

Crises of Faith in the Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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Flannery O'Connor is not a writer normally associated with crises of faith. The term *crisis of faith* seems to appear nowhere, for instance, in R. Neil Scott's mammoth reference guide to twentieth-century O'Connor criticism, and O'Connor's own faith in Catholicism seems to have been exceptionally firm. She wrote from an explicitly Catholic, Christian point of view, and belief in God and in the teachings of Roman Catholicism were central to her outlook on life. At one point, for instance, Betty Hester, a close friend of O'Connor, began reading the novelist-philosopher Iris Murdoch and suffered a crisis of faith in the Catholicism to which she had only recently converted. In a letter to Hester, O'Connor responds, "Many truths are represented by Iris Murdoch but that her truth and her morality are superior to the teachings of the Church I disbelieve—but then that is all you could expect of me" (*Habit* 457). Writing to another friend, O'Connor admits that she considers Hester's exhilaration in having lost her faith "pretty sick-making" but quickly adds, "I manage to keep my mouth shut" (459).

Yet in her letters to another friend, a young poet named Alfred Corn, O'Connor is far more sympathetic toward people struggling with their faith and suffering crises in it. In one letter she tells Corn,

I don't know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living in the 20th century can be at all if it is not grounded on this experience that you are having right now of unbelief. This may be the case always and not just in the 20th century. Peter said, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels, and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith. (476)

Later in the same letter O'Connor speaks of "how difficult it is to have faith and the measure of a commitment to it" and comments that

“about the only way we know whether we believe or not is by what we do” (476). “Faith,” she writes two paragraphs later, “is what you have in the absence of knowledge” (477). Then, at the beginning of the next paragraph, she says, “If you want your faith, you have to work for it.” O’Connor’s letters to Corn on this subject are among the most intriguing she ever wrote, partly because they imply that even Flannery O’Connor was capable of suffering crises of faith, or was at least capable of empathizing with those who did.

In most of her fiction, however, O’Connor’s faith in God seems both firm and highly important. One might argue, in fact, that one chief function of her work is to depict—and also to provoke—crises of faith in beliefs other than true Christianity. In particular, she seems to write partly in order to shock many of her secular characters, as well as some of her superficial Christians, into deep crises of faith in their own assumptions and presumptions. In most cases, the ultimate faith of these characters is simply a deep-rooted faith in themselves—a faith that O’Connor would have considered “pride” in all the most negative senses of that term. Such false faith, as O’Connor would have considered it, struck her as arrogant and egotistical because it involved rejection of the only faith that ever really mattered to her: faith in the Christian God.

In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” perhaps her most famous story, O’Connor continually undercuts the various shallow, secular, or shallow Christian faiths her characters either embrace or simply take for granted. In the first paragraph of the story, for instance, a character identified only as “the grandmother” tries to persuade the other members of her family that they should all take a vacation together in East Tennessee to visit some of the grandmother’s “connections,” or extended family. Her immediate family—Bailey, her middle-aged son; Bailey’s nondescript, unnamed wife; this couple’s two obnoxious children, John Wesley and June Star; and a mostly silent baby—either ignore the grandmother (in the case of the parents) or insult her (in the case of the oldest children). They seem to realize, apparently based on

their past experiences, that the grandmother is simply trying to manipulate them in order to get her own way. Whatever faith they may once have had in her as a selfless, generous old lady has apparently vanished, and in fact the children treat her with a cynicism that seems shocking in people so young. Although the grandmother professes faith in the importance of family “connections,” her connections with her immediate family seem frayed at best. Instead of visiting distant relatives, it might be better for her to try to repair, with the persons she lives with, the faith in family that most of them seem either to have lost or to have never really possessed to begin with. Faith in family “connections” is a faith to which the grandmother gives lip service but never genuinely displays—except, perhaps, in the last split seconds of her life.

Yet at least the grandmother seems interested in the *idea* of faith in higher ideals, which is more than can be said for most other members of her immediate family. Bailey and his wife say almost nothing during the story, and there is little evidence, for most of the text, that either feels deeply committed to anything at all. Admittedly, they *did* name their son “John Wesley,” a choice implying their respect for the founder of the Methodist church. Apparently, then, they are not only Protestants in general but also Methodists in particular, but their supposed faith does not seem especially important to them. Neither, for example, bothers to discipline John Wesley and June Star when the children insult the grandmother. In fact, the children have probably learned some of their disrespect for the grandmother from their parents, perhaps especially (and ironically) from their father, the woman’s own son. Bailey and his wife seem merely nominal Christians. Nothing suggests that their conventional faith, which led them to name their son John Wesley, really matters to them. Later, as the story nears its shocking conclusion, issues of religious faith become crucially important, but until then no character seems to possess enough Christian faith for there to be any danger of a real crisis of Christian belief.

