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## **The Religious Sense in the Works of Flannery O'Connor**

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Francesca Greenfield  
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Flannery O'Connor believed that divine experience is inseparable from everyday life, and this religious sense is integral to her fictional works. A religious sense pervades all of her stories, but no story preaches a religious lesson or doctrine. Nevertheless, the essential tenets of her religious tradition that are necessary to an understanding of her works may be summarized briefly as follows. In the Christian tradition in which O'Connor participates, God is recognized to be at the core of our being, and all humans experience an innate attraction toward this divine presence. If we resist the pull toward participation with the divine, we alienate ourselves both from God and from ourselves. The action of grace corrects our response to God and brings about love of ourselves and of others as we and they are. This thesis expands on and draws out these implicit ideas in O'Connor's works.

For O'Connor, the presence of the divine is constant in human life, but the manifestation of the divine in one's life varies with one's involuntary and voluntary responses to Him. Because, according to St. Augustine, God is in the deepest part of oneself, His presence in one's life does not begin at a certain point but is present from birth. Children are most open to God in acknowledging their attraction to the divine and most willing in their participation. Insofar as they are free of societal restrictions and pressures, they express their desire without hesitation. Since children do not consciously recognize the nature of their desire, however, they require the guidance of their parents in identifying and

responding to their desire. Both "The River" and "The Lame Shall Enter First" present a young boy who expresses an innate desire to participate in the divine and then show the tragic results of the lack of guidance the boy receives in recognizing his desire or in acknowledging and responding to the divine presence.

Young adults and adults often do not acknowledge to themselves or to others the need they feel for the divine. Often adults are either unable or unwilling to acquiesce to participation in the divine because they resist being controlled by something other than themselves. In addition, adults often are subject to and more affected by societal norms than children are, and the modern temperament reinforces their unwillingness to acknowledge, let alone express, a desire for God. In an effort to deny the need for God's active presence in their lives, or to fill the void they may feel, some adults turn to intellectual goals, repeated good works, or other distractions from this desire. Sheppard, Rayber, and Hulga in "The Lame Shall Enter First," The Violent Bear It Away, and "Good Country People," respectively, are three adults who resist the divine and turn to other distractions.

Some of O'Connor's adult characters ignore the need for God and never accept their desire to participate in the divine. Others respond to the action of grace, often in the form of a revelation, and awaken to the truth about themselves and to a deepened awareness of the divine in their lives. Ruby Turpin, Parker, and Mr. Head in "Revelation," "Parker's Back,"

and “The Artificial Nigger,” respectively, are affected by the action of grace and gain an awareness of the divine and a deeper understanding about themselves. Whereas before the responses and revelations, these characters were alienated from God and therefore from a fundamental part of themselves, after the revelations, they demonstrate a capacity to love themselves and others as they are. The ability to love themselves and others unconditionally is due to their awakened desire to participate in the divine, and according to St. Augustine, unconditional love manifests itself as “the enjoyment of one’s self and one’s neighbor for the sake of God”(Huppe and Robertson, 9). Unconditional love is the essence of divine life and the most extraordinary condition O’Connor’s characters achieve.

The anagogical sense of a story reveals the action of grace that brings about the possibility of unconditional love. For the anagogical sense to be persuasive, it must be fully grounded in the detail and development of the story and so escape the tint of sentimentality. The only way to write anything worthwhile, O’Connor says in Mystery and Manners, is to deal with the particularity of ordinary experiences.

Dedicated to everyday experiences of ordinary people, such as rural and often poor characters, rather than to abstract ideas, O’Connor’s works do not preach. Instead, the resolutions of her stories are credible and profound because they evolve from “the concrete world of sense experience” (Mystery and Manners, 125).

Detail forms the basis for the anagogical level of meaning within

O'Connor's works. The deepest level of meaning in literature, the anagogical level, O'Connor says, "has to do with the divine life and our participation in it" (Mystery and Manners, 111). The anagogical level reveals the action of grace because a person's acceptance of grace is the moment at which he or she actively participates in the divine. For example, in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" when the Grandmother reaches out to the Misfit saying, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (132), she is participating in the divine. Seen anagogically, the Grandmother's gesture "is both in character and beyond character," and "suggest[s] both the world and eternity" (Mystery and Manners, 111). We see in her gesture the action of grace. Again in "Revelation" the anagogically rich moment when Ruby receives a divine vision is credible because her vision is grounded in and constituted of the particular details and concrete world of her daily life.

For O'Connor, a story, including its resolution, that is not grounded in detail risks producing sentimentality. Sentimentality in a story causes the reader to doubt the character's genuine participation in the divine so that the meaning at the anagogical level is lost.

"We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock

state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite" (Mystery and Manners,148).

Sudden, easy participation in the divine life, producing an unearned or improbable "happy ending," causes a character to act much differently than he or she has acted previously in the story. To be persuasive, the action of grace, and consequently the anagogical sense must have a strong base in detail so that the reader accepts the change in the character and his or her participation in the divine. "When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality" (148).

The success of O'Connor's works is due to the presence of both "manners" and "mystery." Manners deal with the concrete reality which forms the basis of her stories, while mystery is the action of grace and the mysterious workings of the divine. For O'Connor, the two are dependent upon each other and, in her careful evocation of one from the other, make credible the divine experiences one consistently encounters in her stories if one reads with attention to their anagogical sense.

"It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners. ... The mystery . . . is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery" (Mystery and Manners 124).

## Section One

### **The Inherent Need for the Divine: Exemplified by Children**

“The River”

“The Lame Shall Enter First”



Flannery O'Connor's works reveal her conviction that humans inherently feel a need for a divine presence in their lives. In "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "The River," O'Connor presents two children who demonstrate this need. O'Connor believes that God is incarnate in the world and that children ought properly to experience God's love and care first through their parents. Therefore, when parents do not properly love and care for their children, as is the case with Sheppard and the Ashfields, children do not experience the divine presence in the way that they need. In these stories, the parents' lack of proper care and concern for their children leaves them vulnerable to outside influences which, for Norton and Harry, results in tragedy.

