Hard Sayings

Haddox, Thomas F.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Haddox, Thomas F.
Hard Sayings: The Rhetorics of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction.
The Ohio State University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/23947.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23947

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=896903
I. On Homeric Battlefields:  
A Confession and a Credo

Any consideration of the rhetoric of Christian orthodoxy in late modern fiction cannot avoid Flannery O’Connor, for no other Christian writer of the period has been as explicit about her avowed purpose and her intended audience. Her commentary on her fiction has been quoted perhaps more often than the fiction itself, and her statements have, through repetition, acquired a magisterial ring. “Let me make no bones about it: I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. . . . I write with a solid belief in all the Christian dogmas” (*Habit* 147; emphasis in text). “My audience are the people who think that God is dead” (*Habit* 92). “The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience” (“Fiction Writer” 33–34). Precisely because O’Connor’s intentions are indubitable, much of the debate surrounding her work has been shaped by the degree to which her critics are already in sympathy with her project. The distinguished company of readers who share O’Connor’s theological premises, viewing her as a prophet who lashes the fallen world with the
painful truth that Jesus died to save humankind, is matched by the distin-
guished company of readers, going at least as far back as John Hawkes,
who hold that O’Connor is unknowingly of the Devil’s party. And these
two contending sides are joined today by historicist critics from Jon Lance
Bacon to Patricia Yaeger, who see neither salvation nor nihilism in her work
but only the distorted reflections of the racist, sexist, class-obsessed, and
Cold War–damaged culture that was the South of her lifetime. The situa-
tion has not changed much since 1992, when Frederick Crews complained
that “there is never a shortage of volunteers to replace the original antago-
nists” (156) in the fundamental debates over O’Connor’s work. Some read-
ers ask, “Should we take O’Connor’s Catholicism seriously or stow it away
in a box marked ‘false consciousness’ or ‘irrelevant window dressing’”? Others ask, “Should we condemn O’Connor for remaining silent before the
racial injustices of her time, or praise her for registering some slight or par-
tial resistance to them?”

These questions cannot be answered solely on the basis of O’Connor’s
literary corpus. Although academic readers pride themselves on having
escaped the limitations of the New Criticism, and although they repeat
the notion that there is no disinterested point of view so often that it has
become a bromide, the protocols of scholarly discourse still require read-
ers to act as if their arguments were latent in texts themselves and only
incidentally positions in which they happen to believe. When readers
approach O’Connor, however, such protocols get them nowhere, for at this
late date, it should be clear that all of these contending positions are amply
supported by textual evidence. There is no good reason to doubt the sin-
cerity or the orthodoxy of O’Connor’s beliefs, and readers who know how
these beliefs informed her fictional practice must acknowledge her consis-
tency in applying them. There is no necessary contradiction, for instance,
in the claim that the grandmother’s murder in “A Good Man Is Hard to
Find,” or Mrs. May’s goring on the horn of the scrub bull in “Greenleaf,”
might simultaneously function as the salvation of these women. Those who
blanch at the ferocity of O’Connor’s vision and dispute that so violent and
uncompromising a stance can be authentically Christian need to read more
both about the dogmas and the history of Christianity.

On the other hand, if O’Connor wrote “for those who believe that God
is dead,” seeking to shock them into a life-changing awareness of the Incar-
nation, then the response of individual readers suggests that she failed at
least as often as she succeeded. Early critics of her work such as Josephine
Hendin and Martha Stephens, who found O’Connor’s fundamental prem-
ises (though not necessarily her fiction) repugnant, were neither stupid nor
ignorant of her intentions, and while such readers might conceivably be
guilty of the intellectual hubris that O’Connor loved to skewer, one cannot charge them with a willful misreading of the text. Their own beliefs may be wrong, but their arguments are based on an examination of O’Connor’s fiction in good faith through the light of these beliefs.

Moreover, anyone who has taught O’Connor repeatedly knows that uninitiated students typically adore her work and are deft at generating interpretations, but they almost never arrive at those that O’Connor intended. My avowedly secular students, upon hearing of O’Connor’s religious orthodoxy, are puzzled and sometimes intrigued by what they perceive as the exoticism of her position, but they then shrug and pursue their own interpretations, not converted, not feeling the slightest need to argue with her. My Christian students, on the other hand—unless they have been taught O’Connor by a previous teacher—are usually shocked. I almost always receive papers arguing either that O’Connor’s vision cannot possibly be Christian or that her efforts to persuade are at best counterintuitive, at worst perverse, because in a contemporary United States shaped largely by what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call “Moral Therapeutic Deism” (118—my students do not use this term, but their descriptions make clear that they have something like it in mind), she makes Christianity look depraved and unattractive. The first of these arguments is untenable; the second, however, is difficult to dispute. There is a corpse with three bullet holes at the end of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” a body killed by a man obsessed with Jesus. O’Connor tells us, famously, not to pay attention to it but to “the action of grace” and the “lines of spiritual motion” (“On Her Own Work” 113). Unfortunately, only the body is in the text; whatever grace and lines of spiritual motion there may be exist only in O’Connor’s intentions, in the responses of readers to them, and in the codings that readers might formulate in ongoing conversations about them. To interpret the murder either as a highly entertaining horror, as secular readers might, or as a sign that the grandmother has been saved by one of God’s more inscrutable dispensations of grace, is to go outside the text, to refer to structures of belief rather than to simple, unproblematic evidence. The debate centers not on the interpretation of the text, but on the proper context to choose for the interpretation of the text—and as such, it is irresolvable.

The same is true of the debate surrounding O’Connor’s relationship to racial justice. On the one hand, some readers have found much to praise in O’Connor’s representation of black characters—Alice Walker notes her “distance . . . from the inner workings of her black characters” and praises her for the humility that made such distance possible (52), while Crews echoes many readers’ sense that “the black characters in her fiction gen-
erally do come off better than the whites—more humane, more intuitively sensible, and of course markedly less susceptible to the status anxiety and self-aggrandizement that she loved to pillory” (157–58). There is also, of course, O’Connor’s orthodox conviction, expressed most ringingly in “The Artificial Nigger” and in “Revelation,” that everyone, black and white, can be saved. On the other hand, there is little in O’Connor’s fiction to indicate clear, unambiguous support for the civil rights movement, much distaste for those who participated directly in it, and much to suggest that such merely political matters are insignificant when viewed sub specie aeternitatis. Again, the debate is not about the interpretation of the text, since readers on both sides point to the same passages and interpret them plausibly; it is about the priority of contexts of interpretation. What matters most—representational depth, declarations in support of racial justice, or the state of individual souls? Without a textually grounded way to adjudicate these competing claims, the debate remains irresolvable.

Faced with these impasses, my own impulse has always been to change the subject. Though as a Catholic I share O’Connor’s theology, I have always felt a certain resistance to her work, even when I have found it most compelling. In my own writing on O’Connor, I have read “Parker’s Back” as a critique of visuality that can be illuminated by the work of Lacan and Luce Irigaray; I have invoked Jane Jacobs’s theories of urbanism to account for the function of community in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” and “The Artificial Nigger”; and I have suggested that literary naturalism, especially in its theories of sexual determinism, might be a profitable lens through which to read Wise Blood. In pursuing these readings, my motivation has been to say something fresh, to draw attention to hitherto unnoticed aspects of O’Connor’s texts and, above all, to avoid the boredom of endless repetition. And yet I cannot escape the conviction that these readings, although not necessarily invalid—after all, they point to textual evidence and offer logical argument to make their cases, as any reading must—are ultimately beside the point. None of these readings challenges the fundamental debates about O’Connor’s work; each can easily be pressed into the service of one side or the other. One can, for instance, endorse a Catholic reading of O’Connor and think that O’Connor’s stance toward vision has more in common with Lacan’s than with Descartes’s; there is no necessary contradiction here. One can reject O’Connor’s Christian commitments and believe that Wise Blood is best understood as a naturalist novel. My attention to differences has not made a difference.