The grandmother, whose faith in family and belief in religion seem mostly superficial at best, tries to take refuge in other, equally shallow

faiths as the tale develops. She prides herself, for instance, on the proper, genteel way she dresses:

the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (*Complete Stories* 118)

That final sentence is typical of the way O'Connor both reports and, implicitly, mocks the superficial faiths of her often-shallow characters. As a devout Christian, O'Connor believed that all our pretenses, in which we commonly take great pride, matter not at all when we die and come face-to-face with God. The grandmother's concern that her corpse should look ladylike is just one of the funnier ways in which her various faiths tend to be misguided, worldly, and insubstantial.

Elsewhere in the story, the grandmother expresses faith in the good old days, when "people did right." No sooner does she make this assertion, however, than she refers to a poor black child standing on the side of the road as a "cute little pickaninny." She explains his near-nakedness by complacently telling her grandchildren, "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (119). The contrast between her faith in past goodness and her racial insensitivity is obvious. Once more, then, the grandmother merely professes a faith without really exemplifying it. Later, when she tells her family about having been courted in her youth by Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden, another faith—this time in southern gentility—also seems shallow: she reveals that much of her regret about not marrying Mr. Teagarden has less to do with his somewhat comical gentility than with the fact that he died rich (120). By suggesting that the grandmother is at heart a materialist, O'Connor once more implies the shallowness of her various kinds of faith. Like Red Sammy Butts, the ridiculously narcissistic restaurant owner she

meets midway through the story, the grandmother feels deep, real faith merely in herself. Like most of O'Connor's comic characters, she is consumed by the kind of spiritual pride that makes any truer, deeper faith impossible.

True crises of faith, for most of the characters in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," finally occur when an accident wrecks the family car and leaves the grandmother and the rest of the family stranded in a ditch on the side of a remote rural road. It is then that they happen to be found by an escaped killer known as The Misfit and his two murderous henchmen (a kind of unholy trinity). As The Misfit and his men begin the methodical process of killing the family members one by one, the shallow, self-centered faith of each of them is thrown into crisis. Bailey, for instance, tells the rest of the family to "shut up and let [him] handle this" (128). His faith in his status as leader of the family is, however, almost immediately undercut: he and John Wesley are the first two characters to be shot and killed. Ironically, early in the story the grandmother asks John Wesley what he would do if he were ever confronted by The Misfit, whose crimes had become locally famous. John Wesley immediately responds, "I'd smack his face" (118). Like most characters in this story, John Wesley at first feels enormous faith in his own opinions and capacities. When actually facing The Misfit, however, his bravado vanishes. As he is being led off into the forest to be killed alongside Bailey, John Wesley catches "hold of his father's hand"—the first sign of affection and dependence he has shown (128). Like his father, John Wesley suffers a crisis of faith in his own power and self-reliance when facing The Misfit (a personification of Death).

Ironically, if anyone in the story fails to suffer a crisis of faith, it is June Star, the extraordinarily insufferable little girl who is an egotist from first to last. Early in the story she insults her grandmother; later she insults Red Sammy's wife; later still, she insults the grandmother again; and finally, in her very last words, she insults the killer who will soon shoot her: "He reminds me of a pig" (131). Like her grandmother, she has a knack for saying precisely the wrong thing at precisely the

wrong time. But at least her faith in her shallow values remains steadfast to the end. June Star is the one major character (except possibly Red Sammy) who never doubts herself. She is her own biggest admirer, and her faith in herself never flinches.

