The Life You Save May Be Your Own Study Guide

The Life You Save May Be Your Own by Flannery O'Connor

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Introduction

Like much of Flannery O'Connor's short fiction, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is set in the American South and contains characters whose most notable feature seems to be their ordinariness. Through imagery, dialogue, and moments of revelation, O'Connor explores the themes of morality and religion, both frequent concerns in her work. The story evoked critical praise upon its publication in the *Kenyon Review* in the spring of 1953. Within the sparse, apparently simple plot of the story, O'Connor constructs a world torn between renewal and emptiness, natural beauty and crass materialism, compassion and cruelty. In the end, O'Connor's protagonist must choose between these extremes and attempt to experience the grace of God's love.

Author Biography

Flannery O'Connor's parents had an effect on their only daughter in ways that were both fruitful and tragic. O'Connor was born in 1925 to a prominent Georgia family of devout Roman Catholics—an anomaly in the largely Protestant South. This intensely religious milieu played a major role in O'Connor's evolution as a writer. She attended schools in Savannah and Milledgeville and confronted tragedy at age fifteen when her father died of lupus, a degenerative disease which attacks the body's vital organs. O'Connor later entered Geor gia State College for Women (now Georgia College), majored in social sciences, and spent her spare time writing and drawing for student publications. She began writing and publishing short fiction in earnest when she entered the graduate writing program at Iowa State University, which she completed in 1947.

O'Connor started work on her first novel, *Wise Blood,* while living at a writer's colony in upstate New York. She later lived in New York City and Connecticut with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, fellow Catholics who shared many of O'Connor's literary interests and who later wrote about her. This rather artistic lifestyle came to an abrupt end when, at age twenty-five, O'Connor herself suffered an attack of lupus. She moved back to Georgia to live with her mother on a dairy farm and continued to write, publishing *Wise Blood* in 1952, the story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1955, and a second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in 1960. Her most famous stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953) and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," were both written during this period. She received numerous awards, grants, and citations for her work.

Despite persistent health complications, O'Connor continued to write fiction and nonfiction, displaying a sharp wit and penchant for self-mockery. She spent her final years being cared for by her mother and hired helpers, who likely resembled many of the impoverished characters that appear regularly in her fiction. O'Connor also enjoyed painting and raising exotic birds, motifs that are evident in her writing. She finally succumbed to lupus in August 1964 at age 39. *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Short Stories* was published in 1971 and won the National Book Award. With two novels and thirty-one stories to her credit, O'Connor remains one of the most important short fiction writers of the twentieth century.

Plot Summary

Part I: Meeting

An old woman and her daughter sit quietly on their porch at sunset when Tom Shiftlet comes walking up the road to their farm. Through carefully selected details, O'Connor reveals that the girl is mute, that the old woman views Shiftlet as "a tramp," and that Shiftlet himself wears a "left coat sleeve that was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it." The two adults exchange curt pleasantries. "I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening," Shiftlet states, looking at the sunset, to which the woman coolly answers, "Does it every evening." Shiftlet surveys the run-down farm and inquires about a rusted automobile, which has not worked in years. "Nothing is like it used to be, lady," Shiftlet observes. "The world is almost rotten." Again the woman's response is abrupt: "That's right." Their disturbing conversation continues along the same lines, with additional important allusions to nature. Shiftlet then reveals that he is a carpenter, which suggests that he may be of some use to Mrs. Crater around the farm. Shiftlet's occupation identifies him with Jesus Christ, who was also a carpenter.

Mrs. Crater offers him shelter in exchange for work but warns, "I can't pay." Shiftlet says he has no interest in money, adding that he believes that most people are too concerned with money. Sensing not only a handyman but a suitor for her daughter, Mrs. Crater asks if Shiftlet is married, to which he responds, "Lady, where would you find you an innocent woman today?" Mrs. Crater then makes known her love for her daughter, adding, "She can sweep the floors, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe." Mrs. Crater is clearly offering her daughter's hand to Shiftlet. For the moment, however, he simply decides to stay on the farm and to sleep in the broken-down car.

Part II: Resurrection

Once Shiftlet moves into the Crater's farm, he fixes a broken fence and hog pen, teaches Lucynell how to speak her first word ("bird"—a recurring symbol in O'Connor's fiction), and, most importantly, repairs the automobile. "With a volley of blasts it emerged from the shed, moving in a fierce and stately way. Mr. Shiftlet was in the driver's seat. . . . He had an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead." At this moment, when Shiftlet most clearly appears to be the bearer of heavenly powers, Mrs. Crater offers Lucynell to him. He replies, however, by stating, "It takes money," suggesting that he is perhaps changing and becoming more interested in money. Soon he compares the human spirit to an "automobile," and his smile turns into "a weary snake." Earlier allusions to nature's beauty have given way to nature's darker side. In her desperation to gain Shiftlet's services and marry off her daughter, Mrs. Crater offers Shiftlet a small sum. In this symbolically important car, the three of them drive into town, and Shiftlet and young Lucynell are married. Shiftlet's once mournful

philosophical inquiries suddenly become bitter now that he has taken a wife and some money. The newlyweds then set off on their honeymoon.

Part III: Abandonment

The newlyweds stop at a diner, and in the middle of eating, Lucynell passes out. "She looks like an angel of Gawd," says the boy serving food at the diner, to which Shiftlet simply responds, "Hitchhiker." He pays for lunch and abandons Lucynell.

Afterwards Shiftlet "was more depressed than ever" and he "kept his eye out for a hitchhiker." As a storm is breaking in the sky, Shiftlet sees a road sign that reads, "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." Shiftlet then offers a ride to a boy who did not even have his thumb out.

Shiftlet tries to make conversation, telling stories about his sweet mother, who is—as the boy at the diner called Lucynell—"an angel of Gawd." But the boy does not buy Shiftlet's sentimentality. "My old woman is a flea bag and yours in a stinking polecat," he snaps, before leaping from the car. Shocked, Shiftlet "felt the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him," exclaiming, "Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from the earth!" The rain finally breaks, with a "guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car." Shiftlet speeds off to Mobile, Alabama.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story is set around 1944 on a rundown, desolate Southern plantation. On this plantation there lives an old woman and her daughter, Lucynell Crater. The old woman's name is also Lucynell, but she is simply referred to as "the old woman" throughout the story. Lucynell is slow and does not speak. Though she is around 30 years old, her mother presents her as being 15 or 16 years of age, because of her "innocence." Lucynell is a physically beautiful girl, with long golden hair and blue eyes.

In the opening scene, the old woman and her daughter are sitting on the porch when Mr. Tom T. Shiftlet walks up their path at sunset. The old woman views him as a tramp, and no one to be afraid of. Mr. Shiftlet is gaunt, with long, black, slicked hair, and is missing half of his left arm. Mr. Shiftlet wears a black suit and a brown felt hat, and carries a toolbox. When he approaches, Lucynell wordlessly jumps up, begins to stamp, point, and make excited sounds. Mr. Shiftlet tips his hat and watches the sunset, while the two women watch him. The old woman watches him with her hands folded, "as if she were the owner of the sun." Mr. Shiftlet comments that he would do anything to live somewhere where he could see such a sunset every evening, and the old woman informs him that it does set every evening.

Mr. Shiftlet offers the old woman a piece of gum, but she raises her upper lip to show she has no teeth. Mr. Shiftlet looks around, taking in the whole yard. There is a water pump, some chickens, and a rusted old automobile in the shed. Mr. Shiftlet asks if they drive, and the old woman tells him that the car has not run in nearly fifteen years, since her husband died. Mr. Shiftlet then states, "nothing is like it used to be, lady, the world is almost rotten." Mr. Shiftlet looks at the tires, judges the car to be a 1928 or 1929 Ford, and then turns his attention to the women.

They exchange names. Mr. Shiftlet tells her about a doctor in Atlanta who removed a human heart from a man's chest and held it in his hand, "studying it like a day-old chicken." Mr. Shiftlet says the doctor does not know anything more about it than they do, and the old woman agrees. The old woman asks Mr. Shiftlet where he is from. Mr. Shiftlet comments that he could tell her his name and where he was from, but how would she know he was not lying and was actually someone else. Mr. Shiftlet states the best thing he could tell was that he was a man, but went on to ask rhetorically what a man was.

The old woman asks Mr. Shiftlet what was in his box. Mr. Shiftlet informs her they are tools and that he is a carpenter. The old woman tells him that she could provide him with work in exchange for a place to sleep, but no money. Mr. Shiftlet says that to some men, there are things that matter more than money. Mr. Shiftlet asks the old woman if men were made for money, but she does not answer. Instead, she wonders aloud if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her house. Mr. Shiftlet informs the old woman

that he is 28 years old, and has worked as a gospel singer, railroad foreman, undertaking assistant, and in the military, where he traveled the world and was injured. Mr. Shiftlet also states that, having seen the world, he now wishes to live somewhere desolate, where he could watch the sunset every night.

The old woman asks him if he is married or single. Mr. Shiftlet tells her that instead of the "trash" he could just pick up, he is looking for an innocent woman. The old woman tells him she would not give up her daughter for anything on earth, and any man who wanted her would have to live at her place. Mr. Shiftlet tells her, half-arm or not, there was nothing around their place that he could not fix. Mr. Shiftlet also boasts that he is a whole man "with a moral intelligence." The old woman, unimpressed, tells him he could sleep in the car. Mr. Shiftlet, undeterred, advises her that the monks of old slept in coffins. The old woman tells him that the monks were not as advanced as they are now.

Mr. Shiftlet begins work on the roof the next day, with Lucynell watching him. Within a week, he has patched the front and back steps, built a hog pen, restored a fence, and taught Lucynell her first word, "bird". The old woman watches from a distance, secretly pleased and ravenous for a son-in-law. Mr. Shiftlet tells them he has taken a personal interest in the plantation and is even going to make the car run. Mr. Shiftlet tells them this car has been built when cars were made right, when a single man took a personal interest in building the car. Mr. Shiftlet also says that nowadays, cars were more expensive, built by a group of men with no vested interest. Mr. Shiftlet states the problem with the world nowadays is that no one takes any time or trouble. Mr. Shiftlet points out that Lucynell would not have learned a word if he had not taken the time and interest. Then he asks what he should teach her to say next. The old woman says "sugar pie" and Mr. Shiftlet knows what is on her mind.

