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Flannery O'Connor and her South: A study through "Good Country People"

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Resumen: El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar cómo la autora estadounidense Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) acomete la doble tarea de atacar los viejos valores y clichés tradicionalmente asociados al sur de EEUU, y que han forjado gran parte de su identidad, a la vez que transmite una ideología católica con especial énfasis en la revelación divina. Este último objetivo resulta especialmente relevante en esta autora y su obra, ya que era una ferviente creyente. Para ello, se tomará como referencia uno de sus relatos, "Good Country People" (1955), el cual recoge abundantes muestras de los elementos antes citados. Se incluye también una biografía de la autora que ahonda en sus motivaciones ideológicas y literarias, así como una breve reseña histórica del periodo a estudiar y un resumen de la obra tomada como referencia.

Palabras clave: Gótico sureño, religión, mitoclasmo, grotesco, epifanía.

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to analyze how American author Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) undertook a double task through her fiction: the attack on the old values and clichés associated with the South of the United States, which have forged a great part of its identity, while at the same time transmitting a Roman Catholic message with a special emphasis on divine revelation. This objective becomes especially relevant, since she was a fervent believer. In order to carry out this study, her tale "Good Country People" has been chosen. This tale gathers many instances of those elements. A biography of O'Connor that discusses her ideological and literary motivations, a historical outline of the period to be studied and a summary of the work taken as reference are as well provided.

Key words: Southern Gothic, religion, mythoclasm, grotesque, epiphany.

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1- Introduction

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is one of the most remarkable authors of the American South. Her fiction is set in the 1950's and 1960's, and constitutes an instance of Southern Gothic. Her writing was influenced by the Southern Renaissance and by previous authors and movements such as William Faulkner and the New Critics[1]. But O'Connor has been an influence as well. Some of the current trends of contemporary Southern writing derive from her literary production and the impact she has had on present-day Southern writers (Nadal, 181). The most defining elements of her writing are her religious convictions and the desire to deconstruct the traditional image of the Old South. To do so, she creates characters whose questionable moral behaviour needs the intervention of divine grace, and also grotesque depictions which parody and put into question the set of values associated with the traditional imagery of the South. Her narrative plainly shows the events told, but has a deep and meaningful message underneath. Yet, she never tries to directly influence the reader's opinions. The message she conveys in her writing has to be discovered by the reader, that is, there is a combination of "mystery and manners", terms that O'Connor discussed in her essays and lectures and which became the title of one of her books. One of the tales that best exemplifies her style and intentions is "Good Country People" (1955), which will be taken as a basis for the analysis. This tale gathers many instances of the elements mentioned above. A biography of Flannery O'Connor that explores her ideological and literary motivations, a historical outline of the period to be studied, and a summary of the tale taken as reference are as well provided.

[1] Literary movement influenced by agrarianism which focused on the South and rural communities and promoted a close and critical examination of literary texts. (Gray 434)

2.1- Historical context

Generally speaking, the fifties were a golden age for the United States. Their victory over Nazi Germany and the decline of the United Kingdom as a world power, together with an impressive economic growth which doubled its GDP in less than fifteen years, (Foner 942-943) allowed the United States to emerge as one of the two superpowers in the world, the other being the Soviet Union. It is then, the era of the Cold War, which saw the world divided between the capitalist West, led by the United States and the communist East, led by the USSR.

In this context, one of the most conservative periods in its history and with the hegemony of the Republican party (NARA.gov), American society was experimenting domestic transformations in what concerns gender roles, religion, social and economic structure, and even self-identity. The latter played an especially important role in the South, which was reflected in the literary production of the period.

