

THE CENTRAL MYSTERY:
CONVERSION EXPERIENCES
IN SELECTED WORKS OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR
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ABSTRACT

Although Flannery O'Connor's fiction has been subjected to criticism of all types and although she is known for her interest in religious matters, no one prior to this has done an in-depth study on the presentation of conversion in her fiction. With William James' The Varieties of Religious Experience as a basis for both definition and structure, O'Connor's works were examined in the light of the conversion experience as it is broken down into three stages: a sense of sin, a state of exhaustion combined with a realization of the individual's inability to change, and conversion itself. Conversion can be either sudden or gradual. Francis Marion Tarwater, the protagonist of O'Connor's novel The Violent Bear It Away, is the prototypical convert, going through all three stages and experiencing both types of conversion. O'Connor cements her plot with pervasive symbolism, and both plot and symbolism combine to demonstrate her thesis that conversion – or at least the possibility of conversion – is included in every good story.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor has been examined from almost every possible angle: as a Catholic writer, as a woman writer, as a Southern writer, as a Gothic/grotesque writer, and as a comic writer; her work has been subjected to biographical, historical, feminist, reader-response, and secular as well as theological criticism.¹ But while many critics have discussed the evangelistic intent of O'Connor's work, few have focused on what O'Connor found to be the "central mystery" of religious experience – conversion. Those who have written on the topic (William Allen; Coulthard, "Deadly Conversions"; Coulthard, "Sermon"; Hines) have concentrated on only a few stories rather than on O'Connor's tradition in the matter. This study seeks to examine this tradition as it appears in certain works by O'Connor – in particular, ten short stories and her final novel – as conversion is presented through both plot and symbolism.

A major theme of O'Connor's, conversion appears in its various stages in almost all of her stories and both of her novels; because of this, some sort of selection had to be made. While certainly stories other than the ones chosen

could be used to support the conversion process – most notably “The Displaced Person” and “Parker’s Back,” as well as Wise Blood – the works selected stand as representative, not as conclusive; an exhaustive evaluation would go far beyond the limits of this study. The stories included here cover all periods of O’Connor’s writing career and were chosen according to their usefulness in presenting the stages of conversion as they are described in William James’ definitive work, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.

According to James, there are three stages of conversion: a sense of sin, particularly one’s own (168-70); a state of emotional exhaustion, in which one realizes his/her inability to free himself/herself from “undesirable affections” (177-78); and, finally, either a sudden (180-88) or a volitional conversion (172-74), the latter being a “gradual . . . building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits” (172).

Because O’Connor believed that “all good stories are about conversion, about a character’s changing” (“To ‘A’” 275), that experience – or at least the possibility of that experience – dominates her work, and O’Connor treats all of James’ stages and both types of conversion in her stories. The first stage is demonstrated by Hazel Motes in “The

Peeler," Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth in "The Partridge Festival," and Mrs. Cope and her daughter Sally Virginia in "A Circle in the Fire." In these pieces, O'Connor takes her characters through the first step in the "conversion process" (James 177), allowing them to see their sinful nature, and then she stops. She goes one step further with Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill" by bringing him to a state of emotional and physical exhaustion and a realization that he is unable to make anything of his life without the help of the Holy Spirit, but again she stops short of a full conversion experience.

Finally, in what are considered some of her finest and certainly among her most powerful stories, O'Connor allows her characters to go through conversion itself. For some — like Harry Ashfield in "The River," the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," and Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger" — it is a sudden transformation, for as O'Connor comments, "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime" ("To 'A'" 427). Still others, like the unnamed child of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," demonstrate a volitional conversion, a type that O'Connor also acknowledges:

I don't think of conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it. ("To 'A'" 430)

This kind of conversion, while gradual, also contains "critical points . . . at which the movement forward seems much more rapid" (James 172), and that is evident in the two stories that fit in this mode.

Francis Marion Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away, however, does not fit neatly into any of the stages mentioned above; instead, he can be seen as the prototype of the convert, as he moves through every stage, from a realization of God to a realization of his unworthiness and sin to an emotional "giving up" to a "giving in" to God. His conversion is both gradual, taking place over the fourteen years he has been with his great-uncle, and sudden, when after his rape he returns home and finally submits to his calling.

Throughout the short stories and the novel examined here, Flannery O'Connor emphasizes the spiritual nature of her work by the constant use of symbols: archetypal (fire,

reflections, the sun, trees), sacramental/mythical (blood, bread, bulls, water, wine), and iconographical (particularly hogs/pigs). She also turns everyday objects into symbols, which is particularly obvious in her use of hats, dairies, and shoes. She has a fondness for color, which is her hands – as in Thomas Hardy's in Tess of the D'Urbervilles – becomes symbolic. Colors also reflect her often sacramental approach: black and white, which are usually contrasted in clothes and in the conflict between the races; red, pink, and orange, which appear mostly in connection with the sun – a pervasive symbol in O'Connor (Burns, "'Torn'" 154-66) – and are reminiscent of blood; green, which often indicates life, although sometimes ironically; and purple, which is associated with the sunset and usually indicates penitence, and violet/lavender, which often connotes evil and becomes symbolic at the end of The Violent Bear It Away, when the stranger finally appears to Tarwater.

O'Connor further strengthens her presentation by using repeated themes: baptism, dreams and visions, the concept of "good," laughter and jokes, prophecy, silence, thanksgiving and gratitude, and the sins of vanity, pride, and meanness. These combine with recurrent contrasting ideas, some of which take on almost symbolic qualities:

city versus country; hard work versus "lazy" and "irresponsible"; intellectualism versus wisdom; material success versus spiritual reality; moderation versus fanaticism; old versus young and/or new; predestination versus free will; and self-sufficiency and self-imposed control/order versus dependency.

All these elements work together in O'Connor to present a complete picture of the conversion experience, a subject that O'Connor admitted was difficult to present:

A novel [and, by extension, any story] dealing with conversion is the most difficult the fiction writer can assign himself Making grace believable to the contemporary reader is the almost insurmountable problem of the novelist who writes from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. (Review of The Malefactors 16)

This was the problem O'Connor attempted to overcome; it is up to the reader to decide whether she succeeded or not.

Notes

1. Some critics who examine O'Connor primarily as a Catholic writer are Suzanne Allen, Gary Hart, Josephine Jacobsen, Gene Kellogg, Gilbert Muller, Cheryl Pridgeon, Gabriele Robinson, Albert Sonnenfeld, and Ralph Wood; they and the following critics are listed in the Works Cited section.

Some critics who look at O'Connor as a woman writer are Robert Drake ("Ladies"), Claire Kahane ("Gothic Mirrors"), and Louis Rubin ("Two Ladies").

Critics who consider O'Connor primarily as a Southerner are Thomas Carter, Samuel Coale, Robert Coles ("Flannery" and South), A. R. Coulthard ("Christian Writer"), Drake ("Ladies"), Melvin Friedman ("Flannery"), Louise Gossett, James Greene, Frederick Hoffman, Patrick Ireland, Harvey Klevar, Marion Montgomery ("Southern Reflections"), Delma Presley, Rubin (Faraway, "Flannery," and "Two Ladies"), Lewis Simpson, Ted Spivey ("Flannery's South"), Walter Sullivan, and Thomas Young.

Critics who specialize in O'Connor as a Gothic and/or grotesque writer are Robert Bowen, Preston Browning ("Grotesque Recovery"), Stuart Burns ("Freaks"), Larry Finger ("Elements"), Marshall Gentry, Geoffrey Harpham, Melissa Hines, Kahane ("Gothic Mirrors"), Lewis Lawson, Irving Malin ("Flannery" and Gothic), Muller, Paul Nisly ("Flannery" and "Mystery"), Presley, Ronald Schleifer, Ollie Snow, and Thomas Wright.

Those who consider O'Connor as a comic and/or humorous writer are Louise Blackwell, Rebecca Butler, Brainard Cheney, Kahane ("Comic"), Jane Keller, Roberta Langford, Carter Martin ("Comedy"), Clara Park, Carol Shloss, and Clinton Trowbridge ("Comic Sense").

Biographical critics include Coles ("Flannery"), Friedman ("Human"), Lorine Getz, Caroline Gordon, Josephine Hendin ("Search" and World), Marion Montgomery (Why), George Murphy and Caroline Cherry, and Sonnenfeld. O'Connor was particularly irritated by Time's review of The Violent Bear It Away ("God-Intoxicated Hillbillies"), because the writer spent too much time discussing her lupus erythematosus and not enough discussing the novel ("To Elizabeth Fenwick Way" 373).

Historical critics include John Desmond ("Flannery" and "Risen Sons"); feminist critics include Kahane ("Gothic Mirrors") and Louise Westling ("Mothers" and Sacred Groves); reader-response critics include Robert Brinkmeyer, Sarah Gordon, and Harpham (186-87).

Critics who prefer to interpret O'Connor's work in a secular light include William Doxey, Robert Magliola, John May ("Flannery"), Stanley Renner, and Rubin ("Company").

Those who read O'Connor in some religious sense include Nadine Brewer, Coulthard ("Christian Writer"), Drake ("Shadow"), Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain, David Eggenschwiler, Finger ("O'Connor"), Richard Giannone, Thomas Gossett ("Believer" and "Quest"), Janet Greisch, Peter Hawkins, Forrest Ingram, Klevar, Thomas Lorch, May (Pruning), James McCullagh, Thomas Merton, Robert Milder, John O'Brien, Francis Smith, Sonnenfeld, Spivey ("Religion"), J. O. Tate, and Wood. Especially controversial is John Hawkes' article on "Flannery O'Connor's Devil."

O'Connor has even been accused — by Melvin Williams — of being racist in the presentation of blacks in her stories, although both Barbara Tedford and Alice Walker seem to disagree with that evaluation.

The works cited here are representative, of course, of the wide body of criticism that is available on Flannery O'Connor and her fiction. This listing does not purport to be in any way complete.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Stage of Conversion

William James defines conversion as "the process, gradual or sudden," by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior [sic] and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior [sic] and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (160). The first stage in this process, according to James, is a realization of personal sin, something which causes a "wavering and divided self" (James 165) that requires a subsequent unification through conversion. James describes this first step: "To begin with, there [is] . . . in the mind of the candidate for conversion . . . the present incompleteness or wrongness, the 'sin' which he is eager to escape from" (174). Citing E. D. Starbuck, James claims that "conversion is 'a process of struggling away from sin rather than striving towards righteousness'" (Starbuck 64; qtd. in James 174). This realization of sin – and of the common heritage of man due to original sin – is evident in varying degrees in Flannery O'Connor's three stories, "The Peeler," "The Partridge Festival," and "A Circle in the Fire," although in these stories she does not take her

characters past that sense of sin into any further realization.

"The Peeler" is the basis for the third chapter of O'Connor's novel Wise Blood, although there are numerous differences between the two, particularly in the name and the honesty of the blind evangelist and in the emphasis of the story itself (Burns, "Evolution" 158). "The Peeler" presents a "god-obsessed young man" (Burns, "Evolution" 157) who is walking rather aimlessly downtown in a city in the evening, followed by his shadow – a pervasive symbol in O'Connor, demonstrating the spiritual reality of a person – "a thin nervous shadow walking backwards" (63).¹ A man is selling potato peelers at an outside booth, and Hazel Motes stops to watch. There he meets Enoch Emery, a bitter young man who plays a large part in Wise Blood, and a blind evangelist and his daughter. Haze rips up the tract that he is given, but because the girl has seen him, he feels guilty and follows her and her father, Enoch tagging along, to a place where they hand out more tracts. The blind man tells Haze that he is "marked" by God for salvation (72), something Haze resents. The story ends with a significant flashback to Haze's youth and his first exposure to guilt, brought on by his viewing of a naked woman at a carnival, a guilt that expands afterwards as he stands "flat against

[a] tree" like a condemned criminal to be crucified, punished by his puritanical mother, who somehow sees his loss of innocence and knows he has done wrong:

She hit him across the legs with the stick, but he was like part of the tree. "Jesus died to redeem you," she said.

"I never ast Him," he muttered.

She didn't hit him again but she stood looking at him, shut-mouthed, and he forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him. In a minute she threw the stick away from her and went back to the washpot, shut-mouthed. (80)

The next day Haze attempts to atone for his sins by walking a mile and a half in stone-filled shoes, thinking that "ought to satisfy" God, but "[n]othing happened" (80). This flashback illuminates the entire story, showing Haze to be if not Christ-haunted, at least guilt-haunted, and thus in the first stage of the conversion process.

The first words in "The Peeler" are the name of the main character, Hazel Motes; his first name, Haze, significantly reflects both his vagueness in direction and spiritual insight, and his last name recalls Christ's biblical admonition that in order to see clearly

spiritually one should remove the beam from his own eye – especially before he tries to remove the “mote that is in thy brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:3). Haze is a country boy in the city, and for O’Connor the city often symbolizes evil, a corruption of the natural order and of any earthly paradise, as it does most poignantly in “The Artificial Nigger” and The Violent Bear It Away. Here in “The Peeler,” the city takes on that meaning: Haze acts in an unfriendly manner typical of city dwellers, although he himself is new there. Enoch comments on this meanness, applying it first to the city dwellers and then to Haze himself:

“Only objection I got to Taulkinham is there’s too many people on the street,” he said confidentially, “look like they ain’t satisfied until they knock you down I ain’t never been to such a [sic] unfriendly place before People ain’t friendly here. You ain’t from here and you ain’t friendly neither.”

(68-69, 77)

Haze, in fact, demonstrates his unfriendliness by throwing the tracts that he is carrying into Enoch, causing the boy to run away.

While Enoch is an unsavory character, he can be considered Haze’s double (Burns, “Evolution” 158; see his

recognition of Haze in "The Peeler" 76), and in that role he acts as his name dictates: Enoch is Hebrew for "teacher," and while this Enoch is nothing like the biblical one who "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24), he unwittingly acts in accordance with the prophecy of Enoch in Jude 14-15:

"Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him."²

O'Connor uses Enoch to stir up the sense of sin in Haze, "to convict . . . the ungodly of all [his] ungodly deeds" by showing him his unfriendliness, which according to The Violent Bear It Away is equivalent with evil (138). In fact, Enoch's last name is especially significant, because as a hard, abrasive powder, emery is used for grinding and polishing, something Enoch certainly does to Haze.

The blind preacher, Asa Shrike, is also a catalyst in Haze's renewed sense of guilt. Again, the names are significant: a shrike is a songbird known for its hooked beak and its habit of impaling its prey on thorns; Asa is Hebrew for "physician," and the biblical Asa was "wholly

devoted to the Lord all his days" (1 Kings 15:14). Asa acts in both roles: as a true man of God (unlike the fraud he becomes in Wise Blood as Asa Hawkes), he works to heal Haze of his moral illness. First, like any good doctor, he identifies the problem: "I can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice" (72). Second, he proceeds with the diagnosis: "Listen, . . . you can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact. If who you're looking for is Jesus, the sound of it will be in your voice" (72). Third, despite Haze's insistence to the contrary, Shrike persists in showing Haze his illness:

"You got a secret need," the blind man said. "Them that know Jesus once can't escape Him in the end."

"I ain't never known Him," Haze said.

"You got a least knowledge," the blind man said. "That's enough. You know His name and you're marked. If Jesus has marked you there ain't nothing you can do about it. Them that have knowledge can't swap it for ignorance. . . . You're marked with knowledge You know what sin is and only them that know what it is can commit it." (72-73).

