

The Theology of Flannery O'Connor:  
Biblical Recapitulations in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis examines the way Flannery O'Connor's stories draw upon and transfigure various biblical texts. With sometimes shocking freedom, she twists open the original stories or references, reworking and redistributing their basic elements. Often reversing the polarity of the original stories, O'Connor's stories dramatize elements of biblical texts coming alive in different times and social settings and with quite different outcomes. At the same time, her stories still address many of the same issues as the biblical texts she transforms.

This study focuses on three O'Connor stories: "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which reworks the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18; "Parker's Back," which transforms elements of Moses' encounter with the burning bush in Exodus juxtaposed with Saul's conversion experience in Acts 9; and "Judgment Day," which interacts with portions of Paul's descriptions of the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15. This study draws upon the work of theologically-oriented O'Connor scholars, as well as O'Connor's own letters and essays. I hope, through this approach, to open up a new way of responding to O'Connor's biblical echoes.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Flannery O'Connor:

CW *O'Connor: Collected Works*. New York, NY: Library of America, 1988.

HB *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux Publishers, 1979.

MM *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Almost all Flannery O'Connor scholars concede the fact that her work was influenced by her theology, although how and to what extent continues to be a matter of debate and investigation. Since O'Connor began publishing, there have been numerous books, articles, and reviews concerned with religious elements present in her fiction. Many early critics had no idea how to handle these elements, and most early reviews were either slanderous or erroneous in their criticism as a result of misreading. More recent criticism has helped to clarify O'Connor's work and her "subject in fiction," which is to demonstrate "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" (MM 118). However, one element still overlooked by most scholars is the way that biblical stories often serve as O'Connor's source texts. Although writers such as Thelma Shinn have noticed how "Miss O'Connor is more influenced by the Biblical parables than the medieval morality plays," critics have not yet examined the way popular biblical tales, altered almost beyond recognition, serve as the foundation of much of O'Connor's fiction (67). What I argue here is that through the parallels and allusions to her stories' Biblical origins, we are able to understand the theological implications of O'Connor's work in a richer and more nuanced way.

Throughout the history of O'Connor scholarship there have been numerous arguments among critics attempting to determine the connection between O'Connor's personal faith and her writing. They have ranged from complete misinterpretation to acutely precise insights into O'Connor's theology. I will sketch some of that history here in order to show the larger conversation which my investigations fit within. One of the earliest misreadings of O'Connor is Harvey Webster's 1952 review of *Wise Blood*, in

which he argues that O'Connor is writing about a type of "nihilistic existentialism" (23). Of course, modern day readers recognize that O'Connor was writing about neither nihilism nor existentialism, but felt the need to shock readers awake with "an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable" (MM 118). However, Webster's acknowledgement of the extremity of O'Connor's work becomes a constant element in the more theologically oriented criticism that followed.

As time progressed, early critics came to terms with the fact that O'Connor was a Christian and was, indeed, serious about the Christian motives and themes within her work. Accordingly, much of the early criticism focused on clarifying her Christianity and recognizing it in her fiction. As O'Connor's writing career progressed and O'Connor herself became more adamant about her own writing, her motives became more apparent. In 1960 with the publication of *The Violent Bear It Away*, which takes its name from Matthew 11:12 and received mixed reviews, critics began to understand that O'Connor was neither a nihilist nor a jaded satirist, but was using a different method to write from a Christian perspective, though many still had a hard time understanding her intent<sup>1</sup>. By the early 1960s, critics were starting to develop a more thorough understanding of her work, especially in 1962 when Melvin Friedman published his essay arguing that O'Connor "has failed to please only the most rigidly party-line Catholics who find her brand of Catholicism not orthodox enough and the most 'textual' literary critics who find her language too bare and her experiments with structure not eccentric enough" (233). Despite Friedman's claims, more than just the most rigid Catholics were upset with the way her characters received both "redemption and purification in a way which seems

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<sup>1</sup> "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away" (Matthew 11:12 Rheims-Douay).

unorthodox,” since at the time many people still didn’t understand O’Connor’s approach to theological issues (241). However, Friedman’s recognition of how O’Connor’s “place (the South), her religion (Catholicism), her hobby (peacock raising) reinforce her stories and novels at every turn” represented a significant advancement in O’Connor criticism (235). Perhaps the sea change in O’Connor scholarship occurred in 1964, which brought about both the death of O’Connor and a flood of critical articles, including Ted Spivey’s essay asserting that “Flannery O’Connor is finally achieving the recognition she deserves,” that she “has at last come full circle” and declaring that she’d finally succeeded and had “rounded out her view of life” (200, 201, 205). Ironically, Spivey’s essay was published shortly before her death. Spivey was one of the early critics to highlight O’Connor’s strong personal theology and points out that few realized the strength of her beliefs, or her extensive knowledge of biblical scholarship and theology. After O’Connor’s death, Spivey, one of O’Connor’s close friends, was at the forefront of the O’Connor movement, exposing the deep inner-workings of O’Connor’s work and analyzing the way in which O’Connor approaches religion in her fiction.

While both Friedman and Spivey helped establish O’Connor criticism, Thelma Shinn and Sally Fitzgerald both helped extend it. In 1968, Thelma Shinn’s essay declared that O’Connor’s mission in her fiction was to “wake the sleeping children of God” (58). By this time scholars started to recognize the importance of O’Connor as a Catholic rather than a nihilist, but Shinn was one of the first scholars to highlight O’Connor’s intention to send a message, not only to non-Christians, but to her fellow Christians. Though O’Connor, Shinn claimed, was “accused of nihilism and determinism” and “faced a hostile audience,” she was “influenced by Biblical parables”

and was clearly writing from a Christian perspective (59,67). Shinn's essay points out the way O'Connor uses violence in her stories to write about Christian themes such as mercy and redemption, claiming "she [O'Connor] set out to wake the sleeping children of God. And she succeeded" (58).

Shinn's essay represents a turning point in O'Connor scholarship. As the study of O'Connor grew, scholarship moved from a general acknowledgement of her faith, to a concentrated examination of the spiritual distortions present within her work. Scholars such as Spivey and Shinn claimed that O'Connor sought to wake an audience through violence in order to answer the nagging question of how someone could write as a Christian about such extreme and grotesque subject matter. Further clarification of this approach was made possible largely due not to O'Connor's fiction, but her essays and correspondence.

In 1969, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, old friends of O'Connor's, released *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of O'Connor's essays and lectures. These essays, such as "A Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" and "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," more than anything previously published, helped to establish O'Connor's motives as a Catholic writer and exposed just how deeply theology influenced her writing. Although readers and scholars were beginning to understand and realize her intentions as well as the importance of her work, many continued to misinterpret her work. Though it did not contain her personal correspondence, the release of *Mystery and Manners* was a big step in O'Connor criticism, especially in clarifying the degree to which O'Connor's beliefs impacted her work.

The surge of interest in Flannery O'Connor scholarship, led to the continued growth in O'Connor studies into the 1970s. However, once again, there was a subtle shift in the direction of O'Connor scholarship. Critics became concerned with categorizing O'Connor and examining how she functioned within each category, presenting O'Connor as a Catholic, a Catholic dissident, a Protestant writer, and even a humanist. In a sense, her desire to wake her readers out of their apathy was overshadowed by attempts to describe or interpret her theology. In 1972, David Eggenhwiler produced one of the first full-length books of O'Connor criticism doing just that, viewing O'Connor as a Christian humanist. Eggenhwiler focuses on O'Connor's peripheral vision in her writings, suggesting that most critics practiced tunnel vision in narrowing the scope to O'Connor as a Catholic. Eggenhwiler's study examines O'Connor in relation to influential theologians, sociologists, and psychologists, comparing her theology to Tillich and Niebuhr. Eggenhwiler's book portraying O'Connor as a Christian humanist was released the same year as Albert Sonnenfeld's essay, which focuses on the theological parallels between O'Connor and John the Baptist and also examines the importance of baptism in several of her stories, as he argues "Flannery O'Connor may have been a Roman Catholic, but she is, quite literally, a Baptist" (453). Sonnenfeld's essay offers an exegesis of O'Connor's use of Matthew 11:12 as an epigraph for *The Violent Bear It Away*. Sonnenfeld draws parallels between John the Baptist and his New Testament theology and characters in O'Connor's stories, eventually making the claim that O'Connor's theology seems to have been influenced by the Southern Protestantism that surrounded her.

Although the predominant opinion of O'Connor's fiction acknowledged the theology within her work, there were still dissenting viewpoints. Intertextual critic André Bleikasten was one such dissident. In his essay, he acknowledges O'Connor's Catholic beliefs, but dismisses them offhand, commenting, "O'Connor's public pronouncements on her art ... are by no means the best guide to her fiction," especially since "the self is not even master in its own house" (54, 69). In his essay, Bleikasten examines the "problematical relation between her professed ideological stance and the textual evidence of her fiction" in order to render a different reading of O'Connor's work (54). Bleikasten offers up new interpretations of popular works, highlighting how "religious experience, as it is rendered dramatically in her fiction, comes pretty close to Freud's definition: a variant of obsessional neurosis" as well as pointing out "the close conjunction of sex and death" in her stories, commenting that "the themes of sin and guilt, sex and death, all coalesce around the mother figure and its surrogates" (59, 64). Bleikasten admits that "such a reading is of course likely to be dismissed as reductive psychologizing by those O'Connor's critics who insist on interpreting her on her own terms" and for the most part, he was right (65).

Interpretations such as Bleikasten's were largely displaced with the publication of *The Habit of Being*, just one year later. In the book, Sally Fitzgerald presents a timeline of O'Connor's writing career and life, as well as providing over 500 pages of O'Connor's personal correspondence. Needless to say, this book had a major impact on O'Connor scholarship, providing scholars with access to many previously unpublished letters that reveal O'Connor's thoughts and opinions on her work and theology, as well as opinions on many of her contemporaries. Through this book, readers and scholars alike were

presented with a much more detailed picture of O'Connor as a person and a writer. Just six years after Fitzgerald published O'Connor's correspondence, Nadine Brewer argued "it is true that she has been widely misread" (103). Brewer asserted what many O'Connor scholars now view as factual, examining the misinterpretations of her fiction, which were mainly based on the accuracy of her depictions of nihilists. In many ways, it was the preciseness of her rendering of the ardent unbelievers who populate her fiction that led many to believe O'Connor was trying to make a statement about the irreverence of modern Christianity, which is why many, at first, thought of her as avant-garde, when she was trying to be just the opposite. Although Brewer was not the first to point out the misinterpretations of O'Connor's fiction, her essay focuses mainly on the Southern Protestant tradition within her work, noticing that "for all her [O'Connor] Catholic orthodoxy, nowhere is her profound understanding of her country more evident than in her unerring delineation of Protestantism through her Christ and Satan symbolism" (103). Brewer's essay represents a benchmark in O'Connor criticism as the focus begins to shift from the mere recognition of the importance of O'Connor's theology, to the unfolding of various theological tensions posed within her work—in Brewer's case, the discrepancy between Catholic theology and O'Connor's theology. According to this argument, although O'Connor shows a great knowledge of various Christian traditions, her characters and subject matter seem to suggest a more Southern Protestant interpretation as opposed to a traditional Catholic viewpoint. During the mid-eighties, in a similar fashion to the mid-sixties, O'Connor scholarship returned to O'Connor's personal beliefs, as an increasing faction of scholars read her as Southern Protestant, rather than Roman Catholic.