As pointed out by Boyer el al. (835), this conservatism was more relevant in the South than in the North. If compared, Northern and Southern US offer a different reality even if the country is the same. The South has had its own identity since the country's foundation. Moreover, this differentiated identity has been more important from the ending of the Civil War onwards. In order to establish a clear image of the South and its collective identity in the fifties, several elements will be analyzed and put together. The first is the state of things in the South in relation to that of the rest of the country. Although at the time the United States was enjoying a period of wealth in general, the South was the least developed region, and its economic and welfare indexes were among the lowest in the country (Foner 874-875). The second element was the defeat of the Confederate States in the Civil War. That defeat had not only military consequences, but also economic, social, political, and psychological effects. This last factor is crucial for the understanding of Southern identity. The end of the slavery system and the postwar sense of defeat and lost glory created a feeling of humiliation and detachment from the rest of the country, thus causing Southern population to look at their region's past in search for a collective mirror where to see themselves and feel proud even if that past was based on exploitation and slavery, as Southern critic Diana Roberts states in

her book *The South of the Mind* (368). This glorification of the past has vastly influenced Southern literature, even to the extent of being considered one of the reasons for its existence. In *Mystery and Manners*[2], Flannery O'Connor tells an anecdote about Walter Percy, a Southern writer, who said that the reason why the South had so many good writers is that they had lost the war (58-59). This short sentence conveys the how losing the war is largely responsible for Southern identity, and how it has given birth to a very specific kind of literature. This affirmation is reflected in some of the most important Southern literary figures such as William Faulkner, the most emblematic figure of Southern renaissance.

That renaissance enhanced motifs such as agrarianism, the sense of nostalgia for the antebellum idyllic past, a general feeling of decadence as the consequence of that glorious past vanished with the defeat in the war, and that separated, unique identity. However, that glorification of the past was contested by several Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor and Barry Hannah (Nadal 182). It is from the fifties onwards that the concept of mythoclasm[3] starts gaining importance. It should be mentioned that in spite of the fact that these authors intended to undermine and deconstruct that image the South had constructed for itself; they were Southerners who felt attached and identified with their region, and whose writing was typically Southern, as it features literary elements to be mainly found in Southern writing such as the grotesque first found in Poe, a special sense of humor already present in Mark Twain as well as gothic influences which ultimately led to the development of Southern Gothic, one of whose major examples was Flannery O'Connor.

A third element that has shaped Southern identity is religion. As Flannery O'Connor said in *Mystery and Manners* "While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (44). The South has been widely regarded as a fanatic place when it comes to religious beliefs. This religious fundamentalism has given path to the coining of the term "Bible Belt", used to refer to those highly religious Southern states whose vision of Christianity influences their population's daily lives. Religion is widely present in O'Connor's writing, even to the extent of having been defined as a religious

[2] Collection of essays written by O'Connor and compiled posthumously. In them, she deals with the role of the writer, and reflects on her own writing.
[3] Concept which refers to a trend in American literature which seeks to undermine the South's received notions of community and tradition, and that implies a historical revisionist spirit. (Guinn 573).

writer, a label she rejected (Alther 2-8). Nevertheless, her writing has a religious motivation, and the fact that she was a Catholic in a protestant South further highlights this characteristic of her writing. In her fiction, we can see that one of the characters is touched by divine grace and experiences an epiphany triggered by violence, which she used as a tool in order to attract the reader's attention. This aspect will be further discussed in the biographical section of the paper.

All that has been explained must be put together and seen as a whole in order to analyze "Good Country People". Southern views on religion, this region's peculiar identity, its literary renaissance as well as the social, economic and cultural conditions at the time of writing, 1955, converge and result in the ideology, setting and even style on this short story. That convergence constitutes what Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin called the chronotope[4].

2.3- Southern Renaissance, agrarianism, Southern Gothic and the grotesque

Flannery O'Connor was influenced by the Southern Renaissance, a literary awakening that took place in the South in the twenties and thirties of the 20th century which involved a critical re-examination of Southern history, the role of the writer within the community, portrayed the actual social and living conditions of the South and also presented formal innovations (Folks 835). This critical re-examination of history is the answer to the previous literary tradition of the South, which glorified its past and the "lost cause", the Confederate defeat in the Civil War. Yet, some authors that belong to this tradition such as Faulkner showed nostalgia for the Old South. Regarding living conditions, this tradition was interested in the individuals' struggle to keep their personal identity in a place where the community and the social aspect of life were given much importance. As pointed out by Gardner, the way of dealing with such matters involved writer's critical distance from the South, and also the adoption of new literary techniques in order to express a new reality (4). Furthermore, this movement was considered an "antidote" for the economic depression of the thirties in the sense

[4] Chronotope: Concept coined by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin which established a connection between a certain point in time (chronos) and a certain place (topos), and how their interaction influences literature (Bakhtin 84).

that it defended a way of life based on the Southern tradition as opposed to the rampant industrialism of the North, which was identified as one of the causes of the Great Depression (5).