By the end of the story, the grandmother, facing death, suffers numerous crises of faith. Her faith that she can manipulate people to get what she wants suffers shock after shock as she confronts the implacable Misfit. Her faith in her status as a “lady” means nothing to him. Her faith in the importance of coming from a “good” family similarly seems unimportant to The Misfit. Her faith in the importance of genteel clothing almost literally crumbles in the final few minutes of her life when her fancy hat brim comes off in her hand. Her faith in her power to control Bailey collapses as he is marched off to be killed. And, although she repeatedly expresses faith in the power of prayer, she never once prays—even briefly—when faced with her own probable death and the deaths of her family members. She urges *others* to pray, but she does not herself take advantage of that resource. Her faith in prayer, in other words, seems just as shallow and superficial as most of the other kinds of faith that have guided her life. Urging The Misfit, once more, to pray, “she [finds] herself saying, ‘Jesus, Jesus,’ meaning Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing” (131). Her faith in Jesus seems no deeper than her faith in anything else.

Just before The Misfit shoots her, the grandmother runs through much of her repertoire of shallow values: “‘Jesus!’ the old lady cried. ‘You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady! I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!’” (131–32). To this, The Misfit simply replies, in one of the most memorable lines in all of American literature, “Lady, . . . there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip” (132). Death, in other words, cannot be bribed. Death is inevitable, implacable. Faced with death, the grandmother reveals that her ultimate trust is in money and in the worldly power

it usually bestows. The Misfit rejects nearly every single one of the faiths that mean so much to her, thereby producing in her a massive crisis of faith and confidence.

The one possible faith that finally intrigues this killer, ironically, is faith in Jesus. For much of his life he has been living without such faith, having apparently rejected both it and many other forms of belief, such as those the grandmother rattles off. He rejects, for example, the common belief that children should be treated more tenderly than adults. He rejects the common assumption that compliments should be modestly accepted, not immediately rejected. He implicitly rejects Freudian explanations of human behavior—explanations that O'Connor herself often mocked. He rejects the common bourgeois ideal of a solid, settled life, and he even takes perverse pleasure in rejecting the idea that women and children deserve special deference and consideration. The Misfit, in short, lives by his own rules. He is, perhaps, the most memorable and frightening example of all the selfish egotists, all the empty nihilists, who populate so much of O'Connor's fiction. These were the kinds of people whom O'Connor believed would increasingly populate the world as faith in Christ diminished. Ultimately the only faith The Misfit lives by is faith in himself.

This is why The Misfit's intense interest in Christ, in the story's final few paragraphs, seems so intriguing. Provoked by the grandmother's confused prattling about prayer and Jesus, The Misfit suddenly announces,

"Jesus was the only one that raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said, and his voice had become almost a snarl. (132)

In response, the grandmother, dazed and utterly confused, comments, “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead” (132). In other words, without quite fully realizing what she is saying, she seems to suffer a crisis in the very faith that should presumably mean most to her. At this point, it is The Misfit who seems to take the possibility of Christian faith most seriously. Having shaken the grandmother’s faith in Christ, he seems intrigued by the possibility of such faith for himself:

“I wasn’t there, so I can’t say He didn’t,” The Misfit said. “I wisht I had of been there,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” (132)

This moment, of course, is crucial. Apparently The Misfit is suffering a deep crisis in his own faith in himself. He apparently feels that faith in the mere ego is shallow and unsatisfying and longs for faith in the kind of redemption and love Jesus claimed to offer. Yet The Misfit still has enough faith in his senses, and in the material world, that he feels the need to *see*, with his own eyes, the physical reality of such love before he can believe. He can, as yet, feel no faith in faith itself. He wants proof that the kind of love Jesus manifested really can exist.

And then, suddenly, without warning and without any really deep idea of what she is doing, the grandmother offers The Misfit the proof he seeks:

His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. (132)

In this stunning development, the grandmother—in the last split seconds of her life—finally *lives* many of the faiths about which she had merely babbled earlier. She acts as a true “grand mother,” reaching out to someone in pain and treating him with the kind of compassion usually shown only to members of one’s family. Having chattered about family values earlier, here she finally lives them. Having earlier merely talked about Christian faith or simply recommended it to others, here she actually lives such faith herself. Suddenly she can see The Misfit’s true potential, his capacity to be a “good man,” and recognizes him as a fellow creature of God to whom she should—and *must*—show charity and compassion. Paradoxically, the crisis in The Misfit’s faith in himself, and his longing for a faith in something bigger and deeper than the self, suddenly prompts the grandmother to *act* according to such faith, impulsively risking her life in a gesture of genuine love.

