

"A MAN THOUGH NOT YET A WHOLE ONE":  
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S VISION OF THE HUMAN DILEMMA

by

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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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May 17, 1977

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For my mother, father, and sister

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and encouragement of many teachers and friends who helped me in writing this thesis, especially Edward L. Tucker, John R. Byers, Jr., and Constance J. Gefvert. Their advice and their understanding, their care and their friendship have helped form this work from beginning to end. I wish also to express my thanks to \_\_\_\_\_, whose friendship has likewise served as a source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my graduate career.

My deepest thanks must go to \_\_\_\_\_, whose love has made these many months of writing months also full of life. To

\_\_\_\_\_, I owe a lasting debt as well. Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my parents and to my sister. This thesis is really for them, and the dedication expresses my love.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of her first novel, Wise Blood, in 1952, Flannery O'Connor has grown steadily in popularity--often, amid varied and fluctuating critical fortunes. Early reviewers of Wise Blood, for example, while conceding that the book possessed various odd virtues, was even, at times, genuinely moving, agreed nevertheless that in the end the novel did not truly commend itself. William Goyen found in the work a certain unexplainable strength, its "stark dramatic power"; but others, such as Isaac Rosenfield, found its action so unreal, so bizarre that it prompted only bewildering confusion. Some spoke of O'Connor's prose as "remarkably pure and luminous"--quite regularly this quality of the book won the admiration of the critics; but finally, almost all expressed severe doubts about the novel. O'Connor's characters, they complained, were "a race of sports" in whom it was impossible to become involved. Her world, these critics indicted, was simply "insane . . . peopled by monsters and submen." The plot consisted, in the words of R. W. B. Lewis of the Hudson Review, chiefly of "the private twitchings of several almost totally dislocated individuals"; and Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Wise Blood, was described roughly in Saturday Review as "so repulsive that one could not become

interested in him."<sup>1</sup> To be sure, critics and readers alike emerged at first confused, then mostly censorious: as Dorothy Walters has suggested, confronted with O'Connor's works for the first time, they came away from her fiction with a sense of having undergone a powerful and moving experience, but unsure of its meaning or cause.<sup>2</sup> Poised on the edge of judgement, they could agree only that her fiction was exceedingly eccentric, unquestionably queer, and decidedly difficult to interpret.

In the past several years, however, the haze of critical confusion that blurred O'Connor's early literary reception has vanished as, almost without dissent, commentary on her works has tended to coalesce, then harden, into a set of received dogmas. Critics had found the key--cued by O'Connor herself--and they applied it zealously: O'Connor's staunch religion, imposed upon her work like a strainer, seemed to be the device that filtered meaning from chaos in her fiction. As a result, it is now almost universally accepted that O'Connor's fiction can be interpreted faithfully only in terms of Christian orthodoxy, and that, consequently, the scope of her work remains, at its broadest, narrowly theological and limited in implication. Indeed, of the major studies published on O'Connor in the past few years, almost all, including Katherine Feeley's

<sup>1</sup>The reviews referred to are, in order: William Goyen, "Unending Vengeance," New York Times Book Review, May 18, 1952, p. 4; Isaac Rosenfield, "To Win by Default," New Republic, 127 (July 7, 1952), 19; R. W. B. Lewis, "Eccentrics' Pilgrimage," Hudson Review, 6 (Spring, 1953), 144-50; and Oliver LaFarge, "Manic Gloom," Saturday Review, 35 (May 24, 1952), 22.

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy Walters, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973), p. 2.

Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock, Carter Martin's The True Country, and Martha Stephens' The Question of Flannery O'Connor, have accepted as a critical tenet the exclusively religious nature of O'Connor's art. Martin states that "any attempt at an appreciation of her work must begin with a clear understanding of O'Connor's Christian theme." He suggests even that any interpretation that ignores the actuality of this sacramental view of life "must necessarily remain meaningless."<sup>3</sup> And Stephens, who admits rather a skeptical opinion of O'Connor's work from the first, reflects the same preoccupation, no doubt echoing in her words the thoughts of others: "To say that Miss O'Connor was a devout Catholic hardly begins to suggest how formidable the distance is between her view of life and the prevailing view of modern readers. To find so bleak, so austere and rigid, so other-wordly a Christian view of life as hers, one is forced back into the distant past of English religious literature--into the dark side of medieval Christian thought with its constant injunction to renunciation of the world."<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis upon the religious nature of O'Connor's fiction, amplified by so many critics, is, to be certain, not without foundation. Time and again, O'Connor identified herself as a Christian

<sup>3</sup>Carter Martin, The True Country (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1968), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 4.

writer with "Christian concerns,"<sup>5</sup> as a writer who portrayed in her works inherently Christian themes. Her talent for fiction-writing she viewed as a God-given gift; her mission in life she perceived, at once, as artistic and religious: to capture prophetically in her art the mystery of the Christian life. Undeniably, then, one cannot ignore--nor should he minimize--in O'Connor's created works the presence of a religious significance so much a part of their creator's life.

Just as certainly, though, one cannot define the extent of O'Connor's fiction, as critics have tended to do, simply--or only--on the basis of her theological perspective. To do so, to cite a comparison, would be similar to interpreting Lawrence's works--Lawrence, himself an avowed prophet, advocated a plan for salvation also, though not strictly religious--only in terms of that single theme. Lawrence, of course, has not been a victim of this critical convergence; a multitude of themes--tenderness, fertility, industrialization, egocentricity, sterility--to name a few, have been identified and traced in his fiction. But O'Connor has been a victim. Perhaps because she was a steadfast Catholic writing in the protestant South,<sup>6</sup> perhaps because she was so verbal in her religious commitment, O'Connor has been curiously singled out of the literary flock, branded and penned, with the result that the religious nature of her fiction and her life have been translated simultaneously as scope and limitation.

<sup>5</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup>Martin, p. 10.



Significantly, O'Connor herself was very much aware of the shortcomings and perversions of such critical telescoping; and only a selective reading of her own comments about her writing will yield any other conclusion. She insisted repeatedly, for example, that her view of the world was not "a restraint on [her] creativity," but that, to the contrary, her perspective functioned as "an instrument for penetrating reality."<sup>7</sup> Thus the meaning of her art was not defined by limitation, but expanded by a broader, deeper vision of the world. O'Connor insisted, as well, that good fiction "operates on several levels,"<sup>8</sup> that it is not enough to find a single abstraction or symbol or theme in a work and "then . . . go off with an elaborate sense of satisfaction and the notion that [one has] 'understood' the story."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for O'Connor, fiction was not--could not be--based on an "abstract issue"--even an issue such as religion: it had to be soldered to "some specific human situation." It had to emanate from "a realm much larger" than the author's conscious mind; it had to be created by a serious writer who dealt with the "whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene."<sup>10</sup> In "Novelist and Believer," a lecture presented at Sweet Briar College, she declared herself first

<sup>7</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 177-78.

<sup>8</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 83, 77.

and most essentially " a novelist, . . . not a theologian";<sup>11</sup> and she recognized that there existed ways other than her own in which her stories could be read: she encouraged multiplicity.

In the face of such compelling testimonial evidence, then, it remains truly remarkable that O'Connor's works have been so often narrowly interpreted in a so narrowly religious perspective. Indeed, since O'Connor advocated a view of fiction that embraced "several levels of meaning," and since she worked with that view constantly in mind, the reader who responds to only a single level of meaning in her work is responding not only partially, but wrongly. He would be denying her central assumptions about existence. For woven into the texture of her fiction is not only the religious, but the human; not only the supernatural, but the natural as well. Certainly, as O'Connor seems even to have acknowledged herself, a preoccupation in her works with religious significance alone denies the scope and the depth, the richness and the complexity of her fictional contribution; such a perspective remains surely an unfortunate simplification.

In truth, there does exist a very significant aspect of O'Connor's fiction, seldom recognized and never traced, that is not wholly religious, but pervasively human: an answer, then, to those readers who have taken O'Connor to task for her singleness of theme and to those critics who have perpetuated the idea by their exclusive emphasis upon it. Beyond the dogma of O'Connor criticism, O'Connor confronts repeatedly in her two collections of short stories, A Good Man Is Hard To Find and

<sup>11</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 154.

Everything That Rises Must Converge, and in both her novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, the serious problem of human selfishness and its ugly effects: man's eventual isolation from those around him; ultimately, his insulation from meaning and life itself. Sometimes brutally, always honestly, she explores throughout her works the monstrous disfigurement that selfishness can cause--and explores it in a specifically human realm, consistent with her conception of the nature of fiction. Embodying her message in her characters, returning in each of her works to a similar pattern of character development and thematic representation, O'Connor exemplifies in all of her protagonists a similar emblematic experience: wrapped in their own selfish natures, her characters must either grow to an understanding that embraces others, or perish in isolation.

At the core of O'Connor's rendering of this essentially human theme lies a consistently formed pattern of characterization. Almost without exception, the characters she employs to communicate her truth suffer from some manifestation of selfishness. To be sure, selfishness for O'Connor is not merely synonymous with greed; nor does it mean necessarily even a preoccupation with material goods. Rather, selfishness, in her terms, describes a way of living or, more precisely--because it is static in a vital world--a way of life; ultimately, it characterizes a condition of the soul. Like the "grotesques" of Sherwood Anderson, O'Connor's characters are grotesque beings because they have "snatched

up one of the truths"<sup>12</sup> among the many in the world, snatched it up and defined their whole lives by it. Steeled in their preoccupations with themselves, selfishly perceiving others only in terms of the "truth" of their created selves--a sort of solipsism, then--her characters emerge as egoistic beings isolated in their solitary, narrow visions of the world. Some, like Mr. Head of "The Artificial Nigger," for example, may isolate themselves through their blinding pride. Others, such as Mrs. McIntyre of "The Displaced Person," who bears no responsibility for others, estrange themselves from humanity through their utter self-sufficiency. And still others, like Francis Tarwater of The Violent Bear It Away, may cut themselves from meaning by focusing exclusively, even fanatically, on a desired end to the exclusion of all else. Whatever the complexion of the selfishness, though, all of O'Connor's protagonists emerge as creatures ultimately alone, who have imposed their own limited and narrow conceptions of reality--tempered by their selves--upon a world of reality that is much larger. Complete in their selfishness, incomplete in life, O'Connor's protagonists, like Mrs. McIntyre who sees as if looking through the wrong end of a telescope--herself being the lens--possess a narrowed and constricted vision of life that is incapable of bearing the burden of a world much richer in complexity and expanse.

Contrary to the indictments of some critics, O'Connor, however, does not merely leave all of her characters stranded in such a meaningless world of isolation. Some--those who are fortunate--are led to

<sup>12</sup>Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York: The Viking Press, 1919), p. 25.

human salvation through a growing awareness of the lives and the world that surround them. For these characters, recognition is generated by a startling experience that shocks them out of their selfish preoccupations, that shatters the insulating shell of their selfishness. Suddenly, harshly, the larger world of reality to which these characters have remained ignorant forces its presence into their beings; and in this moment, the world, as they have known it, collapses, and another world, unbounded by selfishness, is created for them. In this way, the tragic movement of these characters from selfishness and ignorance to realization and knowledge defines the essential form of O'Connor's theme. Significantly, this pattern of characterization, vitalized by such techniques as comic revelation and symbolic patterning, determines the structure of each work as well: each character's experience is patterned in a movement toward negation--in which his selfishness is exposed--then revelation--in which he grows to realize his selfishness--then sometimes regeneration--in which the possibilities for his living in a new world are explored, usually briefly.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to trace the development of O'Connor's protagonists both as they embody the theme of human isolation and as they determine fictional structure, while at the same time focusing upon the specific nature of each character's selfishness in the illustration of theme. To fulfill this objective, the thesis will examine the protagonists of both of O'Connor's two completed novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, and the protagonists of selected stories from her two volumes of short fiction, A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge.

Extensive reading in secondary sources has produced no study similar

to the one proposed here. Certainly, many critics discuss these characters in the context of their respective works; almost all have noted the experience of the epiphanal moment shared by these characters. But most often, these aspects of O'Connor's fiction have been discussed strictly in religious terms. Apparently, no formal attempt has been made to trace the theme of selfishness, represented in these characters, through her works; nor has there been any attempt to discuss this theme in terms of technique and structure. Such a study is valuable, for criticism of O'Connor's fiction--because it has focused so exclusively on the religious aspects--has tended to encourage an orthodoxy in interpretation of her works, perhaps in this way even limiting O'Connor's effective audience. This work will demonstrate that, far from being narrow in scope, O'Connor's fiction illustrates a shared human dilemma that possesses relevance for us all.

## CHAPTER II

### WISE BLOOD: A TALE OF "SHRUNKEN MAN"

Completed when Flannery O'Connor was only twenty-seven years old, Wise Blood represents a remarkable first achievement for such a young writer. As a detailed record of the Christian travail, the novel represents, as well, probably O'Connor's most explicit treatment of the theme identified most often in her work: the theme of the necessity for Christian grace in modern life. Indeed, in the years since the novel's publication, both of these perspectives on Wise Blood have grown together in popularity, first in speculation, then in acceptance. Recognition of the magnitude of O'Connor's accomplishment has grown as the critical confusion that surrounded the work in the early years, detailed in Chapter One, has crystallized into a more orthodox understanding of the novel; and this understanding, as with so many of O'Connor's other works, has been generated primarily by the imposition upon the novel of O'Connor's Christian ideology. Like the glasses that Hazel Motes keeps should he ever need them to see more clearly, O'Connor's theological perspective has functioned as a prescription lens that has brought the once blurred meaning of Wise Blood into a focussed image of religious doctrine.