The next day, Mr. Shiftlet tells the old woman that if she would buy a fan belt, he could fix the car. The old woman says she will give him the money. The old women then extols the virtues of her daughter again, calling her the "sweetest girl in the world", and that she would not let anyone take her away, but that a man could live with them. The old woman says she would not pass up an opportunity to marry such a girl and live in such a place, and Mr. Shiftlet did not appear to be a fool. Mr. Shiftlet does not answer, instead commenting that the car could also use painting. The old woman says she will see.

At night, on the porch, the old woman continues to point out the virtues of her daughter, in particular that, since she did not speak, she could not sass him. The old woman suggests they marry the following Saturday. Mr. Shiftlet says that he could not marry without money, because he would not marry someone unless he had the money to take her to a hotel and buy her something to eat like she deserved. Mr. Shiftlet says he was just raised that way. The old woman points out that Lucynell did not even know what a hotel was, and that he was already getting Lucynell, a deep well, a house without a mortgage, and that the world was unfriendly to disabled drifters such as he. Mr. Shiftlet tells her that a man was made of body and spirit. The old woman then tells him she would pay for the painting of the car.

Mr. Shiftlet states that his spirit insists that he be able to take his wife away, so the old woman offers him $12.50. Mr. Shiftlet replies that this amount would not pay for food, but the old woman says they could take lunch. The old woman says $17.50 was her final offer, and she did not have anymore, so it is pointless to try to "milk" her. Mr. Shiftlet is hurt, but accepts without further discussion.

On Saturday, Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell are married at the courthouse. Mr. Shiftlet is morose and bitter, complaining about the inadequacy of the ceremony. Mr. Shiftlet comments on the blood tests, and about how taking his blood told them nothing about him. The old woman states that the ceremony satisfied the law, but Mr. Shiftlet responds that the law did not satisfy him. The old woman commented on pretty Lucynell looked, "like a baby doll", but Mr. Shiftlet did not look at her.

They drove back to the house in the freshly painted car, green with a yellow strip, to drop off the old woman. The old woman becomes teary, saying she and Lucynell had never been parted for two days before. Mr. Shiftlet starts the engine. The old woman states that she would not have let any man but Mr. Shiftlet have Lucynell, because she knows he will treat her right. With that, Mr. Shiftlet drives off. Mr. Shiftlet drives fast; he has never had a car before and wants to get to Mobile by nightfall. Lucynell sits beside him, pulling the cherries off her hat and throwing them out the window.

Mr. Shiftlet decides she must again be hungry, she had eaten lunch in the car, and stops at an eating place, ordering her ham and grits. Lucynell falls asleep at the counter before the food was served. Mr. Shiftlet says he will pay for the food now, and that the boy behind the counter should give it to her later, explaining that she was a hitchhiker. The boy behind the counter states that Lucynell looks like "an angel of God." Mr. Shiftlet states that he had to make Tuscaloosa, and leaves Lucynell in the restaurant.

Depressed, Mr. Shiftlet drives on, while a storm threatens to emerge. Mr. Shiftlet does not feel like being by himself. Mr. Shiftlet keeps an eye out for hitchhikers, for whom he feels cars have an obligation to stop. Mr. Shiftlet passes a number of signs warning: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." When the sun begins to set, Mr. Shiftlet sees a boy standing at the side of the road with a suitcase. Though he did not raise his thumb, Mr. Shiftlet slows and stops in front of him, asking if he needs a ride. Wordlessly, the boy gets in the car and they drive off.

The boy rides silently, looking out the window. Mr. Shiftlet feels oppressed and begins to speak. Mr. Shiftlet tells the boy he had the best mother in the world, therefore the boy could only have the second best. Mr. Shiftlet goes on to praise his mother, saying that she taught him his prayers and he never rued a day like the day he did when he left her. The boy looks at him and back out the window, remaining silent, but putting his hand on the door handle. Mr. Shiftlet's voice becomes strained when he calls his mother an angel of God and discusses her death in a mist of tears.

The boy becomes angry, stating that: "You go to the devil! My old woman is a fleabag and yours is a stinking polecat!" With that, he jumps out of the car, which is barely moving. Mr. Shiftlet is shocked, reflecting on the rottenness of the world. "Oh lord!" he

prays. "Break forth and wash this slime from the earth!" A cloud, shaped like a turnip, colored like the boy's hat descends in front of the sun, and another behind the car. Thunder begins behind him and huge drops hit the rear of the car. Mr. Shiftlet drives, racing the shower into Mobile.

Analysis

This short story is replete with imagery, touching on overarching themes of innocence (good) versus evil, and materialism versus a more spiritual existence. Flannery O'Connor was, in fact, a devout Catholic, but her beliefs are interwoven and hinted at, without being heavy-handed or preachy.

Symbolism is evident in the story as soon as the characters names and locations are mentioned. Mr. Shiftlet's name is a version of the word "shifty," which suggests someone secretive and dishonest. The old woman and her daughter share the last name of "Crater," suggestive of a deep hole in the earth that is immobile. Likewise, the old woman and her daughter are stuck, not having gone anywhere in a long time. With respect to the old woman, "crater" can signify a black hole, recognizant of her moral emptiness in negotiating with Mr. Shiftlet to pawn off her daughter, regardless of her daughter's well-being. Mr. Shiftlet, on the other hand, is a drifter, a world traveler who has never owned a car, but seeks to get to Mobile, presumably a place of movement. The car is also described as Mr. Shiftlet's "spirit", showing his desire to keep moving and lack of reliability/stability.

The story is also replete with religious symbolism and imagery. In the story, Mr. Shiftlet is described as a "crooked cross" when he raises his arms. This evokes images of the Christian cross. Indeed, Mr. Shiftlet tries to portray himself as a moral, religious man, but like a crooked cross, he is a distorted image of a good man, an inversion of Christ. Mr. Shiftlet tries to depict himself as a miracle worker by teaching Lucynell to say "bird". There is also his comparison of himself sleeping in the car to monks sleeping in coffins.

When he fixes the car, it is said that he "raised it from the dead." Furthermore, like Jesus, he is a carpenter, but that is where their similarities end. When he seals his deal with the old woman regarding his marriage to Lucynell in exchange for the car, he smiles like a snake, one of the images of Satan. In contrast, Lucynell, described as an "angel of God", is truly the only innocent character in the story. Mr. Shiftlet leaves Lucynell at the diner called "The Hot Spot", which is reminiscent of hell, and the evil he has performed by marrying her and then abandoning her there.

Nature is also used to create mood and is symbolic. At various points in the story, the scenery is described as though it is owned by the old woman - the sun, the mountains. Just like these things cannot be owned by anyone, the old woman similarly thinks she understands and knows much more than she actually does. At the end of the story, clouds and rain are shown to depict Mr. Shiftlet's knowledge of the evil in the world, which he attempts to avoid by driving more quickly. Ironically, when he asks God to wash the slime from the world, it begins to rain on Mr. Shiftlet himself, as though to

wash away Mr. Shiftlet. There is irony in Mr. Shiftlet seeking to escape "the rottenness of the world" when he is rotten. Nature plays a major role in this story; indeed, the plantation is set amidst incredible beauty. By the end, Shiftlet's presence has caused darkness, and Mother Nature seeks to punish him by sending a storm.

When the old woman reminds Mr. Shiftlet how the world treats disabled drifters, her words cut deep. This is because Mr. Shiftlet, a true hypocrite, tries to delude himself that the lies he spouts about himself being a moral man are, in fact, true. When the old woman calls a spade a spade, her words remind of something he has been trying to forget, particularly because he tries to view himself as a whole man, despite his disability.

In this story, O'Connor portrays the Southern woman as gullible, and the man raised at his mother's knee, reading the bible, as a hypocrite. O'Connor seems to be warning women not to let themselves be taken advantage of, and not to be blind to the true grotesqueness of the world. Life does not have fairy tale endings, and no prince is coming to save them.

The title of the story comes from the street sign that says: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own."[mlj1] This sign evokes images of two biblical passages: Luke 17:33, "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it" and John 12:25, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." These passages reflect the Christian belief of martyrdom and sacrifice, and forsaking pleasure in this life for redemption into the next one. For example, Jesus gave his life on this earth, so that all may be saved for the next life. In another words, one who cherishes his life on this earth and does no good for others, is a life not worth very much, and thus has not earned entry into heaven. Similarly, Mr. Shiftlet is not seeking to do good for others, but only to profit at their expense.

Also significant is that, while the story is written in the third person, it is not completely objective, instead providing insights into the mental states of both the old woman and Mr. Shiftlet. The result is to better depict the cat and mouse game they are playing with each other.

There is much irony and foreshadowing in Mr. Shiftlet's own statements to the old woman. For example, he tells her about the doctor who removed the human heart, but despite his examinations, still knew nothing of how it worked. Likewise, the old woman only hears and sees what she wants, rather than realizing the true nature and intentions of Mr. Shiftlet. Further, Mr. Shiftlet tells her that he could tell her he was anyone and from anywhere he wanted, and she would not know the difference. Mr. Shiftlet tells her that the best thing he can tell her is that he is a man, but then asks rhetorically, "what is a man?" By the end of the story, the reader learns the unfortunate truth about what a man can be.

Another bit of irony is Mr. Shiftlet's pontifications about the construction of the car, and how, in the old days, cars were made better and less expensively, rather than a number

of men working on the car, only one man did, and he took a personal interest in its construction. Mr. Shiftlet is attempting to use this as an analogy to the personal interest he supposedly took in the old woman, the plantation, and Lucynell. However, as usual, the perception that he tries to create about himself diverges significantly from the truth.