In The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History, Walter Benn Michaels suggests that what I have been trying to do—to multiply possible readings of O’Connor’s work, to let a thousand flowers bloom—reflects a
larger trend within academic writing, a move away from “disagreement” and toward “difference.” The most obvious expressions of this trend are the rise of multiculturalism and the absolute commitment among many theorists and critics to the primacy of the subject position. As Michaels puts it, when readers commit to subject position—that is, to identity—as the key element that determines how they read a text, they commit to a protocol in which “there can be no conflicts of interpretation, not because there can be no conflict but because there can be no interpretation. All conflict has been turned into conflict between those who speak one language and those who speak another or between those who wish to eliminate difference and those who wish to preserve it, and the act of interpreting what someone says has been reconfigured either as the act of saying the same thing or as the act of saying something else” (64). While I have not proposed my readings of O’Connor as an expression of my own identity (in the manner of the “As a [fill in the blank with an identitarian category], I maintain” readings that one sometimes encounters), I have valued them precisely because I saw them as introducing an element of difference into an arena marked by endless disagreement. To speak of disagreement is to speak about belief, about questions of what is true and what is false; to speak of difference is to speak about identity or taste, neither of which is truly subject to debate.

And yet, Michaels suggests, to speak of difference instead of disagreement cannot, in the end, be anything other than a dodge, for the distinction between difference and disagreement is also a clash of beliefs, not a choice—as my writing on O’Connor has sometimes implied—between beliefs and something else. The claim that difference qua difference matters is, after all, a truth claim, and it is just as contestable as the claims that either O’Connor’s religious vision or her vexing position on southern race relations should be the starting point for whatever critics say about her. And as a truth claim, it is necessarily exclusionary, despite its rhetoric of openness to multiplicity. It is, however, a claim that refuses to defend itself against direct challenges, and that smugly takes its refusal as a sign of unwarranted moral superiority.

I read Michaels’s indictment of the way academics argue—or, more precisely, refuse to argue—and I find myself justly condemned. The enjoyment I have derived from my readings of O’Connor has taken the form of one-upmanship, of a sense that while others go on vulgarly shouting at each other about Christianity or about racial justice, I have perceived, as Wallace Stevens might put it, “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (106). I have been like the representative intellectual that Slavoj Žižek posits in the following passage from The Puppet and the Dwarf, one of his recent books on the Judeo-Christian tradition:
[W]hen, today, one directly asks an intellectual: “OK, let’s cut the crap and get down to basics: do you believe in some form of the divine or not?,” the first answer is an embarrassed withdrawal, as if the question is too intimate, too probing; this withdrawal is then usually explained in more “theoretical” terms: “That is the wrong question to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not, but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to a certain unheard-of dimension, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment. . . .” What we are getting today is a kind of “suspended” belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. Against this attitude, one should insist even more emphatically that the ‘vulgar’ question ‘Do you really believe or not?’ matters—more than ever, perhaps. (5–6)

Žižek is correct here. Although his recent work has been rightly criticized by those who perceive its opportunism—his stated thesis, after all, is that Christianity and his own brand of atheistic dialectical materialism belong, so to speak, on the same side of the barricades—this opportunism does not invalidate his more fundamental claim: that everyone is a believer of one kind or another, and that what divides believers in disagreement from believers in difference is merely that the first group takes both its beliefs and its antagonists seriously while the second group tries to disavow its beliefs or to prevent their emergence as points of contention. After all, one can argue with a belief; one cannot argue with a subject position. And one can respond to claims of radical openness to experience only by suggesting that the speaker is less radically open than he or she believes—which leaves unexamined the premise that radical openness is supremely desirable or even possible. To invoke such terms in the course of an argument is, in effect, to declare them off limits, to decline engagement with those who see interpretation as a function of something other than a mere reflection of identity, and to call one’s seriousness into question.

In a time when the general public knows little about the work of literary scholars, and derives much of what it does know from the inevitable stories in the media after each MLA Convention that portray it as a circus, Žižek’s lesson demands attention. The commitment to difference among literary scholars is also, above all, a commitment to novelty, and as such, it reinforces the consumerist imperatives both of capitalist society and the profession. It is becoming difficult to avoid the conclusion that scholars value difference qua difference primarily because they need to go on publishing new things, and that their disdain for repetition differs little from the dis-
dian of the consumer who, having purchased last year’s model, now needs this year’s lest he or she feel outclassed by hipper, more beautiful people.

For this reason, scholars in the field of O’Connor studies may have much to offer their colleagues in the profession as a whole. The record of O’Connor criticism shows that for all the different topics that one might focus on in her work, it is impossible to avoid coming back to or being coopted by a few fundamental debates about significant matters. The profession would probably be healthier and its value more evident if all academic debate were like debate about O’Connor, if scholars were less consumed with the pursuit of novelty and publication and more concerned with the proposal and defense of core beliefs in their interpretations. As Fredric Jameson observed long ago in *The Political Unconscious*:

> [O]ur object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code. [. . .] I happen to feel that no interpretation can be effectively disqualified on its own terms by a simple enumeration of inaccuracies or omissions, or by a list of unanswered questions. Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict. (9–10, 13)

O’Connor criticism certainly has been a “Homeric battlefield,” in which a few interpretive master codes have slugged it out. Secular, religious, and historicizing critics have jumped into the fray, and whatever their arguments, they have expressed their basic commitment to their beliefs in ways that remind me of the altogether admirable sentiment of Rufus Johnson in “The Lame Shall Enter First”: “Even if I didn’t believe it, it would still be true” (477). In other words, they have not shrunk from emphasizing the universality of their claims, the logical conclusion that claims that are true or false must be true or false for everyone, and that every genuine debate—as opposed to proliferations of difference—is a clash of competing universalisms.

Henry T. Edmonson III has recently argued that O’Connor’s work urges a “return to good and evil” and a rejection of modern attempts (beginning with Nietzsche) to transcend these categories. His argument is correct, and it ought to be acknowledged as such even by those readers who reject the Thomist framework that he draws upon to define good and evil. It is correct not only because O’Connor did indeed seek to make readers freshly aware of the distinction between good and evil (this is simply a fact about
her intentions) but also because everyone who argues in good faith for the truth of his or her beliefs necessarily universalizes, necessarily combats those who reject them. Everyone, in other words, committed to the search for truth necessarily invokes definitions of good and evil. Even Nietzsche’s claim to have transcended good and evil entails its own good and its own evil.