But just as Wise Blood marks the first expression of O'Connor's sacramental view of life, it embodies, just as importantly, the first extended example of her concerns for the roots and effects of selfishness. Certainly, to ignore the elements of selfishness in Wise Blood is to deny the work's thematic richness; to acknowledge their presence

is only to magnify O'Connor's achievement by hailing in her work a significant diversity of theme, a diversity that has not been previously regarded in this novel. To be sure, in Wise Blood the theme of selfishness emerges, more than in O'Connor's other works, within an explicitly religious framework, primarily through Hazel Motes' maniacal attempts to deny Christ's existence. But the fact that the concept of selfishness is so integrally related to the religious significance of the novel does not limit its distinctive importance: it serves rather to heighten the theme's prominence both in O'Connor's own hierarchy of values and in her message as it is communicated in the work. Certainly O'Connor saw selfishness, in all its various forms, as a crucial barrier to religious salvation and to human fulfillment. In Wise Blood, she sought emphatically to portray this complex human dilemma, presenting in the action and the structure of the novel a literary sermon on the destructive effects of selfishness.

Like the human landscapes of O'Connor's short stories, the larger landscape of Wise Blood is populated by characters who grotesquely embody various kinds of selfishness, thus underscoring through their perpetual presence in the novel the theme's significance. To some, the emergence of these characters in the work may seem even like a freakish parade of selfish vice figures. Asa Hawkes, who, as his name suggests, hawks religion, carelessly deserts his daughter to satisfy his own cravings. Hoover Shoats, whose stage name is Onnie Jay Holy, markets religion for monetary gain with the expertise and expedience of a shrewd businessman. Sabbath Lily, Hawkes' daughter, pursues a vain course of sexual self-satisfaction, and Enoch Emery, the moronic zoo-



keeper, believes himself finally self-sufficient since he possesses "wise blood." Indeed, in one form or another each character in the novel is indicted by O'Connor for his selfish preoccupations--some merely for their greed, others for their inability to see a larger world beyond their own desires. And like an expansive collage, the elements of selfishness that these characters represent bond together to form a thematic setting for the novel, also to unify it.

Against this relief, however, there emerges in Wise Blood a character even more foreboding, more complex in his selfishness: Hazel Motes, the protagonist of the novel. For while Motes' actions describe on one level his personal growth in the acceptance of Christ--and thus embody the religious significance of the novel--they define on another closely related level his growth from selfishness to understanding, blindness to vision, ignorance to perspective. At once the focus of both the religious and selfishness themes, then, it is in the end Hazel Motes who carries the thematic burden of the representation of selfishness in Wise Blood. Indeed, he is most distinctive for the utter complexity of his selfishness: for, though he is at once fanatical and isolated in his preoccupation to deny Christ, his selfishness is fueled by his inability to accept anything that he cannot verify through self and by his proud confidence in his own self-sufficiency.

Certainly the salient quality of Hazel Motes' selfishness is his exclusive absorption in denying the existence of Christ; Hazel himself brings this preoccupation up again and again. So strong and so singular is this drive that it has prompted one critic to note that he is

never caught in "the least human kindness or love since his single obsession is with his search for religious truth."<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Hazel Motes emerges because of this obsession as a truly bizarre character, isolated from both the other characters who inhabit his world and the religious truth that he so desperately seeks. Wrapped in his own veil of personal preoccupation, following only the object of his selfish and compulsive preoccupation, Hazel engages in little human communication in the novel; he shares in nothing. Rather, his continual, and often inappropriate insistence on denying Christ, functions as a blade that cuts away his only chances for meaning in a world in which human and divine interactions are a necessity. Surely the reader is confounded, and the chance for communication disrupted, when in the middle of Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock's discussion of her sister's children (summarized instead of quoted by O'Connor to increase the sense of distance in interpersonal relationships in this world), Hazel blurts out suddenly: "I reckon you think you been redeemed."<sup>2</sup> And seemingly no less dissonant is his spontaneous eruption to the three strangers who share his dining table on the train: "'If you've been redeemed,' he said, 'I wouldn't want to be. Do you think I believe in Jesus? Well, I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train'" (p. 16). Truly, as Martha

<sup>1</sup>Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962), p. 14. Hereinafter, page references to this edition of Wise Blood will be incorporated in the body of the thesis.

Stephens has intimated, Hazel's obsession with religion serves as a block that insulates him even from the possibility of engaging in meaningful human relationships.

Even more alarming in O'Connor's perspective, though, must be the fact that Hazel's selfishness isolates him as well from religious fulfillment. Like the proverbial character who cannot see the forest for looking at the trees, Hazel Motes cannot recognize objectively his dependence on Christ because he is so intent on refuting Christ's existence. Indeed, it is precisely the nature of Haze's selfishness--his utter obsession with establishing himself independent of Christ--that blinds him from seeing for most of the novel what is readily apparent to the other characters around him: that really he is one in whom Jesus lives. Mrs. Hitchcock, in their first meeting, mistakes Hazel for a preacher because of the look in his eyes; Asa Hawkes "can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice" (p. 50); Sabbath Lily knows that he "wouldn't never have no fun or let anybody else because [he] didn't want nothing but Jesus" (p. 188); Enoch Emery understands that he "didn't have nobody nor nothing but Jesus" (p. 58); and even the taxi driver who takes him to Leora Watts' house thinks that Hazel "looks like a preacher" (p. 31). In just such selfish blindness, Hazel never recognizes that his deliberate sinning is in itself really a sort of unconscious acknowledgement of Christ, an acknowledgement that sin does indeed exist in Christ's world. And he doesn't see until the end that the magnitude of his attempts to deny Christ really reflect Christ's strength within his being.

Symbolically and literally, then, Sabbath's observation on Hazel's

eyes--"they don't look like they see what he's looking at" (p. 109)-- seems imminently correct. For just as Hazel's "fixed stare" on Asa Hawkes causes him to miss the red traffic signal suspended above his head, his selfish, fixed stare on the denial of Christ causes him to miss essential human and religious truths; and he emerges isolated from human relationship and from communion with Christ. Certainly then it is no coincidence that when Hazel looks out the train window, he sees not the outside world, but only his own image in reflection. Immersed in his own selfishness, the larger world has become for Haze only a reflection of his own smaller world of narrow preoccupations. The glass--like every other object in Hazel's world--functions as a mirror, so that he can see neither beyond the obsessions of his self, nor the truth that lies there.

Thus selfishness renders Hazel Motes as freakish in the larger world of reality as his clothes become in the brighter light of outside day. Beneath Hazel's obsession to deny Christ, though, lie two other essential sorts of selfishness. The one, Hazel's inability to trust in those things he cannot validate himself, spurs and helps to perpetuate throughout Wise Blood his continued inability to accept Christ. The other, his belief in his own self-sufficiency, describes Hazel's basic condition as an isolated and selfish individual; it underlies also some of the basic techniques that O'Connor employs in the communication of her theme.

Haze's incapacity to extend his belief beyond the literal and the physical--beyond those things which can be concretely verified by the physical self--into the abstract and the spiritual accounts for another

aspect of his selfishness and for his inability to believe faithfully in that shadowy figure Jesus. His faithlessness thus represents an absolute trust in self, a distrust of that which he cannot perceive through the senses of the self; and as such it narrows his world even further. Indeed, it is this aspect of Hazel's selfish personality that contributes initially to his distrust of Christ. Early in his life he learns that Jesus offers no visible signs. After repenting for looking at the naked lady at the carnival by walking in shoes filled with stones, Hazel stops, thinking to himself, "that ought to satisfy him" (p. 63), and begins to search for a symbol that Jesus has in fact noted his repentance. "Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign" (p. 64). But the absence of such a sign translates for Hazel Motes, who gauges all of reality literally, into a distrust of Jesus' very presence: though he had walked out a mile, he walks only "a half-mile back before he took [his shoes] off" (p. 64). Likewise, Jesus' power, indeed His presence, is questioned by the young Hazel Motes when his grandfather, his parents, and his brother, who have all been guaranteed rebirth after death through Christ, never emerge from their coffins. Once again, literal presence is for Hazel synonymous with certainty; visible absence leaves doubts.

On the basis of such experiences as these, then, Christ remains for Hazel a silhouette not to be trusted, a figure who moves "from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown" (p. 22). As David Eggenschwiler has suggested, Haze

is in this view "afraid to abandon the familiar things around him to enter the darkness" of Christ;<sup>3</sup> he views Salvation uncertainly as the destruction of his certain self." And as a reaction against this uncertainty, as a continued need to surround himself with those things which are, after all, literal and trustworthy, Hazel is led to various attempts to establish a surrogate meaning in his life. He establishes his Church Without Christ--a reflection also of his selfish insistence to deny Christ--as a religion in which "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (p. 105). It is a religion, in other words, in which only physical realities can be believed in. He gets himself a woman; he buys himself new clothes. And he puts great stock in his car also--it is at once his "house," symbolically and literally; his pulpit and his transportation--because "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (p. 113). Thematically, of course, the consequences of Hazel's actions are apparent: because he continues to believe in only the manners and in none of the mystery of life, Hazel is led through his selfishness farther and farther away from Christ; for like his misplaced confidence in his old car--"that car'll get me wherever I want to go" (p. 127)--Haze's stubborn and selfish adherence to the literal and the physical is finally but self-delusion. Neither his literal religion nor his physical car will take him to spiritual fulfillment.

Thus, trusting absolutely in the ability of his self to apprehend

<sup>3</sup>David Eggenschwiler, The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 104.

reality completely, Hazel Motes emerges not only as a character immersed in selfishness, but as a being who believes himself self-sufficient as well; and it is this belief in his own self-sufficiency that fuels his attempts to live on his own, to live without Jesus. Simply, Hazel, like so many of O'Connor's other characters, possesses no knowledge of his own limitations as a human being. But such a realization, important in one way or another in almost all of O'Connor's works, has in Wise Blood a double measure of significance: for Hazel's ignorance of the limitations of his self describes thematically an essential characteristic of his selfishness--he fails to recognize his limitations in a larger world because, bounded by self, the larger world does not exist for him--and it functions integrally in the comic structure of the novel also. In fact, the comic nature of Wise Blood, often noted but rarely ever related to the work as a whole, emerges closely connected to the theme of selfishness. One complements the other; each helps to sharpen and realize the other. Much of the comedy in the novel emanates from the revelation of the incongruity of Hazel's character, from the incongruity between what he perceives himself to be and what we as readers know him to be, from his repeated attempts to grapple, with his selfish and limited perspective, with a world much more complex and broad. Such is the source of much of the comedy concerning Hazel's rat-colored Essex: the car's (one must use the term loosely) repeated betrayal of Haze seems all the more funny because, possessing in his selfishness no knowledge of its limitations, his confidence in the car's superiority is unqualified. Such also is the source of the comedy of the scene in which Sabbath Lily attempts to seduce Hazel: so immersed, as usual, in his

own religious preoccupations, so unaware of her actual presence, Hazel remains completely, and thus humorously, detached during Sabbath's aggressive propositions--this, even though previously Hazel has himself decided that he will seduce her! And just as Hazel's lack of perspective drives the comedy in many scenes of the novel, each of Hazel's comic confrontations only reinforces the reader's vision of Haze as a truly limited and selfish being. Even the Enoch Emery subplot, which at least one critic has called "aggravatingly labored" because it will not "sink into the stream of the narrative,"<sup>4</sup> serves a similar purpose: Enoch Emery's self-sufficiency--he too believes he can rely simply on himself since his blood is "wise"--helps to define further Haze's own selfishness.

In spite of Hazel's entrenched selfishness, however, he does grow to a broader understanding of himself and his world. Indeed, it is only when--in a masterful touch--the ultimate symbol of both his escape from Christ and his narrow and limited vision, his car, is desecrated literally by the highway patrolman that Hazel is shocked suddenly out of his complacency and awakened to the insufficiency of his world view, an action all the more beautiful technically since Hazel, remember, believes only in literal signs. Then does he realize, in an epiphanal moment shared by all of O'Connor's protagonists, that he has been a creature driven by vanity, driven and limited and insulated by his own selfishness. His Essex destroyed, the only world by which he has defined his being snatched from before his eyes--broken to pieces like the shattered windshield of his car--Hazel sees, through the cracked shell of his self-

<sup>4</sup>Stephens, p. 44.



ishness, the world beyond, the world as it is; and he understands. Where once he was blindly preoccupied, now he sees with perspective. Though once his own reflected image had been all that he saw when he looked toward the landscape, now there is reflected in his face--now that he can see beyond his selfishness--"the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (p. 209). And wiser in his expanded vision, Hazel realizes for the first time that in all his actions, as much as he had believed otherwise, he was not really "going anywheres" (p. 209).

In this way, Hazel's realization of his selfishness and the sudden perspective that accompanies his recognition form the second stage in O'Connor's cycle of human redemption. His regeneration, or depicted growth from selfishness, defines the third stage. Thematically the final segment of Haze's development as a human being, structurally the last chapter in Wise Blood, this stage focuses in upon the new being that Hazel has become; for now, in his regenerated state, he has learned finally to see that his acceptance of Christ is a necessity. Free at last from the shackles of his selfishness, he can see the truth that has eluded him previously: that Christ is savior.

O'Connor skillfully reveals Hazel's growth from selfishness in this section through the repeated contrast of his new way of life and his old way of life, a contrast that is accomplished on two levels. More immediately, Hazel's growth and his new-found acceptance of Christ are revealed through the contrast of his own previous and current actions. Then, he could not see Christ for his maniacal denial of him; now he

sees Christ with the spiritual eyes of his soul. Then, because he had no perspective on life broader than his own selfish perspective, he believed that "I am CLEAN" (p. 91); now, aware of his own limited significance in Christ's larger world, possessed of self-consciousness, Hazel realizes that "I am not clean" (p. 224). To be sure, like Oedipus--O'Connor was reading the play for the first time while writing Wise Blood--who grows to realize that he is "a man, no more," a man who is no more than any other man, Hazel, who before had thought himself superhuman in his ability to save himself, has grown to a new understanding of his own mortality: in his less selfish vision to a comprehension of his ultimate meaning as a man. Likewise, Hazel blinds himself in an act of selfless faith and in a direct refutation of his tendency to measure reality literally with his eyes; understanding the world truly as he did not before, he no longer has need of them. Now he sees that "if there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more" (p. 222).