Asa's daughter follows this comment with a suggested cure for Haze's illness ("There ain't nothing for your pain but Jesus" [73]), but Haze ignores her, as he does throughout the story. But he cannot ignore the old man's solution:

He leaned forward so that he was facing Haze's knee and he said in a fast whisper, "You followed me here because you're in Sin but you can be a testament to the Lord. Repent! Go to the head of the stairs and renounce your sins and distribute these tracts to the people," and he thrust the stack of pamphlets into Haze's hand. (74)

Haze tries to escape the condemnation of the blind preacher, claiming "I'm as clean as you are" (74), but Shrike – as his name suggests – continues his relentless pursuit, physically by grabbing him with talon-like fingers and then by correctly identifying Haze's current sin as fornication and arguing with him over whether God is pursuing him or not.³ Haze, however, states the theological implications of original sin even better than Shrike does:

"That ain't nothing but a word [fornication]," Haze said. "If I was in Sin I was in it before I ever committed any. Ain't no change come in me." He was trying to pry the fingers off from around his arm but the blind man

kept wrapping them tighter. "I don't believe in Sin," he said. "Take your hand off me."

"You do," said the blind man, "you're marked."

"I ain't marked," said Haze, "I'm free."

"You're marked free," the blind man said. "Jesus loves you and you can't escape his mark. Go to the head of the stairs. . . ."

Haze jerked his arm free and jumped up. "I'll take them there and throw them over into the bushes," he said. "You be looking! See you can see."

"I can see more than you!" the blind man shouted. "You got eyes and see not, ears and hear not [Jer. 5:21], but Jesus'll make you see!" (74)

This is a critical passage in the story, because it not only shows Haze's resistance to the idea that he is sinful – something that O'Connor indicates that he has at least begun to learn by the end of the story when she concludes with the flashback – but also includes a discussion of two important parts of salvation: the reason and the response. Salvation is necessary, according to orthodox Christianity, because man inherited original sin from Adam. Haze speaks truer than he knows when he says

that he "was in [sin] before I ever committed any." That, O'Connor implies, is the state of every unsaved man. Salvation is a free gift available to all, but while "many are called, few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14), and O'Connor combines the seeming contradiction of predestination and free will by having Shrike insist "[y]ou're marked free" (74).

From this point on, Haze becomes more and more aware of his sinful nature. O'Connor employs here one of her favorite word games, using the name "Jesus" both on the surface as a curse and in a literal sense as the answer to statements: "I wouldn't follow a blind fool like that. My Jesus" (75); "There's always fanatics My Jesus" (75); "'Sweet Jesus crucified,' he said, and felt something turn in his chest" (75). Haze continues to resist the idea of Jesus: "I don't need no Jesus, Haze said. I don't need no Jesus. I got Leora Watts" (75). But he realizes that his relationship with Leora, a woman he had met the day before, is not satisfying for either of them; in fact, when he returns to her for more sexual gratification, she laughs at him (78). Even so, she consents to sleep with him again.

Leora's final words before she removes her nightgown are more than symbolic: they are almost prophetic. Haze sits on the bed, with his hat in his hand – the hat earlier

described as looking "like a preacher's hat" (63), one exactly like the blind man's (64). Leora takes it from him, commenting, "That Jesus-seeing hat!" (78); then she places it on her head and Haze turns off the light. Then without any transition, O'Connor presents the flashback, when Haze remembers the carnival that he attended in Melsy when he was young, where he saw the "SINSational" (78) nude woman in a coffin and was punished for it when he went home.

The entire story, then, works to demonstrate the first stage of conversion – the sense of sin. Haze moves from someone seemingly unaware of any spiritual need – although obviously in his childhood he had such an awareness – to his rejection of the tract "Jesus Calls You" (65-66), to his reluctantly-attempted reparation by the purchase of the peeler for the preacher's daughter (67, 71), to his unfriendliness to Enoch, to his rejection of the blind man's message, to his fornication with Leora, to his remembrance of his youth and the guilt he felt, which ended in another attempted reconciliation, the ascetic action of walking with rocks in his shoes. Haze realizes his need for atonement – that is why he continually attempts to make things right – but in this story he does not go beyond the sense of guilt that is stirred up in him to admit his

inability to remove the guilt by his own thoughts and actions.

The same is true of Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth in "The Partridge Festival," although they have an even stronger, if more subtle, encounter with the spiritual. Calhoun's biggest tragedy is that he is like his great-grandfather, "altogether unremarkable-looking, . . . all innocence and determination" (422). Like Calhoun, the old man was a "master merchant" (422), but Calhoun would rather be identified with a man named Singleton; the name is ironic, because Singleton turns out to be the "common man" rather than the "Übermensch, . . . 'a Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ'" (Browning, "Demonic" 37), that Calhoun romanticizes him to be.

Singleton had killed six people prior to Calhoun's arrival in Partridge because he had been locked up in stocks with a goat for refusing to buy an Azalea Festival Badge. Calhoun thinks Singleton is innocent; he believes he refused to buy the badge out of principle and that he reacted violently because he had been pushed to it, but it turns out that Singleton had refused to pay because he is a miser and that he shot the six men because he is insane. Calhoun, while resisting the obvious likeness he has to his great-grandfather, clings to his supposed likeness to

Singleton: "Though his eyes were not mismatched, the shape of his face was broad like Singleton's; but the real likeness between them was interior" (423).

Because of his identification with Singleton, he hopes to "mitigate his own guilt, for his doubleness, his shadow, was cast before him more darkly than usual in the light of Singleton's purity" (424). He considers Singleton as a "scapegoat. He's laden with the sins of the community. Sacrificed for the guilt of others" (431). Calhoun sees himself as guilty – and Partridge as guilty (427) – and the only men he considered innocent (Singleton and Biller, who was shot by accident instead of the mayor) turn out to be guilty also.

Of course, Calhoun prides himself on his resemblance to Singleton – or, rather, on his resemblance to his image of Singleton – and considers them to be the only two who are "different" (423, 429), and so when he finds a truly kindred spirit in Mary Elizabeth, literally the "girl next door" (425), he rejects her. They are both unpublished writers (434), and both have the same ideas concerning Singleton – that he is a scapegoat for the community, a Christ-figure, although neither believes in Christ (431, 435), and that meeting him will somehow be a salvation for them (437, 438). But both refuse to recognize the

similarity in the other, even while they are on their way in the rain to see Singleton at the insane asylum, to tell him that they are his "spiritual kin" (436):

"I have to go You have to prove to yourself that you can stand there and watch a man be crucified," she said. "You have to go through it with him. I thought about it all night."

"It may give you," Calhoun muttered, "a more balanced view of life."

"This is personal," she said. "You wouldn't understand," and she turned her head to the window. (438)

Calhoun considers Mary Elizabeth to be his competition; she has "shattered the communion between" him and Singleton (439), but he still knows, as she does, that the encounter with Singleton will change their lives:

. . . he was certain that the sight of Singleton was going to effect a change in him, that after this vision, some strange tranquility he had not before conceived of would be his. He sat for ten minutes with his eyes closed, knowing that a revelation was near and trying to prepare himself for it. (440)

The revelation is, of course, much different than either of them expect. After Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth request to see the madman, signing their last names as Singleton and recognizing for the first time that "in their common kinship with him, a kinship with each other was unavoidable" (441), the attendants bring Singleton out. Instead of offering Kurtz-like wisdom (439), however, Singleton comes out cursing, wearing a "black derby hat such as might be worn by a gunman in the movies" (442); he immediately makes lewd remarks and "suggestive noises" to Mary Elizabeth and pulls his hospital gown over his head. But even Singleton acknowledges their common bond: "You and me are two of a kind (443). Now, of course, this is not what either Mary Elizabeth or Calhoun wants.

She runs out of the asylum, followed by Calhoun, who quickly starts the car and drives almost madly, finally stopping a few miles down the road. It is then that they experience their long-anticipated epiphany:

They sat silently, looking at nothing until finally they turned and looked at each other. There they saw at once the likeness of their kinsman and flinched. They looked away and then back, as if with concentration they might find a more tolerable image. To Calhoun, the girl's face

seemed to mirror the nakedness of the sky. In despair he leaned closer until he was stopped by a miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles and fixed him where he was. Round, innocent, undistinguishable as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him. (443-44)

This time, it is pride that crumbles to make way for reality: Calhoun realizes for the first time that he is "no different from his own grandfather [sic] who established the Azalea Festival purely for business reasons" (Scouten, "Mythological" 71), that he is not only no better but no different than anyone else in Partridge. Although Leon Driskell thinks O'Connor "does not permit him the hope of Redemption but fixes him in an apparently predestined role, in which he is the victim of his heredity and caught 'incorrigibly'" (483), at this point both Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth have as much chance for redemption as any other person. After all, while he does recognize the face of his great-grandfather - his own face - reflected in Mary Elizabeth's glasses, perhaps Calhoun also sees a literal

Christ-figure, a "face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival" (444), a "master salesman" who has been "waiting there from all time to claim him" (444).⁴ But the possibility of their conversion remains somewhat ambiguous because O'Connor only allows them to gain a sense of their common humanity, and through that their participation in original sin, and then – as she does in "The Peeler – stops on the edge of the second step.

Much of the same thing happens in "A Circle of Fire," where a sense of guilt and sin becomes obvious to people who had not previously considered themselves "bad," although here the epiphany is even stronger than in the other two stories. The story opens, appropriately, with Mrs. Cope pulling up weeds and nut grass "as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (175), in sharp contrast to the disorder at the beginning of "The Partridge Festival," when Calhoun arrives at his great-aunts' house, an unpainted place "crammed" with azaleas (421). A neighbor of the Copes, Mrs. Pritchard, is discussing a girl who had a baby while in an iron lung. As Mrs. Cope's name implies, she is one of O'Connor's typical women, hardworking and proud of what she has accomplished, and she tries either to ignore Mrs. Pritchard's comments or

to change the subject to "something cheerful" (175). She attempts to handle every difficulty in this way – by hard work and positive thinking – but Mrs. Pritchard, who acts as Mrs. Cope's foil (they even wear almost identical hats; see Asals 52), realizes that some day this method will fail:

. . . she [Mrs. Cope] pointed the trowel up at Mrs. Pritchard and said, "I have the best kept place in the county and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it." She emphasized each word with the trowel. "I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not always looking for trouble. I take it as it comes."

"If it all come at oncet sometime," Mrs. Pritchard began.

"It doesn't all come at once," Mrs. Cope said sharply. (178)

But trouble does arrive "at once" in the form of three juvenile delinquents, led by a boy named Powell, who end up burning down Mrs. Cope's prize possession, her woods.

To emphasize the plot, O'Connor employs some of her favorite symbols. The opening line, in fact, works both to set the tone of foreboding and to invoke the symbolic use

of the trees, which are used to point the way to God. The sky – which usually indicates God's presence – is behind them, "pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through" (176). By the end of the story, the sun, another symbol for God, which here works together with the fire (176, 184), "had risen a little and was only a white hole like an opening for the wind to escape through in a sky a little darker than itself" (191).

The story is told from the point of view of Mrs. Cope's daughter Sally Virginia, a twelve-year-old who closely resembles the unnamed child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," particularly in her ugliness and meanness. She sees through her mother's pretensions and to a certain extent aligns herself with the boys, although her cruelty is in words rather than in actions. The child continually taunts her mother "for meanness" (176), although at the end of the story she realizes that she is, in fact, related to her mother spiritually as well as physically. As she watches the fire that the boys set burn out of control, she feels "weighted down with some new unplaced misery" – similar to Haze's "nameless unplaced guilt" ("Peeler" 80) – "that she had never felt before" (193). When she runs to Mrs. Cope, she sees on her face what she has experienced: "It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her

mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself" (193), stressing the universality of the misery of man's situation.

Up to that point, Mrs. Cope's predominant traits have been her pride and her false gratitude: they are "her woods" (176, 183), "her Negroes" (177), "her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber" (177) – and her thankfulness stems from the fact that "we have everything," although deep down she knows that "it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (177).

When the boys appear, Mrs. Cope is hypocritically hospitable, because she thinks it is expected of her and because she feels superior to them (Tedford 30), offering them crackers and Coca-Colas but refusing to let them spend the night in her house, due in part to her fear of their sexuality (181, 183); she even refuses to let them camp in her woods. But the food is not what these boys want; they have "the same look of hardened hunger" whether they have eaten or not (185):

. . . a peculiar look of pain came over her face as she realized that these children were hungry. They were staring because they were hungry! She almost gasped in their faces and then she asked

them quickly if they would like something to eat. They said they would but their expressions, composed and unsatisfied, didn't lighten any. They looked as if they were used to being hungry and it was no business of hers. (180)

That evening she feeds them sandwiches, but her positive comments on thanksgiving irritate them as much as they do Mrs. Pritchard:

"We have so much to be thankful for," she said suddenly in a mournful marveling tone. "Do you boys thank God every night for all He's done for you? Do you thank Him for everything?"

This put an instant hush over them. They bit into the sandwiches as if they had lost all taste for food. (184).

The boys are a continual exasperation to her because she cannot control them: they are ungrateful for what she gives them (183); they do not obey her about riding the horses (183-84); they insist that "[s]he don't own them woods God owns them woods and her too" (186); they are continually staring at her in what she considers to be a rude manner. But Mrs. Cope attempts to regain control:

"I cannot have this," Mrs. Cope said and stood at the sink with both fists knotted at her

sides. "I cannot have this," and her expression was the same as when she tore at the nut grass.

"There ain't a thing you can do about it," Mrs. Pritchard said. ". . . there ain't nothing you can do but fold your hands."

"I do not fold my hands," Mrs. Cope said.

(186)

But when the boys start the fire in the woods, she realizes for the first time that she is not in control. She cannot put out the fire, and she cannot hurry the black workers to do it (193). This realization is the beginning of her conversion, as it is for Sally Virginia.

Mrs. Cope has spent her entire life "escaping whatever it was that pursued her" (190), by ignoring unpleasantries like illness (175-76) and death (179) and by explaining away everything supernatural (189), but even her fear of fire (176, 181) foreshadows the uncontrollable destruction that is to follow, a destruction that begins the transformation for both Mrs. Cope and her daughter by stripping away their pride. For Mrs. Cope, this means realizing that she has no cause to be proud, that she is part of what Nathaniel Hawthorne called "the sinful brotherhood of mankind" (qtd. in Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 140), as the experience with Singleton revealed

to Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth. "Like the humiliation of Christ," Claire Kahane writes, "her misery leads to a reticence which is the first step to redemption" ("Artificial Niggers" 183). For Sally Virginia, the first step means realizing that she is no better than her mother.

This act of purging destruction – the fire – begins in a significant manner, with something that almost resembles a baptism, when Powell, Garfield Smith, and W. T. Harper strip naked and splash in the water of the cow trough while the girl watches from behind a tree (191-92). Like Haze at the end of "The Peeler" and the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" who has her face smashed into a nun's crucifix, Sally Virginia stands "partly hidden behind a pine trunk, the side of her face pressed into the bark" (192), a foreshadowing of her coming spiritual death. Her realization of the spiritual truth of the situation, that there is "something redemptive even in the heart of catastrophe" (Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 143), is obvious when instead of hearing "an evil laugh, full of calculated meanness" like Mrs. Pritchard has the night before (190), as the fire burns she hears "a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them"

(193), emphasizing Powell and his companions' almost theophanic role.

Once again, O'Connor takes the characters in this story into the anteroom of conversion by allowing them to see themselves as imperfect, even as sinful, but again she allows them to go no further. While Sally Virginia's epiphany is stronger and clearer than Hazel Motes' and Calhoun's, both she and her mother have quite a way to go before their conversion is complete. In other stories, however, O'Connor goes beyond this first stage into the next - a state of exhaustion and a realization that the individual is unable to change on his own.

Notes

1. C. G. Jung interprets the shadow as being "the dark opposite of ourselves that we usually prefer to hide from others, and even from ourselves" (Snider 24), an interesting concept when applied to Haze both in "The Peeler" and Wise Blood and to Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away.