Sheppard, the father in "The Lame Shall Enter First," denies that God exists, and his attitude about the Bible is similar. He says, "That book is something for you to hide behind .... It's for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves" (477). Ironically, Sheppard has not figured anything out. His wife has died, and because he does not know how to respond, he makes no response at all. He tries to avoid his feelings altogether, which presents the first problem for his son, Norton. Sheppard considers Norton selfish because he often asks about his mother. Since Norton is a constant reminder of his late wife, Sheppard tries desperately to avoid Norton. When Norton asks about his mother, particularly where she is now, Sheppard only responds, "She doesn't exist" (462).

Sheppard specifically denies God's existence, particularly by asserting man's intellectual superiority over religious faith. Sheppard adopts the attitude that "heaven and hell [are] for the mediocre" (463). Sheppard's independent attitude is exemplified by his efforts to help Johnson. Although his superficial intentions are to help the boy, Sheppard wants to feel good about himself. He does not do good acts for the sake of doing good, but simply to assert his influence over another's life and to reassure himself that he is a good and powerful person. "Nothing excited him so much as thinking what he could do for [Johnson]" (452). Sheppard is concerned only with improving Johnson rather than with Johnson's happiness. For example, when the shoe with the brace is too small and cannot be worn, Johnson is thrilled while "Sheppard's face was haggard" (466). Sheppard also imagines his success saying, "He knew that some day he would be proud of Johnson" (467).

For Sheppard, Johnson represents a way for him to exert influence over another's life, while Norton reminds him of the grievous loss of his wife. Not only does Sheppard avoid Norton, even when the boy is in his presence, he never actually sees him. His constant attitude toward his child may be observed in the narrator's description of Sheppard's notice of Norton: "He saw the child but after the first instant, he did not let his eyes focus directly on him" (469). Once while Sheppard looked at his son across the room, "[Norton] appeared so far away that Sheppard might have been looking at him through the wrong end of the telescope" (460). In an

effort to escape from his painful feelings, he focuses his attention away from Norton and directly on Johnson. His actions consistently reveal his efforts to control his feelings; he leaves "Norton at home because he did not want his attention divided" (469).

Sheppard offers no explanation to Norton about his mother's death nor does he show through his own example how to grieve, which leaves Norton vulnerable to any outside explanation. Norton naturally is sad because his mother has died, yet he does not know what to do with his feelings because his father also does not know what to do. Sheppard's only reaction to his feelings is to ignore them. In so doing, he invalidates Norton's feelings of sorrow.

The Ashfield's attitude toward their son Harry is similar to Sheppard's attitude toward Norton. Though the Ashfields neither ignore their son to avoid painful feelings nor focus energy on another child, they give only minimal attention to Harry. He exists on the periphery of their concern. They spend most of their time partying with their friends, and when they are with Harry, they usually have hangovers. Apparently they love Harry, or at least have kind feelings toward him, though they do not take much notice of him. When Harry is leaving with Mrs. Connin, his mother is too hung over to come say goodbye, and his father obviously is impatient for them to leave. Mr. Ashfield's relation to his son may be more clearly seen in Harry's reaction to him. When his father tells him goodbye, Harry "jumped as if he had been shot" (158). The day after his

trip to the river, Harry is left alone long enough in the morning to make a breakfast from raisin bread and peanut butter, play with the ashtrays his parents have left out, and take a car token from his mother's purse that he uses to make the trip back to the river.

Sheppard and the Ashfields do not set good examples for their children. Although they do not necessarily need to teach their children formally about religion, they do need to show them unconditional love, thereby developing for them an example of God's love. Norton and Harry's first experience of God's goodness properly is through their parents. If their parents treated them so as to make them feel that they "count," they would show them that they matter to God. When these parents do not pay proper attention to their children, however, the children's yearning to feel unconditional love does not disappear. Their parents should help to satisfy the children's initial experience of their need for a divine order, and when they abdicate this responsibility, Norton and Harry then turn to any form of acceptance they find.

Because Sheppard largely ignores Norton, Norton finds acceptance in Johnson. While his own father tries to avoid Norton, Johnson, whether with selfish intentions or not, seems to adopt Norton. As an older brother would act towards his younger brother, "Johnson's hand was on Norton's shoulder, his head bent toward the younger boy's ear, and on the child's face there was a look of complete confidence" (463). Although Sheppard will "not let his eyes focus directly on [Norton]" (469), Johnson reads to

him. "The two boys were sitting close together on the sofa, reading the same book. Norton's cheek rested against the sleeve of Johnson's black suit" (475). Because Johnson pays attention to Norton, he accepts anything Johnson teaches him about God. Although his father speaks adamantly against God, Norton willingly listens to Johnson talk about God and the Bible.

Similarly, Harry finds acceptance apart from his parents. When Mrs. Connin takes him to see the preacher at the river, he immediately accepts the "Kingdom of Christ" the preacher talks about. Obviously Harry does not fully understand what is happening, but like Norton he will replace no sense of the presence of God with any sense at all of God's presence. Harry is not dissuaded from learning about God, even though "If he had thought about it before, he would have thought that Jesus Christ was a word like 'oh' or 'damn' or 'God,' or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime" (163). That Harry's naive belief in the preacher is only an attempt to find acceptance anywhere may be seen as he says, "I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river" (168).

Since Sheppard and the Ashfields do not love their children unconditionally and pay no attention to them, God is not present for Norton and Harry. Harry and Norton's need for God's presence and openness to outside influences is exemplified by the speed with which they adopt the religion Mrs. Connin and Johnson, respectively, give them. Although they

are consciously unaware of their need, the two boys obviously are desperate for God to manifest Himself. Because God exemplifies and offers unconditional love, they respond without hesitation to the God they are shown. Harry takes the Bible with him and repeats what the preacher has told him. When his mother asks what the preacher said, Harry unknowingly expresses the exact reason he grasps at God; the preacher told him that "he counts" (168). Harry assimilates himself so quickly to his new "religion" that, when listening to his mother, he feels as if he "were under the river and [his mother] on top of it"(170). He is so willing to adopt his new "religion" that he jumps into the river to be in a place where he counts.