As pointed out in the historical introduction, the South has a differentiated identity and tradition because of its history. Among other things, that identity has given way to the creation of a particular literary genre which conveys the violence and otherness associated with the American South. This genre is called Southern Gothic. Southern Gothic has been present as a genre since the 19th century and is still alive (Bjerre 1). As this author remarks, Southern Gothic has American and English Gothic influences. Yet, what makes it distinctive is that it is set in the South and includes Southern tensions, race, poverty, rural settings, religious fundamentalism, irrational characters, dark humor, and the grotesque. In general, it lacks supernaturalism, since it has a realistic and naturalistic basis. Bjerre also highlights that this genre has elements that come from the agrarian literary tradition. William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor are mentioned as examples of Southern Gothic (Bjerre 2).

One of the concepts mentioned, the grotesque, is present in O'Connor and also in Southern Gothic. This term is applied to "a decorative art … characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or caricature. By extension, grotesque is applied to anything … bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal." (Harmon 244). In this sense, professor Molly Boyd adds that the "crucial element in defining the grotesque, however, is the juxtaposition or fusion of contrasting, paradoxical, and incompatible elements, such as an impossible or horrific event narrated matter-of-factly and with great detail, often provoking a humorous response" (321-324).

Lastly, the concept of agrarianism refers to the enhancement of traditional rural values and the importance of peoples' attachment to the land. It defended the idea that the attachment to the land had a positive impact on the individual and on society (Danbom 1). It has been an important element in Southern literature, with Faulkner as one of its major examples.

2.3- Biographical outline

Fully named Mary Flannery O'Connor, she was baptized in the Catholic faith and grew up in a deeply protestant South which, as said before, she described as "Christ haunted". Her upbringing was completely characterized by Catholicism, both at home and at school (Als). However, her faith is not the only element to be taken into account in her biography as an influence on her writing. The grotesque, another of O'Connor's personal marks, was already present in her childhood. This tendency towards the grotesque can be exemplified by an anecdote which gave way to one of her later hobbies: Breeding and keeping fowls. When she was five years old, she owned a chicken which could walk backwards when told. Such ability called the attention of Pathé News, a New York-based news agency which paid her a visit, recorded her and her pet and published a short movie showing the chicken walking. This experience had an impact on O'Connor which has a reflection on her preference for grotesque characters. This idea is reinforced by her own words in *Mystery and Manners*:

> When I was five, I had an experience that marked me for life … From that day with the Pathé man I began to collect chickens … I favored those with one green eye and one orange or with overlong necks and crooked combs. I wanted one with three legs or three wings but nothing in that line turned up. (3-4)

These lines constitute an example of that fondness of the grotesque mentioned above, as well as an example of her particular humor. This combination is seen in several works by her, especially in descriptions, which on occasions humorously ridicule characters. Apart from this episode, O'Connor proved to be a child who did not adjust to what is expected from a person of her age. This is confirmed by journalist and Pulitzer winner Hilton Als, who points out that she read the classic Romans and Greeks and despised tales such as *Pinocchio* or *Alice in Wonderland*. The reason for her doing so is that she clearly preferred direct narratives with complex and mysterious implications which had to be worked out by the reader. This argument arguably fits one of the main ideas

already mentioned in the introduction: That Flannery O'Connor prefers showing over telling, thus the reader becomes the responsible for discovering the message and the symbols leading to that message behind the narration. A message which in her case is Christian on the inside, but cruel, violent, and sometimes even existentialist on the superficial, narratorial level, as she stated in *Mystery and Manners* when discussing this matter:

> The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery as of existence as possible. He has only a short space to do it and can't do it by statement. He has to do it by showing, not by saying, and by showing the concrete … In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself, and when this happens they become symbolic in the way they work. (98)

The distinction between showing and telling in O'Connor is that she did not introduce intrusive narrators or clarifying comments in her works. She did not tell a story, but showed the events that took place in the most neutral possible way. Thus, as said above, the task of discovering the message hidden in the narration, and discern which characters were in need of an epiphany rests on the reader.