2. In Wise Blood, Enoch, who is described as having "wise blood," ends up in a gorilla suit, "walking with God" and happy (O'Connor, Wise Blood 101-02). Robert Detweiler comments on this:

In an elaborate ceremony at night Enoch takes off his clothes, buries them, and dresses in the gorilla skin. The overtones of St. Paul's putting off the old man and putting on the new are unmistakable; the irony is in the inversion of the process: Enoch dresses like a beast in order to become more human. The paradox is that only by really giving himself up in the genuine Pauline sense could he at last become himself. (244)

3. Stuart Burns sees Shrike as a counterpart to Nathanael West's character of the same name in Miss Lonelyhearts, "suggesting his diabolic function and placing his remarks about Christ's redemptive powers in ironic perspective" ("Evolution" 158), but there is no indication in the text that Asa Shrike is being ironic in his presentation. Instead, O'Connor seems to be using the name Shrike in its literal rather than literary sense.

4. A book by Og Mandino called The Greatest Salesman in the World presents a similar picture of St. Paul as a salesman, following Christ as the "master salesman."

CHAPTER THREE

The Second Stage of Conversion

Speaking of the second stage of conversion, William James has this to say:

There are only two ways in which it is possible to get rid of anger, worry, fear, despair, or other undesirable affections. One is that an opposite affection should overpoweringly break over us, and the other is by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop – so we drop down, give up, and don't care any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy. Now there is documentary proof that this state of temporary exhaustion not infrequently forms part of the conversion crisis. So long as the egoistic worry of the sick soul guards the door, the expansive confidence of the soul of faith gains no presence. But let the former faint away, even but for a moment, and the latter can profit by the opportunity, and, having once acquired possession, may retain it. (176-77)

This is what happens to Asbury Fox, the main character in "The Enduring Chill," whom O'Connor described, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as "[a] wretched young man [who] arrives at the point where his artistic delusions come face to face with reality" ("To Alice Morris" 271).¹ A "pseudo-intellectual artist" (O'Connor, "To Maryat Lee" 265) – rather similar to Calhoun (Howell 270) – Asbury thinks he has come home to die, but, as Sally Fitzgerald says, "he is in for an even worse surprise" (Introduction xxvii).

Asbury had left his hometown to go to New York City to become a writer. Like Calhoun, he has failed in that; he has become sick, and the story opens with his return home. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Timberboro, Asbury experiences a near-vision – one of four dreams/visions in this story. In the sun and trees, he sees his first glimpse of the presence and power of God:

The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods that surrounded Timberboro. It cast a strange light over the single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks. Asbury felt that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the

mounting turrets of some exotic temple for a god he didn't know. The illusion lasted only for a moment before his attention was drawn back to his mother. (357)

Mrs. Fox, who owns a dairy farm outside of town, is — in Asbury's mind — the cause of all his trouble. In a letter he has written to be opened upon his death, fashioned on Franz Kafka's letter to his father (364), he castigates her: "I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. . . . Woman, why did you pinion me?" (364) Mrs. Fox, of course, has done no such thing. He sees her as childish (357), when he, in fact, is the one who needs to mature (358, 377).

Asbury's sister Mary George is a country school principal who believes she is an expert on everything (373). She is a realist, contrasting with Asbury's pronounced romanticism, commenting that "if Asbury had had any talent, he would by now have published something" (363). It is indeed due to this lack of publication that Asbury feels he has wasted his entire life (373, 377, 380), although O'Connor makes it clear that his real failure is in the spiritual realm:

There was something he was searching for, something that he felt he must have, some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died – make for himself out of his own intelligence. He had always relied on himself and had never been a sniveler after the ineffable. (378)

When he was five, Mary George had taken him to a revival, promising him a present, but he ran away from the evangelist. Later, when he asked her for the gift, she replied, "You would have got Salvation if you had waited for it but since you acted the way you did, you get nothing" (378). Now, however, Asbury is forced by his illness to wait, and predominant symbols in the story emphasize the inescapable, pursuing presence of God. First, Asbury is equated with the cows on his mother's farm; as soon as he arrives there, he sees "a small, walleied Guernsey . . . watching him steadily as if she sensed some bond between them" (362). This cow has Bang's disease, which is similar to the undulant fever that Asbury is suffering from (381). Later, the cow takes on further meaning when he dreams that a "large white [cow], violently spotted" is resurrecting him by licking his head (374). Second, the woods that surround the house act, as they did

in the beginning of the story, to hold in the light – which, as usual, indicates the presence of God (378). The light, like the cow in the field and the bird on the ceiling, seems to be waiting for Asbury (378).

The major symbol in the story, however, is the water stain on his bedroom ceiling:

Descending from the top molding, long icicle shapes had been etched by leaks and, directly over his bed on the ceiling, another leak had made a fierce bird with spread wings. It had an icicle crosswise in its beak and there were smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail. It had been there since his childhood and had always irritated him and sometimes had frightened him. He had often had the illusion that it was in motion and about to descend mysteriously and set the icicle on his head.

(365-66)

Later, as he waits for the Jesuit priest, Father Finn, to come, it seems that the bird is “poised and waiting too” (374). Father Finn sits below the bird during their conversation and chastises Asbury for his lack of belief and prayer, telling him to ask for the Holy Spirit. Asbury insists that “the Holy Ghost is the last thing I’m looking

for!" (376), an ironic statement because He is the one waiting in the form of the icicle-shaped bird (O'Connor, "To Caroline Gordon Tate" 257). Father Finn's one good eye glares at him then, pinning him to the bed by his stare (377), much as Dr. Block does (381). Asbury has spent the entire time insisting that "what's wrong with me is way beyond Block" (359, 360, 367), which is true in a spiritual sense, but both these men work to heal Asbury, one spiritually and the other physically. After Father Finn's visit, Asbury sits in bed, "staring . . . with large childish shocked eyes" (377), and after an abortive attempt at "communion" with his mother's farm hands, he falls asleep and has another dream, where two large rocks, resembling Ezekiel's wheel within a wheel, circle each other.

He wakes as Dr. Block arrives, for the first time experiencing a "clear head" and an almost prophetic insight into the future:

He had a sudden terrible foreboding that the fate awaiting him was going to be more shattering than any he could have reckoned on. He lay absolutely motionless, as still as an animal the instant before an earthquake. (381)

But the "fate" he expects is not forthcoming, at least not in the way he thought; instead of coming to announce Asbury's imminent death – something Asbury, as a romantic, has been looking forward to as a release from his life as a failure and as an action that, at last, would provide meaning to his existence (360, 367, 370, 373-74, 377, 380) – Dr. Block has come to tell him that he "ain't going to die" (381). He has undulant fever, caused by his rebellion in the dairy the year before when he drank unpasteurized milk against his mother's orders, showing on a literal level how sin causes both physical and spiritual illness (cf. O'Connor, "To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 299).

Asbury is disappointed with Block's announcement because he realizes that he must continue to live – and that, by implication, he must make something of his life – and as he looks into the mirror, he sees his "shocked clean" eyes and knows that "they have been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him" (382).² He cannot stand that knowledge and so he turns away and looks out the window, but what he sees there only reinforces the idea of "the Hound of Heaven" who is in patient pursuit. The sun, this time a "blinding red-gold," appears under a purple cloud (382), the purple perhaps indicating Asbury's coming penitence. The now-black tree line is silhouetted

against the deep red sky, acting as "a brittle wall, standing as it it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming" (382).

Then he experiences the exhaustion that James describes (176-77): "The boy fell back on his pillow and stared at the ceiling. . . . The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of the new" (382). This new life arrives in the form of the "fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness has been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously" (382). Asbury imagines that it is moving, and in that moment he understands that he must live his life "in the face of a purifying terror" (382), because – on a surface level – while undulant fever is not deadly, it is incurable. But his realization goes beyond that, and he knows that he must now face life realistically, including the spiritual aspects: "A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacably, to descend" (382).

Asbury, then, clearly demonstrates James' second stage of conversion. He has been reduced from someone who resists God to someone who realizes his imperfection; his inability to be successful is the source of his guilt (377). He is, as O'Connor says, "frozen in . . . humility" ("To 'A'"

261), and he now realizes that what the Jesuit in New York, Ignatius Vogle – the last name, appropriately enough, means “bird” in German – said is true: self-fulfillment comes through salvation, and salvation is only possible when “assisted . . . by the Third Person of the Trinity” (360). But Asbury must go through a state of exhaustion and must come to the point where he is ready to admit his intellectual and spiritual impotence before the transformation can take place, as James describes it:

In the extreme of melancholy the self that consciously is can do absolutely nothing. It is completely bankrupt and without resource, and no works it can accomplish will avail. Redemption from such subjective conditions must be a free gift or nothing, and grace through Christ’s accomplished sacrifice is such a gift. (200)

This is the point where Asbury finds himself at the end of the story, with “a developing self-awareness which may prepare the way for an epiphany” (Chard 8056A). As O’Connor comments on “The Enduring Chill,” “It’s not so much a story of conversion as of self-knowledge, which I suppose has to be the first step in conversion. You can’t tell about conversion until you live with it for a while [sic]” (“To Dr. T. R. Spivey” 299). While O’Connor calls this the

"first step," Asbury has actually come though the second stage of conversion and is perched on the edge itself, but once again Flannery O'Connor stops just short of the full experience, saying that for Asbury, "Faith can come later" ("To 'A'" 261). In other stories, however, her characters plunge, if somewhat reluctantly, into sudden and often violent conversions.

Notes

1. Asbury's name is a combination of two earlier Protestant evangelists: Francis Asbury (1745-1816), the first American Methodist bishop and a missionary to the Indians, and George Fox (1624-91), the founder of the Society of Friends. While the similarity may not be intentional - O'Connor commented once that "[t]he name Asbury don't interest me" ("To Cecil Dawkins" 546) - she often ironically uses the names of prominent Protestants like Methodist founder John Wesley ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Greenleaf") and Bible commentator C. I. Scofield ("Greenleaf").

2. Compare this description with the prophecy of Old Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away: "The prophet I raise up out of this boy will burn your eyes clean" (168).

CHAPTER FOUR

Sudden Conversion

William James defines a "sudden conversion" as one of "those striking instantaneous instances of which Saint Paul's is the most eminent, and in which, often amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complex division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new" (180). James lists the usual feelings that accompany this type of conversion: a sense of peace, of enlightened perception, of the newness of the world, and of some higher control (199, 202-03).

Some of Flannery O'Connor's best-known and most often-critiqued stories conclude with a sudden conversion, the protagonists often experiencing one or more of these four reactions. In addition, the conversion is usually accompanied by a rather violent death, with the main character, for example, being drowned, shot by a convict, or gored by a bull. This violence is, according to Stuart Burns, part of O'Connor's "pattern of consecration in death" ("Evolution" 155), but in at least one case – "The Artificial Nigger" – the protagonist lives on after his

conversion.¹ This violence is well in keeping with the idea of sudden conversion that James presents:

Emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements [conversions]. The sudden and explosive ways in which love, jealousy, guilt, fear, remorse, or anger can seize upon one are known to everybody. Hope, happiness, security, resolve, emotions characteristic of conversion, can be equally explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them. (166-67)

A. R. Coulthard, however, sees the deaths as a necessity for O'Connor due to her inability to show life after conversion ("Sermon" 56), but John Hand is closer to O'Connor's own view:

What has often been criticized within [O'Connor's] work as a gratuitous preoccupation with violence is an attempt to awaken her readers to spiritual vision. . . . Her vision is often a dark one since she is concerned with original sin, but there is always the possibility of grace if her characters can open themselves to it. (5227A)

Because conversion is often described in the Bible in terms of death (see John 12:24; Rom. 6:3-9; Gal. 2:20), O'Connor presents this spiritual concept in a literal, physical way.² She realized, however, that by doing this she was opening her works to misreadings:

. . . in my own stories I have often found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. . . . Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. ("On Her Own Work" 112, 113)

One of those taken by violence to heaven is Harry Ashfield in "The River," who experiences James' sense of peace as he drowns during his self-baptism. As the story opens, Harry is being sent off with a soldier-like babysitter named Mrs. Connin (157). His parents, who are more interested in parties than in him, are suffering from

hangovers. Harry, who is "four or five," is an unpretentious child who seems "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" (158). After announcing her intention to take Harry to a healing service led by the Reverend Bevel Summers, Mrs. Connin leaves the Ashfields', the little boy in tow.

This is obviously the first time Mrs. Connin has taken care of Harry, because she does not even know his name. When she asks, he says it is Bevel, adopting the preacher's name and telling his first lie in the story.³ Mrs. Connin, expressing surprise at the "coincidence" of the name, describes the healer. Harry – now called Bevel, even in the narration – seems interested: "'Will he heal me?' Bevel asked. 'What you got?' 'I'm hungry,' he finally decided" (159). This demonstrates Harry's desire for salvation and foreshadows his conversion (Magliola 355), as a satisfaction of hunger means a renewed relationship with God. While Bevel Summers' baptizing him does not solve his hunger (171-72), his own baptism later does.

At Mrs. Connin's house, Harry has his first introduction to Jesus Christ: he sees a picture of Him over the bed. Prior to this, "he would have thought Jesus Christ was a word like 'oh' or 'damn' or 'God,' or maybe somebody who had cheated [his parents] out of something sometime"

(163). Harry does not know who is in the picture, but just as he is ready to ask, the Connin boys gesture for him to follow them. They lead him to a pigsty, and faking kindness (161), they get him to let one of the pigs out, somehow satisfying their "great need" for cruelty (162).

This is the first instance where pigs or hogs play a large part in an O'Connor story, and here they act in conjunction with Mr. Paradise, the ironically-named man who does not believe in healing and who acts as the catalyst for Harry's success in his self-baptism. The first time Mr. Paradise is mentioned, Mrs. Connin points to the freed hog, commenting, "That one yonder favors Mr. Paradise that has the gas station" (162). Later, after Mr. Paradise follows him to the river with a peppermint stick (Magnolia 353), Harry sees "something like a giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting" (174), causing him to go under the river and be carried away by the current. In medieval times pigs were often thought to be incarnations of Satan (Sillar and Meyler 82), and in this story, the pig-like Mr. Paradise acts in the role of the Devil (166), serving as an example of the demonic acting to push the protagonist into salvation (Magnolia 356):

. . . just as Haze Motes [in Wise Blood]
proclaims that "the only way to the truth is

through blasphemy" [78], Miss O'Connor seems to say that, in an age so well adjusted to its own tawdry norms that the very idea of Good becomes precarious, the only way to the Holy is through evil. (Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 160-61)⁴

This is especially true in The Violent Bear It Away, where Tarwater's "friend," appearing as the Devil at the end, catapults him into salvation.

After the escapade with the pigs, Mrs. Connin shows Harry a book called The Life of Jesus for Readers Under Twelve, an antique picture book in which "every word . . . [is] the gospel truth" (163). The picture that affects him most, due to his recent experience, is one of Christ "driving a crowd of pigs out of a man" (163). Harry steals the book, putting it in the inner lining of his coat, demonstrating again his eagerness to learn about Christ, even if his method is somewhat dubious.

Once they are at the healing – and later when Harry returns to the river – O'Connor uses sun imagery to emphasize the interworking of God with the events occurring. In the apartment where Harry lives, "there is little sun and no possibility of grace . . . [but in the country the sun is omnisciently present" (Burns, "'Torn'" 155). As Mrs. Connin and the children walk to the river,

"[t]he white Sunday sun followed at a little distance, climbing fast through a scum of gray cloud as if it meant to overtake them" (162-63). Harry is suddenly very active, wanting to "dash off and snatch the sun" (164). He gets his chance at the river, when the preacher offers salvation through baptism. Although Rev. Summers thinks he is speaking in figurative terms, the message is taken literally by Harry:

"There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' Blood . . . and if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin . . . slow, you people, slow as this here old red water river round my feet." (165)

The entire time the preacher has been talking, Harry has been watching birds spiraling over the river, "a broad orange stream where the reflection of the sun was set like a diamond" which turns the preacher's face red in the light reflected by the water (164). Suddenly, Harry is the center of attention when Mrs. Connin, introducing him as Bevel, asks the preacher to baptize him. Harry, who tries to be comical, is suddenly confronted by the seriousness of the occasion:

The grin had already disappeared from his face. He had the sudden feeling that this was not a joke. Where he lived everything was a joke. From the preacher's face, he knew immediately that nothing the preacher said or did was a joke.