Arthur Kinney, for example, examines the function of grace within O'Connor's work, pointing out that she was always writing about the extraordinary moments of God's grace, the moments when it touches even the most impoverished people, though Kinney believes that O'Connor was, at times, writing outside the traditional Christian tradition with stories that were peculiarly twisted. Still, Kinney presents an O'Connor who writes from an implicitly Protestant viewpoint of achieving a moment of grace, rather than receiving grace through process and sacrament.

The scholarship of the 1970s-1980s served not only as a catalyst for O'Connor's increased posthumous popularity, but also as a clarification of the complexities and ambiguities of her work. By the mid-eighties, O'Connor criticism moved from merely categorizing her theological positions to surveying the complexity of her characterization and eventually to investigating the ways her Christianity is grounded within her nonsectarian choice of characters. Robert Brinkmeyer's essential *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor* is one such book. Brinkmeyer provides an innovative perspective, appraising her work from several different angles. Brinkmeyer explores O'Connor's personal beliefs, as well as Christian themes and character types within her fiction. Brinkmeyer provides an excellent analysis of O'Connor's devotion to Catholic dogma, such as her steadfast belief in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. Brinkmeyer not only examines the "depth and commitment of [O'Connor's] faith," but provides concrete examples showing how her faith influenced her writing (2). Brinkmeyer argues that "as a Roman Catholic writer [O'Connor] was very much concerned with matters of the spirit ... and was well aware that the only way to portray the spiritual in fiction was to ground her work in the human"; thus, he argues the grotesque within her fiction is often the result

of the spirituality grounded within humanity (13). Brinkmeyer probes major characters, themes, and devices in O'Connor's fiction, providing a unique theological insight into much of O'Connor's fiction. Brinkmeyer's book touches on not only her grounded or incarnate spirituality, but how its potential stranglehold on her work as theology becomes not just a common theme, but a constant in all her writings. Although the work wasn't entirely unique, it provided much more depth and insight than many of the previous studies on O'Connor.

Brian Ragen's book published two years later expounded further on the incarnational focus of O'Connor's writing. Although the work is focused specifically on the significance of automobiles in O'Connor's work, Ragen's deeper concern lies with O'Connor's underlying "essential Christian doctrines—Original Sin, the need for a savior, the Savior's Incarnation" which he underlines throughout O'Connor's fiction (xviii). Ragen studies significant symbolic elements used frequently throughout O'Connor's fiction, drawing biblical ties and specifically focusing on her use of the automobile in her fiction. Throughout the work, he examines O'Connor's incarnational art, focusing specifically on the way that "her [grounded] characters are often driven—even tormented—by the idea that they have been redeemed" (1). Ragen's study became significant because he recognizes not only O'Connor's extensive knowledge of biblical scriptures and medieval Catholic theology, but the way that, although O'Connor held strong religious beliefs, her stories never became sermons, contending that "her exploration of the mystery of Incarnation is always the story of a tattooed man, never a précis of the Baltimore catechism" (197). In doing so, "O'Connor reclaimed a large region of literature for the religious writer" (Ragen 197).

Another major critic whose theological interpretations have been extremely influential within O'Connor scholarship is Ralph C. Wood. Throughout the late 1980s into the present, Wood has continued to publish essays reading O'Connor from a theological standpoint. As O'Connor criticism has a tendency to diverge into new directions, Wood maintains an insistence on authorial intentions in O'Connor criticism. In his essays, Wood devotes attention to critical interpretations of O'Connor, positioning himself especially against the rise of feminist theory in O'Connor scholarship. Wood warns of Sarah Gordon's chastising of O'Connor because she "steered clear of the feminine realm altogether" (3). Wood argues that O'Connor writes from a non-sexed point of view, rather than a traditionally feminine or masculine point of view. Wood also recounts Gordon's arguments that O'Connor's Catholic faith actually impeded her writing, as Wood asserts that Gordon's "chief grievance is that O'Connor submitted her imagination to the ultimately oppressive institution—the Roman Catholic Church" (5). Wood asserts that this fact never hurt O'Connor, since her theology was her motivating factor and argues that recent "interpretations of Flannery O'Connor" such as Sarah Gordon's "reveals a great deal about American academic *zeitgeist*. There is something in the air, a gas that a lot of professors are breathing. O'Connor identified it as nihilism" (7). In many of his essays and his book *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ Haunted South*, Wood emphasizes the importance of reading O'Connor from a Christian point of view, seeing her Christian faith as an enabler for her fiction rather than a barrier, claiming that even though O'Connor has been studied for the last fifty years, "we have not yet begun to fathom the depth of her literary and theological witness" (321).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See "Flannery O'Connor's Witness to the Gospel of Life."

It is to the unfolding of this “literary and theological witness” that this study seeks to contribute. Following Shinn, Spivey, Brinkmeyer, and Ragen, I would claim that O’Connor’s fiction, in incorporating specific theological dilemmas grounded in often extreme situations, seeks to wake the theologically informed reader. But I would take that approach further by arguing that we need to look more closely at the biblical texts in which her stories are deeply grounded—as deeply grounded as they are in her poor, protestant, rural landscapes. Those texts too, I will argue, are transformed and rendered extreme and for precisely the same reasons as the situations—to wake the reader. O’Connor scholarship has changed drastically since the spurious reviews and critics who interpreted her as a nihilist, but as it continues to disperse into different directions, it is important to keep O’Connor’s theological perspective in mind.

Throughout her fiction, I would claim, O’Connor often shifts the polarity of the biblical stories she recapitulates, often providing the antithesis of readers’ expectations. Often, she actually retells these biblical stories in a reverse fashion, using very different characters to achieve the same results as the biblical counterparts. She reverses the polarity of these stories in order to get them back to where they were originally supposed to be: reversing the typical archetype, writing about God extending grace, often times by means of violence, to the faith-poor. This emphasis on extending grace to the lowly, brought about by subverting these biblical stories and setting them in the South, reveals itself through the subtle biblical allusions, sometimes implicit and hidden, in her fiction.

Other critics, of course, have called attention to O’Connor’s use of biblical allusion, but in a fairly narrow way. For example, take the case of O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” one of the most celebrated and anthologized of her short stories,

yet one of the most problematic for critics and readers alike, especially for those concerned with O'Connor's theology. Many critics wonder how O'Connor could be writing from a Christian viewpoint and use such secular subject matter. However after years of criticism, as well as the publication of O'Connor's letters and essays, scholars have gradually revealed O'Connor's motives for the story, recognizing O'Connor's intentions. An obvious way to explore further these theological intentions is to examine O'Connor's biblical allusions, which is what Hallman Bryant did in his 1981 essay where he traces the journey made by the family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Within his essay, he looks at the importance of the places, with a focus on the fictional town of Timothy, Georgia, where the family stops at Red Sammy's for lunch. Bryant argues that Timothy, GA is the only fictional town named in the story and, thus, serves as the only recognizable biblical allusion in the story, to the book of Timothy in the New Testament. Although Bryant wasn't the first to notice this allusion—Robert Woodward first mentioned it in his essay, published eight years earlier—Bryant develops the argument by examining the possible implications of the name. Several years later this argument was not only continued, but augmented by Matthew Fike, who argued that the allusion points the reader not only to 1 Timothy, but to both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. Woodward and Bryant focus on the moral connections between 1 Timothy and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," while Fike focuses on the spiritual implications of both books of Timothy. All three critics use the town's name to suggest "meaningful parallels between the epistles and this story" (Fike 311).

Though Fike, Bryant, and Woodward notice the parallel between the name Timothy and the O'Connor's story, they have completely overlooked the crux of this

story. These critics—and many more who build upon their readings—have missed the much richer significance of the Misfit's allusion to the story of the rich young ruler, when the Misfit tells the grandmother "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him" (152). In this instance, O'Connor's Misfit paraphrases Jesus' command to "go and sell all you possess and give to the poor and ... come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21). What I hope to do in this thesis is focus on the implications of a series of such biblical allusions in O'Connor's fiction that have been unnoticed or all together disregarded by scholars. I hope to show not only why examples like these are important, but how O'Connor's transfigurations of these stories follow from her desire to awaken readers to certain truths.

Current O'Connor scholarship has evolved greatly through the years; however, some significant biblical allusions have been overlooked or underestimated and more importantly, the methodology behind these biblical allusions as a whole has been neglected. What I'm contending is that we can fully appreciate her incarnational writing—her theological explorations that are grounded in specific, complex, tormented people in unusual situations—by looking at the ways in which her explorations are also grounded in specific biblical texts, which she similarly distorts, exaggerates, and subverts, in order to shock and teach readers. Her work is not filled with simple biblical allusions, but is rather a complex transfiguring of popular biblical stories. O'Connor doesn't reference these stories, she rewrites them. Of course, when one searches the bible for the faithless Misfit who kills a family alongside the highway or a despondent ex-sailor who finds comforts in body art, one finds no such stories. With sometimes

shocking freedom, O'Connor twists open the original stories or references, reworking and redistributing their basic elements. Often reversing the polarities of the original stories, O'Connor's fiction dramatizes elements of biblical texts coming alive in different times and social settings and with quite different outcomes, not just exploring Catholic theology in a Protestant setting, but also biblical debates in the corners of her Southern landscapes, knowing that "most readers will be repulsed by these people," yet acknowledging, deeper down, after examining the theological dilemmas these characters face, they are no more repulsive than we are (Whitt 11). In summary, I intend to argue that one can see that O'Connor had intentions in her stories similar to the original biblical passages, but used different techniques to achieve these goals.

