an angsty girl throwing a book in a doctor’s office. “Revelation” showcases O’Connor’s typical handling of race relations, class relations, religion, and her beautiful command of description, quick wit, and the short fiction form. However, my attention diverted from O’Connor’s short fiction for a time when I read her poignant novel *The Violent Bear it Away*.

I did not encounter her short stories again until my senior capstone course. During the first half of the course we read from *The Complete Stories*, exploring a new story nearly every day. From O’Connor’s thesis story “Wildcat,” to her most infamous tale “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” to the imagery of “Parker’s Back,” to the social commentary of “Judgment Day,” we discussed common themes, views of academia, writing techniques, the Southern Gothic, and the grace evident on each page. Yet even after all the studying and discussion, I did not know much about Flannery O’Connor the person.

After college, I continued to read from my copy of *The Complete Stories* with the bunch of muted peacock feathers on the cover, reveling each time I was able to check off a new story in the Table of Contents. Some of my deepest academic discussions during my time between college and graduate school were centered on those short stories, and those conversations kept me hungry for more literature study.

Though I briefly considered writing about O’Connor in my first graduate-level theory class, I instead wrote about her British contemporary Dorothy Sayers. I’m glad I held off, because when spring rolled around I knew I wanted to write about O’Connor. At

first I wanted to explore the trickster character in the short stories—I had just read *The Confidence Man* by Herman Melville, and it was consuming my thought-life at the time I was making initial thesis decisions. That topic morphed into appearance and false appearance, which morphed over the summer into physical and spiritual appearance, which morphed into the spiritual manifesting into the physical, which finally morphed into a thesis exploring the ways disabled characters are spiritually transformed and how they act as catalysts for the spiritual transformation of others.

Just as my topic shifted over time, the list of stories I wanted to incorporate shifted. My desire in choosing particular stories first found root in the stories that are seldom talked about or analyzed. “The Turkey,” one of O’Connor’s thesis stories, is an example. Second, the stories needed to mesh with my topic and work in tandem with each other. In each of the following chapters, I’ve chosen three stories that combine to show similar transformations. I chose the stories for Chapter 1 quite easily, but Chapter 2 required more research into the themes I was attempting to explore. In the end, my chosen stories list looks quite different from my initial proposal, but the result is much more cohesive.

Although I chose to keep “The Turkey” as one of the stories for the majority of the process, it was difficult making the transition from my early ideas to my final topic. At first, it was simple to juxtapose the elements of the deadly sin of pride and the sacrament of confession. However, once my focus shifted to include disability, I realized I needed to reanalyze the story to see if it would still be a viable option. Since the catalyst for change in the story is the old beggar woman, I tried to make her the foundation for my analysis. While it is possible that she represents a disabled character, as I discuss in

Chapter 2, I felt I needed more of a direct connection to make the story fit with the others, so I placed the story on the backburner and turned my attention to different narrations. Some time later, I decided to incorporate “The Turkey” into my teaching curriculum. As I created assignments and reread the content for class discussion, I realized that the turkey itself could be considered a character in the story and that the turkey was described in terms associated with disability. Though I could not make the connection while analyzing in a thesis mindset, I was able to find inspiration while in a teaching mindset.

Similarly, I made some other observations when teaching O’Connor’s short stories. My students seemed to have some issues and some triumphs while reading “The Turkey” and “The Crop.” I choose to assign relatively unknown O’Connor stories since I assumed some of them would have read either “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or “Good Country People” in high school. Reflecting on the process, I think it would have been more beneficial for me to choose stories that had a stronger sense of active narration and stories that were written later in her career since both the stories I chose were very cerebral and from her early Master’s thesis. Some of the students complained that they could not tell where plot and inner dialogue diverged. Others seemed capable of tracing daydreams and reality. Some students understood the complex motivations of the characters. Some students asked me if they could include the turkey as a character in their project while others needed to be prodded. The most interesting experiment I did with my students was when I asked them to read the first sentence of the story and write about their expectations for the rest of the narrative before completing their reading. Many of the students thought the story was set in the Wild West, and even with the title as a clue, they were surprised when it turned out to be about a boy and his quest to capture a wild

turkey. Many commented that it was important not to believe their first impressions because the main action of the story really takes place in the last few pages of the story. Though many of them would not verbalize this phenomenon, I believe it is wrapped in the moment of epiphany occurring at the end of many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories.

During my research and planning stage, I had the incredible opportunity to visit Flannery O'Connor's home just outside Milledgeville, GA. It was on this estate that O'Connor spent the last decade of her life and wrote the majority of her short stories. I toured her home—her front bedroom, dining room, kitchen, and mudroom just as they were when she lived there. The other back rooms are now updated with displays of farm artifacts, a small theater with a biographical documentary on loop, and a rotating artistic display room. The highlight of my visit was when I was given the opportunity to play Flannery's piano in the main dining room. The archivist said it "helped with the preservation process." I can now say that I helped preserve, in some small way, O'Connor's legacy. The farm itself boasts a tenant farmer house, cow barn, milking shed, horse stable, water tower, and aviary in addition to a number of other small buildings scattered across the 544-acre estate. My favorite spot was in the cow barn as the afternoon light fell on a complex network of wire and a lone paper marking tag. In addition to the buildings there are fields, and forests, and rolling hills leading to a lake with a winding trail. Even though I made my visit in December, the property was beautiful. Before leaving, I snapped a picture in front of the main house and purchased a peacock feather from the resident peafowl, Manley Pointer.

Before leaving Georgia, I made my way four miles into the town of Milledgeville. With a hand drawn map from the estate, I was able to find O'Connor's church, her childhood home, and her final resting place. Someone had placed a peacock feather on her grave as tribute to the writer often associated with the bird.

Finally, I'd like to thank a few people before I begin. Thank you to my undergraduate professors Tiffany Kriner, Christina Bieber-Lake, and Roger Lundin for introducing me to Flannery O'Connor and fostering my love of short stories. Thank you to my father, Paul Moore, for traveling with me to Georgia for my research trip and for listening to my sometimes-lengthy O'Connor ramblings. Thank you to my mother, Jennifer Moore, for the many words of encouragement that helped me stay positive during the lengthy writing process. Thank you to Andalusia Farm and Foundation for preserving the legacy of O'Connor and to April in particular for talking with me and showing me glimpses of O'Connor's world. Thank you to my thesis chair, Jeff Saperstein, for the countless guiding conversations and draft meetings and patience with my constantly shifting writing schedule. Thank you to my thesis committee members, Tim Poland and Donald Secreast, for lending new perspectives to this project during my defense. And finally, thank you to Flannery O'Connor for writing the amazing stories that I will be discussing with the utmost care and respect.

"I can, with one eye squinted, take it all as a blessing." ~ Flannery O'Connor

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Before delving into the richness of Flannery O'Connor's short fiction, it is necessary to explore a few fundamentals that will inform my particular analysis. My analysis will show that disability and spirituality join together to reveal the autonomy disabled characters possess. These characters, deemed "disabled" in society because of genetics, choices, accidents, and illnesses, are both transformed themselves and serve as the catalyst in transforming others. To better understand the following chapters of my analysis, this introduction outlines O'Connor's personal experience as a disabled woman, the terminology of disability, the American movement of Eugenics, and the importance of key elements of the short fiction genre.

O'Connor's Struggle with Lupus

No discussion of disability in O'Connor's fiction would be complete without a discussion of her personal struggle with disability. O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus in 1952. Lupus, or systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), is defined by the Mayo Clinic as "a chronic inflammatory disease that occurs when your body's immune system attacks your own tissues and organs" (Mayo Clinic Staff). In O'Connor, the disease "caused her bones to decay, forced her onto crutches, and finally ate its pain into her hands so that she found it agony to continue writing" (Kinney 74). As O'Connor discovered, lupus can be difficult to diagnose. In fact, doctors first told her that her symptoms were caused by rheumatoid arthritis (Gooch 185). At the time, she was living with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald in Connecticut, but decided to return permanently to Georgia after she was given a conclusive diagnosis. Certain people are born with a tendency to develop lupus, and in O'Connor's case, she inherited the predisposition from her father, Edward, who

was diagnosed with lupus in 1937 and passed away in 1941, leaving 15-year-old Flannery shattered. No doubt losing her father was the first thing she thought of when receiving confirmation that she was going to suffer from the same disease.

Even though the diagnosis came as a surprise, O'Connor did not let the disease interfere with her pursuits. O'Connor commented on her illness in a letter to her friend Cecil Dawkins in 1957:

I stayed away [from home] from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away. I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here [in Andalusia].
(The Habit of Being 230)

Carl Horner echoes O'Connor's assertion by noting:

Unable to take for granted or to expect the normal lifetime of an able-bodied person, this brave and noble artist chose not to use SLE as an excuse for thwarted literary opportunity. Within the agony of lupus, persisted a literary genius more ecstatic, more defiant, more insistent, more enabling than any healthy time earlier in her life. (para. 4)

Basselin likewise admits "though she downplayed the illness' effect, she also regularly credited the circumstances of her life, particularly those created by the lupus—as well as the lupus itself—for making her writing better" (Basselin 7). These quotes suggest that the very disease that made her weaker in the eyes of the world, actually led to her strongest creative outpouring. Because of her disability, O'Connor was more equipped to develop depth in her disabled characters. Her disability allowed her to imbue her fiction with a

layer of meaning unattainable otherwise. Because of her disability, O'Connor was able to redeem disability itself and make her disabled characters more relatable, and even allowed them to embody positive transformation and spiritual wellness beyond that of their able-bodied counterparts.

Though I will not be including "A Good Man is Hard to Find" in my analysis, scholars have pointed to that particular story as a specific creative outpouring addressing her struggle with lupus. In the story, the Misfit acts as "the self-attacking, self-dismantling, killing violence of SLE," thus becoming "a metaphor of the baffling disease" (Horner para 1). Through the story, O'Connor is able to give voice to her frustration about her diagnosis and the misperceptions people develop about the disease, while also offering the reader a multilayered narrative. During the time O'Connor was most creatively prolific, she would have been viewed by society as "an unwed, disabled woman in the South" (Basselin 7) whenever she made a public appearance. Since she "understood what it was to be quickly set aside by society...her own marginality helped her recognize that the true residence of evil had been misplaced" (Basselin 7).