The fact that the grandmother is instantly shot by The Misfit means nothing in this contest between competing faiths. Death is inevitable, and the grandmother would have been killed in any case. What matters is that she dies while—and because—she finally lives her Christian faith to the fullest. Her physical death and the physical gesture that precedes it help affirm and redeem her spiritual life. Like Christ, she reaches out in love in a way that leads to her body’s demise. By doing so, however, she defeats The Misfit spiritually. By shattering his complacent egotism, she gives him the chance (if he will only take it) to learn from this experience and be led to the kind of profound faith the grandmother has just displayed.

When we last see the grandmother, she is “in a puddle of blood with her legs *crossed* under her *like a child’s* and her face *smiling* up at the *cloudless sky*” (132; emphasis added). The symbolism is obvious, especially when it is contrasted with our final vision of her opponent: “The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking.” The grandmother’s ability to live her faith in Christ, if only in a moment of extreme crisis, triggers a clear crisis of faith in The Misfit. Earlier in the story he suggests that life might offer “no pleasure but meanness,”

but his very last words (also the last words of the story as a whole) are, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (132, 133). The grandmother’s surprising, loving gesture has shaken, at least for the moment, The Misfit’s faith in himself, in his selfish values, and in his deepest assumptions about the nature of life.

This pattern—in which secularists, nihilists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, and shallow Christians suffer real crises of faith—is repeated over and over again in O’Connor’s fiction. It is one reason that her stories, read in rapid succession, can sometimes seem somewhat predictable. Yet O’Connor, in her best work, keeps the pattern fresh by working interesting variations on it and demonstrating the sheer skill of her phrasing and characterization.

An especially successful demonstration of such skill, for instance, appears in her story “Good Country People.” In this tale, a bitter, arrogant, self-consciously intellectual nihilist, whose name at birth was Joy but whose self-chosen name is Hulga, lives at home on a farm with her conventional and optimistic but somewhat manipulative mother, Mrs. Hopewell. They have almost nothing in common, and Hulga, who stomps around on a wooden leg because her own leg was long ago blasted off in a hunting accident, feels little but contempt for her mother and for most other people. If Hulga feels faith in anything, it is simply faith in her own mental superiority. She deliberately rejects many values that seem important to other people—values such as optimism, kindness, courtesy, material success, physical attractiveness, involvement with the opposite sex, and especially religion. In short, she turns her back on just about every kind of faith displayed by the story’s other characters. She is supremely isolated and seems happy to be so. She prides herself on believing in nothing and, having earned a PhD in philosophy, is intimately familiar with the writings of other nihilists.

These traits make her encounter with Manley Pointer, an apparently stupid, naive young country hick who sells Bibles door-to-door, especially interesting. At first Hulga treats him with the same kind of cynical condescension she shows to everyone else, but eventually she

becomes intrigued by the possibility of seducing him and instructing him about the world as it really is. She therefore agrees to meet him for a picnic in a place distant from her mother's view, where she can teach him a thing or two about the real nature of life. With her typical smugness, she tells herself that "true genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind" (284). Despite the fact that Manley brings to the picnic his suitcase full of Bibles, Hulga is quick to let him know that she does not "even believe in God"—a claim meant to shock and impress the naive young Christian (285). Hulga intends to shake Manley's faith in any number of stupid assumptions, including assumptions about women, love, religion, and the nature of existence. To her, he is chiefly the subject of an almost clinical experiment in which harsh, nihilistic truths will come face to face with simple, childlike, and therefore foolish faith. She will challenge and undermine Manley's sentimental assumptions, and he will learn some valuable if painful truths as a result. This, at least, is her plan.

It is Hulga, of course, who emerges from the encounter with many of her deepest faiths shaken, especially her faith in herself. When Manley kisses her, she discovers that she cannot control her emotions as easily as she thought she could: the kiss "produce[s] that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house" (285). Although Hulga quickly reverts to her usual condescension, her reaction to the kiss is the first clue that she is far less different from (and superior to) other people than she thinks she is. Yet she soon reiterates her contempt for religion, telling Manley, in her usual pretentious way, "In my economy I'm saved and you are damned, . . . but I told you I didn't believe in God" (286). Later, as they are climbing into the loft of a barn, she tells him that there is no need to bring his suitcase, remarking, "We won't need the Bible," to which Manley simply replies, "You never can tell" (287). O'Connor goes out of her way, then, to make it clear that Hulga regards herself as completely independent and superior. She feels no need to love others or to be

loved by others, including her mother and God, and certainly including Manley Pointer.