But these explicit contrasts between Hazel's former and current selves are not the only comparisons that define the extent and the quality of Hazel's regeneration; for on another level, O'Connor measures the depth of Hazel's less selfish being through his utter contrast in this chapter with his landlady, Mrs. Flood. A woman who is herself still enmeshed in selfishness, Mrs. Flood functions in this final chapter as a foil to underscore and intensify Hazel's own growth from selfishness--finally, to help us see through the juxtaposition of these two thematic strands just how far he has come. Mrs. Flood is, in fact, everything selfish that Hazel used to be. Self-sufficient in her selfishness, she still believes, as Hazel did, that she

is "as good . . . not believing in Jesus as a many a one that does" (p. 221). Like Hazel, she "stares for a long time, seeing nothing at all" (p. 222); characteristic of the way he selfishly and literally measured reality, she thinks there is "only one kind of clean," the kind that is--literally--accomplished with "a dust pan and broom" (p. 224). And like the younger Hazel Motes whose earlier journey with rocks in his shoes brought no tangible signs, Mrs. Flood wonders confusedly why Hazel doesn't have anything to "show" for what he is "paying" for now (p. 222). Thus possessed of the same qualities of selfishness that once possessed Haze, Mrs. Flood emerges--exactly like Mrs. Hitchcock in the first chapter of the novel--as a characterizing agent to sharpen and define and reinforce Hazel's character: now, a character all the more bright against the darker background that surrounds him.

The cycle of Haze's selfishness thus completed, there remains yet one important point to be discussed concerning the theme of selfishness in Wise Blood: O'Connor's scenic construction as it reflects this theme of the novel. Indeed, repeatedly O'Connor has been attacked for her inability to adapt her writing to the continuous and extended form of the novel; and even critics who otherwise admire O'Connor's art continue to find the fractured, seemingly incomplete endings of the chapters of Wise Blood a frustrating stumbling block. To be certain, Martha Stephens seems to speak for a great many O'Connor critics when he says that "we distrust [the novel] as we lose confidence in the writer to provide the

completions for the actions that her portentous prose seems to promise."<sup>5</sup> But in fact, contrary to this accepted critical view, the structural division of action in Wise Blood reflects and reinforces beautifully the theme of selfishness that O'Connor communicates in the novel, thus identifying O'Connor's scenic construction not as a weakness but actually as one of novel's strengths; for as long as Hazel remains incomplete and unfulfilled in his selfishness, the action of each chapter--and particularly the tension generated in each chapter, reflective of Hazel's search--remains purposely unresolved. The structural paradigm and the uncompleted, "unsatisfying" closure of action of each chapter therefore reflect a thematic truth: that as long as Hazel is a selfish being, fulfillment and resolution are impossible. Only in the final chapter of Wise Blood in which the more selfless Haze is finally able to find fulfillment is the tension of the scene resolved, the action completed to a satisfying and closed end.

More specifically, the early chapters of Wise Blood follow a pattern in which tension is generated, usually even in the first paragraph by the uneasy fusion of two unlikely qualities, and then allowed to reach a height; there the chapter ends. Chapter Eleven, for example, opens with the picture of Enoch Emery as he delivers the "new jesus" he has just stolen to Haze's apartment. Even in the first sentence of the chapter an uneasiness is created from the juxtaposition of opposites: Enoch is dressed "in a long black raincoat with a lightish hat pulled down

<sup>5</sup>Stephens, p. 76.

low on his face and the brim of it turned down to meet the turned up collar of his raincoat" (p. 73, my italics). This tension, only slightly hinted at here, soon becomes open conflict, though, as Haze, who is once again selfishly trying to avoid Jesus by "making a new start with nothing on his mind" (p. 186), finds his fleeing path blocked by Sabbath. (Characteristic of his selfish preoccupations, Hazel in this scene "didn't notice the rain" outside; he sees "only the car" (p. 186), the means of his escape!) Hazel's attempt to reach the goal of his selfishness thus thwarted, the tension of the scene reaches a crescendo at the end of the chapter as Hazel, now frantic, "almost losing his balance," screams direfully the oath of his selfishness: "I've seen the only truth there is" (p. 189). Unfortunately, however, the truth that Hazel has seen--that Jesus doesn't exist--is in reality but the selfishness that continues to prevent him from seeing the real truth-- that Jesus does indeed exist. Accordingly, then, the chapter reaches no resolution, no fulfillment in either desire or action or theme; the narrative tension remains at a height, undrained. In much the same way, all the other chapters of Wise Blood follow a similar paradigm: like the movement of a tensive arc cut off at its highest altitude, the conflict of each scene and the tension of Hazel's quest remain unclosed and unresolved. The final chapter of Wise Blood is the only one in which the tension and conflict generated at the outset of the scene are finally satisfyingly resolved in closure: like the satisfying wholeness of a complete arc. In this chapter, that resolution is signalled, the tensive curve of action completed and fulfilled, in Mrs. Flood's perception that Hazel's face is "tranquil," by her recognition that "she had

never observed his face more composed," and by her words that reflect the thematic fulfillment of the novel: "I see you've come home" (p. 231). Thus, thoughtfully and effectively O'Connor reflects Hazel's growth from incompleteness and selfishness to fulfillment and selflessness in the structure and in the form of the novel.

Both in structure and especially in theme, then, Wise Blood represents not only a statement of O'Connor's religious perspective, but also an eloquent testimonial on the effects of selfishness. Indeed, Hazel's journey to fulfillment symbolizes not just the journey of the Christian to salvation: it describes the path from selfishness to manhood as well. For, from his desperate attempts to avoid Christ and from his inability to believe beyond his self, both of which leave him isolated and alone, Hazel Motes grows to understand uniquely his role in God's world, realizing in the process truly what it is to be a man. From his selfishness, he grows, in spite of his self, into a whole and complete being, thus avoiding the fate of those who are selfish, so avoiding the tragedy of those who--as Hazel once did--worship fanatically and distractingly the "new jesus": the idol who is the symbol of our selves, who is himself a "shrunken man."

### CHAPTER III

#### A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND: STORIES OF DISPLACED PERSONS

The theme of selfishness, presented and explored in Wise Blood, is extended and reinforced in A Good Man Is Hard to Find. In this first published collection of short stories, O'Connor depicts again, yet with even greater diversity, the awful perversions and the calamitous consequences of selfishness. All victims of one or another type of selfishness, the characters in these stories share similar emblematic experiences that unite them like the movements of a symphony into a powerful thematic presentation. Mr. Head, in "The Artificial Nigger," suffers from egoism grown out of pride; Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" are victims of selfishness born out of desperate desires. Hulga's selfishness is represented in "Good Country People" in the narrow world of her intellectualized self; and in "The Displaced Person," Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre are depicted as characters whose proud natures lead them ultimately only to isolation. All victims of insecurity, all guilty of a form of selfishness, these characters thus illustrate together one of the essential truths in O'Connor's fiction: that selfishness is a condition shared by many men and that it insulates them from meaning and companionship and fulfillment.

The shades of selfishness portrayed in "The Artificial Nigger" are pride and self-concern, qualities embodied primarily in the character of Mr. Head. Complacent and overbearing, Mr. Head, like so many of O'Connor's other characters, hubristically believes himself superior to

other human beings. O'Connor skillfully reflects this excessive self-trust even in the narrator's first, physical description of his room. Notable for O'Connor's use of setting quickly to suggest character--a recurring technique in her works--this initial glimpse into Mr. Head's world underscores his arrogance and intolerance, his overbearing nature and elevated opinion of his self-importance. Notable also is O'Connor's use of comic exaggeration. Continuing the successful formula of Wise Blood, O'Connor again uses humor and irony as a hammer and a chisel to hone character. With humor and not without sarcasm, in subtle details that place Mr. Head's stiff self-esteem, the narrator notes suggestively that Mr. Head's trousers, "hanging on the back of a chair, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant," that even the light of the moon "paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter."<sup>1</sup> Even his chair, the narrator remarks in another comment surely intended to evoke the reader's suspicion of Mr. Head's dominating willfulness, "looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order" (p. 249).

Outlined at first by these subtle details, Mr. Head's character is fleshed in by the reader's exposure to his thoughts. Another example of O'Connor's purposive, active use of point of view, the communication of these thoughts, like the narrator's initial description of his room, reinforces Mr. Head's arrogant nature. Complacently he thinks that "age

<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 249. Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.



is a choice blessing and that only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable companion for the young" (p. 249); and he remains "entirely confident" that he can carry out the "moral mission" of destroying his grandson's own pride (p. 249). Certainly, as it is selectively reinforced in the narrator's details, the moral in the story is clear, the conclusion apparent: as exemplified in his condescending treatment of Negroes, his proud refusal to ask for directions, even his pretentiousness in demonstrating the water cooler on the train "as if he had invented it" (p. 256), it is pride that underlies much of Mr. Head's behavior.

In a more profound sense, however, more than mere pride rests at the core of Mr. Head's being. Rather, his pride emerges as an apparent symptom of a deeper disorder: his excessive concern with himself, or his selfishness. Indeed, more deeply, it is Mr. Head's strong inner need to assert his self that forms the basis of his pride. Likewise, it is his preoccupation with the projection of his own superior image that causes him always to think of himself instead of others, that causes him always to direct his feelings inward toward himself instead of outward toward others. Simply, Mr. Head's view of the world is centripetal, not centrifugal. Self-centered, tempered by self-concern, Mr. Head interprets and judges events only as they relate to him; he plucks out and ascribes a personal significance to everything. Thus his primary concern that the train stop for him and Nelson is really not so they can travel to Atlanta, the object of Nelson's dream. His concern is not even for Nelson's welfare. His concern is selfish: "he was secretly afraid [the train] would not stop, in which case, he knew Nelson would say,

'I never thought no train was going to stop for you'" (p. 252). In the same way, his foremost concern when he and Nelson are lost in the city is for its effect upon his own image. Characteristically interpreting the event in terms of himself, Mr. Head is afraid of appearing to be an "idiot" (p. 252).

Selfish in origin, Mr. Head's constant preoccupation with himself ultimately insulates him from any true bonds with others. "Occupied with his own problems," Mr. Head pays no attention to Nelson (p. 262). Seeing in others only the reflection of his own selfish values and expectations, he perceives the black man on the train as nothing more than a "nigger," as only another opportunity to prove his own knowledgeable superiority to his ignorant grandson--unlike his more selfless grandson who perceives the black man as merely a "man," as nothing more (p. 255). Indeed, like Hazel Motes, who remains unable to divorce his egoistic vision from his perspective of the world, who sees only his reflection when he looks out the train window, Mr. Head, when he looks toward the window on his train, sees only his own image in reflection; he cannot see beyond his self. Even later, when he does glimpse the passing buildings outside, he still must look "through his own reflection" (p. 257); for he cannot see the world unmediated by his own presence. To be sure, selfishness, represented in Mr. Head's denials of Nelson, literally forms the action of the story. Mr. Head's egoistic desire to assert his superiority by proving to Nelson his own dependence leads him to abandon Nelson on the street, and his heartless attempts to deny responsibility for Nelson's actions prompt him carelessly to deny his kinship with Nelson to save himself.

Yet this ultimate illustration of Mr. Head's selfishness, or rather his realization of his selfishness through this act, also leads him to his redemption. For as soon as he speaks the words of denial, "This is not my boy" (p. 265), he begins to feel the terrible emptiness of his isolated, solitary state. In a description that embodies well the epiphanal experiences of all of O'Connor's protagonists, Mr. Head finds himself suddenly in "a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before" (p. 267). He sees nothing but "a hollow tunnel that had once been a street" (p. 265). Thus, finally tied to the inward suffering as well as to the outward consequences of his actions, now physically alone too, Mr. Head grows to a more complete understanding of his selfish condition. Sensing his aloneness and abandoning his egocentricity, at last forced to realize the utter emptiness of his world, he reaches out to embrace the experience of another. For the first time he concerns himself not with his own welfare, but with Nelson's: "The speed of God's justice," he selflessly thinks, "was what he expected for himself, but he could not stand to think that his sins would be visited upon Nelson" (p. 266). In the end, then, the experience that "was to be a lesson the boy would never forget" (p. 250) turns out instead to be Mr. Head's own lesson; for he emerges both humbled by the appalling knowledge that "no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own" (p. 270) and wiser since "the action of mercy [had] covered his pride like a flame and consumed it" (p. 269). Having descended into the living hell of selfishness, having then ascended to a more selfless way of living, Mr. Head grows most importantly to an ability to see beyond his own limited conceptions to the truth beneath. For Mr. Head, who before saw only a

"nigger" in the black man, by the end of the story is able to recognize through eyes once "fierce" (p. 254), now "glazed with fear and caution" (p. 265), that the plaster figure of the Negro represents more than just an artificial nigger: it represents salvation as well.

Selfishness eventually leads Mr. Head to salvation in "The Artificial Nigger." In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the selfish natures of Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater lead only to destruction. Indeed, in this story, their self-interests converge to destroy not only each one's delusions, but an innocent victim as well. Viewed in this perspective, the story represents the misdirected, often catastrophic consequences which can result from such singular desires.