Defining Disability

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), "disability" can be defined as "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities." For the purpose of this thesis, I will use this definition. "Disability" will refer to any physical condition that limits a character's functions, no matter if the condition is genetic, contracted, or conferred. By studying the Flannery O'Connor stories that incorporate disabled characters, I can show O'Connor uses disability in a manner that was a reversal of norms for her time period. Instead of a disabled character acting as a disabled

metaphor or becoming a stereotype, O'Connor allows her disabled characters to display positive transformations and to act as catalysts for change. In doing so, the characters become empowered and demonstrate growth and intrinsic value. This goal aligns with the aims of Disabilities Studies. This movement seeks to find ways for personal and societal responses to difference, seeks to break down stereotypes of medicine "fixing" disability, and strives to highlight the positive contributions of those in the disabled community.

Another term that I need to discuss that is often associated with O'Connor's work is "grotesque." While both O'Connor and some critics use this very particular term, each is using the term in a different way. The OED defines "grotesque" as something "characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre, [and] quaint." O'Connor herself was known to use that particular term in a congruent manner. She often described her work as "grotesque" in the sense of the Southern Gothic style—"the word gothic means nothing to me. I prefer to use grotesque" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* 501). She notes, "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 40). In her own way, "grotesque" simply referred to an exaggerated reality that in many cases included a portrayal of one or more disabled characters. Timothy Basselin takes the connection between the term grotesque and physicality a step further and notes that "the physical grotesques in her fiction are metaphorical mirrors for the characters' (and readers') moral grotesques" (Basselin 5). This idea is very similar to my own argument, for in my analysis I also connect physical and spiritual disabilities. However, I go further to show that a

character's physical disability can just as easily be the indicator of a different character's spiritual disability.

From the cases above, it is clear that Basselin chooses to use the terms "disabled" and "grotesque" interchangeably in his book *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*. While I don't fully agree with this usage, I can see the urge to combine the terms since Basselin does not wish to fall into the "disability-as-metaphor" trap (110). Too often, a disabled character appears in a narrative to serve as means to an end. However, in O'Connor's short stories, the disabled characters rise above basic utility and become autonomous, lively people. In her lecture "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," O'Connor once said, "in these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life" (*Mystery and Manners* 40). She also admits that the writer of the grotesque describes life in a way that takes "the least doing" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 42). Since symbols are easily digested by the reader, the writer utilizes a well-known symbol in order to "connect or combine or embody two points" of meaning—one concrete and visible and the other fluid and invisible (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 40). Neither O'Connor nor Basselin wish to demean disabilities in any way, nor do they want to use a disabled character as a caricature or simple metaphor, but each is using "grotesque" in a different way. Basselin goes on to say,

What makes O'Connor's employment of disability so complex is the tension between her regular use of disability as negative metaphor and the fact that the larger concepts and intentions behind O'Connor's use of

disability are often aligned with the values and aims of disability studies.

(110)

Viewing disability in O'Connor's short stories as negative metaphors would be an error on the part of the reader. Rather than simple metaphors, O'Connor's disabled characters are themselves agents of transformation.

Context of Eugenics

Another unifying theme I will be tracing is O'Connor's response to the eugenics movement, also known as degeneracy theory, which stems from the idea of socially condemning disabilities. Eugenics, the study of "the production of fine offspring" and those of the human species who are "hereditarily endowed with noble qualities," was first developed in the United States during the late nineteenth century, and held societal popularity for seven decades (Lombardo 1). According to Elof Axel Carlson, "degeneracy theory found its origins in the urbanization surrounding the Industrial Revolution and the social problems created by the late nineteenth century's boom-bust economy" (quoted in Lombardo 11). Theologies of charity, philosophies of heredity, and new surgical methods dovetailed to create the idea that the regulation of procreation among the "undesirables" of society would ensure a more healthy and successful population.

In his book, *A Century of Eugenics in America*, Paul Lombardo explores different ways that the eugenics movement manifested itself in the United States. The first indication of the eugenic movement's development was the flux of its definition in terms of social and legislative norms (Lombardo 6). Some policy makers used eugenics to argue that women in poverty should be prevented from having children in order to cut tax

burdens. Other legislators—and doctors—used eugenics to stop “the replication of the deviant, the disabled, the diseased, or the criminal,” and impede the growth of “inferior” races (Lombardo 7). Instead, proponents of eugenics sought to encourage only “the most prosperous and successful to multiply” (Lombardo 7). By the 1920s, thirty states had passed “compulsory sterilization laws” (Lombardo 21).

The most common association made today is between eugenics and Hitler’s Holocaust because of Hitler’s quest to eradicate those of Jewish ancestry, those with disabilities, and those adopting lifestyles contrary to his idea of purifying and elevating the Aryan race (Lombardo 1). O’Connor was diagnosed with lupus in 1952, and would have been all too familiar with the eugenics of World War II. Not until the “rights movement” of the 60s and 70s did eugenic ideals fall out of respectability (Lombardo 22). Based on this context, I hope to show that O’Connor was aware of the movement, and through her fiction was actively undermining the idea by offering a new vantage point.

Elements of the Short Fiction Genre

In addition to the many facets of disability that I will be exploring, I will also be incorporating observations of a few fundamental short story elements in order to make the connection between physical and spiritual disabilities more defined. Flannery O’Connor once said that the short story form is one of the “most natural and fundamental ways of human expression” (*Mystery and Manners* 87). When addressing the best way to analyze short stories, she noted “that discussing story-writing in terms of plot, character, and theme is like trying to describe the expression of a face by saying where the eyes, nose, and mouth are” (O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 89). What O’Connor was trying

to convey is that each element cannot exist without the others – plot, characters, and theme must be analyzed in close conjunction in order to create a meaningful experience for the reader. It is therefore important to look at these three elements before jumping into the texts.

The first element O'Connor mentioned was Plot. Plot allows us to “find out not only *what* happens, but *how* it happens, to *whom* it happens, and most importantly, *why* it happens” (Bailey 50). Though I will acknowledge the *why* in each story, for the purposes of my analysis, *how* things happen and to *whom* they happen will be of utmost importance. At the intersection of these two facets is epiphany. Epiphany describes the conclusion of a short story by showing us the extent to which a character has undergone an ultimate realization or how the reader determines the extent of meaning inherent in the text. In my analysis, I will show how a character comes to an epiphany. Some might ask whether the terms *climax* or *recognition* could act as substitutes for *epiphany*. I argue that in O'Connor's stories, epiphany occurs between these two points. *Climax* is the time of greatest action and *recognition* is the time of complete understanding, while *epiphany* is the moment after climax, but before recognition. Many of the stories I analyze demonstrate this idea.

Each individual story will contain a different degree of transformation after the epiphany. Some stories end just as the character comes to realization, others allow time for the reader to see change, and others show realization but end before explicit change. As Arthur Kinney notes:

In O'Connor's fictional world God seems to spend his grace on the unlikeliest of people. Often they do not appear to deserve His blessing;

almost as often they appear to learn nothing from it (or, if they do, we are not told about it). Nor is grace dramatized as a dazzling joy, a sweep of awareness. Rather, it can come in an act of random violence, a forceful accident, a blinding pain. It can be unexpected, intrusive, unwanted, ignored, baffling, misidentified forgotten. It can bring suffering, wretchedness, even annihilation. (71-72)

However, ambiguity post-epiphany is just another differentiating feature between the novel and short fiction genres. The endings of short stories more commonly end with questions, irony, and dialogue, thus creating more openness and tentativeness during interpretation (Friedman 18). Though the ending of the story's plot might leave the reader wanting to see more change in a character, epiphany gives the character the opportunity to act in the future without that future explicitly presented to the reader wrapped with a tidy bow.

The second element O'Connor mentioned, Character, is what differentiates stories from each other no matter how similar the plots. To put it in mathematical terms as Tom Bailey does, "Character, in writing fiction, acts as the x variable in what would otherwise be a too-obvious and easily enumerated, fixed equation" (29). In the stories I analyze, the most relevant aspect of character will be the difference between a dynamic and a static character. Though I'll briefly mention supplementary static characters, my focus will be on the character showing the most dynamic change. I am not saying that the static characters do not add depth to the narrative, but I will instead stress that in each story there is a pivotal dynamic character who experiences a pivotal epiphany.

The third and final element O'Connor mentioned was Theme. O'Connor believed that a story is not slight just because it is short. Even if the story does not end at a wedding or a funeral, it can still "give us the experience of meaning" (94). One of the ways stories give meaning is through theme. The central theme I will be exploring is spiritual enlightenment. Or, rather, I will be unearthing the theme of a journey—the journey of a dynamic character that leads to a confrontation with his/her moment of epiphany.

Overview

The characters in Flannery O'Connor's short stories manifest their spiritual shortcomings through their physical disabilities. In some cases, the limitations of the disabled are not indicators of their own spiritual disabilities, but rather the catalyst for the reader to understand the spiritual lack of the able-bodied foil. In "Good Country People," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Enduring Chill," "The Turkey," "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," and "The Lame Shall Enter First," the dynamic focusing character in the narrative will have a moment of epiphany catalyzed by disability—either their own as in Chapter 2, or of another as in Chapter 3. For each example, I will highlight the moment of epiphany and comment on the possible enlightenment the character achieves while addressing O'Connor's methods of combating the eugenics movement.

Chapter 2: Personal Epiphany through Disability

Introduction

By exploring three of O'Connor's short stories—"Good Country People" (1955), "The Life You Save May be Your Own" (1955), and "The Enduring Chill" (1958)—I will trace a similar redemptive trajectory for each of the disabled protagonists. Though not all of the characters complete their arc of enlightenment, each comes to a revelation that links their body and spirit, allowing them to view the world they have created for themselves from a new perspective.