Once O'Connor reached her teens, she experienced two episodes which would influence her in the following years. One of them was a tough experience; her father's death of lupus, an illness which would cause her own death twenty three years later. The second one was her first steps into a wider world outside the domestic sphere. Due to her father's job, the family moved to Milledgeville, a town which had no Catholic school in 1940. There, she graduated in the local high school, attended Georgia State University, where she graduated in 1945 and completed her studies at the University of Iowa in 1947 after having been granted a scholarship. During her high school years, the first hints of how her writing style would be are found in the comic strips she published in the school's newspaper. As said before, her preference for showing over saying is best exemplified by this kind of artistic expression; a literary technique she used during her whole life and which expressed in the conferences she gave throughout the US (Burchby). However, these first steps outside home were not easy. Als remarks how her looks and her regional accent called other people's attention and how this caused her to take efforts to hide her religious and Southern side from her fellow students.

In spite of her initial shyness, her experience at Iowa's writers workshop provided her with a remarkable awareness of how the world was like away from home. This openness had its manifestation in 1948, when O'Connor was admitted into Yadoo, a community for artists in Saratoga whose goal is to provide creators from multiple disciplines with a peaceful environment. This school has had notable alumni such as Ted Hughes, Hannah Arendt or Mario Puzo and is still alive nowadays.

This communal experience reached an end the following year but proved itself to be a turning point for O'Connor. This change is represented by O'Connor's acceptance of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald's invitation to stay at their Connecticut home in 1949, where she spent more than a year. Although relatively short, this time was profitable, both in a literary sense, as she could develop and polish her style, and in a personal, self-conscious sense. Regarding her personal evolution, she found a good friend in Sally Fitzgerald, who was a Southerner and devoted Catholic. This friendship cannot be understood without that religious element. It is precisely their shared faith that helped O'Connor in the task of shaping the last frills of her writing style. Issues such as the grace of God, its consequent redemption and the use of grotesque characters lay their roots in this period of O'Connor's life (Gildea; Woo).

This stage of her life came to an end in 1950. That year, she was diagnosed with lupus, causing her to leave the Fitzgeralds and return to Georgia with her mother, with whom she spent the rest of her life. She settled in Andalusia, a vast estate in the small town of Milledgeville, Her return to the South was physical, but not spiritual, since she had never left it in that sense. This idea contrasts with what has been previously said. Despite O'Connor hiding part of her true being during her time in Iowa, and despite her openness to the world, she never stopped being a Southerner in her heart. Although this might seem to be a contradiction, it is just the opposite. Her experiences in the North made her largely aware of who she was and further reinforced her previous self-identification with her region in contrast to the rest of the country. Her own words in *Mystery and Manners* are an example of how she regarded the South as both a differentiated reality and part of herself. "The South has survived in the past because its manners, however lopsided or inadequate they may have been, provided enough social discipline to hold us together and gives us an identity" (234). Furthermore, as stated by

Macksey and Moorer, this realization of herself as a Southerner in linked to the fact that almost all her works take place in the South (1273).

Apart from her Southerness, her illness and subsequent return to Georgia had a deep impact in her life as well as in her writing. Several factors converge in this final stage of her life. One of them is living with her mother. However, before dealing with O'Connor's relation with her mother, O'Connor's opinion of intellectuals must be taken into account. As seen in some of her tales such as "Good Country People", "Everything that Rises Must Converge" or "The Artificial Nigger", O'Connor despised intellectuals, or, more exactly, pseudo-intellectuals. This rejection of pretended intellectualism is connected to her religious beliefs and her conception of the sin. This connection is clarified by American critic and writer Joyce C. Oates in her essay "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor" (46). In it, she explains how for O'Connor one of the worst sins was to think of one oneself as knowing more than Jesus Christ, thus usurping the role of divinity. Furthermore, and according to Oates, if O'Connor's characters are compared, those who happen to be murders, psychopaths or just thieves, are bad, but not as much as those who defy Jesus as the supreme *connoisseur*. This portrait of the pseudo intellectual has a clear example in the character of Hulga, which will be later discussed.