Within this thesis, I will focus on three primary examples: "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which reworks the story of the rich young ruler found in Matt. 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-30, Luke 18:18-23 into a story about a faithless Misfit and his encounter with a hypocritical grandmother; "Parker's Back," which transforms elements of Moses' encounter with the burning bush from Exodus and Paul's conversion in Acts into a story about a shiftless ex-sailor obsessed with body art; and "Judgment Day," which interacts with portions of Paul's descriptions of the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15 to tell the story of a displaced Southerner living with his daughter in the heart of New York City. The common thread that I will draw out of all three of these stories is the way in which O'Connor's stories engage their biblical analogues in unusual, unexpected, and sometimes violent and grotesque manipulations, but manage to convey essentially the same message. Theologically, her main motivation in her fiction was to argue many of the same points about grace that her biblical sources did, but to a modern-day audience.

Through this approach, I hope to open up a new way of responding to O'Connor's biblical echoes.

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## **Chapter 2: A Good Meaning is Hard to Find: The Gospel Allusion in O'Connor's**

### **"A Good Man is Hard to Find"**

If the benchmark of good fiction is, as O'Connor claimed, a story that "hangs on and expands in the mind," then "A Good Man is Hard to Find" has passed the litmus test since the definitive meanings have yet to be exhausted fifty years after she wrote the story (MM 108). Throughout her lifetime and long afterward, Flannery O'Connor's fiction was consistently marred by critical misinterpretation. Even within her own Catholic community, O'Connor's theological implications were overlooked and often dismissed, since many critics fixated on the violence present in several of her stories. However, her troubles with misinterpretation weren't limited to the Christian community; it has been widely documented, especially by her own correspondence, that O'Connor consistently fought against the misinterpretation of the Christian themes subtly woven throughout her fiction. Much of the scholarship on O'Connor has focused on making these themes clear. One approach to these theological issues that hasn't received much attention yet is her way of reversing the polarity of biblical tales as a way of retelling them, a method used within "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which reads like a biblical parable modernized by being turned on its head. Though many, including O'Connor, believe that the story was not her best written work, it has remained her most popular simply because it provides an introduction to O'Connor's fiction: an easily accessible piece that is representative of themes and techniques common within her work.

Since publication, the story has garnered O'Connor plenty of—often unwanted—attention from literary critics as they attempted to unravel the meanings hidden within the story. For years, critics have analyzed and interpreted almost every single aspect of the

story in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the work. Though “A Good Man is Hard to Find” has been thoroughly dissected by readers and critics alike since its publication, a key element that has been overlooked is the biblical parallel between O’Connor’s Misfit and the story of the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-30, Mk 10:17-30, Lk. 18:18-23) and the ways in which this thrice- documented interaction reveals O’Connor’s theological intentions within “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

The story begins as O’Connor documents the journey of a young family on their way to Florida, despite the grandmother’s staunch opposition to their chosen destination. The journey is filled with continuous foreshadowing, as the grandmother, in an attempt to make Bailey rethink his choice of destination, tells the entire family about the criminal on the loose headed toward Florida, aptly titled the Misfit. O’Connor tells us that, although everyone else had dressed casually, the grandmother had worn “a navy blue dress” so that “in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (CW 138). Along the way, the grandmother makes sure to point out “a large field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it” (CW 139). This is only fitting since the car includes the six passengers. O’Connor details the towns they pass through including the fictional Toombsboro, all foreboding examples of the family’s ill-fated journey<sup>3</sup>. On their way, the family stops at Red Sammy’s for lunch, where the grandmother and the proprietor, Red Sammy, discuss, among other things, the Misfit and complain about the difficulty of finding a “good man” (CW 142).

This rendezvous occurs shortly after the family leaves Red Sammy’s. The grandmother convinces Bailey to take a side-trip to an old Civil War mansion—which

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<sup>3</sup> Most likely a play off of Toombsboro, GA, a town approximately 25 miles from Milledgeville, GA, where O’Connor resided.

she tells John Wesley and June Star contains a hidden fortune. Much to her dismay, she realizes, after she has gotten the family utterly lost in a labyrinth of back roads, that the mansion is located in Tennessee, not Georgia. However, just as she realizes this fact, the cat, Pitty Sing, which the grandmother had hidden in a basket, gets loose and “sprang onto Bailey’s shoulder” causing him to wreck the car in a ditch (CW 145). After the wreck, the children flee from the car screaming “We had an ACCIDENT!” (CW 145). The term “accident” sounds an ominous echo to O’Connor’s earlier comment about the grandmother’s attire (CW 145).

It is at this point that a hearse-like car discovers the wreck and the grandmother correctly identifies The Misfit and his gang, as he tells her “it would have been better for all of you, if you hadn’t of reckernized me” (CW 147). As the grandmother is driven to hysterics, the Misfit’s assailants take each member of the family into the woods and shoot them, as pistol retorts are heard from a distance; however, the focus on the story remains on the interaction between the grandmother and the Misfit, rather than the execution of the family members.

As the Misfit’s gang continues to murder the family, the Misfit’s conversation turns to religion. The Misfit explains a theological dilemma that has, at its crux, his lack of faith, his inability to believe in resurrection. He tells the grandmother that he doesn’t know if Jesus raised the dead, but because such a claim has been made, “Jesus thrown everything off balance” (CW 151). In the end, the grandmother has an epiphany; as “her head cleared for an instant,” she tells the Misfit “you’re one of my own children” and “reached out and touched him on the shoulder” (CW 152). This gesture is too difficult

for the Misfit to accept and he jumps back and, almost instinctively, shoots her three times.

O'Connor has often claimed that her story rests on the grandmother's display of grace, which has become the common way for most critics to interpret the ending. However, focusing solely on this display overlooks the way that much of the story rests on the Misfit's theological dilemma, as he explains:

Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead ... and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. (CW 152)

This inability to believe in the resurrection lies at the very heart of the Misfit's spiritual and philosophical predicament and serves as the catalyst that has led him to kill his father and turn to a life of crime. In focusing on his predicament, O'Connor presents us with a much more complex character than a cursory reading would imply. The Misfit is much more than a common criminal, but is rather a man so steeped in a theological crisis that he has rebelled through "meanness" or criminal activity, the easiest outlet available to him.

O'Connor's exposure of the depth of the Misfit's dilemma can be chronicled through the progression of his conversation with the grandmother. The grandmother, in what must be seen as an attempt to save her own life, tells the Misfit, "I just know you're a good man ... You're not a bit common" (CW 148). The grandmother, in her frenzied

state, even tries to urge the Misfit to renounce his ways, telling him that he “could be honest” and begs him to “settle down and live a comfortable life” without “somebody chasing you all the time” (CW 149).

Of course, O’Connor’s Misfit is much too clever for the grandmother’s frantic logic. The Misfit, after all his life experience, has become jaded, especially since he has “been most everything” ranging from gospel singer to undertaker and seen almost everything: he “seen a man burnt alive” and “a woman flogged” (CW 149). But, deeper down, the Misfit is unsettled because he knows that the law doesn’t work and that there is no way he can “settle down and live a comfortable life” (CW 149). The Misfit explains, “crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it” (CW 150). This characterizes the Misfit’s innate understanding of the law.

In his experience, the punishment never seems to fit the crime, which is how the Misfit receives his namesake, “because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment” (CW 151). He realizes that there is “a misfit” between the law and the punishment, which is why he signs everything himself, including his criminal acts, and keeps a copy to “know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match” in an attempt “to prove you ain’t been treated right” (CW 151). That is, the Misfit has developed his own rudimentary moral accounting system. He realizes that since the law doesn’t work, there’s no reason to try and follow it, so he disregards the laws and lives by his own law of meanness, keeping his own

accounts in almost Pharisical fashion, hence Hallman Bryant's assertion that in the Misfit's moral system, "goodness is a matter of sadistic gratification" (305).

The Misfit's attachment to his own system of "sadistic gratification" is why he continuously spurns the grandmother's proselytizing because, as he tells the grandmother, he "don't want no help" since he's "doing all right" by himself, taking pleasure in his own meanness and being prepared to acknowledge and stand by his crimes (Bryant 305, CW 150). Of course, although the Misfit seems confident in his own system, the grandmother's ceaseless command for him to pray greatly upsets the Misfit.<sup>4</sup>

Pressed by the grandmother, the Misfit curses Jesus because "Jesus thrown everything off balance" and doesn't fit into the Misfit's system. He was unjustly punished, yet indiscriminately offers grace to everyone. Jesus would return him to a world in which "one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all," precisely the world the Misfit's system of record-keeping sought to eliminate (CW 151).

O'Connor's Misfit doesn't suffer from a traditional lack of faith inasmuch as he admits belief in God, but like many of O'Connor's characters, the Misfit seems to be in an eternal limbo, immersed in religiosity. Some readers sense the Misfit's fanatic belief in Christian traditions; in fact, Bellamy claims, "The Misfit is a Bible Belt Fundamentalist in spite of himself" (116). This is apparent in the contextual clues that O'Connor provides since the Misfit was formerly a gospel singer and his father is buried in Mt. Hopewell Baptist Church cemetery, both of which suggest a fundamentalist upbringing. It is not the existence of God that has thrown the Misfit's world off-balance, then, but what he perceives to be a great injustice. The Misfit can't understand how

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<sup>4</sup> The grandmother commands the Misfit to pray several times on CW 149, 150.

Christ could resurrect the dead, changing the system by offering a new life to someone who is undeserving of such a thing.

This is the crux of the Misfit's philosophical and theological dilemma, unsettling his tendency toward "killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him," essentially the driving force behind the entire story (CW 152). By raising the dead, along with his other miracles, Jesus offers a new system, a system of grace that overrides the law. What the Misfit can't understand or accept is how everyone is offered grace, whether they deserve it or not. This question plagues the Misfit as he claims, "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known...I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now" (CW 152). The Misfit, in his uncertainty, can't make the leap of faith required for belief and can only say that Jesus "thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left" (CW 152). In his doubt, the Misfit can't get over the fact that he wasn't there to see it happen; thus, there's no guarantee that Christ "did what He said" and the Misfit just can't risk it (CW 152).

This is the flaw in his system, the foreign idea of grace which becomes too difficult for the Misfit to comprehend. This lack of understanding is why the grandmother's gesture as "she reached out and touched him on the shoulder" is so unsettling because she treats him like a child, reaching out in love when he doesn't deserve it (CW 152). When she offers him something he hasn't earned, she is echoing Jesus and this is unbearable to him. The Misfit, in a sense, lives in a meritocracy and can't accept a new system that offers grace to those who are undeserving. This is why

the Misfit “sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest” since “his shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness” (CW 152, HB 389). However, like it or not, the Misfit’s system has been overridden by the introduction of grace, which is why her death—his own act of meanness—brings him “no real pleasure in life” (CW 153).