Good Country People

Upheld as one of her most well-known stories due to its inclusion in numerous short story anthologies (Kirk 69), "Good Country People" follows the spiritual journey of Hulga Hopewell. Christened *Joy* at birth, Hulga legally changes her name to spite her mother and to signify that she has renounced what she believes are the simplistic Christian beliefs of her mother in favor of academia. Her name and degree essentially function as her artificial leg does, as defense mechanisms. During Hulga's time working for her Doctorate of Philosophy, she develops a loathing for those she considers "innocent" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 276). However, after thriving in the academic sphere, Hulga, like O'Connor herself, is forced to return home due to her health issues—failing eyesight, an artificial leg, and a persistent heart condition (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 276). Although her degree goes unrecognized by those at home, Hulga's new name acts as the outward reflection of her new inner worldview, which in turn enables her to adopt superiority over her simpleton neighbors and supposedly romantically innocent conquest, Manley Pointer.

Hulga's immature reactions to the way the people around her utilize her name emphasize the idea that she has yet to fully develop her personal ideology, but is in need of a catalyst to stimulate true spiritual growth. Whereas her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, refuses to call Hulga by her legal name—instead reverting back to Joy—Mrs. Freeman tries to follow Hulga's wishes to be known by the new moniker. Though Hulga responds to her mother's insistence on *Joy* "in a purely mechanical way," she violently rejects Mrs. Freeman's attempts at following her desire to be called *Hulga* (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 247). Hulga is repulsed by Mrs. Freeman because of this and feels that it is an affront to her privacy since the decision to change her name was "her highest creative act" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 275). This repulsion, however, is merely a visceral impulse connected with the possessiveness of her name, which acts as yet another defense mechanism and crutch. It becomes almost laughable for the reader to trace her ideology once knowing her "highest creative act" is merely changing her name. At this point in the narrative, Hulga feels too much possession over the name, wants to retain the name only to spite her mother, and does not have the maturity necessary to support an ideologically driven name change. Her attitude only serves to emphasize her childishness and innocence, complementing the actions and beliefs of Mrs. Hopewell that Hulga is still a child though thirty-two years old. However, Hulga's attachment to the name shatters during her final scene with Manley Pointer. Manley Pointer is the last person to utter her name in the text, and he does so "using the name as if he didn't think much of it," and right after he says it, he concludes that she "ain't that smart" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 291). Once made aware of the correlation between her name—thus her ideology—and naiveté, Hulga realizes that her ideology may not be as formulated as she

thought. In this moment of revelation and epiphany, she begins to put the pieces of her body and mind back together.

As mentioned previously, Hulga is often described with child-like terminology, which emphasizes the concept that her belief system is immature. O'Connor consistently highlights this youthful description to accentuate her eventual journey to enlightenment through experience. Although Hulga is well educated, she has an underdeveloped understanding of spiritual matters. In fact, when she is first introduced to the reader, the descriptors "large blonde girl," "child," "thirty-two years old," and "highly educated" follow each other in close proximity to highlight the juxtaposition of innocence and experience (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 271). Her own mother, Mrs. Hopewell, thinks that Hulga's appearance and actions "showed simply that she was still a child" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 276). By the end of the story, the narrator also describes Manley Pointer as a "boy" and as having "a delighted child's face," which Hulga recognizes and is repulsed by, even though the similar description deepens the association between the two characters (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 288-289). Though Hulga is still a "girl" when the reader last sees her alone in the barn loft, she has been changed by *Manley* and ushered into knowledge of *womanly* experience (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 291).

Upon a first reading, one is likely to assume that the inevitable transformation of character will be seen in Hulga's condescending mother. Instead, Mrs. Hopewell represents O'Connor's argument that able-bodiedness is not an indicator of spiritual balance and acts as a foil and mirror for Hulga. From the start, O'Connor presents Mrs. Hopewell in a poor light. She stereotypes people, belittles her daughter by consistently

treating her like a child, and does not filter her speech. Though she is physically able, she displays disability of character. The story ends with Mrs. Hopewell remaining under the assumption that Manley Pointer, a disabled Bible salesman attracted to her disabled daughter, is one of the “good country people” she so eagerly tries to surround herself with (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 272). In the final scene of the story, Mrs. Hopewell comments that “the world would be better off if we were all that simple” as Manley Pointer (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 291). Since Hulga’s portion of the narrative ends with her stuck in the barn, one-legged and alone, Mrs. Hopewell has no way of knowing the consequences of inviting Pointer into their home and cannot use that information to grow her character. Although O’Connor originally wrote the barn episode as the final scene, before publication she included the last conversation between the two women based on a suggestion from her editor (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* 75). By doing so, O’Connor was able to bring the story full circle and emphasize that Mrs. Hopewell—able-bodied as she is—does not gain a deeper understanding of people or begin a path towards spiritual revelation like her daughter. Based on these factors, Mrs. Hopewell acts as a vessel through which O’Connor can juxtapose Hulga’s enlightenment.

Readers might also assume that Manley Pointer is the character that signifies ideological development. However, it is faulty to come to that conclusion since Pointer’s worldview does not actually change during the course of the narrative. His worldview only appears to change since he consistently lies in the beginning and then tells the truth in the end. Some might also argue that Pointer represents a second physically disabled figure during the story (Behling 91). Yet this conclusion is also misguided since Pointer only pretends to have a heart condition in order to gain trust and sympathy from Mrs.

Hopewell, and in turn, Hulga. Therefore he cannot serve as a disabled entity reaching a moment of epiphany. Instead, his pretense serves only to shed light on Hulga's true physical and spiritual conditions. Since Pointer claims a "disability," Behling equates the two characters (91). Instead, the two characters should be linked based on their dogma alone, each serving the purpose of revealing the spiritual condition of the other.

Nevertheless, it certainly is no accident that Pointer has a make-believe heart condition. In some respect, he lies about having a heart condition in order to cover up his spiritual and ethical maladies. By doing so, he makes a connection with Hulga and they end up in the barn, each thinking the other is an easy target. Pointer then proceeds to destroy every level of comfort Hulga possesses, leaving her shaken in the barn loft without her leg and without her glasses (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 287-291). Even though both the pride in her advanced degree and her wooden leg are stripped from her in this moment, she gains a deeper understanding of the fallen human condition. In a sense, once her glasses are stolen, she is more clearly able to see her own spiritual shortcomings and the shortcomings of those around her. As Kirk notes, in the beginning Hulga's "bitterness and withdrawal from people had blinded her to the goodness of the world" but once her glasses are forcibly taken, she is able to view humanity for what it is (73). As Hulga watches Pointer glide off through the field, she sees humanity is a complicated jumble of beliefs, actions, unanswered questions, and unfair "struggling success[es]" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 291). While Hulga has the necessary physical implements to improve her physical disabilities, her artificial leg and glasses, she does not have the necessary spiritual tools to adjust—or even see—her spiritual disabilities. Yet once Pointer removes the artificial physical aids, the natural deformity of her body

illuminates spiritual conviction and emphasizes the importance of the intellectual ownership of individual belief. In other words, without her props, she is forced to come to terms with her body, both as a woman and as a disabled person. As O'Connor said in one of her letters, "her realization in the end [is] that she ain't so smart. It's not said that she never had any faith but it is implied that her fine education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been overridden by pride of intellect" (*The Habit of Being* 170). Once Hulga is able to rid herself of false intellect and conviction, she begins to see the path toward illumination.

By the end of the story, Hulga has found the catalyst for her epiphany in Manley Pointer. Initially, Hulga sees Pointer as a conquest and kindred spirit in that he, too, is disabled from a heart condition (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 279). Yet the reader, and Hulga, realizes in the barn that Pointer has lied at every turn, and therefore does not actually fit into the confines of the characterization previously established in the text. Rather, Pointer has entered the scene in order to act as foil to Hulga's academic philosophy. For the majority of the story, Pointer is connected to Hulga's physical disability, but in the end, he is connected with her worldview. As he strips her of her physical ability, he also strips her of her philosophical ability, thus forcing her into the contemplation of her belief system. Because Hulga is aware of her physical disability from the beginning, Pointer provides the dose of world experience she needs in order to discover her ideological and spiritual disabilities. O'Connor uses an unlikable character with a similar mind to Hulga to show Hulga the faults in her reasoning and allow her to grow. The reader's last glimpse of Hulga is in the barn, "sitting on the straw in the dusty

sunlight” as her new epiphany about the human spirit enlightens the foundations of her worldview (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 291).

Although Kate Oliver posits "that 'the greatest flaws' of 'the intellect, the heart, or soul,' are 'often found in those characters with physical impairments'" (Behling 88), this particular story demonstrates flaws of the human spirit in all of the characters, disabled and able-bodied alike. Mrs. Hopewell is condescending, judgmental, and prideful. Manley Pointer is deceitful, unsympathetic, and a thief. Hulga is cynical, spiteful, and confused, but in terms of "ranking" faults of human character, she has the most redemptive arc of the three. As Laura Behling notes, "the disabled, are, in fact, necessary in order to expose imperfection and inhumanity" (88). So, instead of the disabled character possessing the "greatest flaw," the disabled Hulga acts as a model and showcases the power of enlightenment and grace.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

In many ways, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” mirrors “Good Country People.” Both stories portray an easily and willingly manipulated mother figure with a physically disabled daughter in her early thirties, yet described in child-like terms, who is taken advantage of by the trickster stranger who had been readily welcomed into the home. However, whereas Manley Pointer “put on” a physical disability, Mr. Shiftlet is actually physically disabled. When he first arrives, Shiftlet waxes eloquent in order to convince Lucynell Crater that he is both trustworthy and able-bodied in spite of having a stump for an arm. “I’m a man, even if I ain’t a whole one. I got a moral intelligence!” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 149). As I discussed in the introduction, this story was "written during the peak of eugenic influence" (Arant 70). As such, there was a desire for

this character to prove that physical disability did not necessarily equate to moral or intellectual disability. In making such an argument, Shiftlet is appealing to Lucynell by letting her know that he does not think of her daughter as less of a person because of her disability, while at the same time making himself appear more desirable.

As the dialogue progresses, the reader becomes aware that Shiftlet repeatedly talks about, thinks about, and looks at the broken car in the yard. However, beyond the few questions Shiftlet asks Lucynell about the Ford, the mother remains unaware of his particular fixation, thus foreshadowing the end of the story. To his credit, Shiftlet does tell Lucynell that he might be lying about his name and background saying, “I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain’t lying?” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 147). In spite of this monologue, the reader correctly guesses Shiftlet is simply talking about lying in order to prove his trustworthiness by making light of the possibility and steering conversation towards an attribute that the mother can know for certain – that he “is a man” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 148). However untrustworthy Shiftlet may seem, the mother really does not hold him to high standards, for she too has ulterior motives, and the only hinge is if he “is a man.”