As a whole, Flannery O'Connor's story paints characters without sympathy or redeeming qualities. O'Connor squarely takes on the evil in the world without sugarcoating or a forced happy ending. The author deals with the duplicity of people and their warped perceptions of themselves and others. O'Connor's characters are well-developed, despite the shortness of the story, and have a surprising amount of depth. O'Connor is a religious woman, and tends to seen things in black and white, good and evil, rather than shades of gray. The author was born in Savannah, Georgia in 1925, and died at the young age of 39. Despite her early demise, she was a prolific writer, and her stories have a timely quality to them to this day.

Characters

Lucynell Crater

Lucynell Crater is Mrs. Crater's mute daughter who eventually marries Tom Shiftlet. Though she is almost entirely silent, she plays a pivotal role as a symbol of innocence, an "angel of Gawd" whom Shiftlet rejects, forcing him to confront his own emptiness.

Mrs. Crater

An old, toothless woman trying to marry off her mute daughter and secure Shiftlet's services as a handyman, Mrs. Crater is abrupt and manipulative. She speaks of her undying love for her daughter while trying to pass her off on Shiftlet, whom she attempts to win over with material goods. Even her name suggests the emptiness of her character. At the end of the story she appears to have been outsmarted by Shiftlet, who has taken both her car and her daughter.

Tom T. Shiftlet

The pivotal figure in the story, Shiftlet is a onearmed drifter who wanders into the Crater family's life. Shiftlet even admits that he may be lying about his real name. This ambiguity has led to divergent critical readings of Shiftlet as a character. Presented at first as a lost, Christ-like figure who asks poignant questions and appreciates nature's beauty, Shiftlet can be viewed as either corrupted by Mrs. Crater's opportunism, or as a sinister and calculating figure who feigns naivete to gain access to the Crater family's possessions. The latter interpretation is supported by his name, which suggests a "shifty" nature. By the story's conclusion, Shiftlet is spiritually bereft. He has opted for the emptiness of the nomadic lifestyle that led him to the Craters in the first place.

Themes

Search for the Meaning of Life

When Shiftlet approaches the Crater's farm, it is not clear what type of person he is. What is apparent is that he is searching for something. By marrying Lucynell and then abandoning her, he has missed an opportunity to experience redemption (an event symbolized by the "guffawing peal of thunder" and his anguished plea to God at the end of the story). Shiftlet has failed to bring meaning into his transient life. He entered the Craters's lives as a lonely wanderer, and he leaves it the same way.

Given the gradually increasing interest he shows in money and Mrs. Crater's automobile, perhaps Shiftlet believes that such material possessions might bring meaning to his life. By the end of the story, he has obtained these things, as well as a wife who can perform household chores and who, as a mute, "can't sass [him] back or use any foul language," as Mrs. Crater tells him. But none of these things bring meaning into Shiftlet's life. He wanders on towards Mobile (notice the double meaning of the town's name), where he will likely continue to live a life devoid of significance.

Moral Corruption

While on the surface, the automobile and wedding gift in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" seem unimportant, they in fact reveal a world in which money has become more important than people or spiritual peace. From the beginning, it is clear that Mrs. Crater is seeking to lure Shiftlet into her home so that she can gain his services—first as a carpenter, and then as a husband for her daughter. This causes Mrs. Crater (whose name suggests emptiness) to treat her own daughter as little more than an object to be traded.

While Shiftlet seems initially unconcerned with money, he is soon inquiring about the automobile, as well as cash for a wedding. (His name suggests that he is capable of such a "shift.") Like Mrs. Crater, he also abandons Lucynell, mistakenly believing, perhaps, that a car—which he admits he has always wanted but has never been able to afford— will fulfill his needs. O'Connor's morally corrupt characters, who prize cars and money over human relations, are capable of self-deception but not selffulfillment. In the end, Shiftlet cannot avoid the fact that he is once again empty and wanting.

God and Religion

Closely related to the moral corruption of Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater is their inability to embrace everyday manifestations of God's grace. Indeed, both surrender Lucynell, who is referred to as an "angel of Gawd." In doing so, each trades a symbol of God's presence for material comfort. It is this very absence of religious redemption that has led to Shiftlet's nomadic life and Mrs. Crater's lack of compassion. A road sign warns

Shiftlet, "the life you save may be your own." Embracing Lucynell would have offered him an opportunity to grasp at some form of salvation or atonement—one that Mrs. Crater has apparently already yielded. Shiftlet even makes one final desperate attempt by offering a ride to a young boy. But the boy scolds Shiftlet, who is bluntly reminded of the lack of a religious presence in his rootless existence.

Nature and Its Meaning

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" opens with a "piercing sunset" but ends with a "cloud descended . . . over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind" the car driven by Shiftlet. A thunderous storm breaks; Shiftlet's eyes are "instantly clouded over with a mist of tears," and he feels "that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him." The light and illumination of the sun has been replaced by a dangerous and threatening storm. These are two examples of O'Connor's use of natural imagery in this story.

Such imagery serves as a function both of O'Connor's plot and her characterization. Mrs. Crater is initially seen "shading her eyes" from the light of the sun and later standing "as if she were the owner of the sun," whereas Shiftlet is initially awed by its beauty. Mrs. Crater tries to deflect the sun, while Shiftlet seems to want to understand its powers. This is confirmed later when, after a "fat moon appeared in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to roost there with the chickens," Shiftlet says that "a man had to escape to the country . . . where he could see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do." This lush passage, connecting the moon, plants, and animals, further suggests the important presence of nature in O'Connor's story and the way in which she uses it to suggest Shiftlet's longing. Even the first word he teaches Lucynell is "bird."

While attempting to persuade Shiftlet to marry Lucynell, Mrs. Crater refers to Shiftlet as a "poor disabled friendless drifting man." This appears to be where Shiftlet's "shift" of attitude begins to take place. Natural allusions point the way. "The ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlet's head like a group of buzzards," and his smile becomes "a weary snake waking up by a fire." Nature remains present, but it is more threatening, foreshadowing Shiftlet's abandonment of Lucynell. After he leaves Lucynell at a diner, a sinister storm breaks. The storm seems to have a double meaning; Shiftlet pleads for the storm and asks it to "wash the slime from the earth." Such salvation eludes Shiftlet, but as all of O'Connor's complex allusions to nature suggest, nature can be both a pleasure and a threat, a guiding light or sinister shadow. This is consistent with O'Connor's view of her characters, who are capable of either saving or condemning themselves.

Style

Point of View

O'Connor employs a detached yet observant third-person narrative in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Shiftlet is a stranger without a fixed identity who wanders into the Craters's lives. He soon moves in with them and takes an interest first in the Craters's automobile and then in Lucynell, Mrs. Crater's mute daughter. Shiftlet and Lucynell are married, but he abandons her at a roadside diner.

While Shiftlet clearly emerges as the central character, O'Connor offers enough glimpses into both his and Mrs. Crater's psyche to provide insight into their motivations. For example, the reader learns that Shiftlet "always wanted an automobile but he had never been able to afford one before." This passage, late in the story, confirms his desire for the automobile and the importance he places on money and material goods. Furthermore, O'Connor includes careful details in several descriptive passages which establish the natural world as an important aspect of the story. The reader might not perceive such details if the story were narrated from the point of view of one its characters.

The characters' dialogue works in tandem with her descriptive passages to reveal their moral emptiness. For example, the cold, abrupt way that Mrs. Crater responds to Shiftlet's elaborate soliloquies on sunsets and innocent women suggests that she intends to land Shiftlet as a husband for Lucynell. Readers may note that the initial discussion between Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater is odd, even unrealistic, moving casually from philosophy to human nature to the weather. Such jarring dialogue should be read closely because it reveals aspects of both characters' personalities. It also suggests a certain fantastic quality that is consistent with much of O'Connor's fiction and elevates her stories above a fixed time and place, giving them a mythic timelessness.

O'Connor's reserved tone also plays a part in achieving this quality. Rarely does she intrude into the narration, pointing the reader neither in one way nor the other. O'Connor's subtle tone requires the reader to pay close attention to the details that she provides. Given O'Connor's detached narrative point of view, when a disturbing line like "The world is almost rotten," is spoken by Shiftlet, readers should assume that this is more than just a casual observation.

Setting

O'Connor's short fiction is steeped in the culture of the American South, and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is no exception. The landscape—rural farmland that is seemingly isolated from "the real world"—heightens the timelessness, or disconnection from a specific time or era, of O'Connor's fiction. The Craters and Shiftlet make a quick appearance in the nearby town so that Lucynell and Shiftlet can be married, and the

only other setting used in this story is the highway, where the newlyweds stop at a roadside diner.

Setting is important in one key area: the character's voices. They speak with a fairly strong Southern dialect, using local slang and occasionally broken English. The effect, however, can be disturbing, since such important issues are often discussed using this seemingly flawed language. "There's one of these doctors in Atlanta that's taken a knife and cut the human heart . . . out of a man's chest and held it in his hand," Shiftlet says at one point, "and studied it like a day old chicken, and lady . . . he don't know no more about it than you or me." This odd, powerful imagery is made stronger because it is revealed using such language.

Symbols and Imagery

O'Connor uses symbols and imagery to signifi- cant effect in this story. Some recurring images and symbols include Christ, nature, physical ailments, and the automobile. When the reader is first introduced to the protagonist, for example, Shiftlet forms "a crooked cross" against the sky. He is also a carpenter. Thus, he appears to be a Christ figure, but since he has only one arm, it may be that he is a flawed Christ. Indeed, all three characters are physically disabled: Shiftlet is without an arm, Mrs. Crater is without teeth, and Lucynell is unable to speak. All of these physical features may reflect the difficulties of the human condition, which is made worse by both Shiftlet's and Mrs. Crater's refusal to embrace Lucynell, the manifestation of God's grace (or "angel of Gawd," as she is called) in the story.

Nature is perhaps the most pervasive symbol in this story. It is used as both a positive contrast to the crass materialism of Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater and as a negative foreshadowing technique. For example, after Shiftlet chooses to pursue his greed, the tone of the story grows darker. Both nature and Lucynell, who is closely linked with nature in the story, are depicted as victims of the automobile which Shiftlet resurrects.