It is not long, however, before Manley asserts his own superiority. He quickly convinces Hulga to take off her glasses, rendering her vision both literally and figuratively unclear, and then he tries to convince her to remove her wooden leg. At first Hulga is disturbed by this suggestion, but then the truth (at least as she sees it) dawns on her:

She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, "All right," it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his. (289)

Hulga, in other words, feels faith in Manley because Manley seems full of reverence for her. For "the first time in her life" she seems to believe in someone other than herself, but only because he seems a reflection of herself. O'Connor skillfully alludes to biblical phrasing here to suggest that Hulga undergoes a kind of cheap salvation that is entirely rooted in self-regard. Having found, apparently, a true disciple and worshipper, she even imagines the day when she might "run away" with Manley—phrasing typical of O'Connor's subtle irony since at present Hulga is in no position even to walk, let alone run (289).

Now that Manley has Hulga where and how he wants her—trapped in a barn loft and completely dependent on him—he reveals his true nature and intentions. He pulls from his briefcase a hollowed-out Bible, from which he takes a small flask of whiskey, some obscene playing cards, and a pack of condoms. He presents these to Hulga as if "presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess" (289). Ironically, the "boy" who, moments before, had seemed to Hulga so innocent and even worshipful now has the real potential to rape her. Desperate to regain control of the situation, Hulga's tone is sometimes pleading, sometimes angry: "'Aren't you,' she murmured, 'aren't you just good

country people?”” Confronted with the possibility of real evil, she falls back on faith in one of her mother’s shopworn clichés. Manley, almost insulted by her own apparent naivete, harshly responds, “Yeah, . . . but it ain’t held me back none. I’m as good as you any day in the week” (290). Here the word “good” is double-edged: Manley means that he is at least as socially worthy as Hulga is, but his use of “good” reminds us that neither of them is especially “good” in the moral sense of that term. Both he and Hulga are essentially egotists who do not care how ethically (or unethically) they treat others. Hulga’s faith in herself is battered, paradoxically, by confronting someone who is just like her, only worse. Manley is her *doppelgänger*, her alter ego, her other self. In confronting Manley, she has a chance to see her own worst traits—especially her selfishness and contempt for others—pushed to their logical extreme.

One great irony of “Good Country People” is that Hulga, the atheist and nihilist, is ultimately reduced to accusing Manley of not being a good Christian.

Her face was almost purple. “You’re a Christian!” she hissed. “You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all—say one thing and do another. You’re a perfect Christian, you’re. . . .”

The boy’s mouth was set angrily. “I hope you don’t think,” he said in a lofty indignant tone, “that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!” (290)

This is an especially intriguing moment. Hulga, who has felt nothing but contempt for Christians, now seems shocked that a Christian could possibly be as hypocritical as Manley. Paradoxically, her own faith in the kindness of Christians—a faith she has taken for granted but has never expressed—is here in crisis. She has complacently assumed that Christians will be “good country people,” however stupid and foolish they are; now, however, that easy assumption is shaken. She suddenly

holds Manley accountable to standards that she herself ignores and for which she feels no real respect. Thus it is she, ironically, who is the real hypocrite here. It is she who says one thing but does another. Hulga suddenly gets to experience how it feels to live in a world in which the supposed stupidity of Christians is no longer present—a world in which she will have to deal with other people who are just as cynical, selfish, and unloving as she is. It is Hulga who suffers a real crisis of faith here, not Manley. He, after all, is perfectly honest in saying that he does not “believe in that crap.” All along, Hulga has taken others’ belief “in that crap” as an article of faith. Now, however, as Manley makes off with her glasses and her prosthesis, she can ironically see more clearly than she ever has seen before, even though she is literally left without a leg to stand on. Manley cuttingly informs her, “You ain’t so smart. I’ve been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (291). Manley has no faith to lose; he suffers no crisis of belief because he, unlike Hulga, quite literally believes in nothing.