As the Misfit questions Jesus’ actions, he comments how “if He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him,” a statement which is an intentional allusion to the story of the rich young ruler. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recount the tale in analogous fashion:

As He was setting out on a journey a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, Do not Murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.” And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.”

Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. (Mk. 10:17-22).

Within the story, the young magistrate approaches Jesus and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mk. 10:17). The ruler, much like the Misfit, seeks knowledge rather than salvation or grace, although it is obvious by the fact that he goes out of his way to find Jesus that he is sincere in his questioning and not trying to merely

test Jesus. Sadly, Patte points out, “this knowledge will not help him to do what is good and to receive eternal life” (270). This query, which scholars recognize as “a legitimate question” is important because (1) it is a question that has piqued curiosity of mankind throughout the ages, and (2) recognizes Jesus as the “Good Teacher” who could provide him with an answer (269). Thus, this first interaction in which the young ruler acknowledges Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life signifies a type of belief. This idea of Jesus as “good” signifies the ruler’s initial openness to the possibility of seeing Jesus as the Messiah, the same possibility that the Misfit considers. This ruler isn’t completely clueless and, on some level, is willing to consider that Jesus might be who he claims to be.

However, Jesus challenges the young man’s assumption by responding “Why do you call me good?” (Mk. 10:18). At the heart of his question, Jesus is challenging the young man’s idea of goodness. The young ruler sees “goodness” as something obtainable through deeds, but Jesus’ response is that “no one is good except God only” and, thus, goodness can only be achieved through God alone (Mk. 10:18). In a sense, Jesus tells the young man “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

Jesus’ response to the ruler to follow the commandments is not only “a generic answer which any teacher of the Law in his day would have given,” but also a method to entice the ruler to reevaluate his system (Fitzmeyer 1197). The ruler is asserting his own righteousness when he tells Jesus he has kept the commandments “from my youth up” (Mk. 10:20). In his answer, the ruler highlights his attempt to seek eternal life through works, by scrupulously keeping the commandments.

At this point, Jesus looks at the young man with love and tells him “one thing you lack: go sell all you possess and give to the poor, and ... come, follow Me” (Mk. 10:21). This watershed moment is not meant, necessarily, as a test, but instead it is Jesus offering grace to the young ruler as he beckons to him to disregard the law and become one of his disciples. It signifies Jesus’ foresight that “what the man needs is something other than knowledge of what is good” (Patte 270).

The gospels tell us that instead of joy in the prospect of joining Jesus, the ruler “was saddened and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property” (Mk 10:22). At that moment, Jesus offers the same grace that the grandmother offers the Misfit as she reaches out and touches him on the shoulder; much like the Misfit, the ruler lets his foolish obstinacy stand in the way of acting on faith. For, as Kierkegaard suggests in *Fear and Trembling*, if the young ruler had assented to giving away all of his possessions, there is no doubt that he would have heard the words “you shall get every penny back,” as many biblical characters, such as Abraham, were rewarded not only for their sacrifice, but for their resignation and willingness to sacrifice (78). The ruler’s grief, according to Patte, is due to the fact “he wants to enter life, but he perceives that he will not obtain it because he does not want to do what is necessary for that purpose” (271). Although, Jesus reaches out in love to the ruler, he is not able to escape his system of legalism.

It is after the ruler turns away grieving the Jesus says to his disciples “how hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God,” commenting on how hard it is to follow the law and do all that God demands (Mk. 10:23). “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” he all but tells them. At this point, the disciples respond by asking who

can be saved then, to which Jesus replies, “with people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God” (Mk. 10:27). In essence, Jesus tells them mortals can’t save themselves through effort, only through dependence on God.

When examining the two stories side by side, there are several major differences that would rule out any possibility of allegory or metaphor, which is why the connections have been overlooked; after all, the Misfit is “a hypocritical liar who has no faith in a moral purpose in the universe,” while the ruler clings whole heartedly to the law of Moses (Bryant 305). Thus, these two stories present a perfect example of O’Connor’s polarity shift. The Misfit has broken, almost literally, the exact commandments the young man keeps. Superficially, the Misfit seems to be the complete opposite of the ruler. However, this difference is merely a testament to O’Connor’s genius, for although she writes the Misfit as wholly opposite of the ruler, they both share, after they’re confronted, the same sensibility. Both the Misfit and the ruler “don’t want no hep,” and both implicitly claim, “I’m doing all right by myself” (CW 150).

Both men, through great effort, have put together their own systems in which they seek to save themselves: a legalistic checklist to “prove you ain’t been treated right” (CW 151). Hence, after being confronted by Jesus, they both realize that the law doesn’t work for them. One realizes the limits of good works, the other of evil deeds. The rich young ruler realizes the law doesn’t work but can’t move beyond it and so he “went away grieving,” while the Misfit, in a world where the punishment will never match up to the crime, is unsettled in his attempt to enjoy his time on Earth “by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him” (Mk. 10:22, CW 152). O’Connor has written the Misfit, ostensibly, to be the exact opposite of his biblical

counterpart; however, inwardly they are exactly the same. Both men realize that the law cannot work, that there is a “misfit” between punishment and crime or between our desire to be good and our standing before the law.

In both cases, “mere belief is not enough,” given that the Misfit and the ruler each walk away from certain salvation disheartened because neither can resign himself to give up his own way of life and accept a new one (Fike 314).<sup>5</sup> This is why, in both stories, Jesus is such an affront: he throws both hierarchies off balance. Since Jesus claims to resurrect the dead, offering life as a thing unearned, it undoes both systems since it requires complete dependence on God. It’s a concept that’s too difficult for either man to accept. Jesus, with his command, means to show the ruler that it is impossible for man to save himself, but with his summons to “come, follow Me,” Jesus also tries to show that through God, there is eternal life (Mk. 10:17). Thus, Jesus shows it’s not about deserving, and it is precisely this system of undeserved mercy that is too much for either to comprehend.

Herein lies the significance of the Misfit’s gospel allusion; O’Connor has her character paraphrase Jesus’ well-known command to follow him (Mt 19:22, Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22) to key readers in on the similar call in the gospels, since this was O’Connor’s very reason for writing. The allusion and all of the parallels between the interaction of the Misfit and the grandmother and Jesus’ interaction with the rich young ruler are no coincidence, but are yet another example of O’Connor’s working through reward. This allusion keys readers to the fact that this is the same story retold, re-imagined, modernized, and incarnated in the deep South. Instead of Jesus and a wealthy man, O’Connor presents a hypocritical grandmother and a dangerous felon, telling the same

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this subject, see Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (77-78).

story by presenting us with similar traits in opposing characters. Through her complex villain, O'Connor presents readers with a character emblematic of all of us who can't really believe that Jesus "did what He said": can't believe there could be such a gift (CW 152). If he could believe it, then there is no doubt that he would "throw away everything and follow Him," just as he tells the grandmother, but through his adherence to his own convoluted logic, he can't make sense of such an act of grace (CW 152). When Jesus, much like the grandmother, reaches out in love, the Misfit, like the rich young ruler, can't accept it because he can't allow this new system to erase the one he has.

Therefore, it is apparent that O'Connor intentionally alludes to the story of the rich young ruler with a hope that readers would recognize the biblical reference in her story. In doing so, she makes a biblical point to her audience, as if to tell them that life comes only as a gift; it doesn't come through effort and balancing things out. By completely distorting the story of the rich young ruler and "reversing its polarity" in modernizing it, she seeks to make it applicable and visible to a contemporary generation so that, in effect, it will work again.

O'Connor was very clear about her intentions as a writer stating "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" and later stating in a letter to John Hawkes, "I write the way I do because and only because I am a Catholic. I feel that if I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write" (CW 805, 966). Thus, we see that the biblical parallels are not coincidental, but an intentional device O'Connor uses in her attempt to write about Christian themes for a mainstream audience.

Though “contemporary reviewers were dismayed by what they saw as her propensity for writing ‘horror stories,’” her desire to write from a Christian perspective ultimately became clear (Carson, Hawkins 15). Though this subject is not exclusive to O’Connor’s corpus, it was how she wrote these themes that gave her work such a unique appeal. By recapitulating the story of the rich young ruler in the modern day South, O’Connor writes from a standpoint of Christian orthodoxy like no other writer before her, with the hope that the thematically Christian message might have an impact upon readers.

This parallel between the Misfit and the rich young ruler is more than just a subtle coincidence or an approach “for which any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious,” but is a pointer toward an exploration that opens up a range of such theological explorations in O’Connor’s fiction (MM 108). Within “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” it is easy to see the influence of this gospel allusion, and thus is not out of the question to assume that these similarities are more than mere happenstance, but are quite deliberate. This connection, once understood, changes how we view the Misfit’s interaction with the grandmother, broadens our understanding of the complexities of this well-known story, and illustrates O’Connor’s great interest in reversal as an author. This unique literary device helped her accomplish her mission of spreading the message of Christ and his grace “in a territory held largely by the devil” (MM 113).

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### Chapter 3: The All-Demanding Eyes: Following the Gospel Allusions in “Parker’s Back”

For the most part, critically speaking, “Parker’s Back” seems to be a dead issue, a literary problem already solved. In modern day critical interpretation, most interpreters (1) reference Westarp, acknowledge Teiihard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man* as O’Connor’s muse for “Parker’s Back,” and (2) recognize Inman’s *The Augusta Chronicle* interview with a tattooist or Burchett’s *Memoirs of a Tattooist* as O’Connor’s source material. Those who acknowledge the theological underpinnings often give a cursory acknowledgement of the burning tree as the burning bush from Exodus, but disregard Moses, choosing to focus on Obadiah, Job, or Jonah; nowhere do these critics carefully consider Exodus as the source of O’Connor’s story or notice the parallels between Parker’s and Saul’s conversion experience.