This story intensifies the involvement of the mother figure in the daughter’s life to a level beyond that of “Good Country People.” In the first, Mrs. Hopewell does not make an attempt to stop Hulga’s companionship with Pointer, but in the second, Lucynell shamelessly markets her daughter in order to tempt the male protagonist. The narrator even describes the mother as beginning “business” when she enters into discussion with Shiftlet (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 151). Amid the many questions that Shiftlet

poses to Lucynell, she interrupts to ask if he is married or single. When he insists he is looking for a girl of innocence to settle down with, Lucynell says that her daughter can “sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe” even though at this point in the narrative the daughter has only been seen sitting on the porch, playing with her hair, chewing gum, and speaking unintelligibly (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 149). Lucynell the elder emphasizes that she “wouldn’t give her [daughter] up for a casket of jewels” (O’Connor 149). However, the narrator soon reveals that Lucynell was “ravenous for a son-in-law” and “secretly pleased” that Shiftlet took an interest in her daughter (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 150). O’Connor successfully makes the reader uneasy and disgusted at the way Lucynell the younger is treated as a commodity and bargaining chip. Appropriately, Lucynell the elder, just like Mrs. Hopewell, is left unaware of her disabled daughter’s plight or even final location. Lucynell the elder and Shiftlet have a fixation on their own selfish goals: the mother the marriage of her daughter and her subsequent freedom from worry or responsibility, and the drifter the acquisition of a free car.

Some readers might express concern for the fate of Lucynell as one who is clearly mentally disabled. While Lucynell is an integral part of the story as the catalyst for Shiftlet’s ideological questioning, her fate is not the driving arc of the narrative. The reader might be drawn to Lucynell, but Shiftlet is the dynamic character that shows transformation. In this case, O’Connor simply wishes for the parallel to be drawn between Shiftlet’s spiritual deficiency and ignored enlightenment. In fact, upon receiving word that Harcourt had omitted the final paragraph of the story in their printed textbook, she wrote, “I don’t like the idea of my story being in a textbook and the last paragraph

omitted” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* 415). In this story in particular, the concluding paragraph is vital to the interpretation that Shiftlet has understood the revelation he’s been given, yet chooses to continue, literally, down his own path of destruction.

The majority of Shiftlet’s spiritual journey takes place in the final few pages of the story and is characterized by his increasingly agitated and depressed attitude. After spending so much time setting up the game between Shiftlet and Lucynell, O’Connor seizes on the very idea that many in her society would have been thinking—that according to eugenics, the disabled are inherently inferior. Lucynell the elder, the only physically able-bodied individual in the story to this point, lets Shiftlet know that “there ain’t any place in the world for a disabled friendless drifting man” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 152). Shiftlet is visibly shaken, but after a moment of reflection on the “ugly words,” he explains, “a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 152). He defines his spirit as the part of himself that roams and is free—free from moral conviction and the confines of a disabled body like Hulga. He does not share the same belief system as his acquaintances and again like Hulga, becomes increasingly dissatisfied—in front of Lucynell, since the reader has been aware of his unreliability and agenda from almost the beginning. As soon as he is out of the driveway in the freshly painted car with the freshly married Lucynell in the passenger seat and “seventeen-fifty” in his pocket, Shiftlet becomes “depressed in spite of the car” and resolves that he must take action (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 153-154). Alone in a diner with only his new wife and the boy behind the counter, Shiftlet decides to leave Lucynell sleeping at the counter so he can make his get-away. Before he can dash out the door, the boy exclaims “She looks like an angel of Gawd” (O’Connor, *The Complete*

Stories 154) to which Shiftlet replies that she is merely a hitchhiker he picked up, but is in too much of a hurry to help any further. On the road again, Shiftlet becomes “more depressed than ever” and increasingly introspective, demonstrating the true illumination of his moral compass (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 155). As I’ve just shown, as the story progresses, and examples of his deceitful interactions with people and his consistent demonstrations of greed and disrespect and selfishness accrue, Shiftlet transforms from the façade of a happy handyman into the reality of a depressed disabled man. Lucynell the younger, the angel of God, has become the lens through which Shiftlet can see his transformation.

O’Connor aptly traces this correlation between Shiftlet’s deceitful habits and his increasingly despondent emotions; she chose to end the story with an episode that cements Shiftlet’s realization that he is not spiritually healthy. O’Connor uses what seems at first a somewhat arbitrary scene in order to solidify the reader’s understanding that Shiftlet’s perspective of himself and his worldview have indeed started to change. This final episode follows Shiftlet’s conversation with a hitchhiking boy. Interestingly enough, the text shows a correlation between this boy and Lucynell since they are both hitchhikers, since Shiftlet lied in the diner by saying Lucynell was just another hitchhiker, and both force Shiftlet to reexamine his ideals. As Shiftlet passes a sign on the road warning “Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own,” he stops to pick up the boy (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 155). Ironically, Shiftlet demonstrates a sincere concern for the well-being of hitchhikers as he felt “that any man with a car had a responsibility to others” when just a few hours earlier he called his new bride a “hitchhiker” and abandoned her in a diner (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 155).

Shiftlet does his best to convince the lad that mothers are the best thing in the world and that his own was “an angel of Gawd” in an attempt to convince the runaway to return home (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 156). This exchange ends abruptly, for the boy lashes out and jumps out of the moving vehicle, leaving Shiftlet shocked. He cries “Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 156). Fittingly, the last scene of the story is Shiftlet racing the Ford into Mobile with his stump hanging out the window trying to outrun the “galloping shower” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 156). Whereas in the previous story the deceived—Hulga—was left in the light of her spiritual awakening, in this story the deceiver—Shiftlet—is left in the midst of a literal and figurative storm. Whereas Pointer leaves the barn without a moral conviction of his reprehensible deed, Shiftlet enters a new town as he begins to realize his shortcomings. Whereas the reader leaves Hulga on the cusp of a breakthrough, the reader sees Shiftlet come to an epiphany, yet choose to continue on his disastrous path while trying to outrace the storm of retribution.

Unlike “Good Country People,” which ends with Hulga in complete shock, Shiftlet experiences his own moment of shock and chooses to move forward. The reader is aware of Shiftlet’s epiphany, yet questions his motivation for tossing that epiphany to the curb. In fact, in a television adaptation of this story, artistic liberty was taken and the ending changed to show Shiftlet complete his change of heart, return to the diner to retrieve his bride, and ride off in the car towards the sunset. O’Connor commented on this change in her lecture “Writing Short Stories.” She noted that her aunt felt the story was more complete, but O’Connor admitted to having “other sentiments about it—which [were] not suitable for public utterance” (*Mystery and Manners* 95). She also said after

buying her mother a new refrigerator with the royalties, “while they make hash out of my story, she and me will make ice in the new refrigerator” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* 174). The story as it stands is sufficient to complete O’Connor’s vision of Shiftlet’s journey. O’Connor did not feel the need to narrate Shiftlet’s complete transformation because all that was needed was the implication of epiphany and potential for growth. Even though narrative time is truncated and sometimes transformation happens all at once, in real time, changes of the heart and the mind are gradual and in need of multiple catalysts.

The Enduring Chill

Just as the previous two stories mirror each other in a number of ways, “Enduring Chill” also mirrors aspects of “Good Country People.” In both stories, a well-educated young person must return home to a stifling atmosphere with an overbearing mother in order to receive care for a physical abnormality, just as O’Connor herself had to return home because of her lupus. Hulga suffers from a heart condition and the loss of a limb from a traumatic hunting accident while Asbury suffers from recurring “undulant fever” contracted from drinking unpasteurized milk (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 381). As with Hulga in “Good Country People,” Asbury Porter Fox in “Enduring Chill” is a disabled protagonist destined for spiritual enlightenment. He, like Hulga, finds the country to be repressive and longs for the stimulant of the city. He becomes “irked that he had allowed himself, even for an instant, to see an imaginary temple in [the] collapsing country junction” that was his home (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 358). While Hulga changes her name to spite her mother, Asbury keeps two notebooks containing a single damning and accusatory letter intended as a way to induce his mother’s guilt after his

death. Asbury blames his mother for his failed writing career, and the lengthy letter he's penned for her is his only remaining manuscript, thus the proof of his career. He even appears pleased when he sees the shock on his mother's face because of the outward manifestation of his internal sickness.

The narrator's descriptions of Asbury's appearance are stark and unpleasant, much more so than either the descriptions of Hulga or Shiftlet. The youngest character of the three, Asbury is the only character seen in my analysis thus far who is in danger of dying as a result of his physical ailments. When he first arrives home, his mother is shocked to see his degenerative state. He "was puffy and pale and his hair had receded tragically for a boy of twenty-five" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 357) as his "bent unsteady figure" looked to be "a hundred years old" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 363). While he is not physically deformed, he is chronically ill and therefore can be considered disabled for the purposes of this analysis. Unlike his previous counterparts Hulga and Shiftlet, however, he can early see the extent of both his physical and spiritual deficiencies. "What's wrong with me is way beyond [doctors]," implying that multiple layers of sickness actively consume his mind and body (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 360). His outlook on life and his interactions with family have chilled, sending him into a spiral of hopelessness, accentuating the extent to which he needs some sort of jarring, awakening epiphany.

Before returning home, Asbury has an encounter with a Catholic priest at a lecture on Hinduism, finding that he is the only person with whom he could feel any connection. It is here that this scene sets the stage for the later appearance of Father Finn. It is important to note as foreshadowing that the priest possessed a look of "icy clarity" when

speaking with Asbury about his impending death (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 360). That encounter with a priest prepares Asbury to seek counsel from another priest, much to his mother's dismay. The encounter also enables O'Connor to insert the idea of the Holy Ghost near the beginning of the story so that the ending revelation does not appear too abrupt. In earlier versions of the story, O'Connor omitted this connection, but taking the advice of Allen Tate, she added the foreshadowing element so that Holy Ghost's final appearance wouldn't "come too fast" (*The Habit of Being* 261). This idea relates back to O'Connor's commentary on Shiftlet's journey, as the process of redemption after epiphany is often gradual rather than instantaneous.