. . .

"You don't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count." (167-68)

Then he baptizes him, amidst "pieces of the white sun scattered in the river" (168).

When Mrs. Connin takes the boy home, Harry is caught in his lie when his mother informs the babysitter that his name is not Bevel – although Mrs. Connin does not seem to fully believe the mother (169). There is another party going on, and when Harry's mother finds the book he has stolen – he lies again and says Mrs. Connin gave it to him – she reads it, finding it funny (170). But as his mother tucks him into bed, she asks him what the preacher said, afraid for her reputation because Harry asked for prayer for her hangover (168), but he hears her voice "from a long way away, as if he were under the river and she on top of it" (171). Then, in an almost mock baptism, she makes him sit up, and "he felt as if he had been drawn up from under the river" (171); he then tells her the most important

things – for him – that the preacher said: “‘He said I’m not the same now,’ he muttered. ‘I count’” (171).

After Harry wakes up the next morning, he rummages around for food and, deliberately destructive, empties the ashtrays onto the floor. And then he remembers the river: “Very slowly, his expression changed as if he were gradually seeing appear what he didn’t know he’d been looking for. Then all of a sudden he knew what he wanted to do” (172). He takes a token for the trolley from his mother’s purse and rides out toward Mrs. Connin’s, but he passes her house and goes on to the river, intent on finishing the job the preacher began the day before and followed, as always, by the “salvific sun” (Magnolia 356):

He saw only the river, shimmering reddish yellow, and bounded into it with his shoes and his coat on and took a gulp. . . . The sky was a clear pale blue, all in one piece – except for the hole the sun made – and fringed around the bottom with treetops. . . . He intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize [sic] himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn’t mean to waste any more time. (173)

He immerses himself three times and is unable to stay under, struggling with "something that pushed him back in the face" (173), which Robert Magnolia sees as "the resistance human life offers to salvation" (356), but as Mr. Paradise, who has been fishing on the bank, approaches, he tries to submerge once more, and this time he succeeds:

. . . the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him. (174)

Harry has fulfilled his desire and gone to the Kingdom of Christ in the only real way possible – by death. As Coulthard points out, when Harry is diving, he probably thinks that there is a "fairytale home" under the river ("Deadly Conversions" 88), but since O'Connor implies that he reaches a better home than the one he had at the apartment, this is not necessarily a weakness in the story. Mr. Paradise, attempting to stop the baptism because he is "unable to see the true country which Harry attained" (Martin, True Country 47), flounders around in the water, trying to rescue Harry, but he fails.

Coulthard sees this ending as tragic and Harry's death as meaningless ("Deadly Conversions" 90), seemingly missing the point that Harry is not choosing death over life but life over death, life beyond death. Harry has been given his heart's desire and is no longer angry or afraid; he is in the state of peace which James describes:

The central [characteristic of conversion] is the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same. (202)

Because of this, the reader should feel a sense of relief when Mr. Paradise comes up "empty-handed" (174), because this means Harry's spiritual quest has succeeded and that his peace is secure.

A second protagonist who finds salvation just prior to death is the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."⁵ She is one who at the end of the story has a "sense of perceiving truths not known before" (James 202). The story centers on the grandmother, who is "smug, self-willed and obsessed with breeding and 'good blood'" (Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 143), and a convict who calls himself The Misfit. The others are simply the supporting cast in this "account of a family murdered on the way to Florida"

(O'Connor, "On Her Own Work" 114). Although on the surface these two main characters seem very different, they are basically the same spiritually until the climax.

The grandmother is possessed with materialism and selfishness, and this is demolished throughout the story. The first indication of her materialist bent is the name of her cat, Pitty Sing (118), an obvious pun on "pretty thing." Further, the grandmother is dressed nicely in the car, so that "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (118). In keeping with that role, she uses a clean handkerchief from the cuff of her dress to wipe away her tears (127). While on the trip, she makes up the story of treasure hidden in a plantation house, "wishing" it were true (123).

Because of her selfishness, she is also shallow: she has no concern for the poor black child with no pants (119), but she thinks highly of one of the suitors in her youth, Edgar Atkins Teagarden, because he had bought stock in Coca-Cola and died a wealthy man (120). Later, in her conversation with The Misfit, she tells him that it would be "wonderful . . . to settle down and live a comfortable life" (129), as if this is the answer to all his questions and problems. Finally, she offers The Misfit money not to

kill her (132), unable to understand that money does not have the same attraction for him.

The grandmother's preoccupation in life is with society – her biggest humiliation is that her grandchildren have no respect for anyone or anything (118, 119, 121, 123) – and that society is structured around good manners and wealth. But her security in these things, and particularly in materialism, crumbles throughout the story. This is most graphically illustrated by the disintegration of her hat, a symbol of her vanity. After the accident – caused by her desire to see the plantation and by the cat she has hidden away – she emerges from the car with her hat broken. Later she tries to straighten it, but it comes off in her hand. She stares at it and then lets it fall to the ground (128). The rest of the story takes place with her hatless.

Combined with the criticism of materialism, a death motif – grotesque as it may seem – is the moving force of the plot. As is typical in O'Connor, there are numerous foreshadowings of what is to come. The grandmother, for example, practically predicts her demise by dressing nicely so that if she is seen dead, people will know she was a lady (118). As they travel throughout Georgia, the grandmother points out "five or six graves" in a cotton field (119); she describes it, ironically, as an "old

family burying ground" (120), with just enough space for the family in the story that is killed, which consists of five accountable people – the grandmother, Bailey, June Star, John Wesley, and the children's mother – and one baby. The red dust on the trees, reminiscent of crucifixion, also foreshadows the deaths (124), as does June Star's disappointment that "nobody's killed" after the accident (125). And one final indication is the "big black battered hearse-like automobile" that arrives with The Misfit and his men in it (126).

Life through death is a foundational teaching of the church, and O'Connor acknowledges that: "The heroine of the story is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death" ("On Her Own Work" 110). That death is crucial to O'Connor's message of conversion in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

The first indication of this spiritual/physical death is found, as usual, in the trees, which here symbolize death, sometimes sacramentally by baptism or in the Eucharist (Driskell and Brittain 29-30, 60, 121).⁶ The trees in this story play too large a part and are too reminiscent of crucifixion to be ignored.⁷ As the family begins its trip, the trees are "full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled" (119). The grandmother remembers

an "avenue of oaks leading up to" the plantation house she wants to visit (123), but instead they drive on a road surrounded by trees "for miles around," trees that are, significantly, coated with the red dust of the road (124). After the accident, the family looks around and sees "only the tops of trees on the other side [of the road]. Behind the ditch they were sitting in were more woods, tall and deep and dark" (125).

The use of trees as a symbol of spiritual as well as physical death is easy to see at the end of the story. The grandmother tries to straighten her broken hat, "as if she were going into the woods" with her son Bailey (128), but as the hat falls off in her hand, she stops. It is not the time yet for her to enter the woods, although the other five members of the family are killed there. What cements this symbolism is a passage from the story, immediately after Bailey and John Wesley are taken into the forest:

There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady's head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. (129)

As the grandmother is left alone with The Misfit, she looks and sees "nothing around her but woods" (131). At

this point, confronted with the reality of death and the fact that "sham gentility offers no 'safe conduct' through this life" (Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 145), she turns from speaking empty pious phrases – from her "missionary spirit," as O'Connor calls it ("On Her Own Work" 110) – to desperation and calls out "Jesus, Jesus" (131). The Misfit, a "modern doubting Thomas" (Scouten, "Mythological" 72), replies that Christ has "thrown everything off balance" (131) because He requires death of one kind or another – spiritual life through death, or physical death as punishment for sin.

Then, using wordplay similar to that in "The Peeler," O'Connor presents the basic personality of a nominal Christian, as personified by the grandmother: "Jesus! . . . You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! . . . Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!" (131-32). The Misfit replies with God's answer: your life or nothing.

The Misfit, who is called that because he is the only one who states the truth, seems to have a much better grasp of Christian doctrine than the grandmother. He presents the best summary of the gospel found in the story: "If He did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him" (132). And if Christ did

not raise the dead, The Misfit continues, then a person must "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. No pleasure but meanness" (132). He then bemoans the fact that he did not live in Christ's day, because without seeing he cannot believe.

Then for the first time, the grandmother becomes different from The Misfit. Up to this point she has resembled him quite closely spiritually. When she first meets the man, his face is familiar, "as if she had known him all her life" (126). She has: she sees herself in him. After she recognizes him, he speaks prophetically, on a spiritual as well as physical level: "Yes'm . . . but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (127), better because now she must deal with the realization.

In her conversation with The Misfit, the grandmother attempts to excuse him, using modern psychological explanations for his behavior: he was mistreated as a child, he was misunderstood by society, and his is misrepresented in the press (Montgomery, "Southern Reflections" 196). She then repeats the discussion she had with Red Sammy Butts, the owner of a roadside café called The Tower, dealing with the concept of a "good man."⁸ Unlike

The Misfit, Red Sammy considers himself a "good man" because he is polite and honest (122); his wife, however, does not believe anyone is good: "'It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust,' she said. 'And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody,' she repeated, looking at Red Sammy" (122). The Misfit and his men are also polite, always addressing the females as "ladies" and "ma'am," and the grandmother tries to tell The Misfit that he, too, is a "good man." According to her definition in the latter part of the story, a "good man" does not have "common blood" (127). She repeats the idea again: "I just know you're a good man. . . . You're not a bit common!" (128). The Misfit contradicts her then: "Nome, I ain't a good man" (128). The implication is that he is common, that he is just like all mankind, including the grandmother. He underlines this similarity by saying he was "a gospel singer for awhile" (129); in other words, just like the grandmother, The Misfit was a nominal Christian for a time. But unlike her he was punished for a crime that he cannot recall and became miserable. He knows that if he could believe in Christ, he "wouldn't be like I am now" (132). And if the grandmother would believe – "[m]aybe He didn't raise the dead" (132) is her one statement of disbelief – she would not be like she is either.⁹

In a moment the entire scene changes. The grandmother's head becomes clear – she has a “sense of enlightenment,” as James describes it (202) – and she exclaims, “Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!” (132)¹⁰ She touches The Misfit's shoulder in compassion – “a Christ-like [gesture] demonstrating recognition, kinship, love” (Highsmith 103). This is the first time that the grandmother recognizes her own sinful nature (Coulthard, “Deadly Conversions” 96), and The Misfit, unable to handle the resulting act of empathy, leaps back and shoots her “three times through the chest” (132).

This, according to O'Connor, is the climax of the story. Speaking of the grandmother, she says this:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. . . . it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our

participation in it. . . . It would have to be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.

. . .

I find that students are often puzzled by what [the grandmother] says and does here, but I think myself that if I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story. What was left would not be worth your attention. ("On Her Own Work" 111-12)

In that moment, the grandmother sees herself "joined to [The Misfit] by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about to far" (O'Connor, "On Her Own Work" 112). At that instant she accepts her "moment of grace" (O'Connor, "On Her Own Work" 112), and the "outward gesture symbolizes an internal illumination" (Pearce 300). She is then literally killed, as are all Christians spiritually when they are converted. The grandmother is left lying with her "legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (132), the child imagery echoing Christ's teaching that people must "become like children" to enter heaven (Matt. 18:1-4).

But the grandmother does not stop with her own conversion. There is some indication that The Misfit, whom

O'Connor described as a "spoiled prophet" ("To Charlotte Gafford" 465), realizes that the grandmother's words and action indicate a change in her that he, too, could achieve. After he shoots her, he takes off his glasses to clean them, perhaps an indication of his desire for clearer spiritual sight, leaving him "defenseless-looking" (133), and then he orders her body placed in the woods with the others:

"She was a talker, wasn't she?" Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.

"She would have been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

"Some fun!" Bobby Lee said.

"Shut up, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life." (133)

Meanness is no longer enjoyable to him, which in light of his previous comments indicates that he has begun to consider "throw[ing] away everything and follow[ing]" Christ (132), a possibility O'Connor certainly leaves open:

I don't want to equate [T]he Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled

tree in [T]he Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story. ("On Her Own Work" 112-13)

Unfortunately, that story was never written.

The third example of sudden conversion is Mrs. May in "Greenleaf."¹¹ She also comes to a sense of enlightenment right at her death; for her, the moment she faces death, "[t]he mysteries of life become lucid, . . . and . . . the solution is more or less unutterable in words" (James 202). Mrs. May – the name is ironic because neither she nor the dairy she runs is at all spring-like, although the story takes place in the spring – is much like Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire," a practical, hardworking woman whose life is disturbed by the intrusion of something she cannot handle herself: on a literal level, this is the fanatical prayer-healing wife of her handyman, Mr. Greenleaf, and a scrub bull owned by his twin sons; on the spiritual level, it is the power of God that is represented by these two.¹²

Mrs. May, like Mrs. Cope, prides herself on her hard work: "Before any kind of judgement seat, she would be able to say: I've worked, I have not wallowed" (332). A city woman, she inherited the farm from her late husband and has struggled to make it a success (319), which her city

friends, who do not know any better, consider her to have done (321). This success is questionable, however. In contrast to O. T. and E. T. Greenleaf's spotless, ultra-modern dairy, hers is rundown. The machinery is broken (319), her sons refuse to work the farm (321), and she has not had any milk in two weeks because her cows are dry (330) – but, ironically, she identifies herself with the farm: it is "the reflection of her own character" (321).

Because of this, Mrs. May's constant fear that the bull will "ruin her herd" (312, 314, 320, 322, 326, 327) is significant, implying that she also fears that he will "ruin" her, by taking away the control she has over both her farm and herself. This becomes even more important, because the bull is an indisputable – if somewhat mythologically portrayed (Rout 234) – Christ-figure. He first appears "like some patient god come down to woo her" (311), a "hedge-wreath" around his head "like a menacing prickly crown" (312), and it is clear that he has come as her lover (312, 333). He has been on her property for three days (313), and he cannot be locked up because he has unrestrainable power and "likes to bust loose" from confinement (323). He resembles Christ physically, having "no stately form or majesty / That we should . . . be attracted to him" (323; see Isa. 53:2). Further, Mrs. May

would reject him even as a gift (322), just as she has rejected Christ, and, similar to Christ, the bull must be killed so that he will not "throw everything off balance" by breeding with the cows (328); he is shot four times by Mr. Greenleaf at the end of the story (334), reminiscent of the three nails and one spear that pierced Christ. Finally, much like the bird in "The Enduring Chill" who waits for Asbury, the bull is patiently chewing away at Mrs. May's possessions (311-12, 331). He is going to eat "everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place" (312), leaving the Greenleafs because God already owns them.

Mr. Greenleaf, a man of "insignificant" build, has worked for Mrs. May for 15 years, ever since she began to run the farm (313), but she considers him sly, crafty – even his eyes are "fox-colored" (314, 317) – and "shiftless," unable to look anyone in the face (313), but she can handle him. It is Mrs. Greenleaf who upsets her: ". . . of the wife she didn't even like to think. Beside the wife, Mr. Greenleaf was an aristocrat" (313). Mrs. Greenleaf is the archetypal Earth Mother: she has seven children, including one set of twins (317, 319). "[L]arge and loose" (315), she spends her days in the woods, praying

over buried newspaper clippings of "accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who has escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars" (315-16).