Hulga’s illusions—about Manley, about herself, and about her superiority to “good country people”—have been painfully stripped away. How she will react to this revelation, however, is another matter altogether. As often happens at the end of an O’Connor story, the character lacking religious faith—The Misfit in “A Good Man” and Hulga here—is left to contemplate, and perhaps learn from, the destruction of his or her previous assumptions and beliefs. Such characters have the opportunity, if they so choose, to profit spiritually from what they have learned. O’Connor, however, is not a sentimental writer, and so she rarely shows a complete, obvious, and positive transformation. She merely leaves open the possibility. Thus, Hulga’s last glimpse of Manley, as she looks, without her glasses, at him crossing a distant field, clearly alludes to biblical accounts of Jesus walking on water (Matt. 14:22–33, Mark 6:45–52, and John 6:16–21): “the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake” (291). In scripture, the vision of Jesus

walking on water is a miracle intended to strengthen his disciples' faith. Whether Hulga will be similarly transformed in any positive way after her own eye-opening encounter with Manley is left to our imaginations—and to hers.

Many of the same basic elements of plot and characterization used in "Good Country People" appear once again in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." As in the earlier work, the latter story presents an optimistic, unintellectual mother (whose last name is Chestny but who is also descended from a family called Godhigh). She is paired off with a cynical, sarcastic adult child, here named Julian, who still lives at home and who considers himself intellectually superior to nearly everyone he deals with, especially his mother. Ironically, as the story develops, Julian feels the need to teach his mother various lessons, although it soon becomes obvious that Julian is the character most in need of instruction. By the end of the tale, he has learned some very important truths in an especially painful and even tragic way. Once again, however, how he chooses to respond to those lessons, if at all, is entirely up to him.

Julian's mother has faith in many of the shallow creeds common among O'Connor's secondary characters. Apparently, for instance, she has faith in the efficacy of "reducing classes" offered by the YMCA, although O'Connor may be slyly hinting that she needs a reduction in her ego more than in her weight (405). She takes pride in her social status, which is much less elevated than it once was but is still elevated enough, at least in her own mind, to merit respect. She is proud of knowing who she is and from whom she is descended and of the fact that her distant ancestors once owned a plantation and many slaves. Most significantly, however, she is proud of being white. She thinks blacks were better off as slaves, and when she boards a bus with Julian and sees no black riders, she says, with satisfaction, "I see we have the bus to ourselves" (410). Yet when a large, disgruntled black woman and her playful young son also climb aboard, Mrs. Chestny is immediately attracted to the little boy, Carver. She thinks all children are

“cute” (419). Carver comically flirts with her, and she comically flirts back—partly because she genuinely enjoys his attention but perhaps also to annoy the boy’s mother, who happens to be wearing exactly the same kind of hat as Mrs. Chestny. When the two mothers and their two sons happen to get off at the very same stop, Mrs. Chestny tries to give Carver a penny—a gesture interpreted by Carver’s mother as an act of racial condescension. Without warning, the black woman swings her heavy purse into Mrs. Chestny’s face, knocking her to the ground so that she is utterly stunned.

At this point, Julian—who fancies himself progressive and liberal on racial matters—decides to teach his mother a lesson. He begins by telling her, while she is still prone on the ground, “You got exactly what you deserved. . . . Now get up” (418). When she rises but still seems completely disoriented, he makes the “lesson” more explicit:

“Don’t think that was just an uppity Negro woman That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure,” he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), “it looked better on her than it did on you. . . . From now on you’ve got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up . . . it won’t kill you.” (419)

Unfortunately, however, Julian’s mother does die, partly because of the physical blow (she has a bad heart) but perhaps also in part because of the emotional blows Julian inflicts. Yet her final words do not mention Julian. Instead, they focus, interestingly enough, on the love she felt for—and from—her white grandfather and the black nanny who took care of her when she was a child: “‘Tell Grandpa to come get me,’ she said. . . . ‘Tell Caroline to come get me’” (420). Her last words imply her faith that people, both white and black, can truly love and care for persons in need. In her final moments, Mrs. Chestny is humbled and dependent, but she is also trusting and full of memories of people who

genuinely loved her—unlike her son, at least if his recent treatment of her is any indication.