Mr. Shiftlet's selfishness is represented in his maniacal desire for a car, a desire so strong that he will heedlessly use anyone, even annihilate both Lucynell and her mother, to achieve it. His preoccupation is reflected in his first moments on Mrs. Crater's farm. Although he had just arrived, his "pale, sharp glance had already passed over everything in the yard--the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig tree that three or four chicks were preparing to roost in--and had moved to a shed where he saw the square rusted back of an automobile."<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Crater's selfishness is embodied in her desire, equally as strong, for a husband for Lucynell. "Ravenous for a son-in-law" (p. 150), Mrs. Crater's powerful preoccupation, like Mr. Shiftlet's,

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1971), p.146). Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

leads quickly to her first question of him: "Are you married or single?" (p. 147).

From these pitched perspectives, then, both Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater follow purposively their own obsessive ends--with no regard for Lucynell, who has become the barter in what each one hopes to gain. The extent of each character's singular desire is reflected even in the disjointed exchanges between them, exchanges that are common in O'Connor's works. Their fractured interaction underscores the solitary world of selfish isolation that each character lives in. When Mrs. Crater asks, "What you doing around here, Mr. Shiftlet?" (p. 147), Mr. Shiftlet is paying attention only to the car: "he judged the car to be about a 1928 or '29 Ford" (p. 147). And while Mrs. Crater talks of her daughter--"any man come after her 'll have to stay around the place" (p. 149)--"Mr. Shiftlets' eye in the darkness was focused on a part of the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance" (p. 149). In just such a way, Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater pursue exclusively their established goals throughout the story. Narrowly set on the wave length of their individual desires, they cannot communicate or share as human beings; feigning to walk together, they but follow solitary and divergent paths to the same thicket of destruction.

In the end, it is the selfishness shared by Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater that leads to their mutual disillusionment and ruin. Because of her utter, singular desire for a son-in-law, Mrs. Crater remains blind to Mr. Shiftlet's true, shifty and hypocritical identity--a condition reinforced skillfully by O'Connor through the discrepancy between Mrs. Crater's limited view and the narrator's omniscient view of the story's

events. In her ignorance, Mrs. Crater thinks even that Mr. Shiftlet is the one man "who would do Lucynell right" (p. 154). Thus is the danger of Mrs. Crater's selfish and shallow perspective revealed. Thinking she has tricked Mr. Shiftlet into marrying Lucynell for the car, Mrs. Crater grows to learn that she has been tricked herself, and tricked painfully at the expense of her daughter's destruction. So strongly intent on getting Lucynell a husband, she ends up blindly betraying the aspect of her life she most values: Lucynell herself.

Likewise, Mr. Shiftlet comes to realize that his crafty manipulation, born in selfishness and nourished in deception, will not ultimately bring him fulfillment either. After he has married Lucynell to get the auto, he becomes "depressed in spite of the car" (p. 154). Like Hazel Motes, Mr. Shiftlet has mistakenly placed his trust in the ability of his car "to move his spirit" (p. 152). Like Hazel, he also uses his car--no doubt symbolically--as a home; and he attaches to it a spiritual significance. When he fixes it, he feels "as if he had just raised the dead" (p. 151). But the car can no more fulfill Mr. Shiftlet than it can remove him, speeding down the highway, from the memory of his cruel desertion of Lucynell, the "angel of Gawd." Submerged in his selfishness, Mr. Shiftlet, like Mrs. Crater, has remained blind to the truth of his actions. Now he is left empty and alone. Indeed, with his tears clouding his vision like the rain outside, Mr. Shiftlet's own indictment seems to have been born out: he is "a man, even if I ain't a whole one yet" (p. 149). For as he drives alone toward Mobile, a destination that is itself suggestive of his car and his transient life, Mrs. Crater's prediction seems hauntingly to embody the rest of Mr. Shiftlet's life:

"there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled, friendless, drifting man" (p. 152).

The shattering of Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet's delusions in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is paralleled in "Good Country People," another story in which a character's egoistic isolation leads her to a startling realization of her condition. Unlike Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet's concerns, however, Hulga's selfishness is not focussed simply in a single object of her desire. More essentially, her condition is represented in the narrow and limited world she has constructed around herself. A world that is entirely intellectualized, it is a world that insulates as well. For like the fanatical preoccupation to deny Christ that informs Hazel Motes' life, that leaves him also isolated from those around him, the intellectualized, self-centered life of Hulga also proves too narrow to sustain meaning in a more complex world. Selfish in her desires, self-sufficient in her living, Hulga has intellectualized her life to the extent that she can no longer recognize the fuller reality of an experiential world.

Hulga's selfishness is illustrated most apparently in her relationships with others. She possesses no regard for the people around her unless she can use them toward her own benefit. She learns to tolerate Mrs. Freeman, for example, "who saved her from taking walks with her mother,"<sup>3</sup> and even Mrs. Freeman's two ignorant daughters, "Glynese and Carramae, were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise

<sup>3</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" in The Complete Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 274. Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

have been directed at her" (p. 274). These views, though, are only indicative of the detached and selfish perspective by which Hulga lives wholly. Separated by her mindful web, she lives a life of solitary, intellectual self-indulgence--herself the center. Her life, like her name, is a "personal affair" (p. 275); and even her mother notes that with each passing year "she grew less like other people and more like herself--bloated, rude and squint-eyed" (p. 276). Indeed, Hulga's hard belief in the superiority of her intellectual world narrows her realm to the exclusion of any meaningful human relationship. In contrast to other women, Hulga "looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (p. 276); she possesses nothing but contempt for "good country people."

Hulga's encounter with Manley Pointer, the traveling Bible salesman, reveals climactically the extent of her intellectualism; her behavior illustrates her manipulative and condescending attitudes toward people, her detachment and self-centeredness. Characteristic of her selfish attitudes toward others, Hulga perceives her relationship with Pointer even before she meets him not as a shared or mutual experience, but as an opportunity for her personally to save a poor, backward country boy. To her it is nothing more than an intellectual exercise. Without regard for Pointer, she callously views her intended seduction of him at first as "a great joke" (p. 283). But then she recognizes the serious, though solitary fulfillment in her scheme; for, like a selfish savior, she realizes that the encounter is an opportunity for "true genius" to "get an idea across even to an inferior mind" (p. 284). Reflective of her own preoccupation with herself, there is in her dream no thought of a



shared experience--no true empathy, no real sympathy.

Hulga's behavior while she is with Pointer reflects her selfishness also. She refuses to leave herself, refuses to leave the intellectual cocoon of her mind in any sort of meeting or communion. Rather, unable to extend herself beyond her selfishness, Hulga's in-grown mind, "clear and detached and ironic anyway" (p. 285), regards Pointer "from a great distance, with amusement but with pity" (p. 285). Her trusted mind, in fact, never loses its control over her feelings. Thus, Hulga's essential self functions as a barrier to her involvement with others rather than as a means toward joining others. Narrow in her being, Hulga looks at life, but she does not participate in it. She gauges life objectively, but she does not live it subjectively. Finally, she remains isolated because she can neither abandon her self-possession nor lower herself to the level of those "poor babies" like Manley Pointer. Trusting in herself wholly and independently, Hulga, like Hazel Motes, believes even that she can save herself simply by an act of will, surely one of the coarsest of sins to O'Connor. "Some of us have taken off our blindfolds, and see that there's nothing to see," she says to Pointer--comically, since now, without her glasses, the larger world before her is blurred. "It's a kind of salvation" (p. 287).

Yet ironically because of her own literal and figurative blindness, as a result of her selfish in-grown thoughts that perceive nothing of the world, Hulga is in fact seduced by Manley Pointer. Much like Mrs. Crater's tunnel vision, Hulga's gaze is directed so exclusively on her own selfish goal that she does not realize until the end that it is she who has been made foolish. To be sure, Hulga's inability to live in

the larger world has already been intimated in her first meeting with Manley Pointer; reflective of the narrowness of her life, she treats his simple joke like a "question put up for consideration at a philosophical association" (p. 283). Now, the utter failure of her selfish world to perceive reality wholly is portrayed at the end of the story. Left alone, defeated and crushed, without a leg to stand on (figuratively and literally!), Hulga emerges as a character whose "superior" intellectual vision of the world proves to be no deeper than the cliched worlds of her mother and Mrs. Freeman, characters who serve as foils to Hulga's contemptuous attitudes. Indeed, Hulga's experience exemplifies a truth common in O'Connor's fiction: that when one pursues a selfish, narrow course through life, he blankets himself from much of the experience in life itself. Such is the truth that Hulga learns. At last truly grasping the words of her own philosophy, that "we are not our own light," Hulga learns to "look inside and see what [she is] not" (p. 276). And what she is not, what she can never be, is whole, as long as she is selfish.

"The Displaced Person," structurally more complex than the other stories in A Good Man Is Hard to Find, likewise embodies the theme of selfishness. In this story, the theme is represented on two levels, in two characters as they react to a single foil--a technique used by O'Connor also in The Violent Bear It Away. Through their conflicts with Mr. Guizac, the Displaced Person, both Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre's selfish natures are revealed and explored. Characteristic of O'Connor's fiction, both women also experience revelations that alert them to their conditions. Mrs. Shortley's revelation, however, brings

her salvation; Mrs. McIntyre's realization brings her only loneliness and the knowledge that she must endure the rest of her life haunted by the memory of her horribly selfish actions.

Mrs. Shortley, like Mr. Head of "The Artificial Nigger," is pictured at the very beginning of "The Displaced Person" as a character who possesses "the grand self-confidence of a mountain."<sup>4</sup> When she meets the Displaced Person, she even "moves down from her elevation" to receive him (p. 196). Like Mr. Head's self-confidence, Mrs. Shortley's overbearing trust in herself reflects as well her larger preoccupation with herself. Having built the world around herself, her self the centripetal center, Mrs. Shortley believes hubristically that she is to play a "special part in God's world because she [is] strong" (p. 209). Concerned with only her own welfare and thinking nothing of the welfare of others, she firmly believes also that the poles and others like them should "stay [where they came from] and take the places of people who were butchered. There ought to be a law against them" (p. 205). Clearly, the outside world possesses only a casual importance compared to Mrs. Shortley's selfish inner world.

Moreover, like Hulga's self-confidence, Mrs. Shortley's absolute belief in herself contributes to the narrowness of her vision, also a result of her self-concern. From the very beginning of the story, in fact, Mrs. Shortley's vision "narrows" (p. 195) on the Displaced Person--a description that exists at once not only a a literal level,

<sup>4</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 194. Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

but on a symbolic level also. Her behavior throughout the rest of the story illustrates her narrow and selfish way of looking at the world too. Encased in her own hardened expectations, Mrs. Shortley thinks it truly strange that the displaced people "looked like other people" (p. 195); and she is shocked that Mr. Guizac shakes "the nigger's hands, like he didn't know any difference" (p. 207). Mrs. Shortley's own sense of self-righteousness even reduces the horror of the world to a personal affront. She is offended that in the newsreel pictures of the heaped bodies in Poland, there is "a part that should have been covered up sticking out" (p. 196). Indeed, Mrs. Shortley's narrow conception of the world extends into all realms. Ascribing her own selfish motives to others, she thinks that the priest wants only money from Mrs. McIntyre (p. 208). Even more emblematic is her perception of the peacock. The priest, open to the mystery of the world, recognizes the peacock as a "beauti—ful birdrrrd" with "a tail full of suns" (p. 198). Mrs. Shortley, perceiving only the manners of the world, sees "nothing but a peachicken" (p. 198).

Whereas Mrs. Shortley sees the beautiful peacock as only another bird, Mrs. McIntyre, also recognizing none of the mystery around her, sees it solely as "another mouth to feed" (p. 198)--reflective of the quality of her own selfishness. Truly, Mrs. McIntyre is, first of all, materially greedy. Constantly she expresses her preoccupations with money--"that man saves me \$20 a month in bills alone" (p. 201), with thrift--"that man saves me money" (p. 204), and with the sanctity of profit--her safe is "like a tabernacle" (p. 221). To be sure, Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire" uses her never-ending stream of blessings to

insulate herself from pain. Mrs. McIntyre's self-conceived poverty, measured against her great desire for wealth, serves the same purpose. Because "all [she's] got is the dirt under [her] feet" (p. 203), because there is "nobody in the world poorer than she" (p. 221), Mrs. McIntyre encounters none of the pain or doubt or fear of one who has much to lose. But her preoccupation, though a psychological obstacle to pain, proves also to be an obstacle in human relationships; the psychological benefit is counterbalanced by a spiritual emptiness. For Mrs. McIntyre can no more separate her selfishness from her feelings than she can divide her perception of profit from her perceptions of people. A "logical and practical woman" (p. 231), she marries the Judge first for his money, and she remembers her years with him, in a single thought, as both "the happiest and the most prosperous of her life" (p. 218).

So selfishly concerned with her own prosperity, then, Mrs. McIntyre alienates herself from everything around her; she believes herself wholly self-sufficient. She possesses neither a need nor a use for God because she believes like Hazel Motes that "religion was for those people who didn't have the brains to avoid evil without it" (p. 203). She likewise possesses no personal "responsibility for the world's misery" (p. 233), nor is it her "responsibility that [the Displaced Person] has nowhere to go" if she fires him (p. 228). Even Mrs. McIntyre's giving is selfish and reflective of her human alienation. She gives not for others, but for her own recognition, gain and profit. Such is the reason for her dislike of Mr. Guizac. She dislikes him partly because she doesn't feel he is grateful enough for what she has done for him (p. 219). Such is also the reason that she offers him a job in the first

place. Viewing all relationships in the terms of business exchange, she thinks that Mr. Guizac will be cheap labor and will therefore help her to a profit. Indeed, Mrs. McIntyre is so careless and so detached from her fellow human beings, she can even unfeelingly translate others' misfortunes into her own good fortune. She is herself grateful for the Displaced Person's past plight, for "one man's misery is another fellow's gain" (p. 203): her own.