Historical Context

Postwar Affluence and the Rise of the Automobile

When placed in the context of post-World War II America, this story can be seen as an implicit critique of an increasingly wealthy and mobile America that has become more concerned with money than with individuals. A key symbol in this story is the automobile, which was rapidly changing American lifestyles in the early 1950s. Suburbs were popping up all across the country and highways and expressways were being constructed, all because of the impact of the automobile. O'Connor uses the Craters's old automobile, which Shiftlet repairs, as a symbol of his connection to material goods and his lack of compassion towards Lucynell, whom he abandons at a diner before driving off to Mobile.

O'Connor connects Shiftlet's obsession with the automobile with his inability to attain some form of redemption through Lucynell, who is referred to as an "angel of Gawd." Observers of American society who are aware of America's growing obsession with the automobile during the 1950s can read "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" as a warning: If, like Shiftlet, we become too materialistic, if we abandon relationships with God and our fellow human beings, we will all lose our ability to experience religious grace. That Shiftlet sleeps in the car is linked by O'Connor to the coffins in which ancient monks used to sleep. Mrs. Crater observes, "They were not as advanced as we were." But "advanced" may be used ironically here, suggesting that with their pure lifestyle of religious devotion the monks were more "advanced" than a society obsessed with constant mobility. In this sense, the automobile does become a kind of modern day "coffin," leading these characters to a kind of death. Even the story's foreboding title comes from a road sign which Shiftlet sees and which was a common sight along highways in the 1950s. O'Connor herself, speaking cynically of a television version of the story which was broadcast in 1957, said: "Mr. Shiftlet and the idiot daughter will no doubt go off in a Chrysler and live happily ever after." O'Connor was not only criticizing television's tendency to change dark endings into happy ones but was touching upon the importance of automobiles to her audience.

Relations between Women and Men

Some critics have suggested that "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" relies upon gender roles that men and women historically have been expected to play. Specifically, Mrs. Crater is rooted to responsibility. She cares for her farm and Lucynell, pays the bills, and even arranges Shiftlet's and Lucynell's wedding. Shiftlet, on the other hand, in the tradition of Herman Melville's Ishmael (from *Moby Dick*) and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) is a wanderer with no discernible ties. His desire to obtain the Craters's automobile while seeking to abandon both Mrs. Crater and Lucynell seems to be a reflection of his desire to move on without

becoming tied to women, who represent roots and entanglement in civilized society. In this reading, men are allowed a freedom that women are not.

Critical Overview

Critics recognized the importance of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" immediately after it was published in the literary journal *Kenyon Review* in the spring of 1953. That year the story was included in the annual collection of exemplary short fiction published to honor the memory of the short story writer O. Henry. Critics have seen this story as a nearly paradigmatic example of O'Connor's almost obsessive concern with religious themes— specifi- cally, an individual's ability to find opportunities for salvation and redemption in everyday life.

Initial critical reaction to "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" was largely positive, though some critics were not quite sure what to make of O'Connor's alternately ordinary and grim story. Highlighting the ambiguities and difficulties present in O'Connor's stories, with their odd characters and often harrowing endings, the *New Yorker* went so far as to suggest that O'Connor's collection A *Good Man Is Hard to Find*— in which "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" was reprinted— was meaningless and without depth. *Time* magazine, meanwhile, while acknowledging the skill in O'Connor's narrative style, also found in it a certain amount of "arty fumbling." Still, the *New York Times* deigned O'Connor's collection the work of an "extraordinarily accomplished short story writer," praising the author's originality and noting, as others did, her use of "grotesque horror." The reviewer also called attention to O'Connor's singularly disturbing vision of life, acknowledging that O'Connor's stories "were not a dish to set before most readers," but adding that those "who are attracted by it will admire it immensely."

Since the original publication of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," its reputation, like O'Connor's, has grown in stature. Critics have expanded upon the theological reading of the story and have discovered or incorporated such themes as feminism and anti-materialism as well as its place in the Southern literary tradition.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Deignan is a teaching assistant in American Cultural Studies at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, he traces the theme of Christian anti-materialism in " The Life You Save May Be Your Own," finding it "a cautionary tale of twisted priorities and excessive materialism which is consistent with a rich body of thought in American history."

While Flannery O'Connor builds several important themes into "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the anti-materialist aspect of the story deserves special attention because it fits into what could be characterized as the anti-materialist strain in American intellectual history.

Since the founding of the republic, prominent and common Americans alike have experienced conflicting emotions regarding material wealth. After the late eighteenth-century American Revolution, John Adams, the second president of the United States, wondered how it would be possible "to prevent luxury from producing . . . extravagance, vice and folly?" Such American thinkers as Adams were concerned that the pursuit of wealth would lead to laziness, sin, and moral corruption and might eventually undermine the values of the revolution itself.

Nonetheless, the pursuit of wealth was deeply ingrained into the American nation. It should be noted that issues of taxation were as important as acts of violent repression in fanning the flames of the American Revolution. In the 1780s, a French immigrant named Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecoeur penned a famous group of letters, one of which has come to be known as "What is an American?" In this essay, de Crevecoeur directly links American freedom with the ability to create wealth. Of the American, he writes, "the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurement?" To de Crevecoeur, the essence of American freedom was the opportunity to work hard and reap the plentiful benefits. Thus, in Adams's skepticism and de Crevecoeur's optimism can be seen the two points of view of a conflict with which Americans, in many ways, still have not come to terms.

This conflict was certainly on the mind of the American essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson when he delivered a speech entitled "The American Scholar" in the 1840s. "Perhaps the time is already come," Emerson said, "when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill." Emerson was suggesting that America had expended so much energy mastering entrepreneurial pursuits that it was failing to meet its intellectual potential in poetry, philosophy, and the arts.

Emersonian anti-materialism found an even more radical spokesman in Henry David Thoreau, who lived on the shores of Walden Pond in Massa chusetts for two years because he grew so disenchanted with the industrial outlook of his fellow New

Englanders. "Most men . . . are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. Americans, he added, spend too much time "laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal."

Thoreau is an important figure to understand when assessing O'Connor, since both find signifi- cance in nature. To Thoreau, natural beauty is worth much more than money; lakes, mountain ranges, and the star-filled skies are the "true coins from heaven's own mint." As for industrial progress in the name of profit, Thoreau cynically commented: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us." Like Thoreau, O'Connor contrasts objects from the material and the natural worlds in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and suggests that her characters' obsessions with the former prevents them from appreciating the latter.

Despite the impassioned pleas of such thinkers as Thoreau and Emerson, however, industrialists became popular folk heroes in the late nineteenth century, while men, women, and children often worked more than fourteen hours a day. The most egregious example of trading humanity for profit, of course, is the institution of slavery in the South, which subjected thousands of African Americans to brutal labor and humiliation and was the main cause of the American Civil War.

Through the 1870s and 1880s, which Mark Twain derisively labeled the "Gilded Age," workers and industrialists frequently squared off, with the industrialists usually emerging as the victors. One of the reasons for this was the unique importance of profiteering in America, which elevated the importance of wealth and ingenuity like no other country. Steel baron Andrew Carnegie is often credited with preaching a "gospel of wealth," a phrase which elevates a moneyed lifestyle to a religious level. In the 1870s, author Horatio Alger wrote book after book in which a young boy down on his luck would suddenly—through charity, hard work, and good fortune—come into his fortune, again supporting the notion that the American dream is one with a dollar sign. While these attributes— part myth, part reality—were instrumental in turning America into one of the world's great economic powers, there was always an opposing faction which wondered if we were paying too great a price for our national prosperity.

Much of O'Connor's fiction reflects the concerns of this cynical, questioning faction, and a close reading of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" indicates why. Like nature, the role of religion is also important in both O'Connor and the antimaterialist movement in American culture. Many Americans have felt that obsession with money and material goods blinded people to their duties towards others and made them selfish and greedy, encouraged crime, and generally distanced them from religious dedication. Even the turn-of-thecentury Socialist Eugene V. Debs, often vilified as an un-American radical, rooted his critique of American capitalism in Christian philosophy. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God," Jesus said in Mark 10:25. Some version of this biblical gospel, whether spoken through Emerson or Debs, has usually served as an anti-materialist counter to the "gospel of wealth." This is where O'Connor fits in.

In this story, O'Connor's critique of materialism centers around her main character, Tom Shiftlet, and his desire to obtain the Craters's automobile. O'Connor's criticism is particularly sharp given the context of the story, which was published in 1953, when many Americans were purchasing their first automobiles and hitting the roads to "see the U.S.A. in their Chevrolet," to paraphrase a popular television commercial of the time. Even such beatnik authors as Jack Kerouac, who published *On the Road* in 1957 while O'Connor was still writing, viewed the automobile as a vehicle of flight from stifling middle-class values.

Nonetheless, for O'Connor, Shiftlet's desire for the automobile indicates a hollowness within him, just as Mrs. Crater's desire to use Shiftlet's carpentry skills and his availability as a mate for her daughter reveal her own emptiness. Each character is willing, for the sake of some form of material comfort, to dehumanize not only Mrs. Crater's mute daughter Lucynell but themselves as well, shunning religious grace (whether represented in nature or Lucynell) for common goods.

Even before the automobile is introduced, O'Connor echoes Thoreau in establishing the importance of the natural landscape, which is presented as a purified contrast to a corrupted world. At first Shiftlet seems to celebrate nature; he is a man who would "give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening." As Thoreau did, Shiftlet contrasts a "fortune" in money with the beauty of the natural world. Later, he ruefully remarks that "all most people were interested in was money."

Mrs. Crater, on the other hand, is wheeling and dealing from the very beginning. She even stands "as if she were the owner of the sun" and offers only cold, clipped responses to Shiftlet's rhapsodic appreciation of the sunset and the mountains. She is more interested in his marriage prospects and his household skills.

O'Connor then provides the reader with carefully selected details to highlight the prominence of nature in this story. "A fat yellow moon appeared in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to roost there with the chickens. [Shiftlet] said that a man had to escape to the country to see the whole world and that he wished he lived in a desolate place like this where he could see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do."