When Mrs. May first discovers this, she is appalled. Walking in the woods, she comes across Mrs. Greenleaf: "Out of nowhere a guttural agonized voice groaned, 'Jesus! Jesus!' In a second it came again with a terrible urgency. 'Jesus! Jesus!'" (316). Mrs. May's first thought is almost mystical – that "some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her" (316). Her second thought is less accurate but more practical: somebody has been hurt and is going to sue her. This is especially frightening for her because she has no insurance.¹³ Instead of seeing someone hurt, however, she finds Mrs. Greenleaf on her hands and knees, her face "a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes . . . red-rimmed and swollen," moaning "Jesus, Jesus" (316).

Mrs. May is bothered more by the name than by the spectacle before her:

She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, although

she did not, of course, believe any of it was true. (316)

Because of this, she is even more ill at ease when Mrs. Greenleaf proceeds with her faith-healing, screaming, "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (317) She is offended, feeling "as if she had been insulted by a child" (317), and her reply is practical, if – O'Connor implies – incorrect: "Jesus . . . would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" (317) The contrast between the two is similar to that between Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) – where the practical Martha was concerned with the things of the household and the mystical Mary was more concerned with spiritual matters – and it serves to embellish the contrast between the Greenleafs, who live "like lilies of the field" (319), and Mrs. May, who is like "a broken lily" (322).

But what shocks Mrs. May even more than Mrs. Greenleaf's "laziness" is her fanaticism. Later, as Mrs. May waits for Mr. Greenleaf to shoot the bull, she thinks about Mrs. Greenleaf:

The woman had got worse over the years and Mrs. May believed that she was actually demented. "I'm afraid your wife has let religion warp her," she

said once tactfully to Mr. Greenleaf. "Everything in moderation, you know."

"She cured a man oncet that half his gut was eat out with worms," Mr. Greenleaf said, and she had turned away, half-sickened. Poor souls, she thought now, so simple. (332-33)

According to Mrs. May, the only reason for religion is to increase one's standing in society, and she expresses this when she tells her good-for-nothing sons, Wesley and Scofield, that they should attend church in order to "meet some nice girls" (320).¹⁴

What troubles Mrs. May even further, although not consciously, is Mrs. Greenleaf's similarity to the scrub bull. Beyond being "scrub-human" (317), Mrs. Greenleaf is also described as a "violent unleashed force . . . charging toward [Mrs. May]" and as a bulldog (316), a word that recalls the way Mrs. May addresses the bull (311). And both Mrs. Greenleaf and the bull are connected with the sun (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 148), which is a traditional symbol for Christ (Ryan 46; Burns, "'Torn'" 161). This connection is especially obvious with the bull:

The sun, moving over the black and white grazing cows, was just a little brighter than the rest of the sky. Looking down, [Mrs. May] saw a darker

shape that might have been its shadow cast at an angle, moving among them. (322)

Further, O. T. and E. T.'s dairy is "filled with sunlight" (325), and even outside it, Mrs. May is aware that "the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (325), further connecting the sun and the bull by punning on "bullet."

The night before the bull is killed, Mrs. May has a dream, resembling the one that opens the story. In this nightmare, she is admiring her farm and becomes aware that the noise she had been hearing the entire time is "the sun trying to burn through the tree line" (329). Because she does not believe in the power of God, she feels safe, knowing, like Asbury, that the trees can hold out the sun. As a practical woman, she thinks that the sun has to follow the laws of nature, that it must "sink the way it always did outside of her property" (329). As the dream continues, so does the symbolism:

When she first stopped it was a swollen ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. (329)

At that moment she wakes up and realizes that the noise she has heard is actually the bull chewing on the hedge outside her window (329).

The dream, however, takes on prophetic meaning by the end of the story, when after having to close her eyes because of the brightness of the sun overhead (332), she opens them to see the bull coming out of the woods "toward her at a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again" (333). Rather than being frightened, she is caught "in freezing unbelief" (333), experiencing a situation similar to coming across Mrs. Greenleaf in the woods:

She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. (333)

Almost in response to Mrs. Greenleaf's prayer for her heart to be stabbed by Jesus, the bull pierces Mrs. May's heart with one of his horns; the other "curved around her side" in an "unbreakable" embrace (333). Mrs. May then begins her upward movement toward heaven: first she sees the pasture, and then the tree line becomes "a dark wound in a world

that was nothing but sky" (333). This is an epiphanic moment for her, and the experience on her face is that of a "person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (333).

Coulthard – as well as Robert Drake ("'Bleeding'" 191, 192), Elizabeth Evans (15), and Steven Ryan (49) – reads this passage as indicative of her rejection, rather than acceptance, of Christianity, because she stares at the bull in "a freezing unbelief" and because, while "she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored," she "finds the light unbearable" ("Deadly Conversions" 92). For some reason Coulthard sees this as inconsistent with "the blasting annihilating light" that O'Connor requires for conversion ("Deadly Conversions" 93; O'Connor, "To 'A'" 427), but by doing so he seems to ignore the transitions that take place in the passage: she begins in "freezing unbelief," but then her expression changes; the Christ-bull stabs her in the heart, and afterward Mrs. May's outlook on the world has changed – her sight has been restored, but like a person who has been in darkness for a long time, the light initially pains her. The figure, seen in this way, is not inconsistent with salvation.

In fact, the last line of the story emphasizes Mrs. May's conversion: she does not die with the light being

unbearable; instead, as Mr. Greenleaf shoots the bull, Mrs. May is "bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (334), indicating that her "sense of enlightenment" is similar to the grandmother's in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Instead of dying when she is "good and ready" (321), death is one more thing that Mrs. May has no control over, as Kathleen Rout points out:

The violence Mrs. May finally suffers destroys her class pride and impious self-sufficiency. . . . She cannot control the Greenleafs or their bull just because she scorns their bloodlines, and she cannot control her fate, either. For her, this is a staggering revelation. (235)

Mrs. May's pride is replaced by humility, her unbelief with salvation. Because for a sudden conversion one "must first be nailed on the cross of natural despair and agony, and then in the twinkling of an eye be miraculously released" (James 188) — which is clearly what happens to Mrs. May — the secret she is whispering in the bull's ear certainly concerns her conversion.

Finally, in "The Artificial Nigger," another proud protagonist finds salvation through humility, but this time he lives.¹⁵ Mr. Head is a sixty-year-old man who lives with his ten-year-old illegitimate grandson, Nelson, who acts as

Mr. Head's Doppelgänger (Asals 51). Mr. Head is a man of "will and strong character" (249), and although he considers Nelson to be the proud one, it is "like grandfather, like grandson" in this story. In fact, this inner resemblance is indicated by the outer: they look "enough alike to be brothers" (251), even though they are fifty years apart in age, "for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it" (251).

Mr. Head intends for Nelson to learn humility through a visit to the city, which again acts as a symbol of evil, an anti-paradise that is emphasized in this story by the contrast between Atlanta and the countryside.¹⁶ Mr. Head's goal is for Nelson "to find out from [the trip] that he had no cause for pride merely because he had been born in a city" (251). Nelson is proud – he and the old man are always in competition (see 251; Coulthard, "Sermon" 59, 60) – but no prouder than Mr. Head. In fact, they mirror each other in every way.

On the train to Atlanta, the grandson continues to imitate the grandfather (253), and Mr. Head does his first disservice to Nelson by giving him a lesson in prejudice. A well-dressed black man and two black women in the car, but

since Nelson has never seen a black person before, he does not even notice until Mr. Head points out the difference to him (255). Mr. Head considers this an education for Nelson, but instead it is Nelson's introduction to sin (Scouten, "'Artificial Nigger'" 90) – the boy's first encounter with hatred (255-56). But it is also, interestingly, followed by his first taste of humility: "He looked toward the window and the face there seemed to suggest that he might be inadequate to the day's exactions. He wondered if he would even recognize the city when they came to it" (256). His second insight comes when he realizes that Mr. Head "would be his only support in the strange place they were approaching. . . . For the first time in his life, he understood that his grandfather was indispensable to him" (257).

Once in the city, however, the boy again becomes cocky about being born there (259), and so Mr. Head shows him the sewers, but not even that dampens Nelson's enthusiasm. They stop at a coin-operated weight-and-fortune machine, where Nelson receive the prophecy that he has "a great destiny ahead of [him] but beware of dark women," while Mr. Head's claims he is "upright and brave" (259).

Soon, however, Mr. Head loses the way – his first humiliation – and immediately after that, both he and

Nelson realize they are hungry and thirsty and discover that they have left their lunch on the train. Then, much like Adam and Eve after the Fall in John Milton's Paradise Lost, they begin blaming each other for their misery:

They both wanted to find a place to sit down but this was impossible and they kept on walking, the boy muttering under his breath, "First you lost the sack and then you lost the way," and Mr. Head growling from time to time, "Anybody wants to be from this nigger heaven can be from it!" (261)

Nelson wants Mr. Head to ask directions, but the old man is too proud. Nelson sees a "large colored woman" and asks her the way, almost swooning in the presence of "the mystery of existence" that she symbolizes (261-62; O'Connor, "To Ben Griffith" 78). This is a further humiliation for Mr. Head, and through this experience Nelson is finally humbled:

He pushed his hat sharply forward over his face which was already burning with shame. The sneering ghost [reflection] he had seen in the train window and all the foreboding feelings he had on the way returned to him and he remembered that his ticket from the scale had said to beware of dark women and that his grandfather's had said

he was upright and brave. He took hold of the old man's hand, a sign of dependence that he seldom showed. (262)

Finally fed up with the city, Nelson wants to go home, knowing that while he was born there, this is no reason to be proud (263).

But then the boy falls asleep in exhaustion. Thinking that when he wakes he will be cocky once again and wanting to teach him a lesson, Mr. Head decides to play a rather rude practical joke on the child. He hides around a corner, waiting for Nelson to wake up. When the boy does, he finds himself alone, and he is so frightened that he jumps up and runs down the street. Mr. Head chases after him, but he cannot catch him before he crashes into an old woman carrying groceries. As Mr. Head arrives, Nelson grabs him, but then the woman threatens Mr. Head with a lawsuit in front of a large crowd of other shoppers. Mr. Head has reached the one time in his life when he really must be upright and brave – and he fails: "He stared straight ahead at the women who were massed in their fury like a solid wall to block his escape. 'This is not my boy,' he said. 'I never seen him before'" (265). The women are horrified by this denial, because it is so obvious that the two are related, and they drop back, allowing him to leave. Nelson

follows him at a distance, and Mr. Head feels great remorse, like Judas after his betrayal of Christ. He tries to make amends by offering to share a drink from a spigot with Nelson, but the boy refuses, making Mr. Head feel "as if he had drunk poison" (266). Mr. Head thinks that their relationship can never be restored; Nelson is "frozen" in unforgiveness (267).

But suddenly the situation changes. Mr. Head finally admits his inability to find his way, calling out to a man on the street – with typical O'Connor double-meaning – "Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!" (267) In a dual response, the man helps them on their way – and God also answers. As they walk toward the train station, Nelson still unforgiving and Mr. Head still convinced he will never be forgiven (268), they see an "artificial nigger" on one of the walls surrounding a lawn. The figure works on them both. By their identification with it in their "helplessness and mutual dependency" (Kahane, "Artificial Niggers" 183), they are united once again. Like Mr. Head and Nelson, the statue is neither young nor old, and although he is smiling, "the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead" (268). O'Connor emphasizes the restored bond between the

old man and the boy by showing, once again, their similarities:

"An artificial nigger!" Nelson repeated in Mr. Head's exact tone.

The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets. (268)

For them, the statue is "some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (269), and it works at "dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (269). This is a new experience for Mr. Head, because he has always "been too good to deserve" mercy (269), but he knows he needs it now. After this, unable to spout words of wisdom and thus restore his own pride and the boy's pride in him, he can only say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one" (269). The boy nods and suggests that they go home.

As they step off the train, back at the country junction, Mr. Head once again feels the "action of mercy" — and experiences a sense of unidentifiable enlightenment, of newness, and of a higher power involved in his life, true

to James' descriptions (199, 202-03), as O'Connor presents one of the more doctrinal passages in her work:

Mr. head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt

ready at that instant to enter Paradise. (269-70)¹⁷

Instead of a Judas, Mr. Head has become a Peter (O'Connor, "To Frances Neel Cheney" 18; O'Connor, "To Ben Griffith" 78) – forgiven for his denial both of God and Nelson. He is changed. Although "he bears the same physical contours and peculiarities, . . . they are all ordered to a new vision" ("To 'A'" 275). And Nelson, too, has been redeemed, evidenced by his "lightened" face and his final comment: "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (270), a common sentiment of converts who look back on the experiences that led them to salvation.

Mr. Head and Nelson will continue on in their spiritual growth, O'Connor implies – in this way, they are given a chance Harry, the grandmother, and Mrs. May do not have – but their repentance and subsequent forgiveness are only the first steps in a long conversion process, what James calls the volitional conversion.

Notes

1. Leonard Casper explains:

If death, both actual and symbolic, is a constant provocation to the religious imagination, one might expect to see its images throughout the work of a 'Christ-haunted' writer such as Flannery O'Connor, who had reasonable foreknowledge of her own early doom. In fact, ten of her nineteen collected stories and one of her novels ends with the death of key characters. (288)

2. O'Connor's comments on "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" are equally applicable to all her "deadly conversion" stories:

This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal. A good story is literal in the same sense that a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws, he doesn't intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. Now the lines of motion that interest the writer are usually invisible. They are lines of spiritual motion. And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies. ("On Her Own Work" 113)

3. Robert Detweiler sees this name change as a foreshadowing of the rite of baptism, where traditionally the child's name is first given to him (237).

4. Haze actually says, "Blasphemy is the way to the truth . . . and there's no other way whether you understand it or not" (O'Connor, Wise Blood 78).5. O'Connor spoke and wrote often on this particular story, stating the Weltanschauung she wrote from. In opening comments before a reading of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" at Hollins College, Virginia, on October 14, 1963, she had this to say:

Now I think it behooves me to try to establish with you the basis on which reason operates in this story. The assumptions . . . are those of the central Christian mysteries. These are assumptions to which a large part of the modern audience takes exception. About this I can only

say that there are perhaps other ways than my own in which this story could be read, but none other by which it could be written. Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate. ("On Her Own Work" 109)

6. The woods are also used as sacramental symbols in "A View of the Woods," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "A Circle in the Fire," and "Parker's Back."

7. In Acts 5:30, Acts 10:39, Galatians 3:13, and 1 Peter 2:24, the Greek word for cross is actually wood. The Old English poem "The Dream of the Rood" emphasizes this connection, also.

8. Much has been made of The Tower, to O'Connor's chagrin ("To Charlotte Gafford" 465): Leon Driskell sees it as the Tower of Babel, symbolizing "man's desire to raise himself to heaven through his own efforts, and the heaven sought must then be a materialist kingdom, an earthly paradise" (478); C. R. Kropf thinks it is similar to the Tower of Dis, the god of the underworld (180); Evelyn Sweet-Hurd considers it to be a reference to the Tower in Piers Plowman, postulating that "this symbol of truth and good is 'broken-down' in our times" (9).

9. Dixie Lee Highsmith sees this doubting statement as "a breakdown of pride and complacency – the 'lady,' the 'good woman,' is beginning to recognize her own sin, her fallen nature" (103).

10. She has unconsciously identified The Misfit as her son earlier, when he puts on Bailey's shirt, but she "couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of" (130).

11. Steven Ryan almost completely misreads this story, seeing the Greenleafs as demoniacs, the woods as demonic territory, the bull as anything but a Christ-figure, and Mrs. May's epiphany as damnation rather than salvation.