Similar in their selfishness, both Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre likewise grow to a realization of their natures, the second stage in O'Connor's thematic paradigm. Mrs. Shortley's realization is triggered by her own "prophetic" vision, a vision that ironically foreshadows her own peril. "The children of wicked nations will be butchered," she dreams to herself. "Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand" (p. 210). Though the description of mangled bodies reflects Mrs. Shortley's mental picture of Poland, it also foreshadows unmistakably--and thus all the more ironically--Mrs. Shortley's own bizarre behavior when she understands her selfishness; so it indicts her wickedness too.

Mrs. Shortley sat with one foot on a packing box so that her knee was pushed into her stomach. Mr. Shortley's was almost under her nose and Sarah Mae's bare left foot was sticking over the front seat, touching her ear.

Fierce heat seemed to be swelling slowly and fully into her face as if it were welling up now for a final assault. She was sitting in an erect way in spite of the fact that one leg was twisted under her and one knee was almost into her neck, but there was a peculiar lack of light in her icy blue eyes. All the vision in them might have been turned around, looking inside her. [Remember Hulga's edict "You are not your own light"; "look inside yourself."] She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself (p. 213).

Struggling to resist the vision of her emptiness, Mrs. Shortley hugs to herself everything she can reach--her husband's head and her daughter's leg, the cat and the bedding, her own knee. Still selfish, she struggles to prevent what is hers from slipping away; not whole, she tries to fill her emptiness with the material objects around her. Her bizarre groping for the arms and legs of others, reflective literally of the mangled bodies in her dream, suggests symbolically her own incompleteness. For Mrs. Shortley, though, as for O'Connor's other protagonists, salvation is as sudden as it is violent. In her case, it is portrayed again in a brief and literal action that possesses symbolic significance: in her "loosening her grip" (p. 214) on the material objects around her. Free at last from the preoccupations that have defined her narrow world, having loosened her hold on those things which have represented her selfishness, Mrs. Shortley is finally able "to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontier of her true country" (p. 214)--now, a country unbounded by selfishness.

Mrs. McIntyre's realization, violent also, is initiated by the ultimate act of her selfishness--her horrible, passive murder of the Displaced Person. Like a light passed through chiseled glass, this event focusses Mrs. McIntyre's vision upon herself, concentrates it, and partially reflects it so that she sees her selfish life in his broken image. The gnawing awareness that has been "wearing her down from the inside" (p. 230) then surfaces in a crescendo of revelation. For Mrs. McIntyre, the revelation destroys. As soon as the tractor snaps Mr. Guizac's backbone, Mrs. McIntyre is snapped forever from any chance for meaning or fulfillment in the world. Rather, as soon as

Mrs. McIntyre allows Mr. Guizac to die, she feels as if she were in "some foreign country," "a stranger among the natives" (p. 235). She finds herself, indeed, a stranger to life itself. Bed-bound, numb in her legs and hands, with neither eyesight nor voice, Mrs. McIntyre truly emerges after her experience as a being not quite living, not quite dead: as a person, though not a whole one. The image of Mrs. McIntyre's broken, mutilated life thus established, the significance of the question in Mrs. Shortley's prophetic vision becomes apparent, like the haunting echo of a repeated motif. "Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?" (p. 210). Those who are selfish surely will not. For those who are selfish will find themselves, like Mrs. McIntyre, to be the displaced persons, "displaced in the world from all that belonged [to them]" (p. 214), from all of the meaning that could have been theirs.



## CHAPTER IV

### EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE: MAN IN SPIITE OF HIMSELF

Like Wise Blood and A Good Man Is Hard to Find, O'Connor's second collection of short stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge, continues to portray the theme of selfishness. The title story of the collection, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," depicts a son's egoism that leads eventually to his mother's horrible death. "The Lamé Shall Enter First" likewise portrays the devastating effects of selfishness on others. In this story, a father's ignorance of his own son, provoked by his egoistic desire to "save" the life of another boy, leads to his son's suicide and to his own spiritual death in the realization of his true nature. Finally, "Greenleaf" reveals the staunch selfishness of the independent Mrs. May, a character whose maniacal drive for wealth brings her into conflict with everyone around her. Notable for its detailed examination of the nature of selfishness, "Greenleaf" also provides representative evidence of O'Connor's masterful narrative skill; thus it embodies important clues to her concepts of fictional development and structure as well.

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" portrays the theme of selfishness in a double strand of thematic complexity, represented in both Julian and his mother. Like Hulga of "Good Country People," Julian's mother has narrowed her conscious world to only a partial rendering of larger reality, to a world that exists solely within herself. Unlike Hulga's intellectualized world, however, the world of Julian's mother is a fantasized arena of memory in which pleasant recollections of the

past smother her apprehension of the present. Wrapping herself in the warmer cloaks of her grandfather who "was a former governor of the state"<sup>1</sup> and her father who "was a prosperous land owner" (p. 407), her mother who "was a Godhigh" (p. 407) and "the old darky who was [her] nurse" (p. 409), Julian's mother continues to live vitally according to her own illusions. Indeed, innocent of the outside world, she lives within her self according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which [she] had never set foot" (p. 411).

This created world of Julian's mother, however harmless in itself, possesses an even greater significance in the action of the story: it functions as a catalytic focus for Julian's own unmitigating selfishness. Like the ingredient necessary to provoke an explosive, primary reaction, the mother's presence in the story serves as a precipitant that unleashes ferociously Julian's wholly selfish character. And Julian's selfishness is, to be sure, the center of the story. Concerned with only himself, Julian is a character whose egoism leads him not just to separation from his fellow human beings, but horribly to alienation from everyone. Complacent and overbearing, he believes himself infinitely superior to those around him; self-sufficient, he thinks that he is a self-made man. He prides himself, for example, on the fact that he has turned out so well in spite of his mother. "In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts" (p. 412). The quota-

<sup>1</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 407). Hereinafter page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

tion, illustrative of Julian's condescending self-sufficiency, reflects its larger consequence also: for Julian, self-satisfaction and independence have led even to his denial of love. For most miraculous of all, "instead of being blinded by love for [his mother] as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity" (p. 412).

Having thus encased himself in a selfishness that reflects feelings as a mirror reflects light, Julian emerges as a character who has sliced away his human connection with the outside world. The narrator's description of his life--probably O'Connor's best brief description of the selfishness that afflicts her characters--reinforces the reader's perception of his solitary isolation and the pompous alienation of his narrow world-within-self. Detached and alone, he drifts constantly "into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him" (p. 411). The description embraces, as well, the presumption and lack of feeling of Julian's world. "From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity" (p. 411). Having divorced himself, then, from any shared human relationships, Julian lives alone in a world in which callousness has replaced feeling, in which judgement has replaced love. His very harshness toward his mother reflects his distance from her, his cruel appraisal of her his lack of involvement. Like Mr. Head, Julian remains more concerned

with himself than with anyone else; from the cliffs of his lonely perch he remains distantly objective and superior.

The utter extent of Julian's selfish carelessness is exemplified in the climactic encounter with the black woman on the bus. Determined to refute his mother finally, Julian decides, also like Mr. Head, to "teach her a lesson that would last her awhile" (p. 413) by sitting next to a black woman. Characteristically, he never thinks that the experience will be a painful one to his mother; nor is it really more than a mere opportunity for him childishly to assert himself. Rather, in Julian's sterile world of objectivity into which feelings never enter, the experience remains but a simple exercise in right and wrong, a lesson with a moral. That he does sit next to the black woman on the bus is also a simple matter: he acts not so much out of his own sense of justice as out of his singular desire to horrify his mother. For Julian, it is "as if he had declared war on her" (p. 412). His action is, indeed, reflective of the detached antagonism, grown out of his selfishness, that he maintains toward her at all times. Secure in his righteousness, he allows "no glimmer of sympathy to show on his face" (p. 413) for her. His uncomfortable feeling with what he has done "lasted only a second before principle rescued him" (p. 416). Careless of his mother's eyes that had turned "bruised purple" (p. 416), more hard than merciful, Julian believes that "Justice entitled him to laugh." "Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness," he thinks through his "hardened grin." "This should teach you a permanent lesson" (p. 416).

Even after his mother's own naivete has provoked explosively

the wrath of the black woman, Julian remains unfeeling still, insisting instead on driving the lesson to its ultimate conclusion. As his mother lies stunned on the ground, the victim of her own patronizing attitude toward the black boy, Julian, still more concerned with justice than with mercy, berates her self-righteously. "You got exactly what you deserved" (p. 418), he says. The fact that his mother lies hurt on the sidewalk makes his words seem all the more appalling; for he is still more preoccupied with his own ideological self-assertion than with his mother's physical well-being. Heartless in his feelings toward her, adamant in his own self-regard, Julian continues to press the point of his own superiority. "I told you not to do that" (p. 418), he says angrily. But his words, meant to intensify his mother's sense of guilt, only reflect Julian's own selfishness; for like heavy weights, they pull him from the lifesaver of compassion to the drowning depths of self-assertion. For Julian, horribly, proving himself right has become more powerful than his love for his mother; his preoccupation with himself has become stronger than his concern for any other.

His egoism so strong, then, Julian ultimately destroys not only his mother, but ironically, himself as well. His mother's sudden realization of his selfishness, generated by Julian's harsh treatment of her, is catastrophic. It strips her of her delusions and leaves her in a new, uncertain world. Before, she had believed in her son's love; now, she is assured of his carelessness. Then, she remained secure in her knowledge of Julian; now, she finds "nothing familiar about him" (p. 419). Confronted suddenly with his selfishness, she is faced truly with the loss of her whole world, of the only person whom she loves. Julian

himself senses the change in her--he looks into "a face he had never seen before" (p. 420)--but he mistakenly believes that "the world hasn't come to an end" (p. 420). In fact, his mother's world has come to an end, shattered by his own callousness. He believes, likewise erroneously, that his mother's new world "won't kill you" (p. 419). Indeed, it will. And just as effectively, it will kill him. For like Mr. Head's lesson, intended originally to be Nelson's, the lesson meant for Julian's mother turns out to be Julian's own: for him, too, a lesson on the destructive and irreversible effects of selfishness. To be certain, just as Shepherd in "The Lame Shall Enter First" ignores his son to feed his own desires, so Julian denies his mother to feed his own selfishness; so he also learns too late the consequences of his actions. As the darkness seems to carry his mother away from him, he abandons his pride and rushes toward her, embracing her for the first time with words of tenderness: "Mother! Darling! Sweetheart! Mamma!" (p. 420). But the words of love have no redemptive power in the void that Julian's selfishness has wrought. Too late in his expression, Julian comes to realize that sorrow is all that will fill the emptiness of his remaining days. Now, he must enter "the world of guilt and sorrow" (p. 420)--a world in which, ironically, all of his sorrow, ignited by selfishness, is fueled by love.

In its action and its structure, also in its presentation of theme, "The Lame Shall Enter First" resembles closely The Violent Bear It Away, O'Connor's last novel. A story of the destructive effects of selfishness on love, "The Lame Shall Enter First" personifies selfishness in the character of Shepherd, a man who denies his own son "to

feed his vision of himself."<sup>2</sup> Intent on helping another boy, Rufus Johnson, toward a deeper understanding of life, Shepherd emerges as a character who ignores in his zealousness his own son's love, who grows to realize, as well, that he has in reality tried to help Rufus out of his own regard for himself.

Shepherd's selfish character is rooted, at first, in the narrowness of the world that he has created around himself. Clinical in his stance toward both life and people, he participates vicariously in an incomplete world in which logical psychological laws identify individuals wholly; like Hulga, emotional experience is lost on him. In contrast to Hulga's complex philosophy, though, Shepherd's intellect has reduced the world to a set of simplistic formulas, dogma having taken the place of individual experience. More behavioristic than feeling, then, more analytical than sympathetic, Shepherd relies more heavily upon the application of standardized laws in his relationships with other human beings than on his own perception. He lives according to the generalized cliches of his mind with no sensitivity toward individuals. He never realizes, for example, that Rufus does not want a new shoe for his club foot because he believes that any "child . . . is in love with the world after he had got a new pair of shoes" (p. 459). Likewise he never suspects that Rufus' true personality will only reject such an offering. Such an example only illustrates the incompleteness of

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 481. Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

Shepherd's selfish vision: he acts not so much out of his mutual bond with other people as out of the solitary desires generated in the created world of his own mind. Beneath his actions lie calculated motives, not feelings; no shared, vital relationships exist for him. Rather, in his selfish presumption, Shepherd but plays pretentiously the superior role of a saviour--perhaps to O'Connor the epitome of man's pride and confidence in his self. Rufus, more in touch with the world than Shepherd himself, recognizes it immediately. "That big tin Jesus," he says of Shepherd, "he thinks he's God" (p. 480). "He thinks he's Jesus Christ" (p. 459).

Having reduced his world to a realm of psychological laws existing within his self, Shepherd remains necessarily insulated from the more complex truth surrounding him. Indeed, Shepherd prides himself on the fact that there are "no cracks in his armor of kindness and patience" (p. 461). But the armor of Shepherd's contrived kindness, effective in preventing the entry of Rufus' barbed attacks, prevents him also from perceiving the world rightly beyond the created walls of his "noble" desires. Ironically, the description, spoken by Shepherd himself, embodies his situation more precisely than he knows; for the kindness and patience of his selfish desires truly do shield him from any perception or influence of the outside world. The qualities are in another perspective the isolating armor of his selfishness.