Many readers will find such a conclusion unsettling, because they have become accustomed to thinking of epistemic uncertainty and limitless tolerance as the highest virtues, as the indispensable preconditions for peace and justice. Many might point out that the world’s most conspicuously militant universalism in recent years—a strand of Islamic fundamentalism with a very concrete notion of jihad—has turned to terrorism, religious warfare, and other forms of violent provocation in order to advance its cause. Does not my argument here suggest that firmly held convictions make violence inevitable, because in a pluralistic world, there is no other way to make one triumph over others?

I certainly hope that violence is not inevitable, and the banal fact that people sometimes do change their most firmly held convictions without having suffered coercion supports that conclusion. Yet even if violence is not inevitable, conflict most certainly is, because even the attempt to reject certitude in the name of tolerance grounds itself in a universalist notion of the good, however it strives to deny that fact. What is needed is a better account of how persuasion works, how conflicts about beliefs may end without recourse to violence. How does one interpretation of a work of fiction prove more convincing than another, especially when it is not, as Jameson suggests, a question of asking which interpretation has the fewest inaccuracies, omissions, or unanswered questions, but of asking one to subscribe to a completely different worldview? How does one universalism triumph over another, particularly when the debate is couched not in the conventions of philosophy but in the essentially rhetorical mode of fiction—a mode given as much to the cultivation of “mystery” (to use one of O’Connor’s favorite words) as to rational argument?

In what follows, I will attempt a provisional answer to these questions in O’Connor’s work, though it certainly falls short of a general theory of persuasion. Perhaps if I could answer these questions more generally, I would feel less exasperated. Until then I am, like too many others in this historical moment, too easily bored, too ready to pursue novelty for its own sake, too peevishly frustrated by the fact that debates about the true and the good are, however important, however inescapable, also (for the foreseeable future, at least) irresolvable. The debates go on, world without end, and all scholars in O’Connor studies—myself included—had better learn not merely to accept that fact but to embrace it.
II. Freedom, Grace, and Persuasion in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

Given O’Connor’s stated intentions, what rhetorical strategies does she employ, and how do scholars formulate criteria to measure whether these succeed? I would like to begin with the observation that O’Connor typically cultivates identifications between her readers and particular characters. When these characters condemn other characters, readers are therefore invited to endorse the condemnation. At the climax of her stories, however, readers experience a violent reversal: they discover either that they are not so different from those whom they condemned, or (what is more often the case) that those with whom they identify are horribly flawed. For O’Connor, it follows that these characters need divine grace, and so do we. When Thomas Merton, eulogizing O’Connor, compared her to Sophocles (42), I believe that he had this structure of reversal and recognition (peripeteia and anagnorisis) in mind, which Aristotle has associated with tragedy. Some readers, upon perceiving this shock, accept the tidings she brings, while others (perhaps most) reject them. Although in practice it may be difficult to separate this decision from the question of whether readers have understood her intentions correctly, the two judgments are in principle distinct. One can believe that one fully understands O’Connor’s intentions, even admire her skill in revealing them without resorting to overt didacticism, yet not be persuaded either of their truth or of their relevance to one’s own life. One can also, to be sure, agree with O’Connor’s moral judgments about her characters without agreeing that such judgments entail the necessity of Christian belief. In short, one can reject the identification with her characters upon which such persuasion seems to depend.

1. In A Rhetoric of Irony, Wayne Booth made this argument about O’Connor’s story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” though I believe that what he says is applicable to much of her fiction: “[T]his story can be experienced by anyone who catches the essential contrast among the three systems of norms, Julian’s, his mother’s, and the cluster of traditional, conventional values we share with the author. Though it may seem thinner to those for whom Julian’s self-absorption and cruelty are judged in secular terms than for a Catholic who sees him as in mortal sin, the structure of experience will be the same for both: everyone will be forced to reject all or most of what the words seem to say. At every point we must decide on one out of many possible reconstructions, on the basis of a set of unshakable but silent beliefs that we are expected to share (however fleetingly) with the author. No one who fails to discern and feel some sympathy for these beliefs—only a few of them specifically Roman Catholic—is likely to make very much of the story” (168–69). No doubt this response would exasperate O’Connor, but she might admit that in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” where belief in Christianity is not explicitly addressed and where the civil rights movement’s challenge to white southern racism forms a more immediate context for moral judgment than O’Connor’s Catholicism, readers are more likely to agree with her moral judgments without perceiving the need to pursue a “thicker” reading grounded in Catholic doctrine.
If freedom is possible for her readers, and O’Connor’s arguments invest much in the reader’s identification with her characters, then it follows that such identification is most successful when readers attribute freedom to these characters. The author’s note to the second edition of *Wise Blood* confirms this suspicion, though it also acknowledges the difficulties that readers may have in perceiving Hazel Motes’s freedom: “Does one’s integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery . . . .” (no pg. number). Yet freedom, mysterious enough in living human beings, becomes altogether illusory when attributed to fictional characters. As René Girard once put it, mocking the putatively gratuitous freedom of protagonists in existentialist novels, “if the novelist is free it is hard to see how his characters would be” (256). But this answer falsifies the experience of reading, for while characters in a work of fiction may not be free—one will never, after all, open up “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and discover that this time, The Misfit has shot himself or taken up beachcombing on a Caribbean island—readers’ judgments of characters will prove incoherent if they do not attribute freedom to them. To identify with a character is thus to project my own consciousness of freedom into that character, so that decisions undertaken or fates suffered resonate with my sense that against that other choices are possible, that I might have chosen differently.²

When readers identify with characters in this way, they hypothesize not only about whether such identifications were intended by the author but also about how narrative conventions shape them. Any understanding of freedom in a text emerges against a prior understanding of what models of freedom have been made comprehensible within that text’s tradition. The Catholic standpoint from which O’Connor begins presents special challenges, for its relationship to the mainstream of fiction in English and to the dominant understanding of freedom in that tradition is singularly vexed.

According to the received account of literary historians from Ian Watt to F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, the novel in English is an essentially Protestant genre, in that its commitments to literary realism, individualism, and above all character (in the dual sense of particularized personality and mature moral agency) reflect a Protestant understanding of human freedom and flourishing.³ Over time, as Marina MacKay has suggested, this account

---

². It is in this sense that I understand Bakthin’s claims about the “unfinalizability” of the novel. Unfinalizability refers not to the freedom of the characters—for there is no such freedom—but to the inexhaustibility of readers’ potential judgments of fiction.

³. Many theories about the nature of fiction in English take the novel, not the short story, as their starting point, and it might be objected that because the two are distinct genres,
of the English novel has tended to equate the exemplary virtues of Protestantism with those of political liberalism, so that even an agnostic such as George Eliot is plausibly described as a Protestant novelist. On the one hand, such novels celebrate what MacKay calls the “evangelical spirit of the nineteenth century” that “people are capable of changing” (228) for the better; on the other hand, the freedom they depict is admirable only insofar as it is reasonable and conducive to social harmony—that is, when characters privilege “knowledge’ . . . over mystery and ‘accommodation’ over principle” (217). The explicit anti-Catholicism of many British novels—for instance, the association of Catholicism with the gothic terrors and alleged oppressions of continental Europe—suggests that in this tradition, the Church can only be an enemy of freedom, out to corrupt the will and intellect of unwary Protestants.