Both the character of Hulga and O'Connor's views on intellectuals serve as tools for understanding the relation that O'Connor and her mother had and how it has a reflection in her writing, and more concretely in "Good Country People". The relationship between O'Connor and her mother is an unbalanced one in terms of intellectuality and education. While Regina O'Connor devoted her life to her family and running Andalusia, the familiar farm, with the help of hired workers her daughter's task was writing and giving lectures from time to time. However, Flannery O'Connor already showed hints of that gap between her and her mother in that sense during her college years by means of teasingly correcting her speech, or making fun about her lack of general culture, something that she would continue doing during her whole life. (Miller; Als). As said before, O'Connor's return to Georgia and hence, to the familiar sphere, did influence her writing, but more elements deriving from that return to Georgia are needed for the obtaining of a wider perspective. One of them is the reason why she moved to Andalusia: lupus.

According to Oates ("The Parables of Flannery O'Connor"), her illness reinforced both O'Connor's faith and keenness on breeding fowls as shelters from lupus. Moreover, in a more literary approach, a parallel between one of the effects of lupus, the progressing weakening of muscles which leads to walking difficulties, can be established between her and Hulga. That disability is precisely one of the multiple examples for illustrating O'Connor's particular sense of humor. Sentences such as "I had the best-looking crutches in Europe" (Hyman 314), or some of the answers she gave her readers when criticized (Simpson 47). O'Connor's remark about her crutches is to be dated in 1958 during a trip with her mother to Europe in which she took a bath in the waters of Lourdes and had an audience with the Pope. After their trip and the subsequent return to Andalusia, O'Connor continued writing and publishing works such as her 1960 *The Violent Bear It Away* novel. However, lupus caused her health to steadily decline in the following years, until her death in August 1964.

3.1- Summary of "Good Country People"

A) Characters

Hulga Hopewell: The main protagonist. She is a thirty-two-year old nihilist who has a Ph.D. in Philosophy and lives with her mother on a farm because of her poor health. She also has a wooden leg, thinks of her as intellectually superior to everyone and changed her original name Joy to Hulga–the result of mixing ugly and huge– in order to annoy her mother.

Manley Pointer: An apparently innocent and simple nineteen years old Bible seller. He is an intelligent sociopath who steals Hulga's leg. As Hulga, he is a nihilist as well. His name is a phallic pun.

Mrs. Hopewell: Hulga's mother. She sees the world through clichés and old-fashioned ideas. As Hulga does, she believes in the goodness of country people. Hulga laughs at and disrespects her because of her opinions.

Mrs. Freeman: The Hopewells' employee. She likes gossiping and is fascinated by Hulga's leg.

Glynese and Carramae: Mrs. Freeman's daughters. Glynese is eighteen and has many admirers while Carramae is fifteen and already married and pregnant.

B) Plot summary[5]

Using her fondness in revelation and violence, O'Connor shows how pride can lead to destruction and consequent divine enlightening in this tale. The routinary life the Hopewells have is interrupted by the appearance of Pointer. Taking him for an innocent countryman, Mrs. Hopewell invites him for dinner. Although irritated by this at first, Hulga ends up meeting Pointer the next day. At night, she plans to use her superior intellect to seduce him and then shock him in order to teach him about the emptiness of life. However, the story unfolds in a different way. During the date, they go to a barn

[5] The complete tale is enclosed in the annex.

where they kiss. There, Pointer tries to have sex with Hulga while she is only capable of rambling with abstract ideas about existence. Frustrated, and showing his sociopathic nature, Pointer steals her leg and glasses by means of lies and leaves the barn. A symbolically raped Hulga is left there, having been taught a lesson and seeing Pointer leave the place after he boasts about being more intelligent and nihilistic than her and having stolen other disabled women's parts before.