12. Kathleen Rout comments that the bull "combines his social, sexual, and religious identities in a way that allows him to represent everything that Mrs. May rejects, everything unrestrained or lacking in taste" (233). The same is true for Mrs. Greenleaf.

13. By the end of the story, she has insurance (333); maybe this experience in the woods a few months after the

Greenleafs arrive at the farm, while not teaching her any spiritual lessons, caused her to act in what would be a typically practical manner – getting some insurance.

14. Mrs. May's "religious philosophy" resembles her attitude toward the bull, that "both Christ and the bull should be confined, the former to the church, the latter to a pen," because "each represents a threat to good breeding" (Burns, "'Torn'" 161).

15. O'Connor borrowed the phrase "the artificial nigger" from someone who used it while giving directions to her mother: "I was so intrigued with that [phrase] that I made up my mind to use it. It's not only a wonderful phrase but it's a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself" ("To Father J. H. McCown" 140).

16. After Mr. Head and Nelson return from the city, the country station is described in paradisiacal terms: "The treetops, fencing the junction like the protecting walls of a garden, were darker than the sky which was hung with gigantic white clouds illuminating like lanterns" (269), and the train which had carried them to and from Atlanta "glided past them and disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods" (270). O'Connor acknowledges the connection, saying "in those last two paragraphs I have practically gone from the Garden of Eden to the Gates of Paradise" ("To Ben Griffith" 78).

17. Both Turner Byrd and Kenneth Scouten ("'Artificial Nigger'") see this passage as indicating Mr. Head's damnation, rather than his salvation, apparently ignoring O'Connor's own thoughts on the subject. A. R. Coulthard simply finds it unconvincing ("Sermon" 60-63).

CHAPTER FIVE

Volitional Conversion

Because volitional conversion is a gradual change, a "building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits" (James 172), William James considers it to be "as a rule less interesting" than sudden conversion (173). The gradual change, however, is helped along by "critical points . . . at which the movement forward seems much more rapid" (James 172). At these points the "gradual convert" becomes much more like the sudden convert:

Even in the most voluntarily built-up sort of regeneration there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed; and in the great majority of all cases, when the will had done its uttermost towards bringing one close to the complete unification aspired after, it seems that the very last step must be left to other forces and performed without the help of its activity.

(James 174)

This is what happens in two of Flannery O'Connor's stories, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "Revelation." Both protagonists – the unnamed child and Mrs. Turpin – believe in Christ prior to the actions described in these stories,

but O'Connor provides for each of them one of those "critical points" where their spiritual lives advance rapidly.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is O'Connor's only explicitly Catholic story (Fitzgerald, Introduction xxi) – and the only one of three that contain Catholic characters that includes more than a token priest (Walden and Salvia 230-31).¹ Because "for the Catholic Church, Christ's blood, the sacraments, and the individual's ordinary religious duties are practically supposed to suffice to his salvation" (James 187), the unnamed protagonist of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is, appropriately, a volitional convert, although she experiences "an epiphany, a moment of revelation, whose impact is all the greater since there is little outer action" in the story (Robinson 84).² Like Sally Virginia in "A Circle in the Fire," the child is twelve years old, which is usually confirmation age (Walden and Salvia 231).

As the story begins, she and her mother are entertaining two fourteen-year-old second cousins, Joanne and Susan, who have come from a convent school called Mount St. Scholastica to attend the fair.³ While the child prides herself that "she couldn't have inherited any of their stupidity" (236), she is similar to her cousins in her

cruel laughter (237, 238), making fun of people at their expense, as she does Miss Kirby, a woman who is always very proper (237), much like the Prioress in The Canterbury Tales. Miss Kirby is being courted by a man similar to Edgar Atkins Teagarden, the grandmother's beau in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"; Mr. Cheatam is a "rich old farmer" with gold teeth who brings her "a little gift" once a week (237). The child suggests, cruelly, that Cheatam escort the two girls, but Miss Kirby does not understand the joke (237).

The child also resembles her cousins in her pride, although it takes on a different form: they parade in front of the mirror (236), while she refuses to associate with those she thinks are below her (241-42). But unlike them, she is striving for purity (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 117) and has a finely developed appreciation for the seriousness of spiritual matters; she is "full of spiritual yearnings and a desire for understanding" (Robinson 83). This is one reason she cannot understand her cousins.

For example, at the beginning of the story, the girls are laughing hysterically, and finally they explain that Sister Perpetua, the oldest nun at the convent, "had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should . . . 'behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of

an automobile'" (238). According to Sister Perpetua, they were to halt him by saying, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" (238).⁴

The girls think this is hilarious, and they have trouble getting through the story because they are giggling so much, but the child does not "see anything so funny in this" (238). Neither does her mother:

"I think you girls are pretty silly," she said. "After all, that's what you are – Temples of the Holy Ghost."

The two of them looked up at her, politely concealing their giggles, but with astonished faces as if they were beginning to realize that she was made of the same stuff as Sister Perpetua. (238)

The child is affected by the thought: "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present" (238). Like Harry in "The River," who realizes that because of his baptism he "counts" (168) – and unlike Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," who would not accept Christ even as a gift (322) – the child realizes what it means to be a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The same spiritual sensitivity is apparent when, after the girls sing the "Tantum Ergo" in Latin, showing off in response to Wendell and Cory Wilkins' Protestant hymns, the boys comment, "That must be Jew singing" (241).⁵ The girls laugh, but the child is offended at the ignorantly flippant ways the boys take the Eucharist, and she refuses to eat with them at dinner (241).⁶

The child also has a real understanding of her own nature. She realizes that she is a "born liar" (243, 245) and that she is "eaten up also by the sin of Pride, the worst one" (243) – both references to original sin. Because of this, she tells herself that "[s]he could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick" (243). In contrast to this realistic evaluation of her spiritual condition, she is a daydreamer, imagining herself as the heroine who rescues the Wilkinsons from danger during World War Two (239-40) and turning the carnival into a Roman circus where she dies a martyr's death (243).

Despite this weakness, she does try to be a good Christian. Although she initially forgets to say her evening prayers, for some reason the sound of the carnival reminds her, and she kneels beside her bed (244). Like O'Connor, who once wrote, "The only force I believe in is

prayer, and it is a force I apply with more doggedness than attention" ("To 'A'" 100), the child often does her prayers by rote, although sometimes the true meaning of the privilege breaks through:

. . . sometimes when she had done something wrong or heard music or lost something, or sometimes for no reason at all, she would be moved to fervor and would think of Christ on the long journey to Calvary, crushed three times on the cross. (244)

Even at those times, however, she has trouble concentrating, and after her mind goes blank, she finds that "she was thinking of a different thing entirely, of some dog or some girl or something she was going to do some day" (244). But this night, thanking God that she is not a Protestant, she falls asleep praying (244).

She is wakened by her cousins returning from the fair. They have seen something there that has shocked them, and the child promises to tell them how rabbits are born – although she does not know herself – if they will describe "the freak," a hermaphrodite. Even after the explanation that "it was a man and woman both" (245), the child does not understand, but the mystery works on her, "as if she

were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself" (245).

The hermaphrodite both facilitates and indicates her spiritual growth, as well it might. According to Jungian psychology, the hermaphrodite symbolizes completeness and wholeness (Snider 31). As this is the goal of conversion, which unites the divided soul (James 165), the freak is used to remind the child of her salvation. "[T]o be an individual," David Mayer says, "is to be an ens individuum, a thing undivided in itself but divided from all others, or in other words, to be a freak when compared to another as norm" (148). As she is falling asleep, the child imagines the carnival tent, but in her mind it becomes a revival tent, with the people in it "more solemn than they were in church" (246), and unconsciously connecting her tendency to be unkind – her ugliness – with the "grotesqueness of the freak" (Suzanne Allen 88), she dreams that the hermaphrodite is challenging her:

"Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost.
You! You are God's temple, don't you know? . . .
God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you
know? . . . A temple of God is a holy thing.
Amen. Amen." (246)⁷

The freak shows the child her own human limitations, but it also offers her a way to overcome those limitations. As Gabriele Robinson says, "His existence suggests both damnation of the body and redemption of the spirit; moreover, through faith, spirit and matter are united and redeemed" (87). The child acknowledges this in her dream, repeating after the freak, "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost" (246).

The next afternoon, the child and her mother ride with the girls back to Mount St. Scholastica. Once there, they go directly to Benediction, although the child's attitude is perhaps not what it should be: "You put your foot in their door and they got you praying" (247). They are "well into the 'Tantum Ergo' before her ugly thoughts stopped and she began to realize that she was in the presence of God" (247). She begins to pray "mechanically" for help to restrain her "sass" (247), but this time her mind does not go blank, as it usually does. Instead, as "the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it" (248) – much like "the ivory sun . . . framed in the middle of the blue afternoon" which the child saw on the way to the convent (247) – she imagines the hermaphrodite saying, "This is the way He wanted me to be" (248), recognizing her own relationship to "God-among-us"

as revealed in the Eucharist (Mayer 150).⁸ The child has begun to learn purity, which for O'Connor is "an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances" ("To 'A'" 124).

As the child and her mother are about to leave the convent, a big "moon-faced" nun – perhaps so called because the moon reflects the light of the sun – hugs the child, "smashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt" (248), indicative of the child's identification with Christ's crucifixion, with the "ultimate all-inclusive symbol of love" (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 124) – similar to Sally Virginia in "A Circle in the Fire," who smashes her face against a tree trunk. According to Daniel Walden, the embrace from the nun represents the action of the Church:

The child has not been able to resist the embrace of the church any more than the freak could escape her fate. The freak does not dispute God's will, and since the child has this association, it is apparent that she does not dispute it either; she, too, is a Temple of the Holy Ghost.
(Walden and Salvia 233)

On the way home, the change in the child becomes practical as well as theological. Sitting behind Alonzo

Myers, who is driving, she thinks he looks like a pig – but she does not say anything about it. This is a sign of spiritual growth – and an answer to her prayer during Benediction that she would not “talk like I do” (247). Her increased understanding of what it means to have God dwelling inside of her and of what it really means to pray are reflected in her new ability to show respect for people by keeping her thoughts to herself (Mayer 152).

She learns one final lesson as the story ends: what it means to have a “sacramental view of life” (O’Connor, “Church” 152), the center of which is the Eucharist, which aids believers to “better keep the two great commandments” (O’Connor, “To Dr. T. R. Spivey” 346).⁹ As her mother chats with Alonzo, discussing the carnival which has been closed due to protests by local ministers, “the child’s round face was lost in thought” (248). She looks out the window and sees the sun, “a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood” (248). She watches until it disappears behind the woods, leaving “a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees” (248), indicating the child’s continual upward movement toward heaven, similar to the road Mrs. Turpin sees in her vision at the end of “Revelation.” Of course, the child’s experiences over this

weekend are simply one step along that road, as she identifies further with Christ and His suffering:

The child's insights into the mysteries of redemption – Incarnation, Eucharist, Suffering and Death – came as a climax to a week end of conversion. Previously she had a knowledge of her faith, was willing to defend it against heretical corruption, but it was still very much a child's possessive faith without the awareness of one's personal need of redemption and how the possibility of redemption transforms, even transfigures, all men since each can become a temple of the Holy Ghost. (Mayer 150)

By the end of the story, she has learned both what it means to need redemption and to be redeemed, and she has begun to learn fully what it means to be a "temple of the Holy Ghost."

Ruby Turpin learns these lessons, too, in "Revelation," although her epiphany comes about in a very different manner. Mrs. Turpin is a "respectable, hard-working, church-going woman" (502) who is shown her own hypocrisy. While a Christian who truly wants to serve others (Howell 272), she is "lukewarm," preferring "decent behavior" to fanaticism (Howell 273). She has become a

"country pharisienne, a monument of complacency and self-congratulation" (Fitzgerald, Introduction xxx), and is one of those whom C. S. Lewis describes, people "quite obviously eaten up with Pride" who still insist they "believe in God and appear to themselves very religious" (111):

They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of . . . God, but are really all the time imagining how He approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. (Lewis 111)

Mrs. Turpin comes to this awareness, moving from someone who is consumed with spiritual pride to one who understands that she must be humble before God.

The story begins in a doctor's office – one modelled after O'Connor's own doctor's (O'Connor, "To Maryat Lee" 586). Mrs. Turpin has come in with her husband Claud, who is appropriately named: a cow has kicked him on the calf, causing him to limp (489). Mrs. Turpin immediately begins placing the occupants of the waiting room into categories. At the bottom are the "white trash" – a dirty child with

his mother and grandmother (488, 490). Next is an old man, who proves he is not a gentleman by refusing to give his seat to Mrs. Turpin (488), and a red-head. They are not "white-trash, just common" (491). On a slightly higher level is an acned girl reading a book called Human Development (490), the daughter of a "well-dressed gray-haired lady" who occupies the next highest stratum of society, along with Mrs. Turpin and Claud. The only ones higher are the very rich, and there is no one here in that category. Mrs. Turpin is usually aided in her classifications by the shoes people wear, and those in the waiting room are wearing "exactly what you would have expected [them] to have on" (491), ranging from bedroom slippers to leather pumps.

Mrs. Turpin's system, like the grandmother's in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is based entirely on prejudice and materialism:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them — not above, just away from — were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were

people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. (491)

But even Mrs. Turpin realizes that not everyone can fit neatly into the categories she has made for them:

. . . some of the people with lots of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (491)

Mrs. Turpin seems to make her judgments almost automatically, but she is at least unconsciously aware of her sinful pride because when she dreams, "all the classes of people [are] moiling and roiling around in her head, . . . all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (492) – the historical outcome, on a much larger scale, of this "human tendency to categorize" (Tedford 31).

The pimply college girl, appropriately named Mary Grace, becomes "an instrument through which Christ speaks" (Oates 173), forcing the truth from the subconscious to the conscious in Mrs. Turpin's mind.¹⁰ Mary Grace's mother, who Mrs. Turpin has decided is the only sympathetic person in the room besides Claud, is like many of O'Connor's women –

positive, polite, and rather empty. Mary Grace, in contrast, not only looks ugly but acts ugly as well (492). She is continually giving Mrs. Turpin "ugly looks" (493), her eyes "lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give" (492). A true hypocrite, Mrs. Turpin – making trivial conversation that further reveals her prejudices and her self-righteous attitude – cannot understand why the girl has singled her out:

She was looking at her as if she had known her and disliked her all of her life – all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all of the girl's life. Why, girl, I don't even know you, Mrs. Turpin said silently. (495)

Not knowing someone has never stopped Mrs. Turpin from judging anyone – "[t]here was nothing you could tell her about people . . . that she didn't know already" (497) – so it seems almost ridiculous that she would expect different treatment, although, of course, Mrs. Turpin does not see this double standard at all. In fact, she continues in her self-righteous attitude, much like the Pharisee in Christ's parable who is thankful he is "not like other people" (Luke 18:11). This leads her to recite a "litany of blessings," as Mrs. Cope does in "A Circle in the Fire." But when she

gets carried away, "flooded with gratitude and a terrible pang of joy" (499), Mary Grace literally throws the book at her (see Fitzgerald, Introduction xxx).

After a tussle, in which the girl tries to strangle her, they are pulled apart, and as Mrs. Turpin's head clears, she understands for the first time that Mary Grace can reveal some truth to her:

There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. "What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

(500)

When it comes, however, it is not at all what Mrs. Turpin expects:

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's. "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target. (500)

Here, however, Mrs. Turpin reveals her spiritual sensitivity: instead of immediately forgetting the allegation, she broods on it, first denying the charge

(502) and then, Job-like, "defending her innocence to invisible guests" (503). But she is irritated when the black field workers insist there was no reason for Mary Grace's words and action because "Jesus satisfied with her!" Mrs. Turpin considers this statement idiotic – as it is, because God is not pleased with her pride – indicating a "step toward facing the truth" (Coulthard, "Sermon" 65).