Part of the irony, of course, is that Julian is the center of Mrs. Chestny's faith earlier in the story. Admittedly, she finds some faults in him and often holds her own when he criticizes her, as he constantly does. Her fault finding, however, is often fairly comical, as when she tells him that he looks like a "thug" because he is not wearing a tie (409). For the most part, though, Julian's mother takes great pride in Julian, tries to encourage him, and makes excuses for his failure to achieve his own ambitions. Thus, when Julian complains that he is not making money, his mother tells him, "I think you're doing fine. . . . Rome wasn't built in a day" (406), and later she had repeats that bit of proverbial inspiration (411). Julian even admits to himself that his mother is not selfish (407), and he does "not like to consider all she did for him" (405). His mother even takes pride in his ambition to be a writer. She explains to another woman on the bus, "My son just finished college last year. He wants to write, but he's selling typewriters until he gets started" (410). Julian recognizes her devotion to him and her faith in his future, but he explains those traits in his typically unthankful and judgmental way:

She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot. The law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. If he had permitted her sacrifices, it was only because her lack of foresight had made them necessary. All her life had been a struggle . . . to give him everything she thought a Chestny ought to have. (411)

By the end of the story, as Mrs. Chestny dies in the middle of a deserted street, her faith in Julian seems wholly misplaced, or at least wholly unreciprocated. As Julian abuses her while she dies, her belief in him and support of him seem sadly ironic but also ultimately admirable, despite or perhaps even because of his mistreatment of her. The more

he abuses her, the more worthy, in retrospect, she seems. She dies not only feeling a need for love but also expressing her own love, even if the love she now expresses is for her grandfather and her black nanny. Yet she never expresses hate for her son. Julian turns his back on her, but she never turns her back on him.

Throughout the story, Julian's own faith lies mostly in himself. Like many of O'Connor's other characters who are ignorantly shortsighted, he is consumed by pride. He is incapable of feeling, let alone expressing, the kind of faith or love for others that his mother feels for him. At one point, for instance, the narrator describes Julian as

withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity. (411)

In short, partly because Julian lacks confidence in his ability to succeed in the world as it is, he creates a mental world of his own in which he rules absolutely. He has utter faith in his own right and ability to judge—and condemn—others, especially his mother, even though she, paradoxically, happens to be the one person who actually feels any real faith in and love for him. Instead of accepting and returning her affection, he merely finds fault with her. Doubting his real abilities and potential, he needs *someone* to whom he can feel superior, and his mother is the only and closest target. He prides himself on the supposed fact that

in spite of her, he had turned out so well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up

with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother. (412)

These sentences are among the most ironic in a thoroughly ironic story. In almost every single case, the “real” truth is exactly the opposite of the claims these sentences make: Julian has not “turned out” very well; he is not nearly as smart as he thinks he is; his mind is far narrower than his mother’s, or most people’s; he is brimming with prejudices of his own; he fears facts; and although he has indeed largely freed himself from love for his mother, he is entirely dominated by thoughts—often evil thoughts—of her. Indeed, at one point the narrator explicitly says that “there [is] in him an evil urge to break her spirit” (409). And this, of course, is exactly what he does at the end of the tale when he insults her as she lies, injured and only half-conscious, in the street.

When Julian suddenly realizes, in shock, that his mother is dying and then dead, he is, as the narrator succinctly puts it, “stunned”: “A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him.” Only after he realizes that she is dying does he show her any real love, and even then his expressions of affection seem rooted mainly in selfish fears. In the story’s final sentence, we see him trying to postpone “from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (420). Yet only his entrance into that world has the potential to redeem him by breaking his egocentric faith in himself and helping to make him truly humble. Ironically, only after his mother dies may Julian finally be able to love her and appreciate her properly. In short, only after he suffers a profound crisis of faith in himself may he be able to value properly the faith she had always felt in him. Here, as in so many stories by O’Connor, the shallow protagonist must have his self-centered faith broken and stripped away before he can find some higher, deeper, truer faith in something far greater than the self.

This same pattern—in which a self-centered person must suffer a crisis of faith in himself or herself before true spiritual growth can occur—appears again and again in many of O'Connor's best stories. It is evident, for instance, in "Revelation," in which smug, hypocritical Ruby Turpin, who fancies herself a good Christian, must literally be attacked by an odd, nearly Satanic character paradoxically named Mary Grace before she can experience, at the end of the tale, the true spiritual revelation foreshadowed by the story's title. Similarly, in "The Artificial Nigger," proud Mr. Head does not find himself spiritually until he loses himself physically in a big city where he betrays his young grandson, Nelson. At the end of the story, having lost not only the faith of his grandson but also his own faith in himself, he suddenly comes to one of those final revelations so characteristic of much of O'Connor's best writing:

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. (270)

Here, as in many of O'Connor's works, a crisis of faith in the self leads to the potential achievement of a deeper, richer, more rewarding faith in something higher.

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