O'Connor's full, vivid description of the Crater farm culminates in Shiftlet's longing to connect in some way with God, clearly suggesting that he is a character in search of a religious experience. The natural world, O'Connor suggests, is capable of moving Shiftlet closer to this experience. But Mrs. Crater breaks the mood with a blunt question: "Are you married or single?" Hinting that Lucynell is available, she says of her daughter, "She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe. I wouldn't give her up for a casket of jewels." Not only does Mrs. Crater depict Lucynell as little more than a domestic machine, but she is completely unconvincing in her assertion that she would never give her daughter up. Note also that another comparison using currency ("jewels") is being made, this time regarding not nature but a human being.

By now, though, Shiftlet has noticed the car and has offered not only to fix it but to accept Mrs. Crater's offer to sleep in it. "[T]he monks of old slept in their coffins," Shiftlet responds, eerily linking the car to a symbol of death. Mrs. Crater then says "They wasn't as advanced as we are." But Mrs. Crater's response may be ironic. By inserting the image of stoic, noble monks, O'Connor seems to be contrasting their lives of devotion with these two lives of greedy pursuit. The monks, within O'Connor's value system, are perhaps more "advanced." Furthermore, Shiftlet's desire for the car just might lead him to some sort of death.

Shiftlet repairs the car and fixes several other broken items around the Craters's rundown farm. He even teaches Lucynell to speak her first word which, consistent with the prominence of the natural world in O'Connor, is "bird." In a powerful scene, as Shiftlet tries to get the car moving, "Lucynell was sitting on a chicken crate, stamping her feet and screaming." In slurred language, she yells the word that Shiftlet has taught her. However, "her fuss was drowned out by the car." Lucynell, as the embodiment of innocence and good and the victim of these two connivers, is linked in this scene with nature, yet it is interesting to note that her "fuss" is "drowned out by the car." This suggests the power of machines (and humans, of course) to block out or crush innocence, nature, even other human beings entirely, through machinery. To paraphrase Thoreau, Shiftlet does not ride the car, the car rides him, as well as those around him. But he cannot yet see this. In the driver's seat he wears "an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead." Indeed, in Shiftlet's materialist mind, this is almost a religious experience.

By now, Mrs. Crater has stated explicitly that Lucynell would make a fine wife for Shiftlet, to which he replies, "It takes money." The two of them haggle, and the ugly bargaining over humanity requires O'Connor to insert darker imagery. "You don't need no money," Mrs. Crater tells Shiftlet, "there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man." These "ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlet's head like a group of buzzards." He later adds that "a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit," and the spirit—that which we assume to be most linked to religion and nature—"is like an automobile." Shiftlet has staked his claim. In his crass materialism he is no better than Mrs. Crater. She offers him money, the car, and Lucynell; he accepts, and his smile becomes "a weary snake waking up by a fire."

It is important to note that O'Connor lets her characters choose their own fate. She is always exploring duality; thus, nature, like people, can be both a positive or negative symbol, good or bad, redeemed or condemned. Shiftlet's pivotal choice— to refer to his new bride, who is called "an angel of Gawd," as merely a "hitchhiker" and abandon her —reveals that he has turned his back on redemption.

When he does this, deep in the sky "a storm was preparing . . . as if it meant to drain every drop of air from the earth before it broke." Nature has turned on Shiftlet as he turned on Lucynell, who was at various times linked to both nature and God—that is, the forces that could have filled the hole in Shiftlet's life. Even Shiftlet seems to instinctively realize that he has made a mistake, so he tries to ignore the road signs which provide the story's title and searches for another hitchhiker. He finds one, but his passenger

merely compounds Shiftlet's problems, making him feel "that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him." He makes a plea to God, and the storm breaks, but his choice has been made. The rain falls, but it eludes him, perhaps even menaces him. So he steps on the gas and "with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile." In choosing the car and mobility, greed and selfishness, Shiftlet—at least for now—has eluded nature and God's grace. In this way, O'Connor's story becomes a cautionary tale of twisted priorities and excessive materialism which is consistent with a rich body of thought in American history.

Source: Tom Deignan, "Overview of 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own,'" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Ragen provides an overview of O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and examines the character of Shiftlet, particularly with regard to the themes of freedom and responsibility.

O'Connor makes her fullest use of the automobile and all that is associated with it in *Wise Blood,* but the car and the traditions linked with it are also prominent in some of the short stories. In "Parker's Back," O. E. Parker plays the role of the evermoving American. He escapes from his mother and from the God preached in the revival tent, and then travels the world without any goal, first on board ship, like Ishmael, then wandering through the country in a beat-up truck. He has not meant to "get himself tied up legally" with a woman. But Parker has the good fortune to have his wanderings ended by Sarah Ruth. Sarah Ruth—the domesticating woman— opposes the tradition of endless escape: "One of the things she did not approve of was automobiles." In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" an automobile is at the center of the action, and the central character, Mr. Shiftlet, has a great deal in common with the heroes of the traditions I have described.

Shiftlet takes his place in the long line of evermoving males escaping from entanglements contrived by women. When he first appears he is a traveling man—a tramp. He comes out of nowhere. He just appears on the road before Mrs. Lucynell Crater's desolate farmhouse one day. He gives his name and tells Mrs. Crater where he is from, but then he lets on that it may all be a lie:

A sly look came over his face. "Lady," he said, "nowadays, people'll do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain't lying? How you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?"

Like many American heroes, Mr. Shiftlet, or whoever he is, can create himself by choosing a name. He rattles off in a moment as many names as Huck Finn or Natty Bumppo use in the course of their long journeys. Shiftlet also says that he has had a number of jobs in his "varied life":

He had been a gospel singer, a foreman on the railroad, an assistant in an undertaking parlor, and he had come over the radio for three months with Uncle Roy and his Red Creek Wranglers. He said he had fought and bled in the Arm Service of his country and visited every foreign land . . . .

He is also a carpenter. Shiftlet has, in fact, tried almost as many callings as Emerson's sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont. He can, in the fashion of the American Adam, constantly create himself anew.

Shiftlet, however, is not entirely new and fresh. He carries in his body the evidence that he must have a past. In his left coat sleeve there is only half an arm. He is not Adamic in his newness and perfection, but already maimed by some history. The missing arm points up the contrast between Shiftlet and the Adamic role he plays in much the same way that Ahab's wooden leg shows the difference between the captain and the Adamic Ishmael. Ishmael acknowledges no injury, no past, and no goal, and he bears a name of his own choosing. Ahab, however, is burdened with an evil name he did not give himself, and his wooden leg is a constant reminder of his past, and, at the same time, of the goal of his voyage. Melville and O'Connor both use the missing limb to mark a character who is not new or innocent. Shiftlet's deformity is also an outward sign of his spiritual state: before the story ends it is clear that Shiftlet is more crippled in soul than in body.

When Shiftlet comes down the road, Mrs. Crater is sitting on the porch with her idiot daughter. While he approaches she remains motionless. She only rises when he is actually in her yard. The contrast between motion and stability expresses much of the difference between the old woman and the young man. Mrs. Crater sits. She is fixed to one place, her farm. She has her daughter Lucynell for a companion. She is burdened with the responsibility for both the farm and the daughter. Shiftlet is alone, unencumbered, and moving.

Mrs. Crater sees things she wants in Shiftlet. The farm is rundown and needs attention, and she is willing to trade food and a place to sleep for carpentry work. (While Shiftlet is talking she is wondering "if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house.") But, more importantly, she is "ravenous for a son-in-law." She needs a man who will care for the daughter, as well as tend the farm, and begins dropping hints to Shiftlet about the subject during their first conversation.

Shiftlet is faced with the danger that besets the moving man in our tradition: women who would encumber him with responsibilities and end his travels. Mrs. Crater wants a man who will stay put. "Any man come after her [Lucynell] 'll have to stay around the place."

While Mrs. Crater is sizing up her visitor as a possible son-in-law, Shiftlet also has his eye on something he wants. Almost the first thing he notices is the "square rusted back of an automobile." It is on his mind from the beginning. As Mrs. Crater is introducing herself, he is thinking about what make and year the car in the shed is. While she is telling him that any man who wants her daughter will have to stay around the place, his eye is "focussed on a part of the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance."

Having discovered what each wants from the other, Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater begin bargaining. Mrs. Crater gives Shiftlet a place to stay—the backseat of the car, where he sleeps with his feet out the side window. Shiftlet begins making the repairs Mrs. Crater wants, and teaches Lucynell to say her first word. He then announces that he is going to make the car run, and Mrs. Crater suggests he teach Lucynell another word: "sugarpie." Soon the negotiations become more direct:

"We'll see about that later," the old woman said.

He wants the car moving; she wants a man who will live in a permanent place; it is all very clear.

Both Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet talk a great deal about Lucynell's innocence. Shiftlet asks early on "where you would find an innocent woman today?" Mrs. Crater has the answer—her baby girl whom she wouldn't give up "for a casket of jewels." The American tradition makes a great deal of innocence—the innocence of boys and boyish men. O'Connor shows innocence only in a helpless feebleminded girl. The traveling man is as corrupt and conniving as the stationary woman.

When the bargain is finally complete, Shiftlet gets a painted car and some cash as well. Money has been one of the things on Shiftlet's mind since he arrived—early on he tells Mrs. Crater that "there's some men that some things mean more to them than money"—and he contrives to get the promise of money for a wedding trip before he agrees to the marriage. In their final negotiations, Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater again argue over moving and staying put. Shiftlet says he cannot marry unless he has the money to take his wife "on a trip like she was somebody. I mean take her to a hotel and treat her. I wouldn't marry the Duchesser Windsor unless I could take her to a hotel and giver something good to eat." To Mrs. Crater, taking a trip does not make sense: it is having a place to stay that matters:

Lucynell don't even know what a hotel is. . . . Listen here, Mr. Shiftlet, . . . you'd be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don't need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man.