Although this account, as MacKay puts it, “den[ies] . . . the primacy of the Spanish, Catholic Don Quixote in the inception of the novel, and den[ies], furthermore, that Catholic Europe contributed to the subsequent development of the form” (216), it has rarely been challenged. How might a history of the novel appear if readers were to acknowledge these Catholic influences? They might well reverse MacKay’s terms and conclude that a Catholic vision of the novel might privilege mystery over knowledge and principle over accommodation. It might present models of the self not easily reconcilable with liberalism, models in which change is unpredictable, performative, paradoxical—and in which the “realized individual character is, in fact, the least free of all” (231). And it might suggest that the richest fictions are not necessarily novels such as Middlemarch, in which characters develop over a long span of time in a highly particularized world, but shorter forms that register the shock of freedom more strongly. Here, perhaps, is a possible explanation for why O’Connor’s short stories are usually considered more accomplished than her novels.

It follows then, that precisely because O’Connor identifies herself as Catholic yet works within a tradition historically marked as Protestant, her efforts will take counterintuitive forms and challenge notions of freedom that are dominant in Protestant and post-Protestant milieux. In a sense, then, I am reaffirming O’Connor’s oft-repeated statement that “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling...

this Leavisite account of the novel as essentially Protestant need not apply to O’Connor. It seems pertinent, though, that O’Connor does not seem to distinguish between the novel and the short story insofar as her own rhetorical strategies are concerned. Her two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, display the same patterns of identification, reversal, and recognition that I described above, though most critics agree (as do I) that many of her short stories are superior as works of art.
figures” (“Fiction Writer” 34), with the qualification that it may be just as much the literary context of fiction in English as the unbelief of the twentieth century that contributes to such sensory disabilities. But shouting and drawing large and startling figures pose their own risks, for a Catholic understanding of such things must neither deny freedom nor minimize its essential mystery.

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” perhaps provides the best illustration of this problem in O’Connor’s fiction. O’Connor has of course been criticized for imposing her own interpretation of her work on readers, and her comments on this story, in which she simultaneously justifies and deemphasizes her use of violence, are often cited as evidence. But what has often gone unremarked is the distinction that O’Connor draws between the effect of violence upon her characters and its effect on readers. “I have found,” she writes, “that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (“On Her Own Work” 112). This is, I would argue, one of the cagiest moments in O’Connor’s writing. Even as she underscores the function of violence in her work, she obscures her agency in inflicting it. She has not set out to dispense violence to her characters; she has only “found” that violence achieves the desired effect—and thus casts her characters as autonomous agents whose own stubbornness has driven her to this expedient. Yet while violence seems necessary for her characters, it has the potential to mislead readers. Hence her admonition that readers should “be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother’s soul, and not for the dead bodies” (“On Her Own Work” 113). So even though both characters and readers are potentially recalcitrant, characters are more certain to benefit from violence, not only because they cannot escape it but because there seems to be no danger of their misunderstanding what it portends. Readers, however, are freer but for this very reason more prone to error, and they too must be assaulted, but with commentary instead of direct violence. Here there seems to be a familiar standoff, one suggested long ago by partisans of reader-friendly criticism such as Roland Barthes: the freer a reader is, the more that freedom seems to be measured by resistance to authorial intention.

In what sense, then, can the grandmother—the third party in this transaction—be considered “free”? Readers’ understanding of her proceeds initially through the familiar processing of realist fiction. They observe what she says and does, discern her thoughts, and absorb significant information about her—the name of her cat, her fear of highway patrolmen, her pride in her manner of dress. If readers believe that they understand her, it is
because they recognize her as plausible within her time and place—a ridiculous old woman whose identity has been largely shaped by the discourse of southern ladyhood. The more plausible she seems, the more likely it would seem that she will develop according to a model of liberal selfhood if she is to win readers’ approval—overcoming her vanities, her racism, and her selfishness through a painstakingly drawn sequence of experience and enlightenment.

Yet this does not happen. At the crux of the story, having failed to persuade The Misfit to spare her life, readers are told that her head “cleared for an instant,” that she “saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children’” (29). She then touches him and is killed immediately afterward. In this passage, any sense of her thoughts and motivation falls away. The clearness of her head suggests that readers should trust her action here, but the content of this clearness is not specified. The fact that The Misfit seems close to tears might also be significant, but this perception is itself ambiguous—does it belong to the grandmother or the author? It is not certain that the grandmother experiences a rush of love or pity for The Misfit, plausible though such a reading may be. Nor is it certain that she feigns love or pity in a final attempt to save her life, though this reading is also plausible. Neither reading is compelled by the text as, for example, the earlier judgment of the grandmother’s vanity is. If the grandmother acts freely here—and O’Connor invites this judgment when she refers to the grandmother’s “special kind of triumph” (“On Her Own Work” 111)—her freedom is suggested most clearly by readers’ ignorance of her motives. O’Connor does tell readers, in her commentary, that such freedom is associated with a moment of grace—but it would seem that she cannot, without turning it into an illustration of determinism, account for it. Hence the caginess I mentioned earlier, her reluctance to identify herself as the source of violence against her characters. This too, after all, would diminish the intended sense of the characters’ freedom—it would make violence the ultimate cause, rather than the felicitous revelation, of this freedom.

In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” O’Connor speaks of the writer for whom “the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don’t understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than probability” (41–42). As David Sandner has argued, here O’Connor “anticipates that her grandmother can only be ‘adequately’ read as . . . [a] deluded figure . . . imagining at her last moment what was not there, what cannot be; she anticipates that her criti-
cism can be discounted as well, that it asks for something that need not be deduced from the text as a necessary reading of its determining elements” (177). Indeed, everything that readers have learned about the grandmother, through their processing of realist conventions, might lead them astray, for readers seek clues to her “adequate” motivation in what came before. Any account of such motivation would lock the grandmother into a chain of cause and effect that the story neither confirms nor denies.

I tentatively conclude that O’Connor highlights an inherent tension between mimesis and freedom, and that in affirming freedom at crucial moments, she complicates Aristotle’s judgment in the Poetics that “the use of impossible probabilities is preferable to that of unpersuasive possibilities” (61).4 It is always “possible” to act freely, especially if one understands that one’s truest freedom lies in accepting God’s gift of grace. But is it probable that one will do so—especially if one has been shaped by a formerly Protestant and now liberal culture that tends to view will as untrammeled? O’Connor thinks, with much justification, that such probabilities are “unpersuasive,” though not “impossible.” When she warns her readers not to misread the violence in the story, she might well be exhorting, “don’t worry about being persuaded. Be free instead, for only in openness to grace does proper freedom exist.” The grace that allows for a conversion experience need not be tied to any human event, not even to the reading of a story about it. But O’Connor cannot simply give up the effort to persuade, even to preach—the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) demands it, after all. If readers can be convinced of the grandmother’s freedom even before death, perhaps they can be shocked into awareness of their own. But it is precisely readers’ commitment to a false model of freedom that blinds them, and leads O’Connor to the more overt—and, for many readers, less persuasive—effort of her commentary, which has provoked far more critical resistance than her fiction itself has.