Locked inside his own protective armor, then, Shepherd has really no knowledge of Rufus' true identity. His selfishness thus not only motivates his actions, but perpetuates them as well. Shepherd's own appraisal of the boy, the result of the projection of his own values



upon him, emerges in stark contrast to the reader's perception of the boy. The discrepancy gains intensity in the depth of the omniscient narration; for Shepherd's subjective, limited view of Rufus' goodness contrasts sharply with the narrator's objective view of his devilish personality. Shepherd believes, in his self-delusion, that Rufus "only pretended not to like him" (p. 457). The reader knows that Johnson hates him. Shepherd believes that Rufus acts maliciously because "he was facing himself and his possibilities for the first time" (p. 471), because "the poor kid is lost" (p. 471). But the reader understands that Johnson has already faced his possibilities, that he wants "no explanation" for his actions (p. 450), that he continues consciously to make his own decisions. The incompleteness of Shepherd's narrow vision is reflected even in the narrator and Shepherd's terms for the boy. Shepherd calls him Rufus; the narrator always refers to him by his last name, Johnson, a name that seems to embody much more exactly the boy's distance and independence.

Even more frightening than Shepherd's blindness to Johnson, though, is his blind ignorance of his own son. Also a result of his egoistic quest to save Johnston, Shepherd's insensitive treatment of his son Norton leads ultimately to Shepherd's climactic realization of his selfish nature. To be sure, much like Mrs. Crater, Shepherd is so intent on the object of his desire that he is unable to see the truth before him, his selfish quest defining and limiting the extent of his perception. He believes, for example, that it is his own son, Norton, who is selfish when in reality it is both he and Johnson who are more selfish. His thoughts directed inward, he never understands the

rightfully disconcerting effect that Johnson has upon Norton. Rather, Shepherd carelessly attributes Norton's hostile behavior to his selfishness and his mediocrity (p. 463) and his lack of "intellectual curiosity" (p. 459). That Johnson ransacks the room of Norton's dead mother and that Norton is naturally upset is not really significant to Shepherd either. What is important in Shepherd's mind, attuned only to Johnson's welfare, is that Norton tattles on Johnson's actions like a selfish brat (p. 458). Likewise, Shepherd's belief that Norton's "grief for his mother was all part of his selfishness" (p. 447) actually reflects his own selfishness, his inability to extend himself beyond his own wants and to embrace Norton's feelings. Ultimately, Shepherd's careless ignorance of Norton is represented even in the structure of the story itself. As the story progresses, as Shepherd becomes more and more involved with Johnson to his own son's exclusion, Norton becomes less and less an entity in the story. Once the focus of Shepherd's thoughts, Norton has become by the end of the story a being invisible to both Shepherd and the reader's eyes. Even when Shepherd does recognize Norton again, he perceives him as if he were "looking at him through the wrong end of a telescope" (p. 460). Such is the extent to which Norton's selfishness has narrowed his perspective.

Shepherd's self-delusion, however, only makes his fall into self-knowledge all the more inevitable and all the more intense. Already the reader has recognized directly the selfish, personal significance that Shepherd attaches to Johnson. When Johnson is caught by the police looking in a window, Shepherd accepts the incident as a personal affront and a selfish challenge. "You looked in that window to embarrass me,"

he says. "That was all you wanted, to shake my resolve to help you, but my resolve isn't shaken." And even more emblematic of his proud superiority, he adds, "I'm stronger than you are and I'm going to save you" (p. 474). Later in the story, when Shepherd begins to see the futility of his actions, he likewise begins to sense the selfish nature of his character which the reader has already recognized. Retreating behind the security of his created image--as O'Connor's characters do so often--Shepherd at first comforts himself with his knowledge "that he was a good man, that he had nothing to reproach himself with" (p. 475), that "his every action had been selfless" (p. 481). But the self-delusion by which he has tempered his life cannot last longer. Just as the crumpled body of the Displaced Person mirrors to Mrs. McIntyre the extent of her selfish character, Johnson becomes to Shepherd a mirror that reflects his true image; "the boy's eye's were like distorting mirrors in which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque" (p. 474). His own words, also spoken at first in self-delusion, reflect his guilt as well. Consoling himself in his failure, repeating to himself again and again, "I did more for [Rufus] than I did for my own child" (p. 481), Shepherd realizes suddenly the horrible truth in his statement. Listening to "his voice as if it were the voice of his accuser" (p. 481), Shepherd sees that in his selfishness he has ignored his child, that although "he had not spared himself" (p. 481), he had sacrificed his son. Saviour turned destroyer, Shepherd realizes his selfishness: like Julian, too late. For as he sees his son hanging from the beam, the man who had believed that "any fault was preferable

to selfishness" (p. 446) is forced to experience the painful realization that will temper the rest of his life. "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (p. 481).

"Greenleaf," like "The Lame Shall Enter First," not only illustrates O'Connor's continued development of the theme of selfishness, but also reveals much about O'Connor's fictional techniques. At the core of the story is Mrs. May, a character who, almost exactly like Mrs. McIntyre, prides herself on her self-made success. Also the owner of a farm, overbearing too, Mrs. May is a character whose selfishness is embodied apparently in her rabid desire for material wealth. Always comparing her own attainments to her much greater worldly appetite, she believes herself, like Mrs. McIntyre, "a poor woman,"<sup>3</sup> her farm her only possession. And when she hears terrible screams while walking through the woods one day, her thoughts are characteristically selfish. That someone might be hurt or desperate for help does not occur to her. Rather her thought, more selfish, is also "more reasonable: somebody had been hurt on the place and would sue her for everything she had. She had no insurance" (p. 316).

Mrs. May's selfishness, however, does not define only her attitude toward wealth. As the example above illustrates, it defines her perspective toward people as well. Much like Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock of Wise Blood, who believes presumptuously that the price tag on Hazel

<sup>3</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "Greenleaf" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 316. Hereinafter, page references to this story will be incorporated in the body of the text.

Motes' coat "places him" (Wise Blood, p. 40), Mrs. May measures the stature of the people around her on the basis of another singular quality: their material wealth. The measurement, reflective of her selfishness, possesses a personal fulfillment for her as well. So gauged, her own life becomes a comparative success, the lives of others' miserable failures. Certainly she is more successful than the Greenleafs who are content merely to "wallow" (p. 332) in poverty, possessing nothing. Her attitude, of course, is the basis of much of her self-righteous scorn of them; but her maniacal drive for wealth influences her relationship with her own sons in much the same way. Because she has telescoped her life into an exclusive desire for success, strictly defining it on the basis of the work ethic, Mrs. May remains largely intolerant of her sons who have never done anything for themselves (p. 324). Indeed, Carter Martin, while touching upon Mrs. May's greedy and narrow world by admitting that "Mrs. May's life is outwardly shallow," has suggested that her determined drive to make her farm a success is actually a quality for which she is to be greatly admired.<sup>4</sup> But such an interpretation ignores the effects of Mrs. May's obsession. For like Mrs. McIntyre's subscription to material success, Mrs. May's preoccupation has become so excessive that it functions ultimately as a focal barrier that isolates her from all those around her. Her fanatical drive for wealth has turned her own sons against her in a

<sup>4</sup>Carter Martin, The True Country (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1968), p. 231.

continuing conflict; likewise it has caused her repeatedly to shun the Greenleafs.

In this sense, Mrs. May's selfishness, thematically significant, forms the entire structural foundation of the story as well, composed of Mrs. May's conflicts with everything around her. For Mrs. May, isolation translates into conflict, herself against the world. As a result, she views her relationship with all people, even all things of the world, antagonistically. "Everything is against you" (p. 321), she repeats to herself; and such is the perspective with which she seems to have imbued her life. Her conflict with the world is represented most notably, of course, in her struggle with the bull, but it extends also into her relationship with the Greenleafs. They represent to her, through their slothful ways, a barrier to the realization of her dreams of wealth; they are adversaries too. Characteristic of her selfish, antagonistic spirit, Mrs. May believes that the Greenleafs live "like lilies of the field, off the fat that she had struggled to put into the land" (p. 319). Her relationship with her sons is not much different; nor is her contact with the Greenleafs' sons. Having set herself against all people in her selfishness, believing that she has "always been the victim" (p. 325), Mrs. May has narrowed her world to the point that conflict alone defines the extent of its boundaries. In her lonely and isolated world of which her self is both the center and the extent, even "the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you. They're all in league against you" (p. 321).

When viewed structurally, then, "Greenleaf" emerges as a series of

conflicts--much like the encounters in Wise Blood--which define character and drive the story inexorably to its conclusion. Framed by Mrs. May's conflict with the bull which opens the story and likewise closes it, "Greenleaf" is composed of scenically framed struggles which highlight and define Mrs. May's selfish character. Thus the conflicts which are the result of her selfishness generate the entire structure of the story, form emerging from theme. Like a chain formed of several links, the story progresses through a series of scenic loops that develop Mrs. May's lonely stance toward the world, that then regenerate into another conflict, and that ultimately link together to form the story in its entirety. In the action of the story itself, these scenic frames or loops, usually identified by a rhetorical signal such as "The next morning" (p. 313 and p. 329), correspond roughly to Mrs. May's conflict with the bull, which then dissolves into her conflict with Mr. Greenleaf, which itself then moves into another scenic frame which reveals Mrs. May's antagonistic relationship with her sons. This frame carries the reader into an exploration of Mrs. May's conflict with Mrs. Greenleaf, to another frame that reveals her antagonism toward the Greenleaf twins, and finally to a restatement of her conflict with the bull, the motif that unites the story from beginning to end. Although the correspondence is not exact, the cycle partially repeats itself, ending again with Mrs. May's confrontation with the bull, this time climactically. In just this way, then, the action of the story is fleshed in to form a forceful and coherent experience of Mrs. May's selfish antagonism.

The identification of these scenic frames in "Greenleaf" reveals

a consistently formed structural pattern that complements the theme of the story. But there exists a consistent strategy of development to underscore theme within each frame as well--a movement from a general situation to a specific encounter in which the conflict of selfishness portrayed in the scene reaches its height: as if O'Connor were using a telescopic lens to focus in from a distance on the specific details of the struggle, thus to gain intensity in the specific and concrete. As in the chapters of Wise Blood, each scene then abruptly ends without reconciliation and with an unfulfilled action that usually foreshadows Mrs. May's final calamity. Her first major conflict with her sons ends, for example, in their fight at the breakfast table and her prophetic words, "When I die . . ." (p. 321). The frame that presents her conflict with the Greenleaf twins ends with a similar suggestion of the suspended action which will be completed only at the climatic ending of the story: "If they don't come for that bull today, they'll be making their father shoot it tomorrow" (p. 326). Each scene thus remains unfulfilled in action, unresolved in conflict, undrained of the emotional tension created by the conflict. The ultimate effect of these repeated antagonistic encounters, building one upon the other, is a gradually increasing tension that rises until the end of the story, that likewise reflects the growing intensity of Mrs. May's selfishness. Like climbing a series of steps, the reader experiences a number of mounting, unresolved conflicts that raise him by their cumulative effect to an aroused emotional pitch and expose him repeatedly to the salient quality of Mrs. May's character. Only in the final scene of "Greenleaf" is the emotional tension of both the story's theme and plot resolved in



Mrs. May's realization of her selfish nature; her death and her recognition complete the story's action and theme. The correspondence almost complete, "Greenleaf" thus emerges structurally as a mirror image in miniature of Wise Blood. The unresolved conflicts of "Greenleaf," embodied in its scenic frames, reflect the unresolved tension in the chapters of Wise Blood; resolution of action and theme reflects in both works the union by O'Connor of meaning and structure.

Effectively, then, this pattern of development, represented in each scenic frame, reinforces Mrs. May's selfishness by bringing her true nature repeatedly to the attention of the reader in an alternating collage of her selfish conflicts, each struggle functioning as a relief against which her character is highlighted and intensified. The foreshadowings of the future, each one reflective of the inconclusive action of each frame, likewise prepare the reader for Mrs. May's death and realization. Indeed, in view of the story's repeated suggestions of Mrs. May's climactic death, integrated into its developmental pattern in which theme and structure are connected vitally, Martha Stephens' criticism that the ending of "Greenleaf" is unexpected and inappropriate cannot be supported.<sup>5</sup> Nor can Mrs. May's apparent selfishness, also underscored in the story's development, support Carter Martin's interpretation of the ending. Martin suggests that Mrs. May's "acceptance of death on the horns of the bull is a moment of insight in which

<sup>5</sup> Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 172.

she accepts her fate as a final injustice of the world, not different in kind from the other injustices which she has been subject to."<sup>6</sup> But, quite to the contrary, Mrs. May's insight, surely redemptive, is not of the injustice of the world toward her, but rather of her own unjust position toward the world. Only an understanding such as this can fulfill and resolve both the thematic and the structural inertias of the story. Caused thematically by Mrs. May's selfishness, represented structurally in the scenic frames of the story, these selfish conflicts can only be resolved by an understanding on Mrs. May's part that dissolves the reason for the conflict, by an understanding that thus exposes to her her nature. To be sure, like most of O'Connor's other characters, most notably like Hazel Motes, Mrs. May grows to realize the mutability and the proper position of her self in a world much larger. She comes to realize the utter falseness of her pride in herself and the delusion of her own inflated self-esteem. Finally, the woman who had believed hubristically that she would die "when I get good and ready" (p. 321) is forced to recognize her own mortality. For as she lies slumped over the bull, "her sight . . . suddenly restored" (p. 333), Mrs. May is able to understand at last the significance of her own humanity. "Whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear," she comes to know that she is a mortal human, no better than anyone else--a realization that dissolves the basis of her conflicts with others, that likewise embodies the glory of her humanity in her acknowledgement of its limitations.

<sup>6</sup>Martin, p. 232.