The origins of “Parker’s Back,” obviously, go much deeper than a newspaper article or a memoir, and to suggest otherwise would be insulting to the theological intentions of O’Connor. The story begins as O’Connor acknowledges the background of both O.E. Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth, and even provides readers with a double-flashback, a rarity in O’Connor’s fiction. O.E. Parker is depicted as a man with a numinous awareness, who is at the same time a paradigm of “quotidian complacency” (Hewitt 62). Although, mundane, it is obvious by his name Obadiah Elihue, which Fowler interprets as “the servant of Yahweh, my God,” that there is more to Parker than meets the eye (62). At the age of 14, at a local fair, he spies a man tattooed from head to foot in an arabesquely intricate fashion. Before Parker “saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed,” but the tattooed man inspires Parker to seek out tattoos of his own (CW 658). From that

point forward, tattoos became the focal point of Parker's life; he "began to drink beer and get in fights," and soon found that "tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (CW 658). His lewd behavior incites his mother to drag him to revival, in reaction to which the next day he joins the navy.

The navy only feeds his craving for tattoos, as the service hardens him into a man. Parker picks up a tattoo in every port he visits, although he refuses to tattoo his back, but none of these tattoos make him happy since "the effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched" (CW 659). Soon, Parker receives a dishonorable discharge from the navy after going AWOL and decides "that country air was the only kind fit to breathe" (CW 659). He takes odd jobs, such as selling apples by the bushel to isolated homesteaders. This is how he meets Sarah Ruth, a girl who is not only extremely plain, but the daughter of "a Straight Gospel preacher" who is "away, spreading it in Florida" (CW 662). Sarah Ruth is not the type of girl that Parker would usually spend time with, especially since she thinks his tattoos are "no better than what a fool Indian would do," referring to them as "Vanity of vanities" (CW 660). The zealous Sarah Ruth, a hard-line fundamentalist, who is, "in addition to other bad qualities," always "sniffing up sin" since "she did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face," is the exact opposite of Parker, and he quickly makes up mind to "have nothing further to do with her" (CW 655, 663). Despite this, there is a strange and unexplainable attraction between Parker and Sarah Ruth. She takes it as sign, encountering another who is branded "with a double-barreled Old testament name" (Fowler 62). O'Connor tells us "they were married in the County Ordinary's office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous" (CW 663). Their marriage is an

unhappy one as Sarah Ruth spends her time telling Parker about the judgment while Parker “couldn’t understand why he stayed with her” (CW 655). Parker works as a field-hand for an old lady who refers to Parker as “a walking panner-rammer” (CW 664). Parker decides to get a religious themed tattoo in order to please Sarah Ruth.

The story starts, however, for all intents and purposes when Parker slams a tractor into the side of the tree. Although he’s been warned by his boss to avoid the old tree, he pays no mind. As Parker continues on the tractor, “all at once he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him” and he is thrown from the tractor as he exclaims “GOD ABOVE!” (CW 665). As “the tractor crashed upside-down into the tree and burst into flame,” Parker “saw...his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire,” an obvious allusion to Moses standing barefoot in front of the burning bush (CW 665). At this point, Parker knew “there had been a great change in his life” (CW 666).

After this epiphany, Parker drives straight to the city without hesitation, arriving at the tattoo parlor. While browsing through the book of religious subject matter, he passes the Byzantine Christ “with all demanding eyes” and a voice tells him to “GO BACK”; Parker demands to have the tattoo put on his back immediately (CW 667). Parker, as we’ve seen, is someone who is responsive to outside forces, being much more in tune, spiritually, than the ardently fundamentalistic Sarah Ruth. O’Connor remarks that Parker “obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth” and now, unquestioning, as he decides to get the Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back (CW 673).

The tattoo takes two days to finish, so he spends the night in a church mission and “longed miserable for Sarah Ruth” (CW 669). When the tattoo artist asks, “Are you saved?” Parker replies “Naw...I ain’t got no use for none of that” (CW 669). After he receives his tattoo, Parker, still fanatical from the previous day’s events, drinks a pint of whiskey and visits a pool hall he used to frequent. In the pool hall, the men “pull up his shirt,” but as soon as they see the tattoo, their “hands drop away instantly and his shirt fell again like a veil over the face” (CW 671). They exclaim “O.E.’s got religion and is witnessing for Jesus,” at which point, Parker gets defensive and starts fighting the men and is eventually thrown out of the pool hall (CW 671). Parker “sat for a long time on the ground in the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul” as he realizes that “the eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (CW 672).

Parker, confused, decides to, once again, follow his spiritual instinct and “GO BACK” to Sarah Ruth because “she would know what he had to do. She would clear up the rest of it and she would at least be pleased” (CW 672). However, when Parker returns home, he finds that Sarah Ruth has locked him out of the house and refuses to let him in until he acknowledges his name; “it’s me, old O.E., I’m back,” he tells her, but she refuses (CW 673). Suddenly, “Parker bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole. ‘Obadiah,’ he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (CW 673). Parker feels a change to the “haphazard and botched” “panner-rammer” of his soul that comes with his acknowledgement of his name (CW 659, 664). As he enters the house, he lifts up his shirt and turns his back to Sarah Ruth, exposing the tattoo, but she tells him “It ain’t anybody I know” and later exclaims that the tattoo is

“Idolatry!” at which point her heart hardens as she grabs a broom and proceeds to beat his back until welts form on the face of Christ (CW 674). The story ends as Sarah Ruth watches Parker leaning against the pecan tree in the front yard, “crying like a baby” (CW 675).

The significance of the ending lies in both Parker owning up to his own prophetic nature and Sarah Ruth rejecting the image of Christ. As Parker embraces his own name of Obadiah Elihue, he is doing more than just accepting his given name; he is accepting his prophetic calling and submitting himself to the will of “the all demanding eyes” of Christ tattooed on his back (CW 667). Nevertheless, it is impossible to understand the full importance of this event, without first understanding two predominate Biblical allusions that run throughout the story as well as the implications resulting from the combination of these allusions. The first and most prevalent of these two allusions is O’Connor’s reliance on the story of Moses from Exodus.

Much like Moses, restless, living as a shepherd in Midian, Parker runs from God, living aimlessly, hiding in debauchery and eventually joining the Navy to avoid going to church. Parker is plowing the earth when God gets his attention: “all at once he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him,” and as he is thrown from the tractor he exclaims “GOD ABOVE!” (CW 665). As “the tractor crashed upside-down into the tree and burst into flame,” Parker is spared from harm, much like Moses (CW 665). Parker then “saw...his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire” (CW 665). The significance of this passage is obvious, as most readers will remember God commanding Moses, in front of the burning bush, “remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 2:5). In both occurrences, God gets the attention of his chosen prophet

under incredible circumstances. O'Connor has, once again, rewritten a popular biblical story and set it in the modern day South, with the jaded Parker as a modern day Moses. But the similarities, by no means, end here.

Even as Parker scrambles up, "he could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face" (CW 665). This "hot breath" O'Connor alludes to is more than just the heat from the fire, but the "hot breath" of God. In Exodus 34, God summons Moses to "present yourself" on top of Mount Sinai (Ex 34:2). As Moses journeys to the top of Mount Sinai, "the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him" (Ex. 34:5-6). Unaware of the result of his direct communion with the Lord, Moses, upon descending from Mount Sinai, "did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with him" (Ex. 34:29). Thus, the heat that Parker feels on his face is much like the heat of the presence of God. Even as he scrambles to leave the scene, Parker "collapsed on his knees twice," much the way that Moses "made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship" (CW 665, Ex. 34:8). This conversion scene, then, is more than Moses in front of the burning bush receiving his call from God. O'Connor also adds elements of Moses' direct communion with God on top of Mount Sinai to establish as Parker as the prophet he is destined to become, both of Moses' encounters factoring heavily into "Parker's Back."

Both Parker and Moses are wanderers who, unwillingly, become recipients of a miraculous message. Though they share a mutual resistance, neither character can run from this calling. Neither man, however, embraces God's calling instantly; Parker resists Christ, getting drunk, and fighting until he eventually must acknowledge "the great

change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished” (CW 666). In much the same way, Moses is hesitant, asking God “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” and begs God to choose someone else (Ex. 3:11). Moses, like Parker, eventually realizes the futility of running and submits to God’s calling saying “Please Lord, now send the message by whomever you will” (Ex. 4:13).

Historically, Moses is famous for both his encounter with the burning bush and receiving the Law (the Ten Commandments). While the burning bush scenario is obvious in “Parker’s Back,” Parker’s inscribed back is wholly suggestive of Moses receiving the inscription of the law. God gives the inscribed law to Moses in a momentous event complete with thunder, flashes of lightning, “the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking” (Ex. 20:18). In its modernized version, Parker’s reception is quite dramatic as well. After his encounter with the burning bush, he raced into town knowing “there had been a great change in his life” (CW 666). Upon his arrival into town, “Parker still barefooted, burst,” into a tattoo parlor, where the artist doesn’t even “recognize Parker in the hollow-eyed creature before him” (CW 666). Parker, like Moses, even hears the voice of God telling him to “GO BACK” which leads him to the image of “the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” (CW 667).

Parker, like Moses and the Ten Commandments, faces and inscribes God’s message, with the tattoo being a version of the inscribed law that God establishes. Parker even has God’s eyes boring into his skin, as he literally carries God on his back. Much the same way that the law of Moses becomes the focal point of Exodus, so does Parker’s

inscription in “Parker’s Back,” since the title alludes to both the anatomical significance as well as the implication of Parker’s return.

This voice that commands Parker to “GO BACK” is the same voice that forces Moses to return to Egypt. Parker following God's ominous instruction feels the need to return to Sarah Ruth during the story’s climax. Both are commanded to return, an essential theme in stories of both prophets.

Before he returns to Sarah Ruth, Parker, still awestruck by the events of the last two days, visits the pool hall, an old haunt of his. The tattoo on Parker’s back takes a greater significance when his friends forcefully lift Parker’s shirt in order to view his tattoo. O’Connor describes how the men, awestruck, release Parker’s shirt as it falls “like a veil over the face” (CW 671). Obviously, this allusion is quite intentional, reminiscent of Exodus 34 as Moses stands before the face of God at Mt. Sinai. When Moses returns “the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him” (Ex. 34:30). Because of this, many were afraid to approach Moses. Therefore, “when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take off his veil until he came out” (Ex. 34:33-34). This veil imagery that O’Connor alludes to is no coincidence and reminds readers of the gravity of the situation. Parker’s shirt veils Christ’s face tattooed on his back, and once that veil is lifted “there was a silence in the pool room” (CW 671). The unveiling of the tattoo elicits the same fear that Moses’ unveiled face educes for his peers.