4. The distinctions here, admittedly, are subtle. Wendy Piper rightly notes that in the Poetics, “[t]he two elements of ‘probability’ and ‘surprise’ are interdependent; it is upon their synthesis that the emotional import of peripeteia and anagnorisis . . . depends and the moral and metaphysical weight of the tragedy, the sense of ‘wonder,’ is based” (164). The central issue seems to be whether the kind of tragic recognition and reversal of which Aristotle speaks affirms a conception of human freedom or of determinism. O’Connor contrasts her emphasis on freedom with a “great tragic naturalism” that she respects but believes is achieved despite “the limitations of [a] narrow vision” (“Some Aspects” 41). I read her as rejecting the “probabilities” asserted by determinist theorists of all kinds—which in some versions become invariable laws—in favor of the improbable possibilities of freedom and grace.
III. O’Connor Relaxes: “The Artificial Nigger”

While “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” has probably not converted many readers, its presentation of what is at stake in questions of belief is admirably stark, neither minimizing the essential scandal of the Christian narrative nor shrinking from the fact that readers must make a free commitment to it or reject it. There is no third option. The grandmother’s own attempt to construct an alternative based on moral consensus (and save her own skin) rather than on the irreducibility of doctrinal belief collapses, like most of her dialogue, into platitude: “I just know you’re a good man” (25). O’Connor’s stories, however, are not always so precisely delineated, and I turn now to “The Artificial Nigger” as a counterexample. My argument here is more openly personal, because I have long been struck by the divergence between my own religious beliefs and my assessment of the story, which dissents from the widespread judgment that it is one of her strongest. Because critics who find O’Connor’s rhetorical strategies persuasive often already share her beliefs, I suspect that this divergence between my beliefs and a judgment to which these beliefs might predispose me sheds light on the more general question of when religious persuasion in fiction proves successful.

As a Roman Catholic, I believe in the same dogmas in which O’Connor believed. Moreover, I believe that Mr. Head, like all human beings, is vain, sinful, and in need of redemption. He is not a monster—or, to be more precise, he is a monster in the most ordinary way, for his nature, like ours, is proud and fallen. His recognition of his sinfulness, followed by the reconciliation with Nelson that occurs under the aegis of the story’s grotesque statue, is therefore a crucial awakening. Indeed, O’Connor is unambiguous about what Mr. Head learns or rediscovers: “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). This passage evinces not only a greater theological explicitness than is typically found in O’Connor’s fiction but also an unusually lofty and affirmative tone. Indeed, it is uncomfortably close to what O’Connor scornfully called “Instant Uplift” (“Novelist” 165), and yet one cannot complain that it is more obscure for being so. It is not in and of itself vapid, because the theology that underpins it isn’t. To an unusual degree in O’Connor’s fiction (as opposed to her essays), the final paragraphs make her intentions unmistakable.
Yet despite this clarity of purpose, I remain unconvinced of the story’s effectiveness, for I do not believe that Mr. Head experiences a genuine conversion. I have been surprised to discover that O’Connor considered this her favorite story (Habit 101, 209), irked by its popularity, and somewhat relieved to find Frederick Crews call the end of the story “one of the few trite, dramatically unearned, propagandistic passages in all of O’Connor’s mature fiction” (160). To be sure, the word “unearned” here suggests that Crews has in mind the distinction between “showing” and “telling” in fiction, as well as the evaluative assumption that accompanies it and remains beloved of instructors in creative writing: showing is good, and telling, especially homiletic telling, is bad. But as Wayne Booth observed in The Rhetoric of Fiction, this maxim breaks down as soon as one scrutinizes it: one can cite endless examples of effective “telling” and ineffective “showing” in fictional narratives, so that the distinction between the two often betrays a “radical inadequacy” (16). What determines success is not the proportion of showing to telling, but the skill with which both showing and telling are adapted to the work’s rhetorical ends. My sense of why Crews’s judgment of the story is nevertheless correct begins with a key statement in the passage I quoted above—Mr. Head’s realization that “no sin was too monstrous to claim as his own”—which concretizes the story’s rhetorical weakness.

What prompts Mr. Head to this realization is his denial of his son Nelson. Faced with a crowd of angry women who threaten to call the police because Nelson has accidentally broken one woman’s ankle, afraid because “[h]e had never in his life been accosted by a policeman,” Mr. Head proclaims, “This is not my boy . . . I never seen him before” (265). Nelson responds with horror, accusing his father silently but effectively. Even the women fall silent and allow Mr. Head to leave, “as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him” (265). Clearly O’Connor intends for everyone to recognize what the narrator calls Mr. Head’s “true depravity” (270). His denial, in other words, must be singularly horrifying, but nevertheless in a way that signifies universal—and universally recognized—rather than individual depravity.

The problem, however, occurs in the leap between acknowledging that Mr. Head is guilty of a sin here and concluding that “no sin was too monstrous to claim as his own.” Does his action really reveal his capacity for murder, or rape, or torture? Or does it merely show that he is proud, easily frightened, and ignobly willing to betray to save his own skin? Moreover, even his betrayal could have been far worse: he never actually abandons Nelson; he feels instant remorse, and he tries, in his fumbling way, to rec-
oncile with Nelson even before he encounters the statue—by offering to get him a Coca-Cola and, later, to share water with him. His denial of Nelson is certainly sinful, certainly despicable. But to invest it with an aura of speech-depriving horror that stops the women’s half-righteous indignation in its tracks, is simply not convincing.

Mr. Head’s epiphany makes sense only if he is already within a Christian framework of belief, for the “true depravity” of all human beings, the taint of original sin, is an a priori belief, not something that can be syllogistically deduced from the existence of individual crimes. I believe it to be true because Christianity teaches it, not because human beings have always unleashed horrors upon each other—although the fact of such horrors certainly makes it easier to believe. Even though nearly everyone grants that a capacity for wrongdoing is universal, most people admit degrees of culpability (even the Church distinguishes between mortal and venial sin) and do not necessarily conclude, for instance, that one who tells a lie could just as easily have committed pedophilia or genocide. The “monstrosity” of Mr. Head’s action lies in the overweening pride that it reveals, and to interpret this pride as a monstrous sin requires familiarity with a tradition in which pride can be just as vile as murder—which places pride, for instance, as the first of the Seven Deadly Sins. If I find the women’s reaction unconvincing, it is in part because I do not live in a culture in which pride compels universal fear and loathing. In fact, my hunch is that most contemporary readers of the story despise Mr. Head long before he betrays Nelson, for his racism, his unwarranted arrogance, and his naïveté about urban life, and that his betrayal instead provokes their first real compassion for him, precisely because its motivation—pride and fear—is so understandable, so easy to identify with. Such a response is not admirable—I would even say that it displays its own pride in its smug, implicit assumption that racism is something of which only other people are guilty, and in its automatic contempt toward white, rural Southerners. But I do believe that such a response works against what O’Connor intends here.