Norton accepts what Johnson teaches him about God just as quickly as Harry accepts his new religion. Not only does Johnson pay attention to Norton, a distinct difference from the way in which his father treats him, but Johnson also offers an explanation about where his mother is. Sheppard's only answer to Norton about his mother is that she "doesn't exist" (462). Johnson, however, accepts that Norton's mother still exists. When Johnson says that she is "in the sky somewhere" (462), Norton now can think of his mother as being in a particular place.

The significant difference between the parents and Johnson and the preacher, respectively, is that the outsiders give the boys attention. The boys equate what they hear about God with love and acceptance. The preacher tells Harry that in the Kingdom of Christ "you count now. . . . You

didn't even count before" (168). Mrs. Connin has a tangible picture of Jesus. Not only is Harry for the first time being told of Jesus, but also he is given a visual image of Jesus whereby he can "see" him. He is so excited by the Bible that he takes it with him, "manage[ing] to get the book inside his inner lining [of his jacket] without her seeing him" (163). Johnson reads to Norton and tries to explain where his mother is, and, like Harry, Norton also is very taken with the Bible. Norton sits with Johnson "close together on the sofa, reading the same book" (475). The boys are fascinated with the Bible because, like the picture of Jesus, it is tangible evidence of a God who cares about them. According to their way of thinking, a God must exist because they have a physical book to prove it.

The boys' need for love may be seen more clearly in the manner in which they kill themselves. The children take what they hear literally, and both want to go to the place that offers them comfort. Harry is so comforted by the idea that at the bottom of the river there is a place where he "counts" that he dives in the river to find it. Norton responds in the same manner. Although he does not understand what Johnson means when he says that Norton's mother is in the sky, he finally knows where to go to find her. Each boy is searching for someone to love him. Norton knows that his mother loves him and that he matters to her. Likewise, Harry is going to a place where he matters.

O'Connor makes several points in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "The River." First, every human feels the need to be loved and accepted.

Second, it is the responsibility of parents to provide their children that love and acceptance. Finally, children come to realize God's love through the love their parents show them. When children are ignored and thereby deprived of the apprehensible experience of God's love, the results may be tragic.

Children have not yet fully assimilated the conventions of adult society concerning what they should feel and think. They show what they feel without regard to whether or not their feelings are socially correct. Though adults may be too ashamed to admit the need for participation with the divine, children readily admit, or indirectly show by their actions, the need for acceptance that a divine presence offers. Norton needs to believe that someone or something is taking care of his mother and that, at the least, she still exists. Harry, too, needs to have someone who thinks he "counts."

Where these children find the fulfillment to their inherent needs constitutes O'Connor's second point. Children turn to their parents first to fill these needs. Without an experience of love and an example of loving, children are left vulnerable to forces both without and within. Neither Norton's nor Harry's parents show God's love by example, much less talk to them about God. Harry is not taught anything, so he has no knowledge that there is even a possibility that God exists. Norton is taught that, though others believe in a God, this belief is not valid. The only explanation Sheppard offers Norton is that nothing outside of



material life exists.

The influences the boys receive from Mrs. Connin and from Johnson in itself are not harmful, but because the boys have no one to explain thoroughly the meaning of the Bible or of the preacher, they take literally what they learn. The lack of guidance, not the outside influence alone, is what becomes harmful to the children. Norton and Harry can only think literally, not symbolically, as Bevel, the preacher speaks, or as Johnson talks. Therefore, Harry goes to look for God in the bottom of the river, and Norton goes to be with his mother in the sky who “waved at [him]” (479).

Each story ends, with little or no foreshadowing, with the death of the child, each an unintentional suicide. The deaths of the children are not simply for the sake of the plot. They also bring into relief the consequences of the parents’ lack of love and concern. The parents are largely, or even entirely, to blame for the deaths of their children. Parents are responsible for impressing God’s love and concern upon their children through the force of their own proper love and concern. Parents are in effect a channel for their children to God. By loving and caring for their children, they set an example of God’s love, thereby pointing them towards God.

## Section Two

### **Acceptance of the Divine Through Revelations**

“Revelation”

“Parker’s Back”

“Artificial Nigger”

As seen in “The River” and “The Lame Shall Enter First,” children instinctively feel the need for the divine and demonstrate the need without consciously knowing what they feel. Adults do not acknowledge or express their attraction toward the divine as readily as children. Generally confident in their sense of what they want and how to get it, adults resist yielding their sense of their autonomy. Yet, adults are no less free of God’s presence in their lives than are children. God can reveal Himself to adults through revelations. These unanticipated and unwanted revelations are necessary to gain the attention of adults. Through the revelations, God redirects the prime concerns of adult lives. Ruby Turpin, Parker, and Mr. Head from “Revelation,” “Parker’s Back” and “Artificial Nigger,” respectively, all receive revelations. Through their revelations, their illusions are corrected, and they end with a better understanding of themselves. In each case, the revelations strike at the center of their greatest pride and humble them completely, which gains their attention and causes them to turn to God for help out of their misery. At each character’s lowest point in the revelatory experience, he or she has no choice but to call on God, so that the revelations correspond to O’Connor’s sense that “the highest realities and deepest responses are experienced by us within, or in contact with, the lower and lowliest” (Mystery and Manners, 176).

Grouping Ruby Turpin, Parker, and Mr. Head together allows one to see clearly the general qualities that both call for and lend themselves to

the experience of a revelation. All three of these characters try to control their own lives, and in doing so usually assert dominance over another person or people. In trying to control their own lives, they choose the path of least resistance. It is easier for them to act superior to others than to face the reality that all people are equal. They all, however, eventually acknowledge their deepest feelings, a quality that opens them to a revelation. Ruby genuinely feels and recognizes her gratitude for all that she has been given. Parker admits that “it was himself that he could not understand” (510), and although Mr. Head tries to ignore his insecurity, he acknowledges that he is afraid Nelson will leave him when he grows up.