As Shiftlet keeps talking, Mrs. Crater sees what the price will be,

"Listen, Mr. Shiftlet," she said "my well never goes dry and my house is always warm in the winter and there's no mortgage on a thing about this place. You can go to the courthouse and see for yourself. And yonder under that shed is a fine automobile." She laid the bait carefully. "You can have it painted by Saturday. I'll pay for the paint."

Once Shiftlet knows he will get the car, the deal is settled. All that remains is some dickering over how much cash Shiftlet will get for his trip. Shiftlet gets the offer raised from $15 to $17.50, but that is as far as Mrs. Crater will go. "That's all I got so it isn't any use you trying to milk me. You can take a lunch."

While Mrs. Crater talks of the advantages of staying in one place with a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world, Shiftlet talks about why a man has to move.

"Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit."The old woman clapped her gums together."A body and a spirit," he repeated. "The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move, always . . ."

It is at this point that Mrs. Crater realizes that she will have to throw in a painted car. "I'm only saying a man's spirit means more to him than anything else," Shiftlet continues

while asking for the money for his trip. "I got to follow where my spirit says to go." The woman talks about having a place to stay and the man about being able to move.

"A *man* is divided into two parts, body and spirit"; "a *man's* spirit means more to him than anything else." Shiftlet's division between the moving spirit and the unmoving body seems to apply to men only. Women, who stay put, are perhaps less spiritual than the men who move when the spirit says go. If this is Shiftlet's theory, it puts him again into the mainline of the American tradition, in which only men are capable of escaping the traps of society and its responsibilities and finding fresh, new, innocent selves by escaping into the wilderness or down the road.

As Mrs. Crater's farm, with its responsibilities and its deep well, is feminine, the car is masculine and attracts all of Shiftlet's attention. The old car has not moved since the farm has been in the hands of women— "The day my husband died, it quit running." Automobiles, like moving itself, are linked with masculinity. And Shiftlet keeps emphasizing that he is a man: after he reels off the list of names that might be his, he says, "Maybe the best I can tell you is, I'm a man." When he says he can fix anything on the farm he again proclaims, "I'm a man." And when he strikes his deal with Mrs. Crater he explains what a man is like and what a man needs. Shiftlet keeps emphasizing the masculine role he plays, and the car is certainly part of it.

Once the car is painted and all is settled, Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater and Lucynell drive into town for the wedding. The ceremony at the courthouse leaves Shiftlet discontented.

As they came out of the courthouse, Mr. Shiftlet began twisting his neck in his collar. He looked morose and bitter as if he had been insulted while someone held him. "That didn't satisfy me none," he said. "That was just something a woman in an office did, nothing but paper work and blood tests. What do they know about my blood? If they was to take my heart and cut it out," he said, "they wouldn't know a thing about me. It didn't satisfy me at all.""It satisfied the law," the old woman said sharply."The law," Mr. Shiftlet said and spit. "It's the law that don't satisfy me."

The law could hardly satisfy him. It means involvement and entanglement with society—anything but the freedom to be always on the move. Shiftlet, like the heroes of the running-male tradition in American literature from Deerslayer on, is opposed to the law. They, like Shiftlet, are all antinomians, and proclaim their doctrine by always moving on, fleeing the law, just as they flee women and home.

Once the unsatisfactory ceremony is complete, and they have stopped at the farm to drop off Mrs. Crater and pick up their lunch, Shiftlet drives away with Lucynell. Shiftlet does not say a word as he leaves, and Mrs. Crater, who is clutching the car as she says her good-byes, only lets go when the car pulls out. Once he is on the road, Shiftlet begins to feel the joy of motion.

Although the car would go only thirty miles an hour, Mr. Shiftlet imagined a terrific climb and dip and swerve that went entirely to his head so that he forgot his morning

bitterness. He had always wanted an automobile but he had never been able to afford one before. He drove very fast because he wanted to make Mobile by nightfall.

For a moment, Shiftlet's spirit is satisfied.

The satisfaction does not last long. He soon becomes "depressed in spite of the car." Shiftlet's new wife seems to be the cause of his depression, for it descends on him after he has "stopped his thoughts long enough to look at Lucynell in the seat beside him." The woman and the responsibility she represents ruin the pleasure of driving. After about a hundred miles, Shiftlet stops at a diner. Lucynell rests her head on the counter and falls asleep as soon as she sits down. Shiftlet tells the boy behind the counter to give her her ham and grits when she wakes up. "'Hitchhiker,' Mr. Shiftlet explained. 'I can't wait. I got to make Tuscaloosa'." He drives off, having avoided the entanglements of women.

Once on the road again, Shiftlet is even more depressed. He decides that he wants company. "There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker." Finally he picks up a boy standing at the side of the road with a suitcase.

Once he has a companion, Shiftlet feels no better.

The child held the suitcase on his lap and folded his arms on top of it. He turned his head and looked out the window away from Mr. Shiftlet. Mr. Shiftlet felt oppressed.

The hitchhiker is a wandering male like Shiftlet himself, and Shiftlet tortures him with talk about running away from women. In the most sentimental fashion, he talks about mothers— "I got the best old mother in the world so I reckon you only got the second best"—and says "I never rued a day in my life like the one I rued when I left that old mother of mine." By this point the boy's hand is on the door handle. Shiftlet ends, "My mother was an angel of Gawd. He took her from Heaven and giver to me and I left her."

This talk drives the boy to rage. He jumps out of the car after yelling at Shiftlet, "You go to the devil! . . . My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" He does not want to hear about the blessedness of women while he is making his escape from them. Shiftlet, however, seems almost free of the guilt for abandoning a woman with which he torments his passenger. He talks about leaving his old mother, who was "an angel of Gawd," soon after abandoning Lucynell at the diner, and hearing the boy behind the counter say that Lucynell "looks like an angel of Gawd." Thanks to her idiocy, Lucynell is as close to angelic innocence as a person can be; while mothers, like Mrs. Crater, are as involved in sin as the rest of humanity. Shiftlet's sentimental talk about mothers points up the real quality of the act he has committed.

After the boy is gone, Shiftlet drives on. The day has been hot and sultry and a storm has been brewing. As Shiftlet's car moves down the road, the clouds begin to descend.

Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. "Oh Lord!" he prayed. "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"

As if in answer to his prayer, the storm descends on Shiftlet himself.

After a few minutes there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tincan tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car. Very quickly he stepped on the gas and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile.

Shiftlet seems to be fleeing from the divine wrath he has invoked. That the skies respond to Shiftlet's prayer with guffawing thunder is appropriate: "Why do the heathen rage?. . . He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2:1,4). Shiftlet flees God, just as he flees women. He tries to escape both by always moving on. That his destination is Mobile can hardly be accidental. His goal is to be always mobile, always moving, and in this he is like many American heroes.

He is also like them in the direction of the journey. Mr. Shiftlet is heading West. Like the frontiersmen, like Natty Bumppo going out to the prairie, like Huck Finn lighting out for the territory, Shiftlet follows the course of the setting sun. "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" opens with Shiftlet watching the sun set over Mrs. Crater's farm. His first words to Mrs. Crater are, "Lady, I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening." Mrs. Crater assures him that it does it every evening. She means that the sun sets over her three mountains every day; her sunsets take place only on her farm. Shiftlet, however, seems to be attracted by the dream of the golden West. After he has abandoned Lucynell, he drives off into the West, and the sun begins to set directly in front of the automobile.

Shiftlet's goal, finally, is the freedom of the open road, but he hides his true character as much as possible. The real attraction movement has for him only appears clearly once or twice—when he first gets the car moving and when he drives away from Mrs. Crater's farm. For most of the story he dissembles. He presents his air of "composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly." He prays at the end though he is running from God. He praises women—in his talk about an innocent women and his old mother—but he is running from them. He plays a number of roles in the story, and plays them convincingly enough to get what he wants. To put it another way, he creates himself anew several times. The figure of the Confidence Man is not altogether separate from the figure of the innocent, moving male—Huck Finn, for instance, is constantly lying and assuming new identities—and Shiftlet joins the two.

One of the roles Shiftlet plays is that of Jesus himself. There is a fair amount of incongruous Christ-imagery in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." As Shiftlet watches the first sunset, he extends his arms so that "his figure formed a crooked cross." He is a carpenter. And his resurrection of the automobile seems almost miraculous: when he drives the repaired car out of the shed for the first time, he wears "an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead." He is

in many ways an Anti-Christ: he offers what must seem like salvation to Mrs. Crater and Lucynell but brings disaster on them instead.

He is, in fact, almost diabolic. In a letter to John Hawkes, O' Connor wrote that Meeks in *The Violent Bear it Away* is "like Mr. Shiftlet of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil" (*The Habit of Being* . . .). "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is a story of grace resisted. In Mrs. Crater and Lucynell, Shiftlet is presented with an opportunity for a real sacrifice, an opportunity to love unlovable people. Shiftlet refuses it in order to remain free and mobile. In escaping from female entanglements, he is not preserving his innocence, but rejecting a chance to redeem his sinful self. The roadside sign he passes warns him to "Drive Carefully. The life you save may be your own." Shiftlet is trying to save only his own life—while he is given the chance to at least improve Lucynell's or Mrs. Crater's. But "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25). The wickedest and most abandoned characters in O'Connor's stories are those, like Mr. Shiftlet and the Bible salesman in "Good Country People," who keep moving and never have to face God.

Source: Brian Abel Ragen, "The Automobile and the American Adam," in *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt, & Conversion in Flannery O'Connor,* Loyola University Press, 1989, pp. 55-106.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Edelstein offers an interpretation of the use of satire in O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Edelstein also examines the theme of man's perversity in the character of Shiftlet.

Whenever anyone bothers to ask why modern satire is so poor or why there is so little of it, the usual reply is that satire depends upon the general acceptance of certain values or standards of behavior and that contemporary society lacks such values and standards. This explanation is not very satisfying, however, for even if the assumption is correct that the satirist must rely upon widely shared values, the fact is that contemporary men do still hold some values in common, and such values could be used as the basis for satire.