Once one realizes that Mr. Head’s epiphany makes little sense unless he is already some kind of Christian, it becomes easier to account for what Richard Giannone has called the “dissonance” between “the elevated language [of the narrator]” and “the rhetorical capacity of the plainspoken hick” (Hermit Novelist 125). Mr. Head would not express himself in this way, but he has, no doubt, been taught, for instance, that he has “conceived in his heart of the sin of Adam,” and that “God loved in proportion as he forgave.” He may well perceive, in the isolation and misery that he feels just before he encounters the grotesque statue, “what man would be like without salvation” (268). All of these claims resonate within Christian
teaching, and they suggest that Mr. Head’s belief has always been more genuine than that of the merely nominal Christians who appear more often in O’Connor’s work, such as Mrs. MacIntyre from “The Displaced Person” or Mrs. May from “Greenleaf.” Other critics have made this point as well. Martha Stephens, for instance, compares him to the twelve-year-old protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” Both she and Mr. Head must learn a lesson in humility, but as Stephens puts it, because they are already believers, “any sins of [theirs] . . . are going to be quite indulgently dealt with, [their] lesson in humility quite tenderly viewed” (165). While I do not share Stephens’s sarcasm, I think that she is on to something. Many readers know O’Connor’s claim that “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.” Yet they tend to forget what immediately precedes this statement: “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs that you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it” (“Fiction Writer” 34). Mr. Head, perhaps because he shares these beliefs, will not require so violent a lesson. Accordingly, one should describe what happens to him not as a conversion, but what one might call in Protestant terminology a rededication. Or, to use a Catholic formulation that O’Connor probably knew, Mr. Head experiences a movement from what John Henry Newman calls “notional assent” of Christianity to “real assent.”5 For this reason, however crucial such a change may be, it is not dramatically satisfying, because the distance to be traversed is not so great—certainly not the distance, as O’Connor once opined to Ben Griffith, “from the Garden of Eden to the Gates of Paradise” (Habit 78).6

What about the grotesque statue itself? The narrator underscores that it is not a mere symbol of reconciliation, but its active agent: “They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy” (269). That O’Connor subscribes to a sacramental view of existence in which ordinary objects can become visible vehicles of God’s invisible grace, is a critical commonplace, but the statue functions more literally as something like

5. “In its Notional Assents as well as in its inferences, the mind contemplates its own creations instead of things; in Real, it is directed towards things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imagination” (Grammar of Assent 57). Moreover, “[Real assents] are of a personal character, each individual having his own, and being known by them. It is otherwise with notions; notional apprehension is in itself an ordinary act of our common nature. All of us have the power of abstraction, and can be taught either to make or to enter into the same abstractions” (Grammar of Assent 63).

6. To be sure, Mr. Head does feel, in his agony, “what man would be like without salvation” (268). The use of the conditional here, of course, suggests that the statement is contrary to fact: human beings are already (potentially) saved, through the accomplished death and resurrection of Jesus. Even in the depths of his agony, in other words, Mr. Head does not reject the basic claims of Christian orthodoxy.
the sacrament of reconciliation, for it appears only after both Mr. Head and Nelson have indicated a desire to be reconciled, however imperfect their contrition might be. Mr. Head’s desire takes the form of his overtures toward Nelson (the Coca-Cola and the water); Nelson’s takes the form of allowing himself to catch up slowly with his grandfather—within three pages, Nelson moves from “[t]wenty feet behind him” (266) to “within fifteen feet” (267) to “about ten feet away” (268). The statue effects the reconciliation in response to an implicitly expressed desire for it. How?

One might reply that the arbitrariness, even the “artificiality” of the statue, is part of the point, that God bestows his grace where he will, and that to ask “How?” is an arrogant presumption. Inasmuch as the statue has inevitable political implications, however—implications that O’Connor acknowledged when she called the statue “a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself” (Habit 140)—the story cries out for a reading that will connect the statue’s function as agent of grace to commentary about the suffering of African Americans and the moral responsibility for it. Mr. Head sees in the statue an image of universal agony—he learns from this experience that mercy “grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children” (269). But it is understandable that readers might flinch at the quick leap to the universality of suffering here, as if what Mr. Head and Nelson have endured is comparable to the systematic oppression of African Americans that the statue makes visible. (To his credit, Mr. Head, having reflected on his suffering, immediately recognizes its paltriness, for he understands that agony “was all a man cold carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him” [269].)

Moreover, the reconciliation does not lead to anything like racial enlightenment on Mr. Head’s part, as other critics have acknowledged—indeed, the retreat to their rural home, punctuated with Nelson’s “I’ll never go back again” (270)—suggests a refusal to continue the challenge that the story has proposed, a challenge to test one’s faith through continued interaction with the suffering of others. Whereas the language that refers to Mr. Head’s individual salvation is clear and unambiguous, that which might suggest a recognition of his racism is vague—compare, for instance, “He saw now that no sin was too monstrous to claim as his own” with the story’s most obscure sentence, “They stood 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” (269). The best reading of this sentence I have seen is Christina Bieber Lake’s: “Like Ozymandias in the sand, this ‘monument to another’s victory,’ now completely effaced, shows how thin a victory it had really been. When Mr. Head sees
it, it changes him—or, more accurately, helps him name the changes he has already experienced. Instead of seeing his identity as defined against the other, frozen in a cold rationality, he stands now with the suffering community in identification and sympathy” (106).

I do, however, have a quibble with Lake’s interpretation. Whose victory is referred to here? It is “another’s” victory, contrasted with Mr. Head and Nelson’s defeat, presumably the victory of a racist society over those whom it oppresses. Yet to the extent that Mr. Head is complicit in the oppression of African Americans that the statue reveals, this victory has, until now, also been his own. Do readers therefore read a renunciation of racism here, since logically, identification with the suffering community must entail identification with African Americans as well? Does the contrast between “another’s” victory and “their” defeat imply that Mr. Head, too, has, unknowingly, been a victim of racism—but a victim who can take comfort in the fragility of the victory? I see no evidence that Mr. Head’s epiphany about the universality of suffering and pride entails specific identification with others, as opposed to recognition of a common humanity. Indeed, because the fact of suffering is existential and its specific causes not addressed, one might even suspect that Mr. Head now considers the amelioration of suffering undesirable. If is true that having so little agony to take to one’s Maker at death is a source of shame, why not allow things to remain as they are? The more suffering that African Americans endure, the better off they will be when they face God; perhaps even the better off others will be, if we are to take seriously O’Connor’s claim that the story suggests “the redemptive quality of the Negro’s suffering for us all” (Habit 78).

I conclude that even though O’Connor envisaged her audience as the people who think that God is dead, “The Artificial Nigger” is best understood as a fable for Christians. Mr. Head serves as a kind of double for the Christian reader whose assent to Christian doctrine is mostly notional and who requires a shock to recognize anew his pride and his dependence on Jesus’ sacrifice. I wonder, however, whether O’Connor’s use of the racist statue is meant to extend Mr. Head’s epiphany further into the minds of her readers. It is easy to perceive how ridiculous Mr. Head’s pride makes him, long before he denies Nelson; but perhaps it is harder for a Christian, southern, white reader of the 1950s to extend the lesson that Mr. Head learns into a recognition that racism has distorted southern society and imperiled souls. I do not believe that Mr. Head learns this specific lesson, but the vagueness of O’Connor’s language at this crucial point allows readers to draw it, if they will.

It is interesting that none of O’Connor’s manuscript drafts of “The Arti-
financial Nigger” contain the kind of extended commentary on reconciliation and salvation that the published story includes. There is also more doubt about just what has been learned. In all the versions of the story, Mr. Head and Nelson realize that they have been reconciled, but in one version neither one realizes that the statue had anything to do with it; in one version Nelson understands this but Mr. Head doesn’t, and in yet another version Mr. Head does but Nelson doesn’t. Clearly O’Connor believed that the more explicit she was about the means and implications of the reconciliation, the more her readers would grasp the essential point. But in order for her to do this, it was necessary to make Mr. Head’s Christianity more evident and thus to lessen the distance that he had to travel to his final revelation. Judged according to her own stated criteria, then—as an attempt to shock an unbelieving audience into the truth that Jesus died to save us— “The Artificial Nigger” seems less convincing.