While the similar qualities that Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head possess open them to revelations, these characters’ differences also illustrate the many types of people revelations can affect. Ruby is of a higher social class than Parker or Mr. Head. She is outwardly racist and acts condescendingly towards those she considers inferior. Ruby’s condescending, judgmental attitude joined with her physical size can make a room “look even smaller by her presence” (488), and she focuses on the faults of others to make herself seem superior. Mary Grace’s “face was blue with acne and Mrs. Turpin thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. . . . Mrs. Turpin . . . had always had good skin, and though she was forty-seven years old, there was not a wrinkle in her face. . . . (490). She tries to remain in control of her situation by creating in her

mind a strictly stratified world, placing Claud and herself near the top.

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people. . . ; then next to them . . . were the white trash; then above them were the home-owners and above the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged (491).

Ruby's belief in God is similarly self-righteous. She seems to consider herself on God's level, almost a partner in her own creation, when she imagines conversations between herself and God. She "would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself . . . . 'All right, make me a nigger then - but that don't mean a trashy one.' And he would have made her a neat, clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black" (491).

Parker does not consider himself superior to others as Ruby does, but he does try to control his situation by asserting dominance over his wife, Sarah Ruth. Mainly wishing to be left alone, Parker gets the tattoo of Christ hoping to end Sarah Ruth's criticism and gain control of his situation. Though he "understood why he married her - he couldn't have got her any other way - he couldn't understand why he stayed with her now" (510). Nothing he does pleases Sarah Ruth, and in frustration Parker rebels against her religiosity. Pretending to have hurt his hand, Parker yells, "'God damnit! . . . Jesus Christ in hell!'" (511). In contrast to Ruby,

Parker has actively resisted God most of his life. When his mother tried to introduce him to the church, he “jerked out of her grasp and ran” (513). Parker is very self-confident and denies any need of divine intervention. He tells the tattooist, “A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he don’t deserve none of my sympathy” (524-5).

Unlike Ruby and Parker, Mr. Head asserts no particular stance for or against God, but like Parker, he tries to assert his authority and control over one other person, his grandson Nelson. Afraid that Nelson will leave him when he grows up, Mr. Head plans a trip to the city “so that [Nelson] would be content to stay at home for the rest of his life” (251). By showing Nelson the city, Mr. Head intends to demonstrate to Nelson his dependency on him and to eliminate any sense in Nelson that he is superior to Mr. Head or capable of dealing with life in the city. He wants to show Nelson “that he had no cause for pride merely because he had been born in a city” (251). Finally, being prejudiced establishes Mr. Head’s dominance over Nelson. Mr. Head acts condescendingly towards blacks as Ruby does towards blacks and white-trash, but Mr. Head uses his prejudice to prove he is wiser than Nelson, challenging him, “You ain’t never seen a nigger” (252).

Ruby’s characteristically “unanticipated and unwanted” revelation may be understood more clearly through the use of the anagogical level. The anagogical level, with which the Catholic writer must be concerned, deals with “the way in which faith and reason, belief and knowledge,

manifest themselves in human lives amidst social contexts, or mystery as it is incarnated in the manners of men”(Mystery and Manners 3).

According to St. Thomas, the natural and supernatural worlds are not opposites but continuous from one another. For this reason, one can discover the divine, or supernatural, through the concreteness of the natural, physical world. Ruby unknowingly echoes St. Thomas’ sense when she says, “you have to *have* certain things before you can *know* certain things”(p.494). Ruby obtains God’s revelation through the events and amid the circumstances of her ordinary, everyday life.

As Ruby is in the doctor’s waiting room, she continuously speaks of her gratitude towards God in order to show her superiority over others. She silently thanks God that He did not make her white-trash or a nigger. As opposed to the gratitude she expresses to make herself look better, an unfeigned wave of gratitude overcomes her when she yells, “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!”(499). Whereas other declarations of gratitude are meant mostly for others to hear, this surge of gratitude seems expressed directly to Jesus and seems to come from beyond her conscious intention. Ironically, the genuine exclamation, indistinguishable by others from the usual expression of self-satisfied superiority, prompts Mary Grace to hit her with the “Human Development” book. Literally knocking Ruby upside the head, Mary Grace then delivers “the possible truth Ruby has spent a lifetime trying to avoid” (Giannone, 217), saying, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog”(500).

Called a “wart hog,” Ruby contemplates “how [she] could be a wart hog and me both”(506). Ruby’s initial reaction is to assume that God made a mistake to have chosen her for a revelation. Shocked that she is chosen from amid the white-trash to receive such a rude remonstrance, she tells God, “There was plenty of white-trash there. It didn’t have to be me” (507). She fumes, “I am not . . . a wart hog. From hell,” but as revelations painfully force one to face the reality of one’s situation, “the denial had no force” (502). As the “bottom rail [is put] on top,” as she dares God to do, Ruby identifies with the lowest status of life, whereas she previously saw herself on one of the highest levels of her stratified world.

Ruby deals with hogs daily, and she receives the fullness of her revelation through these animals.

Ruby Turpin’s attitude toward the objects and people around her and her actions prepare readers for her final revelation, in which O’Connor begins with a physical object and, without diminishing its natural reality, shows a transcendent power, . . .

in and through it (Rath 5).

Ruby recognizes that God is delivering a message for her, and she looks for the meaning of His message behind the physical objects before her. She sees the hogs, which appear “to pant with a secret life” (508), as the most intelligent animals. From this humbled position, in which Ruby Turpin learns something of who she is from hogs, she is ready to receive a



vision “as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge” (508). In her own yard beneath the crimson sky of this natural world, Ruby receives a vision of the supernatural world. Ruby sees a divine vision in the physical streak of purple in the evening sky. The anagogical unfolding of her experience is at work in her as the physical streak in the sky becomes “a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire” (508). Her vision shows “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). Ruby’s vision exemplifies the use of the anagogic in that it arises out of concrete detail, such as the specific descriptions of lunatics. Ruby is finally aware that she participates in the one order of things and on the same level as all others, rather than with a larger influence or a different status. By bringing Ruby to the lowest point in her life thus far, the revelation dissolves her cherished illusions about her place in the world. Her vision corrected, she sees herself as she truly is, rather than as she has imagined herself to be.