Father Finn, a nearly blind and deaf local priest, offers Asbury guidance and conversation, even if that is not what Asbury wants. Father Finn visits the home as part of Asbury's final wish before succumbing to death. His coming from "Purgatory" only solidifies the assumption that Asbury has been crafting his own particular Hell, yet also gives the first glimpse of a redemptive arc and possible ascension to Heaven (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 375). Once Father Finn leaves, Asbury has clearly been impacted as his mother observes that he is "pale and drawn and ravaged, sitting up in his bed, staring in front of him with large childish eyes" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 377). Through Father Finn, the disabled catalyst, Asbury, disabled and bedridden, is able to shed his façade of wisdom and age and return to childlike innocence, ready for revelation.

Yet another example of O'Connor arguing against the eugenic influence of the period is the character of Asbury's sister, Mary George. Asbury, as the focalizing character for the narrator, sees her in a negative light through a lens of resentment for the entirety of the story. The reader, processing the narrative from Asbury's perspective

through limited omniscient narration, cannot help but feel this animosity and foster a dislike for Mary George. By the time she speaks up to her mother about Asbury's condition, the reader is already predisposed to distrust her analysis. In fact, Mary George would represent eugenics because she sees a direct correlation between Asbury's physically and mentally disabled states. In a conversation with her mother—which Asbury overhears—Mary George says, “what’s wrong with him is purely psychosomatic” even though her mother insists he has “a real disease” that is crippling (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 373). Callously she then suggests he is just a flop as a writer, has decided to become an “invalid instead of a writer,” and should simply endure shock therapy in order to “get that artist business out of his head once and for all” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 373). Although the reader does not feel entirely sympathetic for Asbury at this point before his revelation, the reader has enough insight into Asbury's motivation and ideology to disagree with Mary George. In fact, O’Connor wrote in a letter, “I think Mary George is a monster who ought to have a little comedown” (*The Habit of Being* 261). O’Connor does not want her readers to emulate Mary George's dismissiveness, but instead wishes that people acknowledge disabilities and work towards acceptance and reconciliation.

At times, O’Connor spells out exactly what she wants her audience to know, as in the case of Mary George and the flaws of the eugenics movement. However, another important layer of the story's meaning is only visible under close inspection. For instance, an important symbol in this story, as in many other O’Connor stories, is contained in the image of birds. Beyond the scattering of guineas upon his arrival home, Asbury notices that the water stains on his ceiling resemble “a fierce bird with spread

wings” with “an icicle crosswise in its beak” and with “smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 365). At this point, the image is frozen and static. The bird, visible to him since his childhood, irritated and frightened him. In fact, the reader finds out that Asbury believes the bird looks as though it is constantly poised and willing to drive the icicle into his head (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 366). The image of the bird at this point matches the condition of his spirit—fierce and icy. Once again, Asbury recognizes the icy bird as he waits for Father Finn to arrive. He thinks it appears to be waiting to strike, and so it is. However, after the illuminating visit with Father Finn and once Asbury understands his role in creating his own debilitating illness from drinking the unpasteurized milk, he observes that the image has sprung into motion. At this point, “the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 382). Here the bird develops a meaning separate from the meaning Asbury had previously ascribed to it, becoming the representative for the Holy Ghost instead of just a mark on the ceiling, just as the priest at the beginning foreshadowed. O’Connor mentioned in a letter to Caroline Gordon Tate while she was working on the text of “The Enduring Chill” that she was “busy with the Holy Ghost. He is going to be a waterstain—very obvious but the only thing possible” (*The Habit of Being* 257). O’Connor’s intention was for a parallel to be seen between the water-stained bird silhouette and the redemptive figure of the Holy Ghost. Asbury finally understands this connection along with the reader, and submits to the realization that his transformation will be “emblazoned in ice instead of fire” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 382). Just as a phoenix rises into rebirth from the ashes with a song, so Asbury rises into rebirth from the ice with a cry.

Conclusion

In the three stories I've just analyzed, the concrete and visible image is that of the disabled body while the fluid and invisible image is the disabled spirit. O'Connor was able to achieve this woven symbolism in her work. While her readers may not have experience with the disabled body, each person has, in some form, dealt with a disability of the spirit whether that be personal or relational. Our definition of "disability of the spirit" does not need to be limited to the spiritual journey, as O'Connor often indicated, but can also indicate a conflict of intellect like Hulga, a conflict of morals like Shiftlet, or a conflict of accountability like Asbury. O'Connor, by providing an easily digestible symbol for her readers to latch on to, successfully illuminates the one disability that connects all people. In a way, this technique demystifies disability itself. So, far from presenting the disabled body in a poor light or in jest, O'Connor instead proves to the reader that all men and women are equalized through a disabled spirit.

However, as I will explore in the following chapter, sometimes it is the physically disabled person who illuminates the spiritual deficiency in the able-bodied person just as Lucynell and Father Finn did in their respective stories for their disabled counterparts. Father Finn parallels Lucynell the younger in a number of ways. Each character is key in the spiritual awakening of a disabled person, and each is unaware, as far as the reader knows, of the impact he or she has had on that main protagonist.

Chapter 3: Disability as Epiphany Catalyst

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored ways in which a disabled person came to an epiphany. In those three stories, circumstances acted as the catalysts for the revelations. However, in other O'Connor stories, the disabled character acts as the catalyst for the abled-bodied character's epiphany. By examining "The Turkey," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and "The Lame Shall Enter First," the trend of a disabled catalyst will be revealed. In these stories, the focus is on the able-bodied epiphany, rather than the disability. In other words, showing the protagonist's journey of transformation, as catalyzed by a disabled character, is the main goal of the analysis.

The Turkey

Little has been written about "The Turkey." In fact, the short story is only mentioned once by O'Connor in her collection of letters, *The Habit of Being*, and even then only in passing when describing publication technicalities (4). The story was one of O'Connor's six thesis stories and she revised it multiple times, publishing it again under the names "The Capture" and "An Afternoon in the Woods." Though these two titles add to the number of times O'Connor mentions this particular narrative, the additional references are still only used when speaking about the publication process. Although O'Connor did not choose to mention nuances of the story's meaning in her available letters, the fact that she rewrote it and renamed it twice suggests that she found inherent merit in the material. Since "The Turkey" is the version anthologized in her *Complete Stories*, and taking into account "An Afternoon in the Woods" was only published posthumously, I've chosen to use "The Turkey" as the basis of my analysis. The two

versions differ the most at the beginning when the motivation for the main character's excursion into the woods is explained, but the final epiphany stays more or less intact.

In the story, a young boy named Ruller vacillates between spiritual conviction and cockiness, but his experience of epiphany reveals his inner disability. Ruller is both prideful and profane in private, yet seems to act in such a way because he feels neglected by his family. By the end of the story, Ruller has received enlightenment about his pride and runs home as if "Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 53). That "Something Awful" is his crippling pride on the cusp of resurfacing since it is clearly shown in the text that he has a history of vacillation between humility and pride. O'Connor actually uses the phrase "his arms rigid and his fingers ready to clutch" to describe Ruller's first method of chasing the turkey, highlighting the explicit connection between the turkey chase at the beginning and the "Something Awful" that marks his epiphany (*The Complete Stories* 43). During his chase, Ruller daydreams about returning home as a hero—receiving accolades for catching the turkey—and as the story moves forward this vision turns into an obsession.

If he came in with the turkey, they wouldn't pay any attention to his shirt.

Hane [his older brother] hadn't ever got a turkey. Hane hadn't ever caught anything. He guessed they'd be knocked out when they saw him; he guessed they'd talk about it in bed. (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 44)

At one point, Ruller thinks he has lost the turkey in the woods without a hope of retrieving it, and, as a result, has a conversation with God about the situation. During this conversation, he takes the opportunity to drop a string of forbidden curse words and

imagine all types of crimes he could commit, prompting him to wonder if he was “going ‘bad’” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 47). He soon realizes that the only thing upsetting him is that “God could go around sticking things [like the turkey] in your face and make[] you chase them all afternoon for nothing” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 48). Immediately, he literally stumbles upon the turkey and is able to seize it, reckoning that his good fortune is dependent on his status as an “unusual child” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 49). In a complete turn of events, Ruller begins to imagine that the turkey was God’s instrument for giving him a mission to lead the other boys, a mission that only he could complete, further inflating his ego. As Ruller walks through town, he revels in the looks people give him and watches his own reflection pass in a store window, much like Narcissus in a pool. “He felt warm all over and nice as if something very fine were going to be” and “hoped [the boys] would come up and ask to look at the turkey” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 51). In these textual examples, it is clear that Ruller is vacillating between extreme pride and extreme meekness—he is either God’s gift to humanity or an unwanted child turning “bad.” Or, as George Monteiro points out, Ruller’s name “alludes to Scripture: ‘he that ruleth his spirit [is better] than he that taketh a city’ (Prov. 16:32)” (118). The “point” of a story about “Ruller” would be the journey that character takes in ruling his own spirit. By the end of the story, Ruller does just that and is seen running “faster and faster . . . up the road to his house” showing that he has internalized his epiphany and is seeking to follow the enlightened path—perhaps by first reconciling with his family or realizing that home really is a safe space (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 53).

The source of Ruller's epiphany at this point comes in the form of an elderly beggar woman named Hetty Gilman with a face "the color of a dead chicken's skin" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 52). Her age and skin tone suggest that her health is in decline. In addition, the way she "smells" Ruller suggests that she had lost her sight. Even though Hetty sees him approaching, the text emphasizes that her expression mirrors an expression reserved for "smelling something bad," perhaps insinuating that her sense of smell has been heightened in order to compensate for the lack of clear sight (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 52). When Ruller sees Hetty approaching, he sees a deprived soul in need of charity, and in the midst of his own great fortune—a ten-pound turkey—Ruller believes he has been called by God to offer that charity. In fact, Ruller has offered pleas to heaven to grant him an encounter such as this with a less fortunate person on whom to bestow some of his new fortune. Immediately after he "thrusts a dime" into her hand and feels a satisfying mixture of "happy and embarrassed," he encounters the group of boys that will ultimately steal the turkey from his grip (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 52). In a sense, Hetty ushers him into the situation which causes his epiphany, and Ruller's encounter with her places him in the necessary unguarded frame of mind in which he is more easily taken advantage of (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 52). Even though Hetty appears only in one page of the narrative, her appearance and role are integral in shaping Ruller's journey.