Perhaps one can find a better answer to this question of modern satire by considering Northrup Frye's statement that "satire demands at least a token fantasy, a context which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude toward experience" [*Anatomy of Criticism,* 1957]. If, as I believe, the contemporary satirist can fulfill the second requirement, can employ a moral standard that is acceptable to his readers or that he can convince his readers to accept, then it may well be the other requirement, the fantasy, that is the real problem.

At a time when reality seems both fantastic and grotesque, as it does to many people today, then the satirist's fantasy may strike us as different from the real world only in the degree of grotesqueness, and the satire is likely to sound redundant to us. But the fact that reality now seems to satirize itself does not mean that the modern satirist is out of business. It simply means that the satirist's fantasy, the grotesque world which he depicts, cannot merely be an exaggeration of the real world's grotesqueness. The satirist must create his own world in order to make the fantasy work, that is, in order to maintain the necessary distance and the necessary difference between the content of his work and the object of his attack. This world must be related to our world and yet distinct from it, not necessarily more fantastic than our world but fantastic in a different way. The itinerant preachers, Bible salesmen, and "good country people" of Flannery O'Connor's fiction constitute just such a world, and through these people O'Connor brilliantly satirizes contemporary man.

The making of a satirist is a complex affair, involving much more than simple disapproval or dislike of the world as it is, and I do not mean to imply that O'Connor decided to change the world through satire and invented a grotesque world for that purpose. Rather, I think that O'Connor actually saw man as grotesque, not grotesque in the way others have seen him, but grotesque because he tries so hard to escape from his own salvation; and the stupidity of this infuriated her to the point where much of her writing *had* to be satire. In the story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the cook asks the difficult young girl why her attitude toward other people is so "ugly," and the child can only reply, in utter exasperation, "Those stupid idiots." O'Connor's own ugliness of attitude, her relentlessly harsh view of man, is born of the same exasperation.

O'Connor's view of man as grotesque may have developed before her religious ideas or independently of them, but this view eventually merged with her ideas so that man's rejection of God became both the ultimate symbol and the most important instance of man's incredible perversity and stupidity.

Although most people would admit that there are elements of satire in her works, O'Connor is not generally thought of as a satirist. This is not because people have misunderstood her attitudes toward man, but is due, rather paradoxically, to the fact that as satire her work is much more successful than it should be. O'Connor's satire is not based on the kind of moral standard her readers might readily accept but on a religious perspective that should, theoretically, render her satire ineffective among all non-believers. If God does not exist, then there is nothing perverse about man's rejection of God and, therefore, no real ground for O'Connor's satire. But the satire *is* effective, and the reason for this is that quite surprisingly and quite against our will O'Connor manages to convert us. O'Connor is no gentle Christian lady; she drags us forcefully into her world and *makes* us believe by the very nature of that world. The conversion may be short-lived, but it is none the less real; for the more we read of O'Connor, the more we see the startling similarities between ourselves and her grotesque atheists and hypocrites. We must believe in God simply in self defense; for to reject God, once we have been drawn into O'Connor's world, is to reveal the same kind of perversity that strikes us as so ludicrous in her characters. . . .

O'Connor satirizes both man's perversity and his perversion; he is grotesque both in the act of turning away from God and as a result of that act. The theme of man's perversity is an undercurrent in most of the stories, but it is most plainly a subject of satire in "Wise Blood," where Hazel Motes tries frantically to escape his own deepest beliefs, and in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," a story almost entirely devoted to this satiric attack. The "hero" of this story, Tom T. Shiftlet, seems at first glance to be merely a vicious, heartless hypocrite, a man who would marry a woman's mentally retarded daughter and then desert her on their honeymoon just to get his hands on the mother's car. But Shiftlet is more than this, or perhaps less than this, for he is also an utter fool. In taking the almost worthless old car, he not only gives up "a permanent house, a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world," but also gives up his own salvation, for O'Connor describes the girl as an "angel of Gawd." Here, as in most of her other stories, O'Connor underlines the fact of man's perversity by showing that he is surrounded by the manifestations of God in nature. The sun, birds, mountains, sky, and moon all reflect God's presence, but they fail to make any real impression on the obtuse Shiftlet. He is so totally perverse that he can hardly appreciate the truth of his own hypocritical words; and when he understands the truth, he cannot apply it. He speaks frequently of God and the spirit, but he acts as though neither exists. At one point he states that he is a "moral intelligence" and is then "astonished himself at this impossible truth." Needless to say, he does not let this realization stand in the way of his greed.

After Shiftlet abandons the girl in a restaurant, he picks up a hitchhiker, a boy running away from home. In characteristic fashion, not only does Shiftlet try to dissuade the boy from leaving home as he himself drives the boy away, but also he speaks of how wrong he was to leave his own mother, whom he describes in terms directly applicable to the

girl, while he has not the slightest intention of turning back. At the end of the story, as a storm is about to begin, Shiftlet calls on God to "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth"; but as the first drops of rain touch the back of his car, Shiftlet steps on the gas and races the storm into Mobile. When he is actually confronted with the purification and redemption that he has called for, he can hardly move fast enough to escape it.

The title of the story alludes to a sign that Shiftlet sees as he drives along. The sign warns: "Drive Carefully. The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and the satiric point here is most obvious, for Shiftlet has earlier compared the soul to an automobile. His failure to care about anyone else is ultimately a failure to care about himself, about his own salvation. He does not "save his own life," but O'Connor clearly wants us to see that he could have, that the possibility was definitely before him. We see Shiftlet as a fool turning down a gift of ultimate worth for junk, for nothings; and at the same time we see that Shiftlet is not much more of a fool than other men who turn from God to materialism, who fail to see the truth that is always plain as a roadsign before them. . . .

If the modern satirist wants to stir up his readers about evils or failings or absurdities that the reader is already very aware of, then he must find some way to surprise the reader, to shock him out of the complacent attitude he has been forced to develop because he has seen no alternative to those evils and failings and absurdities. O'Connor is successful as a satirist because she does surprise us consistently by the very peculiarity of her characters. She does not try to show man his own face but the face of a stranger, a comic and grotesque face that bears a disturbing resemblance to his own.

Source: Mark G. Edelstein, "Flannery O'Connor and the Problem of Modern Satire," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring, 1975, pp. 139-44.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Griffith examines the use of religious parallels and the thematic signifi- cance of the Christ archetype in O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

Christ crops up so frequently as a character in modern literature that every sophisticated reader nods knowingly when an author takes pains to point out that a certain character bears the initials J. C., is Thirty-Three Years Old, or Once Worked as a Carpenter. When a character has a Defeat on Friday, the mythwise reader can guess that the same character will rise to Triumph on Sunday. Writers as diverse as Dostoyevsky and Tennessee Williams, Steinbeck and Graham Greene, Faulkner and Nathanael West have all produced recognizable Christ figures, often in metamorphoses perverse enough to shock a pagan Ovid. But identifying a latter-day incarnation is one thing; understanding its artistic function is often a more complex problem.

No modern writer illustrates this problem better than the late Flannery O'Connor, who once even transfigured Christ in a strutting peacock on a Georgia farmyard. "When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality," she once theorized, [*America,* XCVI, March 30, 1957] and applied her own theory by plopping Christ archetypes down among the good country people of her stories, in clay field, dark wood, pig parlor, wherever they happened to be. The thematic significance of the mythic device is, however, sometimes obscure and puzzling.

The frequently anthologized story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find,* 1955), provides an example of the difficulties that one may encounter. Ample clues, beginning with the words *life* and *save* in the title, will tip off any college sophomore who has ever read any quarterly review criticism that Religious Parallels abound. The author introduces the reader at once to a Mr. Shiftlet, who is coming up the road to a "desolate spot" where an old woman and her mute and retarded daughter live. The old woman recognizes at once that the seedily-dressed, onearmed stranger is a tramp and "no one to be afraid of." With long black hair that hangs flat from a part in the middle, the tramp seems to be a young man with a paradoxical "look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly." When the woman greets him, he swings both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicate "an expanse of sky" and his figure forms a "crooked cross."

After this, Miss O'Connor allows progressively less doubt about the identification. Mr. Shiftlet quickly begins to expound on the beauty of the sun for contemplation, the rottenness of the world, the mystery of the human heart, and the purpose man was made for. He is coy about his name, even suggesting that Tom T. Shiftlet is just a pseudonym. "Maybe the best I can tell you is, I'm a man; but listen lady," he says ominously, "what is a man?" He admits, however, that he is a carpenter and has been in the past a gospel singer, a foreman on the railroad, an assistant in an undertaking parlor, a radio broadcaster, and a visitor to every foreign land, all burlesque disguises

for a messianic role. He insists that there is not a broken thing he cannot fix; and he asserts, with "sullen dignity" and with emphasis on "the immensity of what he was going to say," that he is a man with "a moral intelligence."

The action of the story, without ever for an instant abandoning its authentic regional realism, furthers the symbolic suggestiveness by a close series of semi-comic parallels to the Christian myth. Thus Mr. Shiftlet begins to teach the Christian doctrine of human dichotomy: "The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move." He shows his disdain for the body when he rejects the old woman's offer for "a permanent house and deep well and the most innocent girl in the world," and he shows his concern for the spirit ("I'm only saying a man's spirit means more to him than anything else") when he restores an old car on the farm to running condition—a car that had quit running the day the old woman's husband (the old Adam?) died (fell into Original Sin?). The restoration of the automobile (which he has, with liturgical appropriateness, painted green, the color for hope) is indeed the crucial action of the narrative, with the aura of a miracle about it: "He had an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead."

The simple-minded daughter of the old woman, named Lucynell Crater just like her mother, now emerges into symbolic prominence. She joyfully learns from Mr. Shiftlet her first word—*bird,* which in the mythic context readily suggests the promised Paraclete. After dickerings between the older woman and Mr. Shiftlet, the threesome drive into town, where Mr. Shiftlet marries the daughter. The pair are thereby removed from the house (which Mr. Shiftlet has identified with the body) and carried away in the automobile (which he has identified with the spirit). The winning of the innocent girl is not without cost to Mr. Shiftlet, however; he must submit to the ritual shedding of blood —here literally plausible in the required pre-marital blood test. "That didn't satisfy me none," Mr. Shiftlet says, insisting that nobody can know a thing about him even if his heart were cut out. When the old woman reminds him that the blood shedding satisfied the law, he replies: "It's the law that don't satisfy me."