Then Mrs. Turpin deliberately sets out to confront that truth, leaving for the pig parlor with "the look of a woman going singlehanded, weaponless, into battle" (505). On a literal level, she is going to see the pigs, to prove that she is not one of them, but she is in actuality going to face her Accuser, God Himself. The sun indicates God's willingness to meet with her: it "was riding westward very fast over the far tree line as if it meant to reach the hogs before she did" (505). Once she arrives at the pigsty, she sends Claud away and proceeds to hose down the hogs, at the same time questioning God in a voice "barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury" (506): "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (506) Significantly, she is washing out the eye of an old sow in the pig parlor (506), just as spiritually her own eyes are being cleaned. And like her, the sow is squealing in anger.

As if in reply to her question, the sun sets behind the woods "which [she and Claud] owned as well" (507), showing true ownership – "like a farmer inspecting his own hogs" (507). As Mrs. Turpin talks, complaining how "good" she is (507), the sun continues to set, making everything look "mysterious" (507).

At last, she challenges God: "'Go on,' she yelled, 'call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom! . . . Who do you think you are?'" (507) And God, by His silence, answers:

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood. (507-08)

Mrs. Turpin, like Job confronted with God's unanswerable questions, can no longer argue (508), and like the Prodigal Son, who came to his senses in a pigsty (Luke 15:15-17), she comes to certain understandings about herself and her relationship to God. She looks into the pig parlor, "as if through the very heart of mystery, . . . absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (508).¹¹ She

realizes that she, like the hogs, is clean outwardly, but an inferior creature all the same when compared with God (Coulthard, "Sermon" 66) – that a hog is a hog, whether clean or dirty, just as all human beings share a common misery as well as the possibility of a common salvation.

The sun leaves a "purple streak in the sky, . . . leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk" (508), like the red road that the child sees in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." But this road is more than a symbol – it is a "purgatorial" vision (O'Connor, "To Maryat Lee" 577). Mrs. Turpin sees a bridge of fire, and on it a countless number of people:

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. (508)

These people are leading the procession, followed by "those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right" (508). They appear in her vision as they have in life – dignified, responsible, orderly, sensible, respectable – but they are still "bringing up the end of the procession" rather than marching at the beginning (508). And Mrs. Turpin can "see

by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away" (508).

In that moment, she realizes what Christ meant when He told His disciples that "many who are first will be last and the last, first" (Matt. 19:30), and while the vision fades in the sky, it remains with her even as she heads home, indicating a changed attitude toward life, a more Christ-like attitude toward people and possessions that results in her advancing one step closer to full Christian maturity, continuing the conversion begun long ago.

O'Connor was describing these two main characters – the unnamed child and Mrs. Turpin – when she wrote about conversion:

I am thinking . . . about the deepening of conversion. . . . I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it. ("To 'A'" 430)

Both the child and Mrs. Turpin see this side and choose to "turn inward toward God," thus continuing the volitional conversions that had started before the stories began.

Notes

1. O'Connor was rightfully disappointed by the lack of attention given to this story: "Odd about 'The Temple of the Holy Ghost.' Nobody notices it. It is never anthologized, never commented upon. A few nuns have mentioned it with pleasure, but nobody else besides you" ("To 'A'" 487).

2. A. R. Coulthard disagrees with Gabriele Robinson concerning the power of the epiphany in this story. He finds it a failure because the "theological message dominates artistic matter" ("Sermon" 58).

3. Once again, names play an important part in this story. Joanne and Susan are very similar in name to two of the women who followed Christ during his earthly ministry, Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:2-3), perhaps indicating that while the two girls in the story do not seem to have any interest in spiritual things, they will later on become more devout.

The name of the school relates to various concepts, from the simplest definition of scholastic – "of or relating to schools or scholars, especially high school or secondary school" – to a specific kind of school called a "scholasticate," which is college-level and primarily teaches general subjects for those who want to enter a Catholic religious order. Mount St. Scholastica could also refer to Scholasticism:

[This is] a philosophical movement dominant in western Christian civilization from the ninth until the seventeenth century and combining religious dogma with the mysticism and institutional tradition of patristic philosophy, especially of St. Augustine.

The most obvious reference, however, is to St. Scholastica, the sister of St. Benedict and one of the contemplatives.

The child is, significantly, unnamed – the only one of O'Connor's main characters who does not have a name. This "generalizes [her] experience" (Mayer 147), putting the emphasis on the events rather than on the individual.

4. The title of the story comes from two places in 1 Corinthians. Here 1 Cor. 6:18-20 is alluded to:

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know

that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

5. O'Connor gives most of the "Tantum Ergo" in Latin. One "literal but unpoetic translation" is by Jane Salvia:

So great a host, therefore,
 we worship prostrate;
 The Old Law must give way
 To the new ritual.
 Let faith fulfill the
 defect of the senses.
 To the Father and to the Son
 be praise and jubilation,
 Health, honor, virtue, and
 benediction also;
 Let there be equal praise
 for him [the Holy Ghost]
 who has come forth
 from them both [the Father
 and the Son].

Amen. (Walden and Salvia 232)

6. O'Connor, like the child, considered the subject of the Eucharist to be serious: "I believe the Host is actually the body and blood of Christ, not a symbol" ("To 'A'" 124). Once, at a dinner party, the guests began discussing the Eucharist, which O'Connor felt obligated to defend:

Mrs. Broadwater [Mary McCarthy] said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the "most portable" person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable. ("To 'A'" 125)

7. This is the second reference to 1 Corinthians. Here it is 1 Cor. 3:16-17:

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him,

for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

The freak clearly alludes to this passage throughout its "sermon."

8. Louise Westling sees an even closer bond between the hermaphrodite and the Host:

As the receptacle for the Host, which is the body of Christ, the monstrance symbolizes God's human receptacle much as the body of the individual serves as Temple of the Holy Ghost. Thus the hermaphrodite's monstrous physical form can be interpreted as a sanctified vessel for the Host (Latin "hostia" - sacrifice or victim). By accepting his/her condition, the freak becomes a martyr for Christ. ("Adolescence" 93-94)

9. The two great commandments are "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:36-40).

10. Westling thinks that "ultimately Mary Grace's presence . . . is too strong and troubling for the limited role she plays" (Sacred Groves 148), but O'Connor - viewing Mary Grace as an incarnation of theological truth ("To Cecil Dawkins" 579) - would have disagreed.

11. This is an appropriate place for an epiphany, because, unlikely as it may seem, certain medievalists considered pigs to have prophetic powers (Sillar and Meyler 116), as well as signifying various vices such as lust and greed (Sillar and Meyler 21).

CHAPTER SIX

Francis Marion Tarwater as the Prototypical Convert

"Conversion," William James writes, "is in essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity" (167). Because of this, most conversions, statistically, take place between the ages of fourteen and seventeen (James 167). Usually they are accompanied by a "loss of sleep and appetite" prior to the transition (James 168). The process toward conversion, while much stormier for the adolescent than the adult or young child (James 168), includes the same "symptoms" – a "sense of incompleteness and imperfection; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like" (James 167) – resulting in "happy relief and objectivity" after conversion (James 167).

This definition of adolescent conversion describes, for the most part, the situation of Flannery O'Connor's prototypical convert, fourteen-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater, the protagonist in what has been called – rightly, in the light of James' comments – one of the

"important psychological novels" of the 1960's, The Violent Bear It Away (Witham 265).¹ The process that Tarwater goes through includes all stages of conversion and both volitional and sudden conversion. Because this novel is about both "the kingdom of heaven manifest[ing] itself violently, and men in violence tak[ing] hold of it" (May, "Meaning" 86), Tarwater's transformation does not result in anything resembling James' "happy relief." The objectivity, however, is certainly there as he, like Christ setting His face toward Jerusalem and the crucifixion (Luke 9:51), starts off toward the "dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" in order to warn them "of the terrible speed of mercy" (267).²

Tarwater enters the first stage of conversion – a sense of guilt, a recognition of sin – as a result of his failure to bury his dead great-uncle as he had been instructed. Up to that point, he has never acted independently from the old man, but Mason's death has worked a change on Tarwater (129), allowing him to make his own decisions for the first time. But even though the old man is dead, his presence is a moving force in the story, especially as he speaks for O'Connor herself (O'Connor, "Catholic Novelist" 204). He has lived up to his name and has constructed a sense of God's destiny for the boy, brick

by brick, throughout the fourteen years he has raised Tarwater after stealing him from his uncle, a schoolteacher named Rayber (126). Throughout the novel, the boy is unable to rid himself of the pervasive presence of Mason, who wars with Tarwater's other influence – the voice of the stranger who first begins talking while Tarwater is digging the grave and who appears in physical form twice in the book, acting as a Doppelgänger both as Tarwater's alter ego and as the literal Devil (Asals 83; Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 148).³ Tarwater's conscious battle is between these two, one speaking for God and one for Satan (Palms 321A), but his unconscious struggle is with the devil inside – because choosing himself would be the same as choosing Satan (146) – and there the choice becomes one between "some unfathomable hunger and pride" (184).

Tarwater gives up digging and goes to get some refreshment at the still that his great-uncle ran back in the woods. In his first act of rebellion, he takes a drink of the liquor, and "a burning arm slid down Tarwater's throat as if the devil were already reaching inside him to finger his soul" (150), a foreshadowing of the drugged alcohol the stranger in the lavender car offers him at the end of the novel (260). Just like his great-uncle, who

became intoxicated when he "couldn't stand the Lord one instant longer" (149), Tarwater gets drunk.

After he wakes from his stupor, he sets the house on fire, thinking that the old man is still in it, unaware that a black man named Buford Munson has finished the burial (125). This is Tarwater's "declaration of independence from the old man" (Browning, "Grotesque Recovery" 151), his first act of direct defiance. He further rebels when he walks to the road and hitches a ride with a flue salesman named Meeks, who offers to take him into the city.⁴ Meeks attempts to instruct Tarwater about "love" as a sales technique (153-54), wanting to sucker the boy into his business (155), but Tarwater ignores him and concentrates instead on the goal ahead of him, removing the image of the old man from himself.

Tarwater is haunted by his almost sacrilegious act of rebellion, however, and he cannot seem to rid himself of the guilt he feels (188), first confusing the city with the fire he has set at Powderhead (153) and then wearing the guilt in his eyes so that he reminds Rayber of Tarwater's father, a divinity student whom Rayber "converted" to atheistic humanism who subsequently committed suicide (184). Instead of having Rayber's eyes, Tarwater has "eyes of repentance . . . , singed with guilt" (184).

But his first rebellion – getting drunk and burning the body instead of burying it – falls by the wayside in his attempt to revolt completely against the desire his great-uncle had to “raise up [a prophet] out of this boy” (212). To begin that ministry, Tarwater must baptize the idiot son of the schoolteacher. And although Tarwater attempts to refuse and deny that destiny (253), his every action in the book moves toward the initiation of his vatic ministry.

Bishop, Rayber’s idiot child, is the catalyst to Tarwater’s realization of his call. When he and Mason had visited the city a few years earlier, Tarwater had stood at the door of Rayber’s house, knowing “by some obscure instinct that the door was going to open and reveal his destiny” (141). It does: Bishop answers. Bishop resembles Old Tarwater, especially in his “fish-colored” eyes, and when Tarwater sees him the first time, he is “gnawing on a brown apple core” (142), the first reference to Bishop’s role as a demonstration of the result of the Fall. Another one occurs while Rayber, Bishop, and Tarwater are at the Cherokee Lodge near Powderhead, Tarwater’s home. The young people dancing there are shocked by the sight of Bishop in the lobby, “as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before

they were allowed to see it" (235). This role adds more significance to Bishop's baptism, because baptism, in granting salvation, removes original sin and restores the unity between God and man that was severed by the Fall.

Even though Tarwater seems to have put aside his guilt over the burning, he must still face his destiny as it is embodied in Bishop, who acts as a "kind of Christ image" or "redemptive figure" (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 191). The battle to resist that call begins as soon as Tarwater leaves Powderhead. After Meeks dials Rayber's number, Tarwater feels a sense of foreboding. Bishop answers the telephone, and Tarwater has a sensation similar to the one he felt the first time he met the child.

Although Bishop does not say anything, the silence is full of presence (172), as if "the Lord might be about to speak to him [Tarwater] over the machine" (172). And then, in a foreshadowing of his coming baptism, Bishop begins to gurgle, "the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe underwater" (172). This is an epiphanic moment for Tarwater:

He stood there blankly as if he had received a revelation he could not yet decipher. He seemed to have been stunned by some deep internal blow

that had not yet made its way to the surface of his mind. (172)

When he sees Bishop a few hours later, the revelation – “silent, implacable, direct as a bullet” (177) – is made clear. He knows his destiny is to “baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared for him” (177), but unlike the Old Testament prophets, “his prophecy would not be remarkable” (177). Tarwater sees himself “trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus” (177), and he attempts to cry out “NO!” but he cannot (178).

His entire struggle against God, in fact, is wrapped up in his seeming inability to refuse his call.⁵ Later, he comments, “You can’t just say NO You got to do NO. You got to show it . . . by doing it” (217), and he thinks he has done so when he drowns Bishop (255), although, of course, he has not. Rather than acting completely freely, Tarwater has performed in accordance with both influences on his life: as Rayber desired, he has drowned the boy; as Old Tarwater wished, he has baptized him (Kellogg 200-01). Thus drowning Bishop is, for Tarwater, a “momentous failure” (247), and like a reluctant Prodigal Son, he returns home.

Tarwater's pride is tied up in the fact that he "can act," unlike Rayber (223, 225), and that pride is stripped away by his unwillingly saying the words of baptism as he drowns Bishop (248). Rather than this loss of pride leading to a state of exhaustion, as it does for Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," for Tarwater it increases his hunger, while at the same time adding to a lack of appetite, which James observes as a common symptom of an adolescent entering a conversion experience (168). Like the boys in "A Circle in the Fire," spiritual hunger has been a pervasive problem for Tarwater throughout the novel. He has always been afraid he would be affected, like his great-uncle, by "the bread of life," which is Jesus — that "he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life" (135).⁶ This hunger is tied to the Eucharist, just as the water is connected to baptism.⁷ In fact, the most important symbols in the novel — fire and water — are connected with Tarwater's hunger, since "loaves are baked . . . and fish swim" (Trowbridge, "Symbolic Vision" 298).

The hunger does not affect Tarwater, however, until he arrives in the city (219). Rayber immediately notices the hungry look on his face (184, 193), although he, like Tarwater, thinks it is physical rather than spiritual. Even

after the boy stops at a bakery window, staring at a loaf of bread (197-98), neither understands the spiritual source of the hunger. At the Cherokee Lounge the hunger becomes more acute – as does Tarwater's inability to keep food down (226) – and Rayber finally analyzes it: "You can't eat . . . because something is eating you" (237), that something being the necessity to baptize Bishop. Rayber is right, as far as he goes, but the hunger, as well as the inability to eat, continues even after Bishop's baptism (248, 249, 250), because the baptism was not volitional. The truck driver who picks Tarwater up on the way to Powderhead offers him a "pierced sandwich" (254), reminiscent of Christ, but he cannot eat it:

"When I come to eat, I ain't hungry," Tarwater said. "It's like being empty is a thing in my stomach and it don't allow nothing else to come down in there. If I ate it, I would throw it up."
(249)

He needs to be filled by the Bread of Life, but in order to be, he must first give up his pride and give in to his prophetic mission. This becomes obvious when the sun, always a symbol of God, causes an incredible thirst that "combined in a pain that shot up and down him and across from shoulder to shoulder" (255) – the sign of the cross –

echoing his actions while his great-uncle is talking to him before his death, moving "his thin shoulder blades irritably as if he were shifting the burden of Truth like a cross on his back" (169).