When Parker decides to follow God’s instruction and go back to Sarah Ruth, because he believes “she would know what he had to do,” he displays his new insight by literally turning his back to Sarah Ruth (CW 672). As Parker unbuttons his shirt, she

replies “And you ain’t going to have none of me this near morning,” which should cause readers, who realize the gravity of the situation to snicker (CW 674). As Parker removes his shirt, he turns his back to Sarah Ruth and cries “Look at it!” asking, “Don’t you know who it is?” (CW 674). This scene parallels God telling Moses “‘You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!’ Then the Lord said ‘Behold there is a place by Me and you shall stand there on the rock and it will come about while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen’” (Ex. 33:20-23). This event takes place as “the Lord passed by in front of him” (Ex. 34:30). As God shows Moses his back, while hiding him in a cleft on Mt. Sinai, O’Connor has Parker, in a similar fashion, expose Sarah Ruth to the face of God by showing his back. The back is foregrounded in both stories and alluded to in the title, “Parker’s Back.”

As Sarah Ruth looks out the window upon “Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby,” O’Connor ends the story, as she predicts, with Parker, who “felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself, but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country,” echoing the “stranger in a strange land” (Ex. 2:22) theme (CW 675, 672). Again, this recalls Moses, as both men, by standing in the presence of God and accepting his commission, will never be the same. When Sarah Ruth rejects Christ, her words ring out poignantly “It ain’t anybody I know” (CW 674). Thus, Parker is cast out crying, a stranger in a strange country.

Most scholars have noticed the Moses allusion, though few to such an extent; however, before examining the significance of Parker bringing the picture of Christ on

his back home to Sarah Ruth, who clings to the Law of Moses, there is another biblical allusion that should be noted within this story. Though previously unobserved, O'Connor has introduced into the O.E. Parker figure both Moses and Saul allusions. Parker's transformation, indirectly, mirrors Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, which should also be considered to understand the full resonance of the story.

Saul is on his way to Damascus when "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground" (Acts 9:3-4). This light from heaven that flashes corresponds with the analogous flaming tree, which O'Connor alludes to twice. Saul, much like Parker is thrown to the ground and in both instances, the men are subject to the same pair of "all demanding eyes" of Christ (CW 667). Like Parker, Saul is both an unwilling and unlikely candidate for prophecy. Where Parker feels the "hot breath of the burning tree on his face" and "collapsed on his knees," Saul is physically blinded by his encounter with God (CW 665).

Jesus asks Saul, "why are you persecuting me?" and commands him to "get up and enter the city, and it will be told you *what you must do*" (Act 9:4,6). Saul is in the grip of the Lord and must follow him. Parker, immediately after the tree fire, is in a similar state, as he "did not allow himself to think on the way to the city. He only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it" (CW 666). Saul, blindly, must enter the city and wait to follow the Lord's command. Similarly, Parker, on the ground, after he has "obeyed" the voice of God, thinks that Sarah Ruth "would know *what he had to do*. She would clear up the rest of it," and "the thought of her brought him slowly to his feet"

(CW 672). Parker rising up off the ground is amazingly like Saul, who is also told to rise up and head toward the city.

As Parker arrives back home, he is refused entrance unless he first acknowledges his full name. As Parker “bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole,” he finally acknowledges his name “Obadiah...Obadiah Elihue” (CW 673). The moment he does so, “he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (CW 673). This act completes Parker’s transformation, allowing him to accept his prophetic sight through the confirmation of his name and, ultimately, realizing his calling from God. This instance when the light pours through him is evocative of Saul’s conversion when Ananias, taking instruction from God, lays his hands on Saul proclaiming, “‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened” (Acts 9:17-19). Both epiphanies complete a prophetic transformation. Both incidents, also lead to the prophets accepting their names and their callings. Parker embraces his full name of Obadiah Elihue, a name he previously disdained since “he had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only the files of the navy, the government, and it was on his baptismal record” (CW 662). Those who knew the biblically significant name would know his prophetic calling since Parker always felt “as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion” (CW 662, 661). Saul, on the other hand, after his conversion becomes known as Paul.

This name change signals the transformation both complete as well as the religious paradigm shift that both follow.

Neither Parker nor Saul seem likely candidates as God's messengers, yet they share an analogous calling and transformation. Both were adamantly opposed to religion, as Saul was heading to Damascus to persecute Christians, while Parker claims, "he didn't see it was anything in particular to save him from" (CW 662-663). It is because of their lifestyles that their peers, in both stories, are surprised, upon their conversion. Ananias fears Saul, stating "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem," while Parker's friends tease "O.E.'s got religion and is witnessing for Jesus, ain't you...Leave it to Parker to think of a new one!" (Acts 9:13, CW 671).

For O'Connor, using both the Moses and Saul allusions underscores, ultimately, her intentions within "Parker's Back." As one of O'Connor's last stories published and, obviously, one of her most mature works, "Parker's Back" seems to make the point that what Moses sees when he encounters the burning bush, what Parker sees in the tree fire, and the force that knocks Saul onto the ground are all one and the same. What these men encounter in seeing God's glory is really Jesus who said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the father" (Jn 14:9).

Several interesting implications are made visible by the juxtaposition that occurs when O'Connor combines Parker's story with that of Moses, from the Old Testament, and Saul, from the New Testament. In a sense, she reverses the polarity of both these biblical allusions. For instance, Sarah Ruth, whose mere name bears Old Testament significance, uses Moses against Parker in the end of the story. When Parker tells Sarah

Ruth that the tattoo is actually God, her heart hardens much like the Pharaoh in Exodus, as she screams “Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolator in this house!” (CW 674). Of course, Sarah Ruth’s statement is not only an allusion to the idolaters “who inflame yourselves among the oaks, under every luxuriant tree” (Is. 57:5), but also a reference to the second commandment (Ex. 20:4) and to the children of Israel’s idolatry in Exodus 32 as they create an idol to serve while Moses is away on Mt. Sinai. The irony lies in the fact that Sarah Ruth uses the Law of Moses and her own version of Old Testament Christianity in which even “churches were idolatrous” to refuse God’s image presented to her (CW 663). Through Sarah Ruth, O’Connor recapitulates exactly the tension, central to Christianity, in seeing Moses and the Law as only a partial revelation of God and accepting Jesus as the full revelation. Essentially, O’Connor has Parker, a version of both Moses and Saul, offering God’s image to Sarah Ruth, a religious hypocrite clinging desperately to the Law of Moses, and being rejected the same way that Moses was rejected, Saul was rejected, and, ultimately, Jesus was rejected.

In offering grace, in an unusual way, Parker presents God to Sarah Ruth. Of course, this image is that of an “all demanding” God, but also a transforming God, which is the significance of the allusion to Saul in the story. While most scholars focus on the Moses, Job, and Jonah allusions in the story, those are all Old Testament allusions—none of these men experience the transformation that Parker goes through. Thus, it is necessary, for this story to work, to make the Saul connection, since both men experience very similar conversion experiences, the mere magnitude of which are not paralleled. When Parker acknowledges his name and feels “the light pouring through him,” this is

Saul transformed (CW 673). Parker, like Saul, has undergone a reformation, and is now a prophet bearing the message of Jesus. Unfortunately, Sarah Ruth, still clinging to the Law of Moses, can't accept this message; it's much too difficult for her and she considers the mere suggestion of God in human form idolatrous since "He's a spirit. No man shall see his face" (CW 674). Parker offers her Christ, and instead she beats him with a broom until "large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ" (CW 674). Like the Old Testament Pharisees whom she was modeled after, Sarah Ruth rejects and crucifies Christ. In typically O'Connor fashion, but in different ways, neither character lives up to his or her Old Testament namesake. This is more than just an ironic detail; it is a fundamental example of the polarity shifts found throughout O'Connor's corpus.

This story, which Bleikasten referred to as one of "O'Connor's most explicitly religious stories," is a multi-layered work in which O'Connor manages to reverse the polarity of the biblical stories she transfigures on two different levels (9). The genius of this story lies in the way that she is able to capture the biblical world and integrate it into the modern-day secular one, in two different ways.

The initial polarity shift in "Parker's Back," derives from the fact that she is retelling the story of Moses through O.E. Parker, "a walking panner-rammer" who can only find pleasure in drinking, debauchery and tattooing, which hurt "just enough to make it...worth doing" (CW 658). Parker, much like Moses, is a wanderer turned prophet who receives a miraculous calling from God, encounters God face to face, is inscribed, veiled, and told to "GO BACK" becoming "a stranger to himself...into a new country" (CW 667, 672). Although, they share several differences, Parker is a modernized Moses who bears "the all demanding eyes" of God and brings the image of

Christ to the people (CW 667). If the image of a modern-day Moses as a tattooed sailor weren't enough, O'Connor further complicates the story by juxtaposing Parker's conversion with Saul's conversion. There is a paradigm shift, or a second polarity reversal, in juxtaposing both Moses and Saul in the same story. O'Connor synthesizes Moses, the man who receives the Law directly from God, with Saul, the New Testament preacher who preaches Jesus' grace freeing one from the Law. Both Moses and Saul are influential biblical figures, yet they stand for different theological positions in the Old and New Testament. The blending and reconciling of the two archetypes is something that no theologian, or fiction writer for that matter, would normally do; however, O'Connor successfully blends elements from both Moses and Saul into her protagonist.

Although an odd combination, the Moses and Saul connection is crucial to the success of "Parker's Back." The Moses connection in the story is important for the setting and development of O'Connor's intended theme. Parker, like Moses, stands barefoot in front of the burning tree before the glory of God. The Old Testament elements running through the story desensitize the reader at first to O'Connor's intentions. Most readers, like Parker, believe that Sarah Ruth will love the tattoo since "she can't hep herself...She can't say she don't like the looks of God," and, thus, are surprised when she rejects Christ (CW 670). However, the Saul connection helps us make sense of this rejection. When Parker returns to show Sarah Ruth the face of God, whom she crucifies, O'Connor illustrates—through Parker's acknowledgement of his name and his own prophetic transformation—that he brings the same message Saul brings: grace. Sarah Ruth is reminiscent of the New Testament Pharisees refusing prophecy, the image of God that Parker bears. O'Connor's striking juxtaposition is

designed to catch the reader's attention and wake him or her up to his own potential rejection of God's image.