Ruby contrasts with Parker and Mr. Head in that she does not have to be taught to turn to God, but rather how to do so. Ruby has assumed that, because she does good works and because God is just, she is superior to others. However, the vision shows her that God is just because everyone is equal, and Ruby loses the illusion that she is of a higher status than others. Therefore, there is no basis for her self-righteousness. Although

Ruby's works are mostly good, her works alone do not set her apart from others since redemption can only come from God.

Parker's revelation is delivered in much the same way as is Ruby's. He, too, is "hit over the head" with a revelation as his tractor hits a tree, causing it to burst into flames. Again the revelation is neither expected nor wanted. Parker "only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it" (521). As he seems aware, Parker is no longer in control. The experience forces him to come to terms with who he is, whether or not his condition is what he would have chosen. Parker is able to accept his situation because he willingly responds to experiences that create a "motion of wonder" (513) in him. When he sees the tattooed man at the fair, "it was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction" (513). Parker actively responds to the stirring within himself by tattooing his own body. Because Parker recognizes "motions of wonder" within himself, he eventually accepts himself as he is and accepts that he loves Sarah Ruth. He seems to have discovered and become aware of himself as he announces himself at the door. "'Obadiah,' he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (528). As Parker stands crying by the tree, he resigns himself to his situation. Although Parker never before understood why he stayed with Sarah Ruth, calling her "plain," he now realizes that "all

along, that was what he wanted to do, to please her" (527). In addition to giving in to his love for Sarah Ruth, Parker also gives in to and appreciates God's authority. "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything" (527).

Mr. Head's revelation, like those of Ruby and Parker, forces him to acknowledge the truth about himself and identify with that which he initially condemns. Although Mr. Head tries to make Nelson realize his dependence on his grandfather by getting him lost in the city, Mr. Head in turn realizes his need for his grandson. After denying that he knows Nelson, Mr. Head imagines "a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end" (267). He realizes now, as Nelson has already willingly admitted, that Nelson is "indispensable" to him. Mr. Head acknowledges his fear that Nelson will abandon him as he grows up.

Ironically, a statue of a black person reunites Mr. Head and Nelson. Though Mr. Head continually asserts his dominance over the black race, by the end of his journey through the city, Mr. Head identifies with their misery. The black statue whose mouth "was stretched up at the corners" (268) is meant to look happy. The look of oblivious contentment suggests that blacks are devoid of the complexity of human feeling and shows the attempts of the white race to dehumanize blacks, which Mr. Head joins in

when he comments that they are “roped off” (256) in the diner of the train. Yet as Mr. Head later feels his own “depth of denial” (266) when he betrays his own grandson, he is brought to the lowest point in his life and can thus identify with the statue that “looked too miserable” to be “young or old” (268). As Mr. Head understands the misery of the black race, thereby acknowledging their humanity, his own humanness is restored to him. Mr. Head and Nelson “stood there gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy” (269). Like Ruby’s experience, Mr. Head must be brought to a point of despair, thereby eliminating previous illusions about his position of authority. Once purged of his illusions, Mr. Head then understands his equality with the black race.

Not only do Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head receive revelations that correct their respective views about themselves, in each’s heightened awareness, he or she realizes that God, specifically, has granted the revelation. Ruby is inclined to appeal to God in almost any situation, but even Parker, who consciously denies God, and Mr. Head, who ignores Him altogether, directly address God after their revelations. Ruby questions God’s authority, asking “‘Who do you think you are?,’” but she recognizes immediately that God is delivering a message through Mary Grace. “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” (500). She is not simply speaking to Mary Grace but to God when she says, “What you got to say to me?” (500). She knows that “she had been singled out for the message” (502). Though Ruby thinks the message should have been directed to any of the available white trash in the room, “the girl’s eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation” (502). Just as Mary Grace does not create by herself the message she delivers to Ruby, the message Ruby receives from her own echo is not self-created. When Ruby’s echo returns, it comes “from beyond the wood” (508) in which it was produced. All evidence points to God as the message-producer. Though Ruby’s question, “Who do you are?” is human in origin, the response is divine.

Parker presents even more compelling evidence that God is the source of revelations because, unlike Ruby, having never believed in God, he too immediately calls on God. As the burning tree reaches out to grab him, Parker screams, “GOD ABOVE!” (520). Whether or not one considers Parker’s reaction a curse or a typical exclamation, Parker to some degree recognizes the experience as divine. For, as he falls off the tractor, “if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it” (520). Parker even regards the tattoo, which he originally intended as a means to gain control of Sarah Ruth, with respect. He describes God to the tattooist as “the religious one” (521) showing that the way in which he sees God has changed, and he appreciates God’s authority as “eyes to be obeyed” (527).

At the lowest point in Mr. Head's experience, he also calls on God for help. Mr. Head makes himself and Nelson miserable when he denies knowing Nelson. As the woman accuses Nelson of breaking her ankle, Mr. Head responds, "This is not my boy. . . . I never seen him before" (265). As Nelson's "finger's [fell] out of his flesh" (265), Mr. Head begins to realize what life would be like without Nelson. He understands his fear of not having Nelson, and "as for Nelson, his mind had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present at the final judgment" (267). Not only do both Mr. Head and Nelson feel estranged from each other, they are physically lost in Atlanta. The description of the city closely parallels Dante's Inferno. "There were no sidewalks, only drives, and these wound around and around in endless ridiculous circles" (267), and Mr. Head feels damnation for the first time. At this fearful desperation, Mr. Head cries, "'Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh help me Gawd I'm lost!'" (267).