IV. The City in “Judgement Day”

A similar situation prevails in “Judgement Day,” which O’Connor completed in the last month of her life. Yet the results, I would argue, are very different. Like “The Artificial Nigger,” “Judgement Day” depicts a protagonist who must leave his contented rural isolation, confront the crowds and the even more profound isolation of urban life, and discover through the usual process of recognition and reversal his own flaws. Like Mr. Head, who hates and fears Atlanta, Tanner regards New York as a place of filth and horrifically indiscriminate human mingling, with air “fit for cats and garbage,” where “all stripes of foreigner, all of them twisted in the tongue” live together in “pigeon-hutch[es]”—in short, “no place for a sane man” (531, 541). He also shares with Mr. Head a measure of O’Connor’s sympathy and some evidence of already being a Christian when he undergoes his experience, which might lead readers of “The Artificial Nigger” to expect him to receive a similarly gentle treatment from his author. Stuck in New York City at the home of his daughter, Tanner is determined to return home, either dead or alive. The conflation of his beloved home with heaven is obvious, and the fact that his daughter finally buries him in his native earth—after originally burying him in the city and then suffering from a guilty conscience—suggests the triumph of his rural vision over the urban wasteland.

7. O’Connor’s drafts of “The Artificial Nigger” are located in the Flannery O’Connor Collection at the Library and Instructional Technology Center, Georgia College, Milledgeville, Georgia, files 157b, 157c, and 158.
Such a reading of the story dovetails with a widespread perception that in O’Connor’s fictional world, cities are little more than foci of evil—places, on the one hand, where “interleckchuls” promote a superficial cosmopolitanism that is no substitute for genuine community, and on the other hand, where industrial capitalism’s relentless activity, instrumentalization of human relationships, and destruction of the natural environment conspire to create a hell on earth. Yet even though O’Connor’s own professed distaste for cities tends to confirm this reading, in practice, urban life in her work appears more complicated and more potentially beneficial—above all, because the sheer number of encounters with other people that are possible can force epiphanies (as they do for Mr. Head) that splendid rural isolation cannot. Indeed, “Judgement Day” builds upon “The Artificial Nigger”—and is, in my judgment, a better story—precisely because it does not let its protagonist off so easily, but rather reveals that in his movement toward something approaching racial enlightenment, unpleasant encounters with others may exact a necessary cost.

If “Judgement Day” were merely about a longing for the country that is eventually satisfied, it would not be significantly better than “The Geranium,” the much earlier version of the story that O’Connor had included in her M.F.A. thesis. As Marshall Bruce Gentry points out, “The Geranium” “comes close to [a] sentimental longing for the South” more reminiscent of Carson McCullers (88). The story ends with Tanner’s earlier incarnation, Dudley, reduced to tears and bewilderment by the condescension of a black man who calls him “old-timer” (13) and by the destruction of a geranium that he used to observe in an apartment window opposite his. Nothing complicates the story’s sentimental pathos. In “Judgement Day,” however, Tanner is eventually murdered—and, perhaps, simultaneously delivered to salvation—by an African American actor who lives in the apartment next door. If one is to read the ending of the story as a triumph for Tanner, as most critics have done, one must acknowledge that his exile in the city has been necessary. Just as in “The Artificial Nigger” the Heads were forced to confront both urban Atlanta and the presence of African-Americans in order to find redemption, in “Judgement Day” Tanner seems to require a confrontation with the city, with a black man, and with violence.


9. “The Geranium” is also O’Connor’s first published story, which first appeared in print in 1946 but was not collected in a book until The Complete Stories appeared in 1971. For a representative discussion of the revisions that O’Connor made to the story through the years, including the intermediate versions entitled “An Exile in the East” and “Getting Home,” see Giannone, Mystery of Love (233–39).
But why is this particular violence necessary? After all, what distinguishes Tanner even from Mr. Head is his lack of stubbornness. Unlike most hard-headed O’Connor characters, to whom change comes only as the result of divine violence, Tanner shows every sign of having learned several important lessons in the absence of violence. Though he is hardly perfect, he has made undeniable progress in overcoming his two most obvious (and interrelated) failings—his pride and his racism—well before he comes to New York.

In the extended flashback that comprises most of the story, readers learn that once, Tanner had owned land in Georgia and had been foreman to a crew of black workers, whom he had kept in check by brandishing a knife and threatening to kill them periodically. Though Tanner has never actually killed a black man, because he fears going to hell, his dominance depends upon the threat of violence and is fueled by a poisonous racism. Tanner constantly carves small wooden figures with his knife, in an effort to conceal the involuntary shaking of his hands caused by kidney illness. Even what might seem a sign of weakness, however, becomes transformed into a reflection of Tanner’s power: “The Negroes picked [the figures] up and took them home; there was not much time between them and darkest Africa” (537). This passage’s free indirect discourse, which blurs the distinction between Tanner’s point of view and the narrator’s, suggests that his carvings, even though the product of a physical weakness, function like fetishes, cast off by a powerful, disdainful god to superstitious worshipers, though it is unclear whether this is an accurate description of the African Americans’ mindset or a fantasy of Tanner’s.

Tanner experiences his first moral advance through his encounter with Coleman, a black man who had appeared on the scene one day, keeping his distance from the workers, watching them, and, provocatively, doing nothing. When Tanner confronts Coleman, the possibility of violence is in the air, and both men, the narrator hints, acknowledge to themselves the satisfaction they would feel were they to kill each other. But when Tanner finds himself carving a pair of false glasses without realizing it, he passes them along to Coleman, clearly intending to mock him: “‘Put these on,’ he said. ‘I hate to see anybody can’t see good’” (538). To both men’s surprise, the event defuses the situation: “[Tanner] saw the exact instant in the muddy liquor-swollen eyes when the pleasure of having a knife in this white man’s gut was balanced against something else, he could not tell what” (538). The result is that Tanner and Coleman become friends, even to the extent of sharing the same home thirty years later. Although Tanner rationalizes that since Coleman had “ma[d]e a monkey out of [him],” the only alternative would have been to kill him—“[a]nd he was not going to hell for killing
a nigger” (539)—his bluster belies the fact that he has just acknowledged Coleman’s humanity. The fact that their subsequent relationship conforms to racist protocols—as Tanner says, Coleman “cooks . . . cuts my firewood and empties my slops” (535)—does not lessen the horror that Tanner’s daughter feels when she discovers that they share the same space.

Tanner’s second, more enduring moral advance occurs after he moves to New York—a move necessitated because he has lost his land, become destitute, and taken shelter with Coleman in a shack on land owned by a prosperous local black man, Dr. Foley. A clear embodiment of the increased social and economic opportunities that African Americans were beginning to achieve in the 1960s, Dr. Foley taunts Tanner by observing that “[t]he day coming . . . when the white folks is going to be working for the colored” (540). In lieu of rent, Foley demands that Tanner share with him the profits from the whiskey still that now gives Tanner his livelihood. Unable to face such humiliation, Tanner contacts his daughter, who, appalled by his situation, takes him north. Here, too, however, Tanner has learned his lesson, as a result of suffering, and conquered his pride: “If he had known it was a question of this—sitting here looking out of this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a nigger, he would have run the still for the nigger. He would have been a nigger’s white nigger any day” (540).