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#### **Chapter 4: From Dishonor to Glory: O'Connor's Pauline Allusion in "Judgment Day"**

O'Connor's "Judgment Day," a reworking of her MA thesis "The Geranium," is perhaps the most mysterious story within her corpus. O'Connor succeeds by transforming it from a simplistic and "sentimental" story which she had "never been satisfied with" into a "theologically pungent" masterpiece (Whitt 62, HB 588). Thus, "Judgment Day" is, as Wood asserts, "as complicated—in narrative and imagery, in plot and character—as 'The Geranium' is simplistic" (162). The reworked "Judgment Day" is filled with several biblically thematic elements ranging from Tanner's hometown of Corinth, Georgia to his obsession with returning home. While the story has never been a critical favorite, the few scholars who have written on the theological underpinnings of the story have noticed a connection between T.C. Tanner's obsession with resurrection and the final judgment with the apostle Paul's account of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. However, what most have failed to notice are the methods that O'Connor uses to transform Tanner into a vehicle for grace, as he brings Paul's message of grace and his vision of resurrection from the biblically significant Corinth, Georgia into New York City, a "no-place" (CW 685).

This story diverges from O'Connor's narrative style since, unlike any other story in her corpus, it is set in New York City—her only story set above the Mason-Dixon line. Her complex reworking has the opening scene occurring right before Tanner's death, with a series of five interlocking flashbacks taking readers back in time, deep into the heart of Corinth, Georgia. The story begins shortly before Tanner's heavily foreshadowed death. Immediately, readers are told that Tanner has been conserving his

strength for his journey home: “he meant to walk as far as he could get and trust the Almighty to get him the rest of the way” (C 676). When told chronologically, the story begins, thirty years before the opening scene in New York, City when Tanner managed a sawmill.

Tanner managed negro laborers in a sawmill outside Corinth, Georgia. Readers are told that he always had a way with negroes and “managed them with a very sharp penknife” (CW 681). To disguise his shaking hands, a repercussion of a kidney disorder, he would use his penknife to whittle as well as threaten the workers, saying, “Nigger, this knife is in my hand now but if you don’t quit wasting my time and money, it’ll be in your gut shortly” (CW 682). One day, a “large black loose-jointed negro,” starts hanging around the saw mill (CW 682). Tanner, afraid that his workers would mimic this behavior, decides to confront the man. As he approaches, Tanner feels “some intruding intelligence that worked in his hands” as “an invisible power” surges through him while carving (CW 683). Tanner, unaware of what his hands are carving, approaches the man; however, instead of feeling threatened, Tanner pities the man and asks, “you can’t see so good, can you boy?” (CW 683). Tanner, then, hands him the pair of spectacles he had been whittling, and said “put these on ... I hate to see anybody can’t see good” (CW 683). The man, appreciating Tanner’s gesture, accepts the glasses, and Tanner immediately, “saw the exact instant in the muddy liquor-swollen eyes when the pleasure of having a knife in this white man’s gut was balanced against something else” (CW 683). As the man accepts the glasses, Tanner sees before him “a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot” (CW 683). As the man accepts the glasses and regains his sight, he tells Tanner that he sees “the man that

make theseyer glasses.” (CW 684) From that point on, Tanner and Coleman are lifelong friends.<sup>6</sup>

The story moves forward thirty years later, as Tanner and Coleman have been living in a jerry-built shack working a still in the woods of a vacant property, after Tanner had lost his land. Tanner’s daughter comes to visit and begs Tanner to move into her apartment in New York City, but Tanner refuses.<sup>7</sup>

Later in the summer, the property is purchased by Dr. Foley, a man who was “only part black,” but was “everything to the niggers—druggist and undertaker and general counsel and real estate man and sometimes he got the evil eye off them and sometimes he put it on” (CW 680). Dr. Foley agrees to let Tanner and Coleman squat on his land if they work the still for him. When Tanner tells him “the governmint ain’t got around yet to forcing the white folks to work for the colored,” Dr. Foley responds by saying “The day coming ... when the white folks IS going to be working for the colored and you might’s well to get ahead of the crowd” (CW 684-685). Tanner felt as “if his spirit had been sucked out of him...and nothing was left on the chair but a shell”; in his predicament, Tanner decides he’d rather move to New York City to live with his daughter than be “a nigger’s white nigger,” a move he’d live to regret (CW 685). As Wood notes, “staying put would have been the practical thing to do,” yet Tanner chooses to adopt a “despicable existence with a dishonorable daughter,” which is “the impractical thing to do” (164).

Upon arrival in New York, his daughter gives him a brief tour of the city, which leads him to proclaim New York is “no place for a sane man” (CW 686). Three weeks

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<sup>6</sup> A play off the term “coal man”

<sup>7</sup> In O’Connor’s first published versions of the story (*Everything that Rises Must Converge* and *Complete Stories*, the daughter and Dr. Foley visit on the same day.

after his tour, new neighbors move into the apartment next door. As they move their belongings into the apartment, Tanner lingers in the hallway hoping to befriend the couple, telling his daughter that a “South Alabama nigger” has just moved in next door (CW 688). The next day, Tanner, waiting out in the hall, confronts the man saying “Good morning, Preacher,” since “it had been his experience that if a negro tended to be sullen, this title usually cleared up his expression” (CW 689). Tanner continues to unwittingly agitate the man saying, “reckon you wish you were back in South Alabama” (CW 689). The man, seething, responds, “I’m not from South Alabama...I’m from New York City. And I’m not a preacher! I’m an actor” (CW 689). Undaunted, Tanner continues, saying “It’s a little actor in most preachers” (CW 689-690). This confrontation leads to the man grabbing Tanner by the shoulders, saying “I don’t take no crap ... off no wool hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you” and finally telling Tanner, “I’m not a preacher! I’m not a Christian. I don’t believe in that crap. There ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God” as he throws Tanner through the doorway (CW 690). Tanner genuinely, if awkwardly, reaches out to the actor, sincere in his desire for companionship in a new place, but is denied, forcefully, by the actor. This event triggers Tanner’s first stroke, which leaves him confined to a chair dreaming about the final Judgment.

A few weeks later, Tanner overhears his daughter tell her husband that she plans to bury Tanner in New York City, saying “I’m not taking that trip down there again with anybody” (CW 678). After hearing this, Tanner becomes obsessed with returning home to Corinth. The next day, he allows his daughter to dress him so he can preserve his strength to write one final missive to Coleman, which he pins inside his jacket, saying:

“If found dead ship express collect to Coleman Parum, Corinth, Georgia ... Coleman sell my belongings and pay the freight on me & the undertaker. Anything left over you can keep ... P.S. Stay where you are. Don’t let them talk you into coming up here. It’s no kind of place” (CW 676).

His daughter grows weary with Tanner’s morbid penchant for “death and hell and judgment,” telling him “Don’t throw hell at me. I don’t believe in it” (CW 686, 678). Tanner continues to talk about the judgment as he tells his daughter, “The sheep’ll be separated from the goats,” an obvious reference to Jesus’ teaching on the judgment (CW 686).<sup>8</sup> Tanner dreams of dying and returning in a coffin to Georgia, only to be resurrected screaming “Judgment Day!” (CW 692). Tanner decides he must return to the South, dead or alive.

The next day, under terrible weather conditions, Tanner’s daughter sets out to go to the store. It is here that Tanner decides to make his getaway, hoping to walk to a train station, hop freight to Georgia, and get off in Corinth. Tanner walks out into the hall slowly, one foot at a time muttering, “The Lord is my shepherd” (CW 693). Tanner fears “he would never get there dead or alive” as he creeps down the staircase (CW 693). He is half way down the stairs before he loses his balance, landing “upside down in the middle of the flight” (CW 694). Delusional, he believes he is in his coffin and the lid is being removed, crying “in a weak voice, ‘Judgment Day! Judgment Day! You idiots didn’t know it was Judgment Day, did you?’” (CW 694). Instead he is greeted by the face of the actor, who mocks, “There’s not any judgment day, old man. Except this. Maybe this here is judgment day for you” (CW 694). Tanner replies “Hep me up,

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 25:32: All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Preacher. I'm on my way home!" (CW 694). When this daughter finds him, his head and his arms are "thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks" (CW 695). The daughter initially buries Tanner in New York City, but a troubled conscience leads her to exhume his body and send him back home to Corinth, Georgia.

As Whitt points out, "Tanner's belief in the resurrection echoes Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians 15," which is Paul's treatise on the final resurrection of the body in perhaps the most important chapter in 1 Corinthians, and a chapter where "doctrinal instruction seems to be Paul's primary aim" (72, Furnish 105). This chapter can be divided into three separate parts: Christ resurrected (1-11), resurrection of man (12-34), how the dead are raised (35-58).

In the first part of Paul's letter, he reiterates the importance of the resurrection of Christ, as he stresses that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that He was raised on the third day" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). He also discusses Christ appearing to Cephas, to the apostles, to James "and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me" (1 Corinthians 15:8). Paul then applies the idea of the resurrection to the people of Corinth saying "so we preach and so you believed" (1 Corinthians 15:11). Thus, the point of this first section is to establish, unequivocally, the resurrection of Christ as common ground for all those who preach Christ as well as for those who believe, in this case, the church of Corinth.

In the second part of this chapter, Paul addresses all of those who doubt the resurrection of believers as he argues, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1

Corinthians 15:12). Paul asserts that if there is no resurrection and the dead are not raised, then Christ, himself, never arose, and thus, Christianity is inane. However, Paul argues, since we [Christians] believe that Christ created men and since we believe that Christ resurrected from the dead, then we must believe in God's ability to resurrect believers. Traditionally, the Greek citizens of Corinth would not be familiar with the idea of resurrection, thus the idea of dying and rising again would be confusing for many, especially since many of the members of the original church were converts from many of the mystery religions prevalent throughout Greece. In this section of the chapter, Paul addresses doubts about resurrection by following the logical implications that arise from this belief; he then argues that since Christ did rise and has complete sovereignty over everything, then we must believe that he brings men back to life. Hence, Paul "argues for the inevitability of a resurrection of believers from the dead" (Fee 714).

In the third part of this chapter, Paul is concerned mainly with "how the dead are raised" (Fee 714). Paul insists that "there are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another" (1 Corinthians 15:40).

At the crux of this entire chapter is Paul's message that "the resurrection of the dead" occurs when the body "is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory" (1 Cor. 15:42-43). In a sense, this is the message that Tanner brings, the gospel turning things from perishable to permanent, from dishonor to glory. Paul emphasizes that as the earthly body falls victim to decay and "is sown a natural body," a heavenly body is raised in its place (1 Corinthians 15:44). Paul is fighting historical misinterpretations about the idea of resurrection; the result of

the earthly body rising up in glory, Paul argues, is that there is “a glorious resurrection-transformation of both the dead and the living wherein the final enemy, death, is swallowed up in victory” (Fee 714).