Mr. Head is reduced to a feeling of hopelessness so that he has no choice but to call on God. Yet he realizes more than either Ruby or Parker what exactly has happened to him. Parker knows that he has changed, and Ruby sees her participation in the order of things. Mr. Head understands a transcending truth. He sees with clarity the estrangement he causes between himself and his grandson. He knows, possibly for the first time in his life, what it is like to be completely helpless, and this knowledge makes him realize that he is exactly like every other human being,

including the black race, in their common helplessness. While Mr. Head did not think he needed mercy prior to the estrangement from his grandson, he now feels his “true depravity” (270), and it becomes clear that he needs divine help. Though, like Adam, he commits the sin of pride, his pride is eliminated and “consumed” (270). “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” (270). Mr. Head has no doubts that God Himself has bestowed a revelation upon him.

Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head are similar in that they each stubbornly assert their beliefs; therefore, their revelations affect them in much the same way. The revelations destroy the characters’ illusions about themselves, and they finally realize the truth about their situations. In order to learn anything about themselves and their situations, they must first be brought to a point at which they fully recognize their humbled positions, for the first product of self-knowledge is humility. According to Karl Jaspers, “faith in Christ [necessarily requires] a call to self-realization” (Grimshaw, 96). By arriving at a point of despair in their lives, Ruby, Parker and Mr. Head are forced to rely on God. Whether or not each was previously inclined to ask God for help like Ruby was, each calls specifically on God. Though God is called “Gawd” in southern slang or

“GOD ABOVE” in a shocked exclamation, no other source of help is appealed to, and no one is denied help. Their lives are then redirected “toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and of one’s neighbor for the sake of God” (Huppe and Robertson, St. Augustine,9).



### Section Three

#### **Adults' Resistance to the Divine**

The Violent Bear it Away

"The Lame Shall Enter First"

"Good Country People"

In The Violent Bear It Away, "The Lame Shall Enter First," and "Good Country People," O'Connor presents adults who do not accept the divine. Unlike characters who receive revelations, Rayber, Sheppard and Hulga do not acknowledge their own feelings. These three characters are all afraid not to be in control of their situations, and by ignoring the way they feel, they consider themselves in control of their lives. The cause of Rayber and Sheppard's need to control their situations is similar. Rayber is afraid to let his love for his son, Bishop, overwhelm him, and Sheppard is similarly afraid to express love for his son because that might evoke feelings of grief for his late wife. Hulga tries to erase feelings of shame about her wooden leg and eradicate natural feelings of desire that are evoked by Manley Pointer. One necessity required to participate in the divine is the ability to relinquish control of one's own life. Since Rayber, Sheppard, and Hulga are unwilling to relinquish control and accept the divine, they experience a void that they unsuccessfully try to fill with other activities.

Rayber has a mentally retarded son, whom he is terrified to love because he is afraid not to be in control. "For the most part Rayber lived with [Bishop] without being painfully aware of his presence but the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity. It was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood" (192). In reality

Rayber loves Bishop but is afraid if he does not control the love, it will overwhelm him. "If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him - powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise" (192). Rayber's main complaint about love is that "those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it" (192).

In order to avoid these terrifying feelings, Rayber tries to develop only the rational aspect of his life through "ascetic discipline" (193). "He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions" (193). Rayber also relies heavily on his intellect and rational faculty to the exclusion of his emotions. He tells Tarwater, "My guts are in my head" (255), and the receptionist at the hotel describes him as a "human trapped in a switch box" (216). His profession as a schoolteacher shows his trust in the power of the intellect, and he analyzes love as a tool. "He knew the value of [love] and how it could be used. He had seen it transform in cases where nothing else had worked" (192).

Rayber treats Bishop very much like Sheppard treats Norton. Neither father pays attention to his own son. Rayber tells Tarwater, "Just forget Bishop exists. . . . He's just a mistake of nature" (194). Both Rayber and Sheppard then focus their attention on another boy. While their own sons evoke powerful feelings of love they cannot control, they can use their intellect to help Tarwater and Rufus, respectively, without the risk

of uncontrollable love. Rayber's attention to Tarwater is another attempt to keep his rational mind in control. Rayber's intentions are clear, for "alone with Bishop he could not go [through his uncle's land] . . . , [but] tomorrow with [Tarwater], with his brain engaged, he would be able to make it" (232). Trying to save Tarwater from his uncle's influence keeps Rayber from having to think about Bishop. For example, Rayber dwells on what happened with the boating incident and a way in which he could have avoided it. "[H]is mind turned on the problem of Tarwater as if his own and not only the boy's salvation depended on his solving it" (233).

Like Rayber, Sheppard is afraid to pay attention to his own son because he is afraid not to be in control of his feelings. For Rayber, feelings of love for his son overwhelm him, but Sheppard is afraid to face his grief over his wife's death, which has the potential to overwhelm him. Because Norton expresses his feelings of grief, Sheppard ignores him in order to ignore his own feelings of grief. When Sheppard tells Norton to be glad that his mother is not in the state penitentiary, "[Norton's] face became a mass of lumps with slits for eyes. 'If she was in the penitentiary,' he began in a kind of racking bellow, 'I could go seeeeee her'" (447). In response Sheppard feels "lashed by some elemental force of nature" (447). Quickly trying to suppress his own sorrow, Sheppard dismisses Norton's feelings as "not a normal grief" (447).

In an extended effort to deny his grief, Sheppard focuses away from Norton and towards Rufus, who does not hold the same reminder of grief

as Norton does. By ignoring his grief, Sheppard maintains superficial control. Therefore, Sheppard does “not let his eyes focus on [Norton]” (469), nor his own sorrow, while he is excited “thinking what he could do for [Rufus]” (452). Sheppard considers Norton selfish for crying about his mother, so Sheppard focuses his energy on Rufus, doing “more for him than [he] did for [his] own child” (481). Like Rayber, Sheppard emphasizes intellect over “irrational” feelings, such as love, especially when helping Rufus. Sheppard assumes he can solve Rufus’ problems by empowering his intellect. By talking to Rufus about “simple psychology. . . [and] astronomy and the space capsules,” he will help him to “see” the universe” (451). The suggestion that Sheppard can help Johnson see better is ironic because Sheppard’s own vision is impaired. He does not “see” his grief nor “see” his own son.