As is often the case, O'Connor chooses a fowl to convey deeper meaning, much like the water-stained bird in "The Enduring Chill" in the previous chapter. Not only is the homeless woman disabled, but also the turkey itself—the titular character—is presented by the narrator as disabled. The two are even linked as similar characters because the old

beggar has a face the color of dead chicken skin, while the turkey's skin would actually be similar to that of a chicken since they are related in the fowl family. The two characters—Hetty and the turkey—are even linked in Ruller's mind, for when he first sees Hetty, he thinks that she was placed specifically in his path for higher purposes, just like the turkey (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 52). From the start, the turkey is "limping" and Ruller thinks to himself, "it was lame, he could tell" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 42-43). For the majority of the story, the turkey, named Mason in Ruller's daydream, is the only entity physically present with Ruller in the woods. As such, it is not a far stretch to consider the turkey a main character—albeit an unconventional one. The turkey also acts as the character who instigates Ruller's dialogue with God, who gives Ruller a renewed sense of purpose, who acts as a catalyst in the revelation of Ruller's prideful streak, and whose abduction signals Ruller's final epiphany. In fact, Ruller postulates, "Maybe that was why the turkey was there...maybe it was to keep him from going bad" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 49). Not only does this disabled turkey act as an agent of change in the story, it is actually a character desired, sought after, and fought over by the remaining characters. During the moment of epiphany, the turkey, for the first time in the story, "flew in his face," thus signaling the restoration of physical and spiritual capability (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 53).

O'Connor also paints a picture of the way some abuse disabilities. During the narrative, Ruller pretends to have a disability when he is either searching for attention or avoiding attention. During his introspection in the forest, Ruller recalls that he "walked off sort of like he had a limp" from a conversation with his father to gain attention and imagined that "his father had looked pretty worried" because of the limp (O'Connor, *The*

Complete Stories 44). On the other hand, when he is walking through town, he “walked on, pretending he was deaf” in order to ignore inquiries from one of his mother’s friends (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 50). Much like Manley Pointer in “Good Country People,” Ruller takes on disability when it suits his purposes without regard for the consequences. Unlike Manley Pointer, Ruller is the dynamic character in the story—a changing character, and O’Connor seems to be saying that one should embrace the circumstances fate decides to give instead of pretending to fall into a different life category—which is very similar to the underlying message found in the following story.

A Temple of the Holy Ghost

O’Connor wrote extensively about the story “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” because it garnered much attention from her readership. It was “as near as I get to saying what purity is in this story is saying that it is an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* 124). The hermaphrodite in the story shocked some because of its dual sexual nature, and in her letters, O’Connor describes one letter in particular multiple times. She says,

I got a real ugly letter from a Boston lady about that story called ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost.’ She said she was a Catholic and so she couldn’t understand how anybody could even HAVE such thoughts. I wrote her a letter that could have been signed by the bishop and now she is my fast friend. (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* 82)

Though I do not have access to the original letter from the Bostonian lady, it is clear after reading the story that she was appalled O’Connor had written about a hermaphroditic

character, especially with terms of acceptance. O'Connor is simply using the story to continue her advocacy of disability acceptance.

Like Ruller in the previous discussion, the dynamic character in this story is a child, and in fact is referred to only as "the child" for the entire story. She is never called by a proper name within the narration or dialogue. From the start, the child "watched...suspiciously" and was scolded for "foolishness" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 236-7). The child, age twelve, believes she is more intelligent than those she encounters, yet is innocent in the ways of the world. The child's defense mechanism is to insult others, claiming things go over everyone else's heads because they are "stupid idiots" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 242). She has such an inflated opinion of herself that when the cook tells her, "God could strike you deaf dumb and blind, and then you wouldn't be as smart," she only replies, "I would still be smarter than some" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 242). Like Ruller, the child vacillates between clear recognition of her fallen state and defiance. When all the characters enter the convent at the end of the story, "she continued in the same ugly vein" but soon catches herself having ugly thoughts and begins to pray. To put it more succinctly, O'Connor creates a character in obvious need of a lasting attitude adjustment. Even so, this character is still a child and "her conflicts, emotional and religious, are those of a child, although one at a very important stage" (Fitzgerald 427). While we as readers must take her final epiphany about acceptance with a grain of salt since she is still a developing child, her position on the cusp of puberty gives significance to the beginnings of moral transformation.

In this story, the disabled character is the hermaphrodite that the visiting girls, Susan and Joanne, see at the fair. Having features of both male and female genitalia, the

character is at the same time physically abnormal and socially shunned, forced to be a freak attraction at the fair. When the two girls return from the fair, the child's "heart began to beat very fast" when she learns that the girls had seen something interesting (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 244). She is eager to hear their news, but they tell her she is too young to understand the thing that they saw. She tricks them into thinking she has more world experience than she does by lying about seeing a rabbit give birth. This lie makes the two girls think the child is sexually experienced, and so they tell her of the hermaphrodite who "was a man and woman both," but the child incorrectly assumes "it had two heads" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 245). The child ponders their account of the fair as she falls asleep and makes believe she "could hear the freak saying, 'God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit'" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 246). Here, it is important to note that the hermaphrodite character is never actually seen or heard directly in the text. The reader only gathers information about that character through dialogue and the child's imagined visions. The child only imagines that the hermaphrodite speaks about personal acceptance of disability.

At the end of the story, when the child is seen kneeling in the chapel and as the priest raises the elements of the Eucharist, she hears the imagined hermaphrodite repeating this phrase. Immediately after this vision, the child is swept up by one of the nuns in a warm hug. This hug, since it occurs in conjunction with the child's vision about the hermaphrodite, implicitly grants a hug of acceptance to the disabled character. O'Connor describes this scene in her letters saying: "When the nun hugged the child, the crucifix on her belt was smashed into the side of the child's face, so that one accepted embrace was marked with the ultimate all-inclusive symbol of love" (*The Habit of Being*

124). In other words, the recognition of disability and connection between the hug of embrace and the hermaphrodite enables the child to realize complete acceptance.

One image that stands as a symbol for the child's spiritual change is the fair itself, much like Asbury's connection with birds around his farm in "The Enduring Chill." When the child retires to her room after the teens leave for the fair, she "let[s] the darkness collect" while she paces in reflection. However, "at regular intervals a light crossed the open window and threw shadows on the wall" signaling the beginnings of a new revelation (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 242). When she looks out of the window to investigate, she realizes that "it was the beacon light from the fair" and it looked like a "long finger of light" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 242). As she continues to "follow[] the revolving searchlight as it widened and shortened and wheeled in its arc," she begins to search her heart and her mind, coming to the conclusion:

She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything you could know; and yet she knew she would never be a saint.

She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one. (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 243)

So, it is the light from the fair that prompts the child to have an honest introspection of her moral character. After leaving the light of the window, she has trouble falling asleep and chooses to think about "a chicken carcass or a piece of beef liver" that she could put in the girls' bed before they arrive home (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 244). Almost as soon as she resorts to this type of thinking, "the sound of the calliope coming though

the window” reminded her that “she hadn’t said her prayers” leading her to a second session of internal reflection (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 244). Finally, in the concluding scene of the story, the child learns that the fair has been closed. This realization sends her into deep thought, and she turns toward another window. The sun acts as the light source that the fair once provided for her, and she sees the Host once again elevated, harkening back to the hermaphrodite’s words that she heard repeated in the chapel. In keeping with the pattern I’ve already established, the reader is not privy to the results of the child’s revelation. Instead, the reader can only be assured that recent events have enlightened the naiveté of the child and forced her to think about acceptance—both the acceptance of herself and the acceptance of others.

The Lame Shall Enter First

Unlike the previous two stories in which a child is the recipient of an epiphany based on a disabled adult catalyst, in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” an adult is changed by a disabled child. “The Lame Shall Enter First” is one of the final stories O’Connor completed before succumbing to her lupus, though she started drafting it in 1961. That summer, she allowed Caroline Tate to read the draft and they both concluded that the “draft wasn’t dramatic enough, but it had a good structure” (445/6). In spite of the failures of the first draft, O’Connor definitely delivered more drama by the time the final version was posthumously published in 1965.

The dynamic character in need of an epiphany in this story is Sheppard, a father struggling to redeem his own son, Norton, while caring for a juvenile delinquent, Rufus Johnson (sometimes Rufus in the text, at other times Johnson, and at others Rufus Johnson). At its core, “the story is about a man who thought he was good and thought he

was doing good when he wasn't" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* 490). From the beginning, Sheppard chooses to see more potential for change and success in Rufus than in Norton, and this misdirection of attention is important in his transformation. A prime example of this tendency occurs directly after Sheppard finds Rufus has finally taken up his offer to come to their house. When Norton tries to tell his father that Rufus defiled his dead mother's comb and corset, Sheppard reprimands him for "tattling." When Norton repeats the insults Rufus spoke about Sheppard before he came home, Sheppard does not believe him, but rather thinks the insults are a "defense mechanism" employed to discredit Rufus (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 458). In a later scene, Sheppard spends time in the evening talking with Rufus, but deliberately ignores Norton when he beckons Sheppard to be with him:

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. He could not go in and talk to Norton without breaking Johnson's trust...He turned quickly and went back into his own room. The child sat for some time looking at the spot where his father had stood. (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 469)

Sheppard continues in this attitude until the end of the story. However, when Johnson is brought up on legitimate misdemeanor charges, Sheppard realizes he has been mistaken. Johnson first shows Sheppard that he was wrong in trusting him, making him realize, "I did everything I know how for him. I did more for him than I did my own child" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 480). In her own analysis O'Connor notes, "If Sheppard represents anything here, it is, as he realizes at the end of the story, the empty

man who fills up his emptiness with good works” (*The Habit of Being* 491). Once Rufus is dragged away from the house, Sheppard is left repeating “more for him than I did for my own child” and it was like his voice was that of his own accuser.