## CHAPTER V

### THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY: THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S MERCY

In The Violent Bear It Away, published in 1955, Flannery O'Connor returned to the theme which she had begun in Wise Blood: the theme of selfishness as it is embodied in a Christian setting. In this novel too, she portrays the turbid life of a character wrestling with his religious faith. In The Violent Bear It Away, however, the poles of conflict, only implicit in Wise Blood, are drawn in the large and startling pictures of which O'Connor was so fond; Francis Tarwater is faced directly with an explicit choice between Christ and selfishness. Represented in two contrasting characters, Old Tarwater and Rayber, this conflict forms the narrative foundation of the novel as Tarwater, much like Hazel Motes, at first resists his commitment as a prophet, then accepts his fate with conviction and understanding. Another tale of the dangers of selfishness--presented in this novel as an ultimate struggle of life and death--The Violent Bear It Away reflects again the significance of the idea of selfishness in both O'Connor's religious perspectives and her artistic creations. Complex in its thematic presentation, carefully balanced in its structure, the novel represents O'Connor's final extended statement on the theme of selfishness, a theme that embraces in this work the very meanings of life and love and freedom.

At one pole of the thematic seesaw of The Violent Bear It Away is the character of Old Tarwater, Tarwater's uncle who represents to him the life of religious selflessness. A prophet himself, Old Tarwater,

much like Hazel Motes' grandfather, first plants in the young boy the seed of religious salvation, the seed that will later blossom into Tarwater's own acceptance of Christ. Yet even this old man who has endeavored ceaselessly "to raise [Tarwater] a Christian"<sup>1</sup> possesses selfish qualities--an answer, then, to those critics such as David Eggenschwiler who have complained that O'Connor's characters are repeatedly simple and "reductively symbolic."<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, Old Tarwater is a character whose human texture is reflected in his complexity. Primarily, he embodies the virtues of the Christian prophet; he is most of the time selfless, concerned for others, a follower of God. But consistent with O'Connor's view that "the good is always something under construction,"<sup>3</sup> he is at other times believably selfish, preoccupied with himself, a follower of his own will. He prides himself, for example, on the liquor that he makes illegally. He is a "prophet with a still" (p. 45); and although he forbids Tarwater to drink, he indulges hypocritically in drinking himself. Likewise, Old Tarwater's pride is shown in his preoccupation with his burial. More concerned at times with his worldly farewell than with his spiritual rebirth, the egoistic old man makes elaborate preparations for his death

<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear It Away (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955), p. 26. Hereinafter, page references to this edition of The Violent Bear It Away will be incorporated in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> David Eggenschwiler, The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), p. 77.

by constructing a handsome wooden coffin, carved even with his initials. Unlike a true prophet, he separates himself from his people and he ignores his own evil nature too. Most reflective of Old Tarwater's selfishness, though, is his self-righteous hatred of Rayber. Unable to forgive Rayber for his critical study of him, Old Tarwater remains more strongly influenced by his own personal desire for revenge than by God's loving mercy. In the midst of a conflict between selfishness and selflessness himself, then, Old Tarwater emerges as a holy man who does indeed possess human weaknesses. More complex than simplistic, more round than flat, he is a character who fails repeatedly through an excess of egoism, who is repeatedly corrected by a destruction of that proud flesh.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict between selfishness and selflessness, however, experienced by Old Tarwater, is much more pronounced in the character of Tarwater, the protagonist of the novel. The old man, though sometimes selfish, had committed himself truly to God. In the young boy, the conflict continues to rage, fueled by his uncle's prophecies and his own uncertainties. Already the old man has prophesied that Tarwater will be "a Christian, and more than that, a prophet" (p. 15), a prediction that penetrates to Tarwater's very blood. And when the role of a prophet seems glamorous and proud, when Old Tarwater looked "the way the boy thought a prophet ought to look," "as if he has been wrestling with a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in

<sup>4</sup>Eggenschwiler, p. 211.

his eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned toward the four points of the universe" (p. 8), Tarwater knows that when the Lord calls him, he will say, "Here I am, Lord, ready!" (p. 8). But like Hazel Motes, when he thinks of "the sweat and stink of the cross, of being born again to die, and of spending eternity eating the bread of life," he would "let his mind wander off to other subjects" (p. 8).

In this sense, Tarwater's inability to accept Christ wholeheartedly-- beyond those few moments when acceptance appeals to him egoistically-- emerges as almost a mirror reflection of Hazel Motes' own refusal to embrace Christ. Likewise it reflects a similar selfishness. Initially, Tarwater's refusal rests in his unwillingness to renounce the certain world with which he is familiar for the uncertain spiritual world of Christ. Literal and practical, "seeing no more than what was in front of his face" (p. 21), Tarwater perceives surrender to Christ as a trading off of the known for the unknown; and he wants a "visible sign" (p. 42). How God is going to save or even find "sailors drowned at sea that the fish have et" and "people that get burned up naturally in house fires" (p. 36) remains for Tarwater an enigma and so a falsehood. His trust of his self, his distrust of that which he cannot verify concretely through the senses of his self, thus not only contributes to his inability to accept Christ, but describes as well a fundamental quality of his selfishness: he trusts the physical world that his self represents completely. Like Hazel Motes he remains unwilling "to come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, when he

might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown."<sup>5</sup>

More pervasive in Tarwater's conflict than his inability to accept the unknown, though, is his refusal to give up his independence. Another aspect of his selfishness, this independence represents to Tarwater his proud separateness and his freedom. Ultimately, it represents the sanctity of his self; for, like Hazel, Tarwater perceives salvation as a destruction of his self. To be sure, such salvation is a metamorphosis, a rebirth too. But to Tarwater it is the rebirth that follows death, the death that is synonymous with destruction of the will and annihilation of the self. "I saved you to be free" in Jesus, Old Tarwater tells him (p. 16). Tarwater, however, perceives such freedom only as bondage of the self to another power. Seeking instead a state of self-sufficiency in which the self--which he believes he can depend on completely--is the highest power, Tarwater feels "sullenness creeping into him that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus, and that Jesus had to be the Lord" (p. 20). His inner voice--the "stranger" that he hears--makes his dilemma even more clear. Whether or not the voice is that of the devil, as Kathleen Feeley has suggested,<sup>6</sup> remains uncertain. What is certain is that the voice of the stranger is very clearly that of selfishness. "It's Jesus or you" (p. 39), it says, making

<sup>5</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Kathleen Feeley, Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1972), p. 165.

apparent the conflict that exists within Tarwater, the conflict between acceptance of Jesus and the self-sufficiency of independence. "It's Jesus or you" (p. 39), it says, portending in its very words the destruction of the self that Tarwater resists so wildly.

Neither able to give up himself nor shake off his strong doubts, then, Tarwater resolves himself to a life of self-assertion and self-indulgence in a desperate attempt to throw off the haunting shadow of Jesus. Encouraged by the selfish voice of the stranger, he attempts, like Hazel Motes, to deny through an act of will his prophesied destiny of communion with Christ, the destiny embodied in "the old man's words [which] were moving in his blood toward some goal of their own" (p. 61). Tarwater's first act of denial is to drink the forbidden liquor of his uncle. "A little won't interfere," says the voice of the stranger. "Moderation never hurt no one" (p. 45). Later, because "now I can do anything I want to" (p. 25), he burns his uncle's body instead of burying it properly. An ultimate act of stubborn independence, this denial exemplifies the path of rebellious selfishness that Tarwater has chosen to take. Still later in his new course of self-assertion, Tarwater decides to befriend his uncle's enemy, Rayber, the school-teacher; he decides to go to the city to deny his fate. But like Oedipus, who leaves Corinth in an attempt to deny his fate too, and who likewise in his action only seals his fate, Tarwater leaves Powderhead only to encounter his greater destiny. Mistaking the glow of the city in the sky for the fire he is leaving (p. 51), the selfish, independent voice of the stranger leading him onward, Tarwater journeys



to the city only to find that the internal conflict he is experiencing is there but intensified and made external.

In the city, Tarwater meets Rayber, the character in the novel who embodies in human form the selfishness that Tarwater's "stranger" advocates. Self-sufficient and independent, a man who has "made [himself] straight" (p. 73), Rayber represents the thematic opposite of Old Tarwater. He is, indeed, almost an exact reflection of Shepherd, the selfish psychologist of "The Lame Shall Enter First." Like Shepherd, he lives with detachment in an insensitive world in which "all his decisions were prefabricated and did not involve his participation." Also like Shepherd, he perceives his duty as saving Tarwater from becoming a "victim of superstition" (p. 172); "I'm the one who can save you from Jesus" (p. 174), he says. As such, of course, Rayber represents the other thematic pole in the novel which fuels Tarwater's conflict--a role that he recognizes himself when he acknowledges that "the boy would go his way or Old Tarwater's" (p. 115). Indeed, viewed in this perspective, David Eggenschwiler's contention that Rayber's presence in the novel represents an "extraneous subplot"<sup>7</sup> is undoubtedly incorrect; for Rayber is in "The Violent Bear It Away selfishness personified. Trusting in his self absolutely, he lives in a world in which one is only "born again by your own efforts, back to the real world where there's no savior but yourself" (p. 76). Already then he has made the choice, still fermenting in Tarwater's mind, between Jesus and himself. "What I can see and do for myself is all my portion"

<sup>7</sup>Eggenschwiler, p. 136.

(p. 172), he says. Having "turned his destiny as if with his bare will" (p. 115), Rayber has reached a conclusive selfishness: "To be born again is something you accomplish yourself, an understanding about yourself that you reach" (p. 195). It's the "natural way" of being born again--"through your own efforts" (p. 195).

Yet even Rayber's selfishness is not without complexity. Like the complex portrayal of Old Tarwater, Rayber's characterization is textured by doubts believably human. In Rayber's case, the doubts are of love. Unable to remain completely untouched in his selfish isolation, Rayber at times feels "a touch of the curse that lay in his blood" (p. 113), the curse of his "horrifying" love for his retarded son Bishop. "Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man's walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk. If without thinking, he lent himself to it he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him--powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal" (p. 113). Love that tempers, it is also the love that Rayber associates with Old Tarwater and God; for "he always felt with it a rush of longing to have the old man's eyes--insane, fish-coloured, violent with their impossible vision of a world transfigured--turned on him once again" (p. 114). Still strongly braced against the "affliction" in his selfishness, though, Rayber is able to deny his feelings of kinship, both those that are human and those that are religious. He staves them off, keeping them "from gaining control over him" (p. 114) by fighting them constantly and by controlling them completely with his

fanatical self-assertion--"The way life had to be lived if it were going to have any dignity at all" (p. 114). The same "undertow in his blood" (p. 114) that Tarwater thus possesses, to which Old Tarwater has already submitted, Rayber believes that the only way to maintain his self-possession, to keep his blood from "dragging him backwards to what he knew to be madness" (p. 114), is to deny his human connection with everything and everyone around him, finally, to deny love. His self-imposed egoism thus representing the horror as well as the complexity of his life, Rayber believes that "if he could refuse to feel [love], he would be a free man" (p. 141).

Although both Rayber and Old Tarwater, then, have both experienced the selfishness and the selflessness inherent in life, each has chosen a different path toward fulfillment. To Rayber, freedom lies in selfish independence and the denial of love; to Old Tarwater, it rests in selfless commitment and the acceptance of Christ. Between the two hangs Tarwater, suspended between "Jesus or you" in the central dilemma of the novel--a dilemma that is embodied most immediately, of course, in Tarwater's acceptance or his refusal to baptize Bishop. Old Tarwater has embraced Tarwater's religious impulse in the command that he dutifully should baptize the boy. Rayber has likewise attached to the action an opposite, selfish significance by characterizing it as a performance of "futile rights" (p. 172). The focus of his rebellion, the dilemma has thus become in Tarwater's own mind a symbolic choice of the highest proportions. To baptize the boy means to accept Jesus; to refuse to perform the act is supremely to deny Him. For Tarwater, who has tried already to deny Christ by refuting his uncle, who continues to

war against Jesus by asserting his selfish independence, the act represents even more his opportunity to annihilate Jesus completely from his being, to purge Him utterly in a horrible act of selfishness. Indeed, like Hazel Motes and the Misfit too, Tarwater has come to learn from Rayber's own inaction that if you're going to assert yourself, "You can't just say no, You got to do no. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you're not going to do one thing by doing another" (p. 157). To prove that he is himself not going to believe in Jesus, Tarwater decides that he will not only refuse to baptize Bishop, but that he will do "no" to show finally that he means it. Doing "something at last . . . to prove [he] ain't going to do another" (p. 167), he decides that he will kill Bishop by drowning him.

Tarwater, however, can no more deny his fate than Oedipus could deny his, his contrary actions having led him to his very destiny. For even as Tarwater drowns Bishop, he baptizes him; the words emerge from his mouth in a chant rhythmical like the steady pulsations of his blood. Clinging still to his maniacal resistance, Tarwater at first dismisses the baptism as an "accident" (p. 209) that "wasn't nothing but words" (p. 211). Still embracing the spectre of his selfishness, he believes that he has "saved himself [Remember Rayber's words] forever from the fate he had envisioned when he had seen himself trudging off into the distance in the bleeding, stinking mad shadow of Jesus, lost forever to his own inclinations" (p. 220). "I had to prove I wasn't no prophet and I've proved it," he says in his defiance. "I proved it by drowning him" (p. 210). Now, he can "begin to live his life as he had elected it, and where, for the rest of his days he would make good his refusal"

(p. 218). But even as Tarwater speaks the congratulatory words of selfishness, his realization of the meaning of his action is creeping into his being. Neither his defiant action nor his ranting words--too much of a protest--can change the essential nature of his character. Both represent in the intensities of their violence but the strength of Tarwater's religious belief. Having been driven to the point of murder to show his disbelief, Tarwater has only proved the strength of Jesus' presence in his being. Having baptized Bishop, he has but saved the boy who was to symbolize his religious repudiation. In his very act of denial, then, Tarwater, as Hazel did, has played the role of Christian minister; and for the experience "his eyes seemed not able to close but to open forever on some sight that would never leave them" (p. 214).