Wanting to assuage his thirst, Tarwater gets a drink from a well, handing the black child there the sandwich in exchange, but he reveals his true desire by sticking his entire head into the well, in something of a self-baptism. This is his first step back toward God, because for O'Connor, "water . . . is a symbol of the kind of purification that God gives, irrespective of our efforts or worthiness" (O'Connor, "To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 387). But because Tarwater — like the Samaritan woman (John 4:11-15) — is thirsting for the "living water," the well water does not satisfy him (256). Then he thinks a "purple drink" will do so — as perhaps it would, being indicative both of sacramental wine and penitence — but he never buys one (258). Instead, as he rides in the homosexual stranger's car, he takes another shot of liquor, disregarding his great-uncle's warning:

"You are the kind of boy," the old man said,
"that the devil is always going to be offering to
assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride,

and to ask you your bidnis. You had better mind how you take up with strangers." (157-58)

The stranger, who is the incarnation of the voice that has been speaking to him since Mason died (144; compare 258), is the Devil himself, and the drink he offers Tarwater – which Tarwater pronounces "better than the Bread of Life" (260) – only makes his thirst worse (260). He is drugged by it, and after the rape in the woods on the dirt road to the burned house at Powderhead (261), the hunger is even worse, although his conversion is only moments away.

In O'Connor's stories, "the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (O'Connor, "On Her Own Work" 117), and Tarwater's conversion is precipitated by the action of the Devil, who unwittingly points out Tarwater's sinful nature to him. The first encounter Tarwater has with this reality is triggered by the woman from whom he wants to buy the purple drink. She judges him – like an archangel – for his burning of his great-uncle's house (257). Wanting to "answer for his freedom and make bold his acts" (257), he searches his soul for "the voice of his mentor at its most profound depths" (257). What emerges is an "obscenity he had overheard once at a fair" (257). This action, which comes from listening to the voice inside him, the voice of

the Devil, results in his awareness of his sinful bent, because "the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matt. 12:34):

The obscenity echoed sullenly in his head. The boy's mind was too fierce to brook impurities of such a nature. He was intolerant of unspiritual evils and with those of the flesh he had never truckled. He felt his victory sullied by the remark that had come from his mouth. (258)

The second violation is not from inside but from outside, from the homosexual in the "lavender and cream-colored car" who picks him up on the road after his encounter with the black woman who acts as the avenging angel. The stranger is "familiar to him," although "he could not place where he had seen him before" (259). He has seen him twice previously, the first time in a vision as he is digging Mason's grave — a face that is "sharp and friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat that obscured the color of his eyes" (144). He also meets him in the park in the city, after he fails to baptize Bishop in the fountain (222), although the likeness there is in voice rather than dress. The stranger in the car, however, is a direct incarnation of the voice: he is thin, wearing a panama hat tipped back so that the color of

his eyes is obvious. They are lavender, like his car and his shirt, and like the handkerchief that he ties Tarwater with after the rape (261), in exchange for the hat and the corkscrew that he takes from the boy.⁸

The rape is what "burns [Tarwater's] eyes clean" (212, 261, 262). Like his great-uncle (126), he endures a baptism of fire, not water, revealing his second step toward God, since fire, for O'Connor, indicates "the kind of purification we bring on ourselves" (O'Connor, "To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 387): "His eyes looked small and seedlike as if . . . they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head. His expression seemed to contract until it reached some point beyond rage or pain" (261). Then, like Bishop while he is being drowned/baptized (242), Tarwater lets out a "loud . . . cry" and begins to rip the handkerchief to shreds (261). Immediately after he is free, he sets fire to the place where he has lain "until the fire was eating greedily at the evil ground, burning every spot the stranger could have touched" (262).

Unlike the burning of the house, this burning is cleansing rather than destructive, and it brings him to an acceptance of whatever lies ahead:

He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final

revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of a prophet [Isa. 6:6-7], they would never be used for ordinary sights again.

(262)

His first truly free action follows – the complete rejection of his “friend.” As he looks on the land that he burned before his trip to the city, “the sign of a broken covenant” (264), his guilt returns, and his lips seem to be “forced open by a hunger too great to be contained inside him” (264), but again it is not for physical food (265). While he is struggling with this, his friend inopportunistly tells him to possess the land for the two of them – finally allowing his own greed to be evident. Tarwater shudders, because for the first time the presence is “a warm sweet body of air encircling him, a violent shadow hanging around his shoulders” (264). And this time, he does not listen; instead, he “shook himself free fiercely” and proceeds to put “a rising wall of fire between him and the grinning presence” (264). No longer his friend, “his adversary [is] soon . . . consumed in a roaring blaze” (264), and Tarwater is finally completely free of him. It is, in fact, due to the “assault of the other stranger [that] has made it

possible for Tarwater to repudiate this one" (Pearce 310), especially since they are the same person. By rejecting the Devil, Tarwater accepts his vatic vocation (see O'Connor, "To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 507).

He goes further into the woods, and there he feels a sense of the mystery that dwells there, almost like entering a cathedral (265), much as Rayber does when he goes with Bishop into the same place (232). For the first time Tarwater is aware of God's presence (265). He approaches the fig tree beside the burned house and sees the grave. Then he realizes that both his "victories" have been defeats – Bishop is baptized, and Mason is buried.

He stands over the grave, opening his hands "stiffly as if he were dropping something he had been clutching all his life" (266), finally admitting "the inevitability of God's will" (Pearce 310). Although Buford is there, Tarwater ignores him, and he experiences a vision of loaves and fishes. He is "aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him," because his hunger is for the Bread of Life, Christ Himself (266). This hunger also has a history:

He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time

and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth.⁹ He felt it building from the blood of Abel to his own, rising and engulfing him. (266-67)¹⁰

But this time he does not despise the hunger, and he does not reject his calling. Instead, he seems to understand that those "who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6).

It is then that his full conversion takes place. As he throws himself face down on his great-uncle's grave, he, like Moses (147), sees a burning bush (267) – a tree set on fire by the blaze Tarwater started himself, "which rose from his hatred of evil when he knew it as it was" (Kellogg 203). At last he hears in silent words his call to "go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy" – not the "terrible speed of justice" that his predecessor was to proclaim (159), because Tarwater is to be a New Testament rather than an Old Testament prophet. The command is "as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood" (267),

the "madness . . . hidden in the blood" (135) come at last to fruition, despite his attempts against it (236).

As he raises himself up from the grave – symbolic of resurrection – the fire is gone, replaced by a "dull red cloud of smoke" (267), reminiscent of the cloud by night that guided the children of Israel through the wilderness (Ex. 13:21). In an act of penitence indicating his conversion, he smears the dirt from the grave on his forehead and sets out for the city, led by his shadow – a Jungian symbol indicating his inner being (Snider 24-25) and somehow connected with the "bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus" that he has so long avoided (177, 255). Instead, like that Jesus, he sets his face toward his own Jerusalem and his own death. But despite envisioning this fate, he presses on – acting out the conversion that he has so dramatically experienced.

Notes

1. The novel has been the object of much critical evaluation, often disparate. The same was true when it was published (O'Connor, "To Robert Giroux" 415). It is still sometimes misread, but misinterpretations were even more common when it first came out. Reviewers, like the one for the English Journal (Review of The Violent Bear It Away 275), saw Tarwater as "warped" by the old man. John Traynor was especially castigating, talking of Mason's "imagined calling," the "warped seed" planted in Tarwater, and Tarwater's "grand and blind act of self-fulfillment" while baptizing Bishop (26). While these sorts of reviews troubled O'Connor because she felt they missed the point — that Tarwater at the end is now acting on the truth (O'Connor, "To Janet McKane" 536) — she was equally afraid that the book would not be "controversial," that it would "just be dammed [sic] and dropped [or] genteelly sneered at" ("To 'A'" 358). This fear arose because she was writing on a subject of great importance to her and wanted desperately to convey the message:

The novelist doesn't write to express himself, he doesn't write simply to render a vision he believes true, rather he renders his vision so that it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader. . . .

When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel — its language, its structure, its action. I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the . . . novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal. ("Novelist and Believer" 162)

2. The title of the novel comes from Matthew 11:12 in the Douai version: "From the days of John the Baptist until

now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." O'Connor was disappointed that she failed "to make the title's significance clear" in the novel itself, where she wanted to express "the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands, of an asceticism like John the Baptist's, but in the face of which even John is less than the least in the kingdom" ("To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 382).

3. O'Connor commented on the comic elements of Tarwater's "friend," saying, "In general the Devil can always be a subject for my kind of comedy one way or another. I suppose this is because he is always accomplishing ends other than his own" ("To John Hawkes" 367).

4. Meeks' name may be an ironic choice, based on the idea that the meek "shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). While Meeks' goal may be to accomplish this in a materialistic sense, his connections in the book indicate that he is part of the conspiracy to keep Tarwater from God. Rayber is similar to Meeks, asking the same questions (171, 188) and making the same comments (158, 239), and since Rayber is clearly on the Devil's side most — although not all (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 357) — of the time (156), so must be Meeks. In fact, O'Connor acknowledges Meeks' role as the Devil — a literal, not merely literary, being for her — even more quickly than she does Rayber's ("To John Hawkes" 359-60).

5. While Tarwater does have free will — as demonstrated through his internal conflict (O'Connor, "To Alfred Corn" 488) — his true freedom comes when he submits to God's call.

6. He has always resented the fact that the freedom he has at Powderhead, which he "could smell . . . , pine-scented, coming out of the woods" (135), is "connected with Jesus" (135), because while he likes the freedom, he does not want to be responsible to Jesus as Lord.

7. O'Connor, in fact, called this novel "a very minor hymn to the Eucharist" ("To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 387).

8. The hat has always been Tarwater's tie to his great-uncle and to his old life as it was "shaped by the old man" (Kellogg 201) — symbolizing the "Lord's design" on Tarwater (Feeley 24). This is why Rayber keeps trying to get rid of

it — and why it is gone now, as Tarwater prepares to enter his "new life" both spiritually and prophetically.

The corkscrew has been the subject of various interpretations, but most likely it is, as Gene Kellogg says, a "key to the material world" (201).

9. O'Connor elaborates on this spiritual country earlier, as Tarwater struggles with his decision not to baptize Bishop:

It was a strange waiting silence. It seemed to lie all around him like an invisible country whose borders he was always on the edge of, always in danger of crossing. From time to time as they had walked in the city, he had looked to the side and seen his own form alongside him in a store window, transparent as a snakeskin. It moved beside him like some violent ghost who had already crossed over and was reproaching him from the other side. (218)

10. Although Harold Gardiner sees the conclusion as open-ended (682), the reference to Abel here indicates Tarwater's probable future. According to Luke 11:50-51, most of the true prophets, including Abel, have been killed, and O'Connor indicates that this is Tarwater's fate as well ("To 'A'" 342; "To Brainard and Frances Neel Cheney" 93).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

For Flannery O'Connor, the "central Christian mystery" is redemption (O'Connor, "Church" 146), and her "gravest concern" in writing was "always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it" (O'Connor, "To John Hawkes" 349). Because of this, it was necessary for her to center her fictional themes on the "fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption and judgment" (O'Connor, "To John Hawkes" 350). Of course, some critics – and some readers – complain that she has "only one story to tell" (Drake, "Flannery" 17), but she once explained her reasons to a correspondent:

The theme is a lot bigger than my powers to deal with it . . . , but I'll probably keep trying; people will say I don't have anything else to write about. Which is okay. You have to do what you have to do. ("To Dr. T. R. Spivey" 506)

Her most prominent theme is conversion, which she considered the central religious experience because it "concerns a relationship with a supreme being recognized through faith" (O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer" 160). O'Connor explains further:

It is the experience of an encounter [with God], of a kind of knowledge which affects the believer's every action. . . . This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead. It is one who confounds the senses and sensibilities, one known early on as a stumbling block. There is no way to gloss over this specification or to make it more acceptable to modern thought. This God is the object of ultimate concern and he has a name. ("Novelist and Believer" 160-61)

The difficulty of conversion, O'Connor believed, is centered in human nature, which "vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful" ("To Cecil Dawkins" 306).¹ This struggle can be seen in all her conversion stories, even those dealing with volitional changes.

The verb "convert" comes from the Latin converto, meaning "to turn around" (Kellogg 191), and in every case studied here, the protagonist has been brought to a point where he/she must decide to continue on in the way he/she has been going – or to turn around and embrace the God that

has been in pursuit like the inexorable "Hound of Heaven" Francis Thompson describes.

"There is a moment in every great story," O'Connor writes, "in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize the moment" ("On Her Own Work" 118). While the reader may never recognize it, the characters in O'Connor's stories always do, and they must then make a choice, for while "[f]aith is a gift, . . . the will has a great deal to do with it" (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 452). William James agrees. "To say that a man is 'converted,'" he says, "means . . . that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (165). This transformation – or at least the beginning of this change – can be seen in all the protagonists examined in this study.

For Hazel Motes, Calhoun and Elizabeth, and Sally Virginia and Mrs. Cope, the conversion has only begun: they are all brought to a recognition of their sinful nature and of their need for salvation but no further. Asbury Fox has become aware not only of his need for salvation but also from whom that redemption emanates; he has been brought, through his illness, to a state of exhaustion, unable to

struggle with God any longer. Harry Ashfield, the grandmother, Mrs. May, and Mr. Head are completely converted, and although three of the four of them die immediately after their acceptance of the grace being offered, their salvations are no less assured and are, in fact, much more powerful to the reader. The unnamed child and Mrs. Turpin, already believers, continue on in their conversion experiences, forcing the "religious ideas" that James discusses to be even more the "habitual centre" of their lives. Finally, Francis Marion Tarwater, who for fourteen years has been trained to accept his vatic mission – a kind of volitional conversion – does so at last, after moving through a sense of guilt and a knowledge of his inability to "save himself" to an acceptance of his call, moving from "Christ-hauntedness" to "Christ-centeredness" (see O'Connor, "Grotesque" 44).

All these conversions, often with the Devil as "the unwilling instrument of grace" (O'Connor, "On Her Own Work" 118), are presented in a natural setting – the Southern countryside or a Southern city, identifiable places with names. But O'Connor does not leave it at that – the supernatural invades the natural in a miraculous way (O'Connor, "To 'A'" 413-14), expanding the natural so that it can become, even on the literal level, a believable

vessel for grace (O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Readers" 176). These natural objects – the sun, the trees, the hogs, fire, water, bread, cattle – work with the supernatural to bring about the conversions of the characters in a way completely in keeping with nature (O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer" 161).²

In addition, each protagonist must struggle through those things that have previously been at the "habitual centre of his energy" – intellectualism, materialism, or self-sufficiency, all of which both proceed from and result in pride, the original sin. But because it is O'Connor's contention that "all good stories are about conversion" ("To 'A'" 275), it is no wonder that most of her characters – and all in this study – at least begin to accept a spiritual change when confronted with the possibility.

O'Connor saw her stories as mere records of the conversion experience, although she was willing to admit to their harshness:

The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them ("To 'A'" 90)

"The greatest dramas," O'Connor insists, "naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul" ("Novelist and Believer" 167). It is not strange, then, that despite what readers may think of her theology, Flannery O'Connor is admired for her ability to present her "central concerns" in a way that causes the mind of the reader "to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (O'Connor, "Nature" 79), whether the reader ever accepts her message or not.

Notes

1. O'Connor once wrote, "This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring" ("To 'A'" 441).

2. O'Connor wrote further on the subject:

For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. . . . The resurrection of Christ seems the high point in the law of nature. ("To 'A'" 100)

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