The sentence echoed in his mind, each syllable like a dull blow. His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation...He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 481)

As soon as he has this epiphany, he goes to find Norton as a “rush of agonizing love for the child” overwhelms him. Unlike the other stories we looked at, in this story the epiphany is clear and the reaction is clear. Sheppard mends his ways and, because of his enlightenment, determines to never let his son suffer again, since he is the “image of his salvation,” filling him with joy (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 482). Unfortunately, Sheppard has this epiphany before coming to the realization that Norton has finally been reunited with his beloved mother in the afterlife. In order to reach heaven, “unspoiled” as Rufus told him, O’Connor strongly implies that Norton commits suicide: “the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space” (*The Complete Stories* 482). As Norton enters Heaven by his death, Sheppard enters a period of life riddled with guilt.

Compared to the other two stories in this chapter, the disabled character holds a prominent role in the narration, similar to the dynamic characters of the preceding chapter. Though Sheppard makes mention of Rufus Johnson early in the story, he does

not mention his disability. Instead, the reader only becomes aware that his foot is malformed when Rufus is introduced in a flashback. Though Rufus considers his disability central to his identity, Sheppard apparently does not automatically equate the boy with disability. When the two characters first meet, it is clear that Rufus uses his clubfoot to barricade himself from the outside world. He tries to faze the detention facility volunteer by showcasing his deformity, but Sheppard is unwilling to be provoked by the distraction. The reader, on the other hand, is unable to forget that Rufus is disabled because O'Connor's narrator continually reminds the reader of this central fact. Rufus "limped into his first interview," and the "monstrous club foot" had an "empty sock [that] protruded like a gray tongue from a severed head" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 449-450). Later, his footsteps are described as "deliberate and irregular, a light and a heavy one" and his "big black shoe rested conspicuously" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 452-453). Though Sheppard chooses to overlook the foot on most occasions, he fixates on having a new shoe brace fitted for Johnson, yet when the clerk removes the old, battered shoe, the "unsheathed mass of foot in the dirty sock made Sheppard feel queasy." Even though Sheppard does not appear to take stock in Rufus's disability, the consistent repetitions of the ailment descriptions makes it nearly impossible for the reader to overlook the effect the disability has on all three males.

Ironically, Sheppard invites Rufus into their home with the hopes that he will be a positive influence on Norton, and he did in fact influence Norton, just not with the results Sheppard was hoping for. In fact, Rufus ends up holding so much influence over Norton that he becomes a dynamic character. Unique to this story (as compared with the other five in this analysis), Sheppard is not the only dynamic character in the narrative because

Johnson also allows Sheppard and his son Norton to experience simultaneous epiphanies. In the other stories we've looked at, only one character has an epiphany. At first Norton is selfish, but it could be interpreted as insecurity and grief over the passing of his mother a year prior to the events of the story. Though he at first is wary of Rufus, eventually Norton trusts and admires him. Sheppard observes them entering the park: "Johnson's hand was on Norton's shoulder, his head bent toward the younger boy's ear, and on the child's face was a look of complete confidence, of dawning grace" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 463). Rufus offers Norton information about his mother that he has been seeking, and his entire countenance changes once he realizes there is even a slight chance that he can be with her again. Rufus begrudgingly takes the role in Norton's development that Sheppard was initially hoping for, but with disastrous results.

Throughout the story, O'Connor describes Johnson's relationship with his own disability in terms of acceptance and even benefaction. As mentioned earlier, Sheppard first meets Rufus Johnson in a correctional facility where he volunteers his weekends to mentor the incarcerated youth. Rufus places his clubfoot in clear sight, and Sheppard thinks it must be a defense mechanism and he says that "[Rufus's] mischief was compensation for the foot" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 450). Rufus seems pleased when his new shoe brace is two sizes too small, insisting with a "pleased expression" that the foot had expanded "on some inspiration of its own" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 466). Throughout the story, Sheppard fantasizes about giving Johnson a new shoe for the deformed foot—something to cover it up—but Johnson refuses the "gift" when it is finally the correct size, instead relishing his disability and choosing to embrace the uniqueness his clubfoot offers. In every instance, Rufus deems the disability an asset. In the last

glimpse we see of Rufus he exclaims, “I lie and steal because I’m good at it! My foot don’t have a thing to do with it! The lame shall enter first” (O’Connor 480). With this declaration, O’Connor makes a comment about the eugenics movement once again. Rufus, like Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” emphasizes that his disability is not responsible for his actions, good or bad. It is well cited in the text that Rufus is extremely intelligent—an IQ of 140 with “a kind of fanatic intelligence...palpable on his face”—shattering the assumption that the psychically disabled are inherently mentally disabled (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 449). Rather than any physical indicator, the inner nature of a person determines their life path.

Conclusion

In a 1955 letter, just a few years after her initial diagnosis, O’Connor recalls an experience during which her disability becomes the topic of public conversation. In it, O’Connor describes the concept of “the lame shall enter first” while illustrating that disability changes based on the eyes of the beholder rather than existing simply as a physically immobilizing ailment.

I have decided I must be a pretty pathetic sight with these crutches. I was in Atlanta the other day in Davison’s. An old lady got on the elevator behind me and as soon as I turned around she fixed me with a moist gleaming eye and said in a loud voice, “Bless you, darling!” I felt exactly like the Misfit and I gave her a weakly lethal look, whereupon greatly encouraged, she grabbed my arm and whispered (very loud) in my ear. “Remember what they said to John at the gate, darling!” It was not my floor but I got off and I suppose the old lady was astounded at how quick I

could get away on crutches. I have a one-legged friend and I asked her what they said to John at the gate. She said she reckoned they said, “The lame shall enter first.” This may be because the lame will be able to knock everybody else aside with their crutches. (*The Habit of Being* 116-117)

Chapter 4: Conclusion

O'Connor wrote stories that gave disabled characters a voice in the midst of the pervasive social approval of the eugenics movement. But beyond giving disabled characters a voice, she wrote about autonomous characters who were catalysts for change, both in themselves and in others. Though the dynamic characters in each of these six stories ended their journey at a different stage, each experienced a moment of epiphany at the crossroads of physical and spiritual disability.

Though I only analyzed stories and characters relating to physical disabilities, this type of analysis could easily extend to social disabilities as well. Social disabilities in O'Connor's stories range anywhere from race to citizenship status to age to artificial body markings as they each fit the definition of disability that I explained in the introduction. I can rephrase that definition to include a condition that limits a person's acceptable movements in society and sense of self-image. Though time and space do not allow me to conduct a full analysis of these stories, some of the same principles I utilized in the main chapters can be applied to other O'Connor stories in order to highlight epiphanies derived from social disabilities.

Similar to the stories in my first content chapter, both "A View of the Woods" and "Parker's Back" follow a character whose epiphany is catalyzed by his own social disability. Whereas Hulga's missing leg, Shiftlet's missing arm, and Asbury's incurable disease are physically debilitating, Mr. Fortune's advanced age and Parker's numerous tattoos are socially debilitating.

While Mr. Fortune's age defines his relationship with his family and his epiphany is marked with violence and blood, Parker's tattoos define his relationship with his wife

and are the visual representations of change. Rather than a physical defect or secondary character, the tattoos become the catalyst for transformation. Parker is described in the story as sullen, and sharp mouthed, inconsiderate, and vain. He values looks over morals and sex over looks, yet concedes to morals if they gain him sex. These characteristics highlight his need for a spiritual awakening. Tattoos, for Parker, become a symbol of self-expression and wonder even though he displays addictive tendencies by continually looking for his next tattoo “fix.” Parker does not grasp the fact that there must be a purpose and plan to each tattoo subject and placement if he hopes to achieve the same fluid look as the man at the fair. Instead, “the effect [of his tattoos] was not one of intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 514).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Parker is seeking something. He finds what he thinks to be a compromise between his insatiable desire for more tattoos and his wife’s disdain for the markings by getting an image of Christ tattooed on his back. He chooses a “Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes,” most likely nearest to the image Sarah Ruth might conjure to represent God, with the hopes of finally receiving her approval (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 522). Once the tattoo is complete and he realizes that “the eyes that were now forever on his back were the eyes to be obeyed,” he is able to return home (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 526). Rather than accept him for his action of devotion, Sarah Ruth calls him an idolater and drives him away from the house. He is left shocked and in pain, searching for answers, but has clearly chosen to be a better husband and man. What Parker sought to achieve through his tattoos was in fact

achieved through the epiphany he received from that final tattoo—and the swish of an angry broom – thus he catalyzed his own epiphany by choosing the catalyzing tattoo.

Likewise, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “The Displaced Person” mirror the stories in my second content chapter in that a secondary character who displays a social disability catalyzes the epiphany of the socially adept primary character. Just as Hetty, the hermaphrodite, and Rufus Johnson are central to the transformation of Ruller, the child, and Sheppard, the black family on the bus and the Polish immigrant family on the farm are central to the transformation of Julian and Mrs. McIntyre. In each of these stories, there is a character with a trait that can be looked down upon in society as either debilitating or undesirable, but it is that very characteristic that acts as the catalyst for spiritual change and social reform.

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge” a young man, Julian, is forced to acknowledge that the same condescension and prejudice that his mother shows towards racial minorities is the same as the attitude he directs towards his mother. Whereas his mother feels threatened by riding in an integrated bus and believes that racial minorities “should rise, but on their own side of the fence,” Julian feels depressed by listening to his mother and believes that when they walk together he becomes “saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 407-408). Julian is similar to both Hulga and Asbury in that he is educated, miserable to be at home, and condescending towards his immediate relations.