Tarwater's realization of his destiny and the resolution of his internal conflict, begun by his baptism of Bishop, are furthered by his encounter with the "pale, lean, old-looking" (p. 227) stranger who picks him up on the road as he returns to Powderhead. The structural double of T. Fawcett Meeks, the selfish salesman who takes Tarwater to the city in the beginning of the novel, this stranger is, as well, the thematic double of the "stranger" who has haunted Tarwater's own mind throughout the entire novel. Tarwater himself recognizes that "there was something familiar to him in the look of the stranger but he could not place where he had seen him before" (p. 228). In fact, the stranger's appearance corresponds exactly to the appearance of the stranger that Tarwater has envisioned in his mind. When Tarwater first encounters the imagined stranger, he knows that "the stranger's face . . . was shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat" (p. 35); likewise the man who picks him

up wears "a lavender shirt and a thin black suit and a panama hat" (p. 228). No different in appearance, the strangers are alike in their motives also. Taking advantage of Tarwater's proud independence by provoking him to drink liquor that is drugged, the stranger robs him, rapes him, and leaves him alone. The action, however, probably the most bizarre in all of O'Connor, presages the most positive ending in all of O'Connor; for it is then that Tarwater is triggered to the realization to which the whole novel has been building. Betrayed, having embraced the brutality of selfishness literally, he realizes in a triumphant moment the insufficiency of his selfish way of life. Indeed, like Oedipus, whose life his own has paralleled throughout the novel, Tarwater grows to see in his decimated state that he can no more control his fate than he could avoid baptizing Bishop; in a world much larger and more mysterious his self is insufficient to the task. Thus, Tarwater's understanding, once "seed-like" in his eyes, germinates, grows and ripens to a fuller understanding of his mortality--the change occurring within him reflected externally in nature by the "ripening berries" (p. 233) around him. His eyes, full now with the growth of his soul, reflect his growth from his "seed-like" understanding: "His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (p. 233).

With Tarwater possessed of the knowledge that his destiny forces him "on to a final revelation" (p. 233), The Violent Bear It Away gallops quickly to its conclusion as Tarwater experiences his last

vision and his ultimate realization. Again, the stimulus is the stranger who is selfishness. Confronted one last time by the stranger of his mind, its "violet shadow" (p. 237) reminiscent of the old man's lavender shirt, Tarwater reacts violently to rid himself finally of the spectre and the selfishness that it represents. An act of destruction, it is Tarwater's act of emancipation.

He shook himself free fiercely and grabbed the matches from his pocket and tore off another pine bough. He held the bough under his arm and with a shaking hand struck a match and held it to the needles until he had a burning brand. He plunged this into the lower branches of the forked tree. The flames crackled up, snapping for the drier leaves and rushing into them until a arch of fire blazed upward. He walked backwards from the spot pushing the torch into all the bushes he was moving away from, until he had made a rising wall of fire between him and the grinning presence. He glared through the flames and his spirits rose as he saw that his adversary would soon be consumed in a roaring blaze. He turned and moved on with the burning brand tightly clenched in his fists. (p. 238)

His selfishness thus consumed in the fire, Tarwater emerges cleansed to accept the redemption of Christ, an awakening that O'Connor portrays characteristically in highly symbolic terms. Almost at once, Tarwater feels "a crater opening inside him, and stretching out before him, surrounding him, he sees the clear gray spaces of that country where he had vowed never to set foot" (p. 238). His hands open "stiffly as if he were dropping something [the egoism] he had been clutching all his life" (p. 240); his gaze rests finally "on the ground where the wood entered the grave" (p. 240) of his father, buried in spite of his refusal to perform the rite. Then, in the intense darkness and the pressurized air, in the burning atmosphere, Tarwater achieves his final realization. Shedding his selfishness and accepting his call,

he realizes that "the object of his hunger was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him" (p. 241). The burning bush for which he has waited so long before him at last, Tarwater, like Oedipus, finally accepts his destiny, "his singed eyes seem[ing] already to envision his fate" (p. 243).

Far more than any of O'Connor's other works, then, The Violent Bear It Away represents O'Connor's most optimistic treatment of the theme of selfishness. Wise Blood, for example, ends in Hazel's death; The Violent Bear It Away ends as Tarwater's life but begins. Hazel ends his life in self-imposed isolation; Tarwater begins his with "his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (p. 243). In this aspect of his life, he represents even a progression beyond his uncle who was content to share the gospels of God and selflessness with only his nephew; Tarwater will carry them to the world. Most of all, though, Tarwater embodies O'Connor's final and most complete statement on the dilemma of selfishness. The dilemma itself is echoed in the choices that underly both the novel's theme and structure: choices between selfishness and Christ that embrace fulfillment and freedom. We are reborn through our own efforts, says Rayber; we are reborn through Christ, says Old Tarwater. Freedom lies in the refusal of love, says Rayber; freedom lies in Jesus, says Old Tarwater. Ultimately, says the stranger, "It's Jesus or you." The conflicts thus posed, the dilemma is resolved in the very destinies of the characters themselves, their lives, like the symbolic characters in a morality play, revealing the consequences of their chosen paths. Rayber, who has chosen the life of selfishness advocated by all of the strangers in the novel, emerges



finally as only a fragment of a human being, as, to be sure, a man though not yet a whole one. One who has denied his human feelings of love, who has believed erroneously that freedom rests in the refusal of love, Rayber comes to find that his seering selfishness has burned away all his connection with his human essence. Emptiness is the result. As he contemplates the death of his son, "waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due to begin so that he could ignore it," he finds horribly that "he continued to feel nothing" (p. 203). His human identification severed, his "eyes . . . like something human trapped in a switch box" (p. 154), the mechanical Rayber realizes--"at the cost of a full life" (p. 114)--that to be alone is not to be free.

It is, indeed, only Tarwater who emerges from the novel with a fuller understanding that brings fulfillment in life, he alone who realizes that freedom truly does exist in Christ. For unlike Rayber, Tarwater grows to understand that accepting his destiny does not mean complete annihilation of the self, but rather the purging of the egoistic portion of the self--a realization that is symbolized in the novel in his burning of the stranger who represents his egoism. His being thus free as once it was imprisoned, Tarwater is able finally to grasp fully the significance of what it means to be human. At last understanding the words of the little girl--"Jesus is love," and "if you don't know what love is you won't know Jesus" (p. 130)--Tarwater realizes that to be free and to be human means to accept Christ and to deny selfishness. Finally, it means to love. O'Connor's ultimate union of the religious and the human, it is this realization that tempers

Tarwater's life as he carries to the world not the warning of God's "justice" (p. 60) of his uncle, but the message of God's "mercy" (p. 242) of Flannery O'Connor's final vision.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Probably the greatest barrier to an appreciative understanding of Flannery O'Connor remains the apparently bleak vision of humanity that her works present. Martha Stephens, at once an admirer and critic of O'Connor, voices just such an indictment in The Question of Flannery O'Connor, echoing, in her criticism and even the title of her book, the reactions to O'Connor of many scholars and readers alike. Ultimately, says Stephens, O'Connor fails because of her inability to see that though man is deluded and weak, hypocritical and bad, "he is not only these things." Consequently, "the total picture of human society that emerges from her work as a whole is one that is difficult to accept."<sup>1</sup> Such criticism, however, seemingly caustic, embodies in another perspective the very essence of O'Connor's narrative art--embodies, indeed, what O'Connor herself might describe as the very weakness of her characters, the very strength of her fictional portrayal of them. That her characters often do seem shallow or singularly obsessed in their motivations is undoubtedly true. But for O'Connor, who believed it more important for her characters to possess "an inner coherence" than "a coherence to their social framework,"<sup>2</sup> such characterization emerges ultimately as emblematic of her particular

<sup>1</sup>Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), p. 83.

view of life, a view that included her realization of the maniacal, exclusive and selfish desires that often overpower men's lives. Endowing her characters with the essential qualities that she recognized in man, O'Connor created literary figures whose "inner coherence" reflects both their lack of human development and their single courses of fanatical selfishness--qualities which define and, at the same time, limit their lives. O'Connor herself recognized the complexity of life as it is lived by full human beings. She knew that "free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man" (Preface to Wise Blood). The malady from which her characters suffer is the convergence of those many wills into a single, obsessive desire in life. Simply, her characters reflect the shallowness which is on a symbolic level their selfishness. True to their conception, then, they emerge not as unrealistic portrayals of human beings, but as truthful representations of selfish beings. Not poorly sketched but accurately drawn, O'Connor's characters embody naturally the limited perspective of living that represented to O'Connor a barrier to a life of fullness and freedom.

Criticisms of the narrowness of O'Connor's characterization, though, only echo themselves accompanying criticisms of the narrow scope of her fictional imagination. Quick to applaud O'Connor's successes, critics also have almost unanimously agreed that O'Connor dealt in her work with a very limited range of themes and experience. In fact, most critics agree that, really, she dealt with only one theme: that of the strictly religious experience. Criticisms such as this one, however, ignore the complexity and the multiplicity of O'Connor's fiction, the

variant themes within her works and the depth of variety within those themes. O'Connor, of course, did write of religion, often consciously; but embraced by her vision also are themes of love and hatred, revenge and forgiveness, city life and country life and, among those, selfishness and selflessness. Time and again, she returned in her works to a fictional portrayal of selfishness, each time embodying her message in her characters, in each character providing a differentiation that gives the theme a rich and deep texture in the body of her collected works. To be sure, O'Connor wrote not only of the greed that is usually associated with selfishness, but of selfishness as a condition of the soul. She wrote of its role in the religious world and of its destructive effect on human relationships, of its quality to mislead and of its ultimate betrayal. Always, she wrote of the theme as a barrier to human fulfillment. Important in O'Connor's own mind, the prevalence of the theme of selfishness thus reflects in all its various manifestations the significance that O'Connor believed the idea held in modern life.

In this sense, O'Connor's art is not nearly so removed--neither from the works of her contemporaries nor from the realm of human experience--as critics such as Eggenchwiler and Stephens would have one believe. Quite to the contrary, O'Connor's fiction, like much contemporary literature, offers in the end but another path to fulfillment. Thus the goals of her work link her unquestionably to the themes of modern fiction. Sensing, like other twentieth century writers, that fulfillment in the modern world was becoming increasingly difficult, O'Connor reacted to the dilemma by proposing a means to

wholeness--both of the being and of the soul--that involved first a realization of the lethal dangers of selfishness, then a purging of the quality so that, in the void, the potential for a fuller relationship with life and God was created. Perceptive and understanding, O'Connor realized that the only way to live meaningfully was to reach beyond the self and to embrace fully the complex reality of a larger world. Aware that such an action is impossible in selfishness, O'Connor wrote of the need for one to remain vitally open to the outside world of mystery and manners--from that union, to grow and to flourish.

Ultimately, then, O'Connor's fiction possesses a message vital not just to a selected few, but to all of those who have striven for meaning in life. Not bitter or bizarre or other-worldly at all, her message touches each one of us who has longed for fulfillment, who has sometimes been thwarted from that experience of wholeness because of his selfishness. Spoken through her characters, O'Connor's own thought emerges persuasively and eloquently with a significance that is profoundly human: that when one immerses himself exclusively in a single desired quest, he separates himself from the broader range of experience that makes life rewarding and complex. He insulates himself, as well, from those around him, including his God, who alone can provide the fellowship and the love essential for a full life. Not a doctrine reserved for the elect, then, but a religion intended for the living, Flannery O'Connor's beliefs--both those that are worldly and those that are religious--emerge in her writings as an integral part of her plan for human salvation. Her own final statement in The Violent Bear It Away unites her vision with consistency and integrity

and fullness. Equating Jesus with love, freedom with selflessness, O'Connor appears not as the advocate of a life-denying religion, but as a priestess of love--her fire not a fire that destroys, but a flame of love that burns out pain and doubt and death. One whose faith is a religion of life, Flannery O'Connor thus emerges as a writer whose unified sensibility instills in her works a power that is, at once, vitally religious and pervasively human. Not merely a way of believing, her fiction embodies, always, a way of living.

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"A MAN THOUGH NOT YET A WHOLE ONE":  
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S VISION OF THE HUMAN DILEMMA

by

JOHN SPENCER CAPPS

(ABSTRACT)

It is now almost universally accepted that Flannery O'Connor's fiction can be interpreted only in terms of Christian orthodoxy, and that the scope of her work remains, at its broadest, narrowly theological and limited in implication. In truth, however, there remains at least one significant aspect of O'Connor's fiction that is not wholly religious, but pervasively human. In all of her works, O'Connor deals with the serious problem of human selfishness and its ugly effects: man's eventual isolation from those around him; ultimately, his insulation from meaning and life itself. Embodying her message in her characters, returning in each of her works to a similar pattern of character development and thematic representation, O'Connor exemplifies in all of her protagonists a similar emblematic experience: wrapped in their own selfish natures, her characters must either grow to an understanding that embraces others, or perish in isolation.

The purpose of this thesis, is to trace the development of Flannery O'Connor's protagonists both as they embody the theme of human isolation and as they determine fictional structure, while at the same time

focusing upon the specific nature of each character's selfishness in the illustration of theme. In accomplishing this objective, this work demonstrates that, far from being narrow in scope, O'Connor's fiction illustrates a shared human dilemma that possesses relevance for us all.