That we are led to these issues by the town’s name, which brings to mind Corinth, Greece and more importantly Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church, should come as no surprise to O’Connor’s audience since one needs look no further than “A Good Man is Hard to Find” to notice O’Connor’s penchant for biblically evocative names. As Margaret Whitt points out, “We know the setting of the story was selected by design. After all, Corinth does not appear in ‘The Geranium,’ but enters the manuscript in a later version” (63). However, while the name Corinth is an obviously symbolic name; it is also modeled after the actual town northwest of Milledgeville, as Whitt observes, “How convenient for O’Connor that a town with this name existed, literally, within the confines of her own territory” (64). In a sense, “Judgment Day” explores what happens when an idea native to O’Connor’s “territory”—resurrection of the body—is introduced to a setting where it is not at home. Corinth is both a literal home for Tanner as well as the final home for his body. He yearns for both, which provides the basis of this story’s biblical transformation. Tanner is the most religious character in the story, especially since most characters don’t believe in “the hardshell Baptist hoey” Tanner concerns himself with (CW 678). After Tanner is transplanted to New York City, the displaced Southerner decides that the North is “no kind of place” to live (CW 678). After one brief sight seeing tour, he refuses to go outside, but rather stays inside, as he imagines showing Coleman around the evils of New York City and regrets his decision to move North,

deciding “he would have been a nigger’s white nigger any day” rather than live in the “pigeon hutch” building that he now resides (CW 685, 686).

Through Tanner’s eyes, O’Connor depicts New York as a wasteland, hence the repetition of New York as a “no-place” (CW 685).<sup>9</sup> As far as Tanner is concerned the Big Apple is rotten to its core, as O’Connor’s New York is inhabited only by the damned who all believe that “there ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God” (CW 690). Thus, the inevitable conflict when Tanner is moved from Corinth, Georgia to New York City.

Indicative of O’Connor’s narrative approach, Tanner is a strange, and seemingly unfit, choice of prophets, an unlikely choice to bring God’s message of victory over death to the “no place” of New York City, but this is often true of God’s elected. However, Tanner is a difficult figure to dismiss and is much more complex than a cursory reading might suggest; even his daughter realizes this as she tells her husband “he was somebody when he was somebody. He never worked for nobody in his life but himself” (CW 677). Although people in New York dismiss his message about the judgment as “morbid,” Tanner is much more spiritually-conscious than any other Northerner who appears in the story. Tanner’s prophetic call begins years earlier when he first meets Coleman. The “Invisible power” that leads him to carve the glasses seems to be the Holy Spirit working through him, making Tanner a vessel of the Lord. As he comes upon Coleman, instead of seeing him as a threat, which is the original reason for the initial confrontation, Tanner finds himself looking upon Coleman with pity and with love. As Tanner gives Coleman the new glasses that enable his vision, it is like a “clownish” version of Jesus looking at the blind man. Tanner handing the wooden spectacles to Coleman echoes Jesus as he “spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and applied the clay to his eyes” (Jn.

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<sup>9</sup> CW 676, 685, 686

9:6). When Tanner sees Coleman as his “negative image,” he is identifying with Coleman, since both are “clownish and captive” in this broken world (CW 683). They are both captive in different ways, yet through Tanner’s action, Coleman is released, wearing the wooden spectacles that have no glass and yet restore his vision of a world that is whole rather than broken. Thus, as Wood argues, “these glasses that are not glasses become the means ... and the symbolic center of the story,” marking Tanner’s transformation into an O’Connor prophet (163).

Tanner’s impish nature is a trademark O’Connor rhetorical device. Tanner is an atypical prophet, a clownish figure who brings the truth to New York City, a no place where no one is interested. O’Connor doesn’t divulge the circumstances that lead to Tanner’s dislocation. Readers do not know how Tanner lost his business and personal property, but simply that Tanner is forced by circumstance to move to New York City. When Tanner arrives in New York, his eschatological beliefs bother everyone around him, as he becomes obsessed with two things: Corinth and judgment (hence the title).

Tanner’s first encounter in New York City comes when the negro actor moves in next door. Tanner, in his clownish way, tries to identify with the actor, much as he had with Coleman the day his hands took on a life of their own. He refers to the new neighbor as “Preacher” because “it had been his experience that if a negro tended to be sullen, this title usually cleared up his expression” and asks the neighbor if he would be interested in fishing (CW 689). Although, his approach may seem ignorant, Tanner has only the best intentions in mind. However, the neighbor responds in horror and rage at the thought that such a person could be identifying with him, as he tells Tanner “I don’t take no crap ... off no wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like

you” (CW 690). When the actor, seemingly responding to the source of Tanner’s empathy, tells Tanner that “I’m not a Christian. I don’t believe in that crap. There ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God,” Tanner responds by telling him “And you ain’t black ... and I ain’t white!” (CW 690). Tanner’s logic is revealed in this reversal, as he comments that the if actor is correct and there is no God, then we can’t be who we think we are. This echoes Paul’s logical reversal as he tells the people of Corinth who doubt the idea of resurrection, “if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless” (1 Cor. 15:16-17). Because he finds Tanner’s beliefs ludicrous, the neighbor also finds Tanner’s implied comparison horrifying, showing that we are all “clownish” and “captive,” no matter if you are “a South Alabama nigger” or a New York City actor (CW 683, 688).

Tanner’s daughter and son-in-law, like the actor, dismiss Tanner’s message as well. Paul’s address in 1 Corinthians 15 is intended for those who do not believe in the possibility of resurrection. This includes Tanner’s daughter who doesn’t want to “waste my good breath” talking about “death and hell and judgment,” the son he lost “to the devil,” his son-in-law and the actor who claims “there ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God” (CW 686, 679, 690). Through his argumentation, Paul asserts the importance of Christ’s resurrection for the foundation of Christian belief. This passage speaks to both non-believers who doubt Christ’s resurrection, as well as serves as a basis to further his arguments about the resurrection of the body for believers. Tanner, as Paul suggests, appears the foolish messenger of a truth dismissed by his own daughter as she tells him “don’t throw hell at me. I don’t believe in it” (CW 678). Despite Tanner’s many documented attempts, she can’t accept that “the Judgment is coming” as Tanner tells her

“the sheep’ll be separated from the goats. Them that kept their promises from them that didn’t” (CW 686).<sup>10</sup> The promise Tanner refers to is the daughter’s promise to bury Tanner in Corinth; this is a promise that neither the daughter nor the son-in-law intend to keep. Tanner’s message falls upon deaf ears, since his daughter and son-in-law ignore his warnings and believe that Tanner’s problems derive from Tanner sitting “in front of the window all the time” instead of watching TV, which would take his mind off “morbid stuff, death and hell and judgment” (CW 685-686). Tanner’s situation parallels, almost exactly, Paul’s words in Corinth, as he addresses all of those who “say that there is no resurrection” (1 Corinthians 15:12).

When no one in New York is receptive of Tanner’s message, he finally decides to return to Corinth. As he feebly tries to walk back to Corinth, he slips down the staircase in his building. Tanner, delirious, begins to picture his own resurrection. Tanner has a very literal interpretation, believing that he will be resurrected as he pleases, when he is pulled off the train in Corinth, Ga. Tanner dreams he will “give a thrust upward with both hands and spring up in the box” crying out “Judgment Day! Judgment Day!...Don’t you two fools know it’s Judgment Day?” (CW 692). Tanner’s vision is a text book example of the changes that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15 (CW 692).

Tanner’s vision is paradigmatic of a body “sown in dishonor but raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power” (1 Corinthians 15:43). Tanner’s body exists in a state of dishonor, since his life—especially its last stage—has been less than an honorable one; Tanner dies in a state of weakness. After his stroke he is barely able to stand; in fact, the last words he moans weakly are “Judgment Day!” and then later “Hep me up, Preacher. I’m on my way home!” (CW 694). Through Tanner, O’Connor

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<sup>10</sup> A direct reference to Mt. 25:32

exemplifies Paul's teachings on the resurrection. Tanner offers the actor grace, but the actor refuses to listen, telling him "there's not any judgment day" (CW 694). As Tanner lies in the stairwell, dying, the actor still can't accept Tanner's message; he can't believe that foolish, released Tanner is a potential reflection of himself. Tanner shows the neighbor that we are all clownish and captive, but he can't accept such a thing. The neighbor wants nothing to do with that and, inevitably, crucifies the person bringing that message.

The message that Tanner brings to the no-place, the message that gets him killed, is the message that Paul preaches in 1 Corinthians 15, that through the gospel we will all be changed, both now and at the Judgment day. It seems a foolish message, carried by a foolish messenger. As Whitt argues, Tanner's death "gives us a comic example of Paul's ideas, for certainly, in Tanner's telling of his resurrection, he keeps his personality" (72). Through Tanner, O'Connor presents a fool spreading Paul's foolishness.

And that is how O'Connor reverses the polarity of this story. O'Connor is able to embody Paul's message to the Corinthians, in which Paul tells the people of Corinth that "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Paul realizes that his message must sound foolish, but he asks "has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:20-21). Paul is aware of how the message must sound to the outsiders. O'Connor's reversal of polarity in which a foolish and clownish man delivers a life-changing message, is in fact no real reversal at all. She overturns the expectations of

those with a traditional expectation of prophet or truth teller, but she doesn't reverse Paul's message. O'Connor's protagonist is the incarnation of Paul's message as he states, "let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise" (1 Cor. 3:18). O'Connor's fool is the perfect courier to deliver Paul's message. The strangeness of Tanner, the way he apparently reverses the polarity of Paul's exalted vision and makes it an old man's foolishness is, oddly, Paul's point—that this message of resurrection is foolishness to the no place, the perishing world of New York City.

In this way, Tanner, ignorantly directed by "some intruding intelligence," is much like the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," whose "head cleared for an instant" as she, unknowingly, reaches out to the Misfit in grace, or O.E. Parker who follows "the all-demanding eyes" of Christ (CW 683, 152, 666). Tanner may not understand his calling, but he follows his calling, which in turn is O'Connor's way of offering this message to the reader. By rephrasing Paul's message, by making the judgment literal and placing it in the mouth of a fool in Corinth, Georgia and the no-place of New York City, she is offering the same foolish message to the reader. Her point is the same as Paul's: that through the gospel we will all be changed, we will be transformed from "dishonor" to "glory," both now and on Judgment day (1 Corinthians 15:43). She offers grace to those who will embrace the message as a method of freeing themselves from their own "clownishness and captivity" (CW 683). And she speaks that grace through the only way likely to catch the reader's—an exaggerated foolishness.

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