Though Julian has a negative reaction each time his mother mentions something about race, it becomes clear that he too holds many of her beliefs. The only times he willingly associates with the black characters in the story are when he wants to spite his

mother, much like Hulga spites her mother by changing her name. These acts of rebellion simply punctuate the depraved nature of his social acceptance. His true epiphany arrives when his assumption that he “was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts” is devastated as his mother dies in his arms after the encounter with the black woman wearing the purple hat. At that point he finally realizes the extent of and the similarity between both of their prejudices, repents of his anger against her, and as she lies dying on the sidewalk “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” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 420). This epiphany has the most similarities to Sheppard’s in “The Lambe Shall Enter First” because both characters come to their epiphany just as a close relation passes away indirectly from the influence of the catalyst.

Another example of a secondary character with a social disability acting as a catalyst is Mr. Guizac in “The Displaced Person.” In the story, Mrs. McIntyre is faced with her own bigotry when dealing with her Polish and African American farm hands, eventually leading to multiple deaths and her own incapacitation. When a family of Polish immigrants arrives at the McIntyre farm, it’s mentioned with surprise, “they looked like other people” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 195). The narrator makes note that Mrs. McIntyre and her hired maid Mrs. Shortley had discussed the family prior to their arrival, feeding their misconceptions that the Polish family would not be able to speak or recognize colors, but instead would be grateful for any used household items since they were lucky “to escape from over there and come to a place like [the McIntyre farm]” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 196). Mrs. Shortley even implies to the black hired hands that Mrs. McIntyre only agreed to house the displaced persons in order to

light the fire of desire under their feet. Similar to Lucynell in “The Life You Save May be Your Own,” the Guizac family serves the narrative by giving the other characters a reason for dialogue and forward action.

The Americans are surprised when the Guizacs prove to be valuable workers. Though Mr. Shortly had only given them “three weeks,” within that time Mr. Guizac had proved to be “thrifty and energetic” as “an expert mechanic, a carpenter, and a mason” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 201). Throughout the text, Mrs. McIntyre makes it clear that she thinks blacks are less than human and prone to be thieves, so even though everyone on the farm knows that the Guizacs are the finest and most honest workers, Mrs. McIntyre resolves to fire the family when it becomes known that a black farmhand and the Guizacs’ cousin are betrothed. Before she can do it, Mr. Shortly proceeds to run Mr. Guizac over with the tractor. Mr. Shortly makes eye contact with Mrs. McIntyre before the deed and as she turns to look at Mr. Guizac’s crushed body she realizes that “she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 234). Immediately after the “accident,” Mrs. McIntyre has the epiphany that she has been prejudiced towards both displaced persons and blacks. In the end she is struck with a nervous affliction, is forced to sell all the cattle at a loss, and is left to face the implications of her non-action with only the company of an elderly black maid.

Another interesting facet of this story in particular that relates directly to my thesis work is the simple fact that the immigrant family was Polish and that they were escaping the impacts of World War II. As I mentioned in my introduction, Hitler’s Nazi Germany is one of the most well-known enforcers of the principles of eugenics during the twentieth century. In fact, Mrs. Shortly recounts a newsreel she saw depicting the Nazi

concentration camps, and rather than the horrific images creating sympathy for the Guizac family, it instead fills her with fear: “If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 196). Even though the same types of discrimination were happening in the United States via mandatory sterilization, the cleansing of physical and social pariahs in Germany was considered by Americans to be more inhumane. O’Connor demonstrates in her stories that everyone, no matter race, gender, age, or disability, has some sort of spiritual or moral flaw which needs to be discovered and dealt with, thus equalizing humanity.

Another way I could choose to continue this research would be to teach a course based on O’Connor and Disability. In this proposed course, I would divide the content of my thesis into four units. My first unit would be structured based on the “Introduction” of this thesis, with class time spent on Disability Studies, Eugenics, and Short Fiction. The second unit would follow my “Personal Epiphany through Disability” chapter, and the third unit would follow suit with my “Disability as Epiphany Catalyst” chapter. Finally, the fourth unit would be comprised of new content focusing on the types of social disabilities discussed in this conclusion. By looking at some of O’Connor’s stories through the lens of disabilities, a more comprehensive understanding of her work would be established. Please see the Appendix for a detailed mock syllabus—with proposed assessments—and a course schedule.

As a final note, I’d like to leave you with the image of Andalusia that I will always associate with O’Connor and her homestead: A few miles outside Milledgeville, GA, there is a trail surrounding a placid lake. The trees stretch up around the outer rim

and recede into the forest, but not before casting their image upon the still water. A slight film on the surface stops the reflection for a time, but the image, clear and vivid and bright, emerges before stopping near the shore. In the far clearing a hill rises towards the daybreak. A worn path, cast with the looming shadows of leafless giants, leads you upward. At the cusp, a blur of white and red appears, a beacon of synthetic humanity in an untouched natural landscape. Colors solidify, becoming the sides and roof of a house. A house upon a hill. A porch reaches to embrace the front façade, and a patched screen door stands guard in the center. It opens, welcoming you inside.



Figure 1. The Lake Trail



Figure 2. The House on a Hill

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Appendix: Mock Syllabus

Author in Context: Flannery O'Connor

(Mock Syllabus)

Course Description

A study of the short fiction of Flannery O'Connor as it relates to the field of Disability Studies. Course will include a historical overview of the Eugenics movement, a biographical overview of O'Connor's life, and an aesthetic overview of the short fiction genre, as well as close readings of select O'Connor short stories and analyses of accompanying media adaptations.

Course Goals

The writing we do in this course will serve to enhance your ability to think and write both critically and analytically about literature. You will also learn about Disability Studies and the Eugenics Movement and then apply that knowledge to O'Connor's canon. Finally, you will hone your presentation skills by leading a day of class discussion.

Required Texts

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1990. Print.

Gooch, Brad. *Flannery: A life of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2009. Print.

Additional articles as assigned and appropriate (Access via our class D2L page).

Attendance

Class Discussion will be an important part of our course, and as such you need to be present as much as possible. This is an upper level course and it is assumed that you will keep yourself accountable for any class time missed. Though I do not have a strict attendance policy, you will not receive credit for journal entries submitted outside of class.

Assessments

Daily Reading Journals (40%): You will be required to write a 300-500 word reading response prior to attending class each day. These logs should be thoughtful reflections of the material discussed in the assigned reading. You do not need to submit a journal the day you lead class discussion or any day that a unit paper is due. Additionally, I allow you two “free” days to be used during a busy time in your semester or as a substitute for class attendance. Two of your reading journals may be annotations of a scholarly article and two may be creative responses. Each of these special journal entries must be based on the story assigned for the day it is submitted. Annotated article entries should demonstrate engagement with your own interpretation of the story—it is not appropriate to simply summarize the scholarly article. Creative responses must be accompanied by an artist’s statement explaining the connection between the short story and the art piece (either written, audible, or visual). Please print these journal entries and turn them in during class as late journals or journals submitted outside of class will not be accepted.

Discussion Leader (15%): You will be required to lead class discussion one day during the semester. Depending on the size of our class you may be responsible as an individual, as partners, or as a group. For your discussion day, you are the expert of the material. This means that outside research and planning are required. It may be appropriate for you to develop a lesson plan outline, an introductory presentation, or a class handout. You will be required to meet with me during office hours the week before your assigned discussion day to talk about your lesson plan. You should plan on filling at least half of class time (about 35 minutes).

Unit Papers (15% each for a 45% total): For each unit (except Unit 1: Context) you will be required to write a 1500-1800 word analytic paper based on the content of the unit. Each of these papers must focus on one short story assigned during the unit and an additional story unassigned during the course. You must also include 3 additional sources from either the scholarly articles assigned in class or your own additional outside research. These papers should be polished and analytical, but feel free to explore the themes that spark your interest. You may choose to develop a thesis and argue for a particular connection or interpretation, or you may choose a topic and trace its appearance in the stories with a reflection of the further research you think necessary for the creation of a future argument. You will be required to give the class an overview of your research during the class the paper is due.

Final Portfolio: At the end of the semester you will be required to combine all of your work into a comprehensive portfolio. This portfolio will include your reading

journals, your three major papers, and your class discussion presentation, handouts, and lesson plan outline. You will need to include pictures of any artistic journals for inclusion with your artist's statement or embed links to any digital media files. You will also need to include a brief introduction to the portfolio in the form of a course reflection (no more than 300 words). This final portfolio will be in PDF format and will be due during your scheduled final. Although there will not be a grade given for the portfolio, your successful completion of the course will be contingent on its timely submission. In other words, even if you complete all other assignments, yet do not submit a satisfactory final portfolio, you will not pass the course.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Context

Week 1

Tuesday: Syllabus and Opening Lecture

Thursday: Flannery O'Connor, *Flannery* Prologue and Chapters 1-2

Week 2

Tuesday: Flannery O'Connor Cont., *Flannery* Chapters 3-5

Thursday: Eugenics and Disabilities Studies

Week 3

Tuesday: O'Connor Documentary

Thursday: Close Reading "Greenleaf"

Unit 2: Personal Epiphany through Disability

Week 4

Tuesday: Unit Overview and Methods

Thursday: "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" *Flannery* Chapter 6, Discussion 1

Week 5

Tuesday: "Good Country People" *Flannery* Chapter 7, Discussion 2

Thursday: "The Enduring Chill," Discussion 3

Week 6

Tuesday: Film Studies

Thursday: Unit Paper 1 Due

Unit 3: Disability as Epiphany Catalyst

Week 7

Tuesday: Unit Overview and Methods

Thursday: “The Temple of the Holy Ghost,” *Flannery* Chapter 8, Discussion 4

Week 8

Tuesday: “The Turkey,” Discussion 5

Thursday: “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Discussion 6

Week 9

Tuesday: Film Studies

Thursday: Unit Paper 2 Due

Unit 4: Beyond Physical Disability

Week 10

Tuesday: Unit Overview and Methods

Thursday: “Parker’s Back,” “A View of the Woods,” Discussion 7

Week 11

Tuesday: “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” *Flannery* Chapter 9, Discussion 8

Thursday: “The Displaced Person,” Discussion 9

Week 12

Tuesday: “Revelation,” *Flannery* Chapter 10, Discussion 10

Thursday: Film Studies and Course Evaluations

Week 13

Tuesday: Unit Paper 3

Thursday: Students’ Choice Story and Conclusions

Week 14

Tuesday: Portfolio Conferences

Thursday: Portfolio Conferences

Week 15: Finals

Final Portfolio Due