Up to this point, the Christian correspondences of the narrative have an almost allegorical neatness: the messiah comes in character as the friendless, homeless man to a desolate country and an empty people (as the name Crater suggests), gradually reveals himself as the Son of Man, teaches the primacy of the spiritual, proves both the identification and the doctrine by the raising of the dead (the car), sheds his blood to satisfy the law, and carries away the innocent soul whom he teaches to pray for the Paraclete. Unfortunately for neatness, however, the story does not end here. Mr. Shiftlet starts off for Mobile on a wedding trip, but abandons his whitegarbed bride asleep at a lunch counter called The Hot Spot, only paying for a meal to be given her when she wakes up. Depressed, he sets out on the road again and picks up a boy hitchhiker whom he lectures about the worth of mothers and the sorrow of running away from home. The boy angrily rejects Mr. Shiftlet's advice, tells him "You go to the devil," leaps out of the car, and leaves Mr. Shiftlet feeling that the "rottenness of the world" is about to engulf him. "Oh, Lord," Mr. Shiftlet prays, as the story ends, "break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"

What does Miss O'Connor mean by this bizarre turn of events? At first, one might suppose that the myth is still being reenacted: The Hot Spot could well be the hell harrowed by Christ's descent; the meal left for the girl might be a Eucharistic commemoration. But the story exists first of all on a literal level, and the tone of the literal details is all wrong for supporting the supposition that Mr. Shiftlet is a true reincarnation of the historical Christ. The authentic Christ does not abandon the souls he weds, as Shiftlet—whose very name suggests both apathy ("shiftless") and unconcern ("let shift") — does. If he is not the real Christ, is Mr. Shiftlet then a pseudo-Christ, perhaps even an anti-Christ? Miss O'Connor is indeed capable of using the Christ figure in either way: in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Sheppard, the counselor who tries to play the Good Shepherd with a reform school parolee, is a perfect example of the pseudo-savior; in *Wise Blood,* Hazel Motes, the backwoods youth who attempts to form "The Church Without Christ," is her prototypical anti-Christ. Yet Mr. Shiftlet never completely reverses his Christ-like role, for he keeps some sense of "responsibility to others," even after callously abandoning Lucynell, and he prays at the end for divine ablution.

If Mr. Shiftlet thus turns out to be neither Christ nor Christ's reverse image, he must be merely *like* Christ—though presumably like Christ in some thematically significant way. There is one sense, of course, in which all men— "the least of my brethren"— are traditionally identified with Christ in the concept of the Mystical Body, and Miss O'Connor has used the Christ figure this way in other stories (notably the Polish refugee in "The Displaced Person," the hermaphrodite freak in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and the delinquent girl in "The Comforts of Home"). But the detailed correspondences between Shiftlet's life and the life of Christ suggest more than this sort of anagogical similarity: they suggest a common vocation, the vocation to live the mobile life of the spirit, to follow (in Mr. Shiftlet's own words) "a moral intelligence." Mr. Shiftlet, then, seems to represent modern man called to follow the pattern of Christ, a pattern that is unfortunately often followed imperfectly and incompletely. Mr. Shiftlet fails in his vocation when he abandons the sleeping girl, a point which the unexpected climax can now be seen to make clear.

The key to the interpretation is the detail singled out for emphasis by the title of the story. After Mr. Shiftlet leaves The Hot Spot, Miss O'Connor writes: "There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: 'Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own.'" The sign is obviously intended to have implications on the religious level, recalling familiar Christian epigrams about the paradoxes of saving and being saved, giving and receiving, dying and living. To the man with a car (symbolically, spirit or moral intelligence), it is a clear admonition to essential charity and prudence.

The dialogue with the runaway boy reveals the gradual impact of the sign on Mr. Shiftlet's conscience. As Shiftlet talks of rueing the day he left his own mother, he is thinking in actuality of the abandonment of Lucynell—a fact made evident when he refers to his old mother as an "angel of Gawd," the exact phrase in which The Hot Spot attendant described Lucynell. The boy's profane rejection of this sentiment forces Mr.

Shiftlet to recognize his own flaw in the loveless boy. The shock of failure leads to his anguished prayer and to an answering shower from heaven, as a turnipshaped cloud (suggesting, perhaps, the stylized figure of the Pentecostal dove) descends on him and spurs him on to his destination, Mobile, symbolically the kinetic haven of the ever-moving spirit.

"For me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ," Miss O'Connor once asserted; "what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." [*The Living Novel: A Symposium,* ed. Granville Hicks, 1957] Mr. Shiftlet, too, is seen in this relationship. As a man who seeks the spiritual, Miss O'Connor seems to say, Mr. Shiftlet leads a meaningful life only insofar as his life corresponds with the pattern set by Christ; when he departs from the pattern, becomes shiftless or lets others shift for themselves, he falls into depression and despair. Only recognition of the failure brings hope of final grace by which he can save others and in so doing save himself.

Source: Albert J. Griffith, "Flannery O'Connor's Salvation Road," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring, 1966, pp. 329-33.

Adaptations

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" was filmed for television in 1957 as a segment included in "Playhouse of Stars" and starred Gene Kelly, Agnes Moorehead, and Janice Rule. This adaptation has a different ending than O'Connor's story.

Topics for Further Study

Research aspects of Christian theology—specifically, passages or stories from the Bible — and compare them with the themes in O'Connor's story. Start with Jesus's disruption of the market in the temple or Judas's betrayal of Jesus.

Research the automobile's effect on American society in the early 1950s. Include such aspects as the way it was advertised on television and in magazines to demonstrate its effect on our modern lifestyle and culture. Based on your research, how might readers from the 1950s have greeted O'Connor's somewhat critical depiction of the automobile in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"?

Is O'Connor's depiction of young Lucynell Crater insensitive to people with disabilities? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: In 1950, the U.S. produces 6.7 million automobiles and sells over 13 million used automobiles. In 1956, The Federal Aid Highway Act proposes the construction of approximately 42,500 miles of roads, particularly interstate freeways, to connect major cities. The federal government is to pay for 90 percent of the proposed 33.5 billion effort.

1990s: With approximately 70 percent of the Interstate Highway System having been finished by 1976, the system is now essentially complete. In urban centers it provides major arteries for daily commuting traffic. However, it is now worn from use and in need of repair and continuous upgrading.

1952: The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission explodes a hydrogen nuclear fusion bomb at its testing site at the Eniwetok proving grounds in the Pacific. In the following year, the U.S.S.R. will explode a hydrogen bomb designed by Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov.

1989: The Berlin Wall, built in 1961 and separating Democratic West Germany from Communist East Germany, is torn down. In the next two years, NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Warsaw Pact countries will agree to reduce their military armaments, the leaders in Russia will agree to give up the monopoly of power held by the Communist party, and Russia will lose control over 15 of its member republics.

1953: O'Connors's character Shiftlet mentions the removal of a human heart by a doctor, but the first transplant of a human heart is 14 years in the future.

1999: There are approximately 2,300 heart transplants performed in the U.S. each year. Approximately 73 percent of patients with transplanted hearts survive for 3 years after their surgery. Approximately 85 percent of patients with transplanted hearts can return to work or participate in some pleasurable activity, including certain sports.

What Do I Read Next?

The Catcher in the Rye, by J. D. Salinger, and *Rabbit, Run,* by John Updike, also explore the search for meaning in a seemingly empty and cruel world. Salinger's novel was published in 1952 and is particularly interesting since its main character, Holden Caulfield, is a teenager. Updike's novel was published several years after O'Connor's story. Both of these novels are set in the Northeast, rather than the South.

James Joyce published several stories and novels which depict religion quite differently than do O'Connor's stories. His novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and some of his stories in Dubliners often depict religion as oppressive.

"The Church and the Fiction Writer" is included in *Mystery and Manners,* a collection of O'Connor's essays and prose. This piece explains O'Connor's concern with what she called the "added dimension" of religious spirituality in her fiction.

O'Connor's other fiction complements this story. Her works include two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). All of her short fiction was reprinted in *The Complete Stories*.

As I Lay Dying, a novel by William Faulkner published in 1930, is another example of Southern Gothic fiction. Told from several different perspectives, it follows a family's journey to another county to bury their dead wife and mother.

Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* was one of O'Connor's favorite novels. Published in 1933, It explores dark religious themes and imagery in its story of a newspaper advice columnist who becomes entangled in the lives he writes about.

The theological and philosophical essays of French Catholic intellectual Pierre Teilhard de Chardin influenced O'Connor throughout her career.

Further Study

Desmond, John F. "The Shifting of Mr. Shiftlet: Flannery O'Connor's 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own,'" in *Mississippi Quarterly,* Vol. 28, No. 1, Winter, 1974-75, pp. 55-9.

A close reading of Shiftlet's character, in which the author argues that his motivations devolve during the course of the story from good to bad.

Gentry, Marshall Bruce. *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*, University Press of Mississippi, 1986, pp. 112-18.

A reading of the religious themes and O'Connor's use of the Grotesque in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

Giannone, Richard. *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love,* University of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. 54-7.

A study on O'Connor, which concentrates on Shiftlet's denial of spiritual grace.

Kessler, Edward. *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of the Apocalypse,* Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 141-47.

Through analysis of language in O'Connor's fiction, Kessler develops a largely negative reading of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," finding the story unnecessarily ambiguous and shallow.

Westling, Louise. *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor,* University of Georgia Press, 1985, pp. 144-55.

This work identifies O'Connor with two other Southern writers and pursues her work from a feminist rather than a religious perspective.

Whitt, Margaret Earley. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor,* University of South Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 52-6.

A general introduction to the themes of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" as well as to O'Connor's life and other works.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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