Hulga Hopewell in “Good Country People” also tries to deny innate feelings of shame about her wooden leg. For O’Connor, “aspects of shame lurk behind physical deformities” (Giannone, 61). Even her mother, who tries to mask her feelings, is ashamed of her daughter’s leg. Mrs. Hopewell still thinks of Hulga as a child because “it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times” (274). Ashamed of her leg and her inability to meet her mother’s standards, Hulga turns to education. Similar to Rayber and Sheppard, Hulga relies on her intellect to deny her feelings. To compensate for her physical incompleteness, she tries to

make her mind complete by achieving a Ph.D. in philosophy. The Ph.D. “permits the crippled woman to feel whole because she and her mind set the ideal” (Giannone, 63). Like Rayber and Sheppard, Hulga thinks that she has gained control of her life. Although she admits that in childhood “she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame,” “education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer” (288).

Although Rayber, Sheppard, and Hulga try to deny certain feelings by replacing them with empty pursuits, their feelings still exist. Each thinks he or she has gained control of his or her situation. However, the control is superficial, and in Rayber and Sheppard’s case, the results are tragic. All three think that they must maintain control of their lives in order to avoid painful feelings. Exercising such strict control over their lives and feelings shows their unwillingness to accept a force which is greater than themselves and beyond rational explanation. O’Connor portrays intellectuals, such as Rayber, Sheppard and Hulga, as “refugees from God” (Grimshaw, 67), and Blaise Pascal maintains that the “main obstacle to faith is self-will” (Grimshaw, 98). In order to accept the divine, these characters must first acknowledge and give in to their feelings, but because they are unwilling to do so, they continue to deny the divine.

Even though Rayber tries to ignore his love for Bishop, his love surfaces involuntarily. When Bishop hangs his head out of the car window as Rayber and Bishop are driving, “automatically, Rayber reached over and

locked the door and pulled him back in by his shirt" (229). He also desires to have some type of relationship with his son and is jealous of Tarwater's relation with Bishop. When Bishop follows Tarwater as Tarwater tells him to get off the bed, "Rayber felt a twinge of ridiculous jealousy" (234). Not only has Rayber unsuccessfully controlled his love for Bishop, but his rational side cannot fulfill his life. "He kept himself upright on a very narrow line between madness and emptiness, and when the time came for him to lose his balance, he intended to lurch toward emptiness and fall on the side of his choice" (193).

Sheppard is equally unsuccessful in fulfilling his life by his own concerted efforts, and remains an "empty man who fills up his emptiness with good works" (The Habit of Being, 491). Instead he realizes too late his love for his son and the consequences of his actions. As he tells the policemen that he did more for Rufus than he did for Norton, "he was swept with a sudden panic. . . . His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation" (481). Rather than Sheppard's "good works" filling his life, they have created a tangible void by passively allowing the death of his own son. Sheppard's behavior leads to Norton's death because he does not face Norton's grief nor his own grief over his wife's death.

Largely due to the desire to control their lives, Rayber and Sheppard outwardly reject the validity of the divine. Rayber considers baptism "futile rites" and "superstitions" and thinks "the great dignity of man" is that which he can "do for [him]self and [his] fellowman" (225). Almost

echoing Rayber, Sheppard considers “heaven and hell [to be] for the mediocre” (463), and he says, “If I can help a person, all I want to do is to do it” (458). Both Rayber and Sheppard’s attitudes may be summarized by the statement about Sheppard, “his credentials were less dubious than a priest’s; he had been trained for what he was doing” (449). “Because a belief in God is irreconcilable with a belief in human freedom” (Grimshaw, 98), Rayber and Sheppard create their own values by which to live. They pour their energy into good but empty works by trying to help Tarwater and Rufus, and they assert the superiority of their intellect over the power of the divine. Their own powers prove inadequate as they fail to prevent their respective sons’ death.

Hulga’s experience with Manley Pointer most clearly shows her inability to ignore her innate feelings or to fill the void within herself. She thinks that she has full control of her feelings because of the superiority of her intellect. When Manley Pointer kisses her, the first time in her life a boy kisses her, she considers it “an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind’s control” (286). Pointer reveals the futility of her intellectual control, however, as he takes advantage of her in the barn. Though Hulga professes to “see through to nothing,” Pointer actually beats her at her own game. As he asks her to show him where the wooden leg joins on, the ineffectiveness of her intellectual power is exposed. Although she thinks her education has removed her shame, she remains “as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock



about his tail” (288). Furthermore, once Pointer has overcome Hulga’s intellect by acting attracted to her leg, she cannot rely on any other part of her mind or intuition. As Pointer takes off the artificial leg, “her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at” (289). Her instinctive or emotional side that would ordinarily deal with a situation such as the one she finds herself in is immature and undeveloped. She has never before experienced feelings of desire, yet she has nurtured her intellect that “not only keep[s] the old wound of ten open, [the intellect] render[s] her unprepared to deal with life” (Giannone, 65).

The ending of “Good Country People” explicitly illustrates that grace is always available. Hulga’s experience as Manley Pointer steals her artificial leg points out to Hulga her own weaknesses. Brought to the point of self-realization, Hulga now has a chance to accept the grace offered by the divine. What will determine Hulga’s condition is whether or not she voluntarily will accept grace. Hulga may continue to consciously avoid the divine, but she has the chance to accept grace and the divine in order to strengthen that “function that [she] was not very good at” (289). Whereas in The Violent Bear It Away and “The Lame Shall Enter First” Rayber and Sheppard do not accept the grace available to them in time to prevent the tragic deaths of their sons, “Good Country People” leaves open the question of whether or not Hulga will accept the divine.

## Conclusion

Flannery O'Connor's stories illustrate God's presence or the possibility of God's presence throughout the course of one's life. Children are most open to God because they "possess the natural openness and trustfulness that prefigure adult faith" (Burkle, 60), and O'Connor uses them as models for the acceptance of the divine. O'Connor then follows adult lives, including both characters who accept the divine and characters who continue to ignore the divine, showing the outcomes of each response. Regardless of previous choices characters have made, O'Connor includes in her works the hopeful sense that grace is possible at any point in a person's life.