In light of Tanner’s progress against his pride and racism, it is not surprising that critics have generally liked him. Frederick Asals calls him “the most sympathetically handled adult protagonist in all her stories,” the only one “in whom control and surrender, will and imagination, are reconciled and made one” (141). For Giannone, he is a “spiritual combatant” (Hermit Novelist 260), whose unhappy existence in New York parallels a hermit’s expiatory time in the desert, and who goes to his deserved reward after undergoing purification. And for Gentry, Tanner is morally admirable but aesthetically flawed because O’Connor herself likes him too much and identifies too closely with him (88). But these assessments lead back to the previous question: if Tanner is capable of moral growth, if he grows without occasions of violence, then what function does the violence serve?

The most compelling attempt to answer this question to date is Ralph Wood’s. Wood connects Tanner’s fate to O’Connor’s celebrated concern with manners, particularly insofar as they affect the changing racial politics of the South. Aligning O’Connor with such theorists of social mores as Alexis de Tocqueville and Jean Bethke Elshtain, Wood argues that “Judgement Day” presents O’Connor’s conviction that “a democracy, perhaps more than any other polity, requires manners” because “[e]xactly to the extent that ancient inequalities have been overcome, there is an even
greater demand for social restraint, for privacy, for the individual space one grants to others because one knows one’s own need for it” (Flannery O’Connor 127). Since the civil rights movement has abolished many “ancient inequalities,” those that remain will become even greater foci for resentment unless, as O’Connor maintained, whites and blacks can construct a new framework for living together based on mutual charity. Such charity will necessarily involve the wearing of masks. Rather than seeing masks as mere hypocrisy that prevent people from expressing their innermost convictions honestly, Wood argues that for O’Connor, masks are necessary for civilization itself. In their absence, society devolves either into a state of Hobbesian warfare or into an enforced egalitarianism that abolishes the distinction between the public and private and in doing so turns totalitarian.

From Wood’s perspective, Tanner’s moral progress is incomplete, because despite his friendship with Coleman, he has never quite relinquished the old mask of racial superiority for a newer “mask” that combines charity with unabashed affirmation of the truth. When Tanner meets the African American next door, he assumes that the man is from south Alabama and must be homesick. He tries to strike up an acquaintance with him, calling him “Preacher” (the only honorific he knows for black people) and suggesting that the two might go fishing together. The man reacts with rage, calling Tanner a “wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard” and for good measure asserting that “[t]here ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God”—though of course his double negative affirms the opposite of what he intends. Tanner immediately retorts, “And you ain’t black! . . . And I ain’t white” (545). The actor then assaults him, causing a stroke. Later, when Tanner is trying to escape the apartment and head southward, he meets the man a second time and repeats his mistake. This time, the man kills him and desecrates his body, forcing his head and arms through a banister so that he resembles a man in stocks. The upshot seems to be that while for most O’Connor characters, salvation and the presence of violence go together, Tanner has achieved his salvation before he is actually killed, in the moment when he simultaneously rejects the actor’s blasphemy and (unwittingly) affirms the irrelevance of racial distinctions. His triumph is so perfect that O’Connor can dispense with further preaching or pointed commentary (Wood, Flannery O’Connor 141).

Wood’s reading, compelling as it is, does not observe that Tanner repeats the mistake of calling the actor “Preacher.” Even if this mistake can be attributed to the mental confusion that has plagued Tanner since his stroke (indeed, he initially mistakes the man for Coleman), this hardly suggests that he has completely overcome the racial condescension that Wood
had criticized in the earlier encounter. Moreover, while Tanner has come to associate his rural home with heaven—his dream of returning in a coffin, only to burst through it and surprise Coleman and Hooten with the joyful cry, “Judgement Day! You idiots didn’t know it was Judgement day, did you?” (549), reveals as much—it is difficult to see how he could have put into practice his new awareness of the meaninglessness of racial distinctions in the South. The story does not give him the opportunity to succeed or to fail: even if the actor who kills him reveals that in “this Yankee Babylon . . . people run over each other in their unrestrained and hell-bent rush” (Wood, Flannery O’Connor 140), even this violence fulfills Tanner’s desires more quickly, and more efficiently, than a return home would. That Tanner’s daughter sends his body home to be buried in Georgia is icing on the cake.

If it is misleading to see Tanner’s violent death simply as a martyrdom or a just reward for his moral and spiritual progress, it is equally misleading to interpret it as a blow for racial justice, as Alice Walker, for instance, suggests when she states that the final version of “Judgement Day” reveals O’Connor’s belief in “justice for the individual” (53). Indeed, Tanner’s fate is constructed so that readers of fundamentally differing commitments can derive satisfaction from it: those appalled by his racism and contemptuous of the rural southern milieu that formed him can see poetic justice in his death at the hands of a black man in New York; those impressed by the moral progress that he makes can view his death (and the relocation of his body to Georgia), as a triumph, citing O’Connor’s injunction to pay attention to lines of spiritual motion, not to dead bodies. Tanner’s Christian belief, like Mr. Head’s in “The Artificial Nigger,” never seems in question—even his fear of going to hell were he to kill bespeaks it—yet his trials in the city and even his death are necessary to the narrative, providing a closure that retrospectively endows Tanner’s life with meaning and with a graver sense of what might be at stake than in “The Artificial Nigger.”

Many critics have argued that as O’Connor’s career progressed, she left behind a tendency toward dualism that marred some of her earliest work, a tendency that belied her insistence elsewhere on the sacramental nature of God’s creation.10 It is easy to see why “Judgement Day” might be enlisted in support of this claim: the signature violence remains—and,

10. Ralph Wood, for instance, has argued that “O’Connor’s public statements are often quasi-dualistic, and that her fiction at times suspends characters between the virtually equal powers of God and Satan” (Comedy 100). He prefers the more comic late stories, “The Enduring Chill,” “Revelation,” and “Judgement Day” itself, as instances of a more theologically accurate and more “splendid comic vision” (Comedy 106)—though he also criticizes “The Enduring Chill” for its “horrific ending” (Comedy 125).
indeed, remains dramatically necessary—but the sense that Tanner is suspended between God and Satan, the sense that gives “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” its unforgettable starkness, is attenuated in favor of a more nuanced portrayal of good and evil mixed up with each other, evil serving as the unwitting means of good, good triumphing despite its relative feebleness. Moreover, O’Connor’s avowed belief in human freedom finds a more powerful confirmation here than in the heavy-handed affirmations of “The Artificial Nigger,” or even in the undercurrent expressed in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” that freedom may be possible but typically reveals itself in its very improbability. Tanner seems freer than the previous stories’ protagonists—perhaps because he has already committed himself to the Christianity that the grandmother must discover and to which Mr. Head must rededicate himself, while readers of the story, perceiving both its greater nuance and its insistence nonetheless on meaningful closure, may also detect less browbeating from the author. The fundamental debate concerning the truth of O’Connor’s theological claims and her effectiveness in making them will not cease, nor should it, and my own judgments of the relative merits of these three stories will not swing the balance in any direction. Even at her worst, however—in the pious insularity of “The Artificial Nigger”—O’Connor demands respect, and at her best, she proves to be the most gifted and incisive of postwar fiction writers committed to orthodox Christian doctrine and practice.