The children in O'Connor's stories, such as Harry Ashfield in "The River" and Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First," are instinctively endowed with the desire to know God. These two stories end in tragedy for the boys, but the tragedy in each case is brought on by adults, not by the simple faith of the children. For children, acceptance of the divine is instinctive, and O'Connor presents the openness of children to the divine as a model for adults. O'Connor's sense "that the kingdom of God is open only to the child-like, trusting and ingenuous who are not destroyed by indifference, greed, fear and cruelty" (Burkle, 69) comes directly from the teachings of the Gospels which say, "'Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it'" (Burkle, 60).

Through their revelations, Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head are forced to become child-like. After their respective experiences, they no longer hold

themselves above others or outwardly resist God. "When emancipated from self-centeredness, the protagonists see their rightful place in the pattern of the whole" (Giannone, 213). Furthermore, just as children do not resist their own feelings, Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head yield to their natural feelings. Norton openly grieves for his mother, and Harry is aroused to action by the preacher's assertion that he "counts" in the "Kingdom of Christ" (168). After her revelation, Ruby understands her proper relation to others. She shares her origin with all other existing persons and things. She is a gift herself, and so the gratitude and praise she sees manifest in her vision has its basis in the very core of her being. Parker realizes and acquiesces to his love for Sarah Ruth and his desire to please her, and Mr. Head realizes his own equality with the black race. Like Ruby understands, Mr. Head understands too that he is not superior but shares his origin with the black race. These characters' acceptance of the divine is accompanied by a genuine understanding of themselves. Karl Jaspers supports this idea by saying, "faith in Christ offers not a substitute for living our lives but a call to self-realization" (Grimshaw,96).

In sharp contrast, Sheppard and Rayber, who never accept the divine, never fully understand themselves or even acknowledge let alone give in to their feelings. Sheppard refuses to express the grief he feels for the loss of his wife. Similarly, Rayber is unwilling to show the love he feels for his son, Bishop, and throughout the majority of "Good Country People,"

Hulga denies feelings of shame about her wooden leg.

Because “man is always more than he knows, or can know, about himself” (Grimshaw; Karl Jaspers, 96), it is not coincidental that those who do not accept the divine also do not understand themselves, since God understands us completely while we do not understand ourselves.

Therefore, those characters who receive revelations of God’s presence also receive insight into themselves. In contrast, Sheppard, Rayber, and Hulga remain mystified by their feelings of grief, love, and shame. In Pensees, Blaise Pascal, a Christian apologist, reminds us that God said, “It is I who have made you and I alone can teach you what you are” (Pascal, pensee 149).

The significant difference between Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head, on one side, and Sheppard, Rayber, and Hulga, on the other, is their acceptance or denial of the grace available to all of them. Although the first three are more prone to accept the divine because, among other reasons, they more readily acknowledge their feelings, any of these characters is equally capable of receiving grace. According to Pascal, God intentionally hides himself so that only those who truly seek Him will succeed; however, Christianity also regards “anyone as long as they live, as being capable of receiving grace which may enlighten them” (Pascal, pensee 427). Therefore, divine grace is always available, but humans are free to accept or deny that grace.

If grace is available to anyone at any point in life, then in every

person exists “some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness” (Pascal, *pensee* 149). Every person requires grace because of his wretchedness, yet every person is capable of receiving grace because of his greatness. Through the action of grace, one comes to realize simultaneously both aspects of one’s condition. “Sometimes by secret stirrings, sometimes by the prompting of circumstance, God recalls the soul to itself. In the most unexpected ways he makes it aware of its wretchedness” (Gordon, 97). Because “God recalls the soul to itself,” Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head, who receive grace through their revelations, gain a fuller understanding of themselves. Sheppard and Rayber, who remain untouched by the action of grace, remain lost to themselves since their souls have not yet been “recalled.”

The “principle of greatness” that exists in Sheppard and Rayber, however, remains in their continuing capacity to receive grace. The Catholic tradition, in which O’Connor participates

cannot see man as determined; it cannot see him as totally depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And it will see this grace as working through nature, . . . so that a door is always open to the possibility and the unexpected in the human soul (Gordon, 97).

At the end of each story, Sheppard and Rayber remain “incomplete in

[them]selves,” while Hulga presents the greatest evidence that grace always is available. In one of O’Connor’s most hopeful stories, because of the open-ended possibility of Hulga’s decision, “Good Country People” ends at the point in which “the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected” (Gordon, 96). The question is whether after being awakened to her own “wretchedness” or incompleteness, Hulga is ready to accept the divine. If she is, according to St. Augustine, “[God’s] hand is ever present to recreate and restore what He has made” (Gordon, 97).

God’s “restoration” of His creatures made in his own image and likeness activates in them the ability to love themselves and others unconditionally. The commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” presupposes the ability to love oneself. Sheppard and Rayber cannot genuinely love others because they cannot love themselves. Sheppard and Rayber deny their involuntary feelings and wish to be rid of them, while Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head accept themselves and their situations. Because Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head accept themselves and their circumstances in life, they are able to love others “as themselves.”

The unconditional love shown by Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head comes from God, while the love Sheppard and Rayber possess comes from themselves. Although both Sheppard and Rayber love their sons, the love is conditional. They refuse to express love for their sons because expressing that love threatens their sense of security. Sheppard does not express love for his son because his son reminds him of his late wife, and

Rayber refuses to express love for Bishop because his love may overwhelm him. Sheppard and Rayber illustrate that love without God is destructive because their conditional love is insufficient to prevent the deaths of their sons. In contrast, Ruby's, Parker's, and Mr. Head's love comes from God and gives them the ability to love those that they would not be able to love through their own efforts. For example, even though Sarah Ruth is difficult to please and does not accept Parker as he is, Parker is able to love her regardless, illustrating unconditional love. Likewise, although Mr. Head previously expressed contempt for the black race, after he receives the action of grace, he is able to love all humanity, an ability only possible because his love comes from God. The ultimate act of God is to exhibit love, and Ruby, Parker, and Mr. Head express this when they are able to love unconditionally.



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