3.2- Hulga Hopewell: The freak, the intellectual, the nihilist

As pointed out above, some of O'Connor characters are influenced by her lifelong experiences and beliefs. Taking O'Connor's life as a starting point, the character of Hulga offers a clear example of this. In order to provide an analysis, three aspects will be analyzed in this paper: Hulga as a grotesque freak, as a pseudo intellectual, and as a reflection of O'Connor herself. Concerning her characterization as a freak, the South is one of the elements to be taken into account, as O'Connor expressed in *Mystery and Manners*:

> Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. (44)

On a similar basis, O'Connor also affirmed that Northerners would perceive Southern writing as grotesque unless it was actually grotesque, in which case they would call it realistic (*Mystery and Manners* 41). This must be kept in mind when dealing with Hulga and Manley Pointer. In the case of Hulga, her freak, grotesque load comes from her physical appearance and attitudes rather than from her regional background. She is characterized as masculine in two senses. The first is the fact that she is not interested in men or marriage. Although nowadays this attitude is socially accepted, the historical context –the fifties– should be taken into account. The second masculinizing element is her physical appearance. From the very beginning, O'Connor uses adjectives such as "large" or "hulky" to describe her (170; 171). Even her name is described as ugly and associated with a battleship hull (173). Yet, what masculinizes Hulga the most is her clothes. The fact that she regularly wears an ugly sweat shirt with a cowboy on it and a

dirty shirt, slacks and nasal spray as perfume for her date further reinforces the image of Hulga as a masculine woman (175; 187). Not only do her masculine looks contribute to form her freaky image; the reason why she wears those clothes –apart from annoying Mrs. Hopewell– is to emphasize her own ugliness, something which, again, emphasizes her grotesque, freak nature (Gordon 117). Apart from her masculinity, the other tool for characterizing her as a freak is her leg. It is the wooden leg that makes her a freak *per se*, but the use she makes of it, the morbid attraction which causes in Mrs. Freeman and Pointer and the desexualizing effect that it has on her. Regarding how she uses it, she makes unnecessary and upsetting noise when moving (184). This, alongside with her clothes, emphasize her distorted image as a grotesque character. Also, Hulga's leg acts as an object of desire for Pointer, who has previously acquired other women's parts in the past. This characterizes him as a freak as well. As for Mrs. Freeman, both the leg and the story of how Hulga lost her original leg in a hunting accident are of high interest (173). While not causing Mrs. Freeman to be a freak herself, these two characters' interest in the leg do make Hulga a freak in the sense that their fascination about her leg makes Hulga an object of interest which can be connected to the freak shows that showed people with deformities, conjoined siblings, and in general self-called "oddities" which were popular in the United States until they began fading in the late 19th century but still survived in the fifties, when this story was written (Crockett). Moreover, this kind of freak shows is a common element in Southern gothic fiction (Bjerre 5). The third effect the leg has on Hulga is related to her mother's attitude towards it and the hunting accident. In spite of the fact that Hulga is thirty two years old, Mrs. Hopewell regards her daughter as a child not only because of her leg, but also because Hulga suffers from a heart condition which limits her lifespan to forty five years as maximum (175). As Bieber Lake argues, this view of Hulga as a child has the effect of desexualizing her, especially if compared to Mrs. Freeman's daughters, who fulfill the social role as recipients for male desire (125).

Apart from a grotesque freak, Hulga is the embodiment of the pseudo-intellectual that O'Connor so much despised. As stated before, Flannery O'Connor especially attacked those who thought themselves as intellectually superior and connected them with arrogance and selfishness. This is case of Hulga, who, furthermore, is a declared atheist and nihilist. This portrait of the pseudo-intellectual must be connected with O'Connor's ideas and her contempt for arrogance and

O'Connor beliefs. Those beliefs are based on the idea that the grace of God is often delivered to the arrogant character by means of a revelation which most of the times comes accompanied by a violent or, at least, discomforting experience. The role of violence is highly important in O'Connor, both as a means of attracting the reader and as the tool that God uses to deliver his grace, which in this case is Manley Pointer. This combination of violence and prophecy in O'Connor's fiction is clarified by Cofer, who highlights the prominent role that violence and destruction has in the Bible as a mean of prophetic regeneration, and how Flannery O'Connor is an exponent of that biblical tradition, stating that:

> Nowhere is this method of holy renewal through destruction re-created more faithfully than in O'Connor's backwoods prophets. … Even "Good Country People" includes a prophet figure who does not bring physical violence, but certainly a message of destruction. … These prophets bring a message meant to humble the proud and literalize the advice found in the Ecclesiastes. (77-78)

Although explicit violence is not present in this story as it is in others, the fact that Hulga's leg and glasses are stolen by Pointer acts as metaphoric violence. However, the core question is why Hulga is chosen as a target for that violence, and therefore for divine enlightenment. The answer to that question is that Hulga is an alleged intellectual who thinks she is more intelligent than her mother –who she also disrespects, thus contravening the fourth commandment "honor thy mother and thy father" (*Holy Bible*, Exodus. 20-12) – Pointer, and everybody in general. However, in order to characterize her as such, an analysis of her behaviour during the story must be carried out.

The first instances of this are shown when Hulga talks to her mother. She does so in a patronizing and even aggressive way which seeks to ridicule her while at the same time showing how superior her knowledge is. One example is how she asks Mrs. Hopewell if she ever looks inside her:

> To her own mother she had said – without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full – "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!"

> Mrs. Hopewell had no idea to this day what brought that on. She had only made the remark, hoping Joy would take it in, that a smile never hurt anyone. (176)

This reaction towards her mother's remark shows how she interacts with the members of her household, and how she despises her mother's views on life, full of clichés and old-fashioned ideas. However, her usual attitude goes further, to the point of resenting her being forced to live with her mother because of her weak health. This resentment causes Hulga to imagine the kind of life she would have away from home: "Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (175). This same attitude is the one she has with Pointer, whom at first she despised as "good country people" and therefore plans to teach him a lesson about life. In the passages dealing with their encounter, Hulga's as can also be seen in statements that seek to puzzle and "illustrate" him such as: "if you use the word[6] loosely you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing." or "You poor baby," she murmured. "It's just as well you don't understand," … "We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation" (191). Not just Hulga's nihilism and the patronizing way she uses when addressing Pointer are interesting, but also her statements about seeing through to nothing and taking the blindfolds off.

These statements are directly related to the fact that Pointer has taken her glasses without notice when kissing her. This functions as an ironic way to present Hulga as someone who believes her opinions to be the only truth, thus being blind to other's opinions. However, her epiphany takes place once her glasses have been removed. The implications are that her glasses function as the blindfold which prevents her from seeing beyond her self-constructed reality and opinions which need to be removed by Pointer –the prophet– in order to allow the epiphany and the subsequent divine illumination into her soul. This reading of Hulga's epiphany is reinforced by Asals, who stated that "Incapable of doubt or self-questioning, her protagonists are incapable of the flexibility of development, and the climaxes of the stories confront them with the

[6] Love.

startling image of all they have denied. Their eyes are finally "shocked clean" …" (93). This is what happens to Hulga, whose experience with Pointer confronts her with a reality she had never imagined: an apparently innocent Christian able to trick, abuse and beat her in intellectual terms. As said before, it is her pride that leads her to that situation.

Moreover, her pride can be connected to the concept of hubris[7], already present in Melville, an author whom in some senses, O'Connor resembles (Orvel 39). As him, she also was interested in darkness and evil, but the consequence of that excess of pride differs. While in Melville it causes Ahab to die, and therefore be punished, O'Connor's characters are punished as well, but just to immediately be enlightened by God's grace.

The third aspect of the character of Hulga is her resemblance to O'Connor herself. Although as stated by Bieber Lake (124), Hulga cannot be considered an exact double of O'Connor, some similarities between them cannot be overlooked. The first and most obvious is that both lived with their mothers on a farm because of their poor health. Moreover, their mother-daughter relationship is similar when, as said before, it comes to cultural and educational differences as well as in how they talked to their mothers. However, it must be mentioned that O'Connor did not treat Regina as disrespectfully as Hulga treated Mrs. Hopewell and just limited herself to soft, gentle mocking. Additionally, their clothes also create a bond between them. As pointed out by Miller, O'Connor wrote that the ugly sweatshirt Hulga wore was similar to the one she wore in real life and points out that Mrs. O'Connor disapproved of Flannery's dressing, just as Mrs. Hopewell does with Hulga, something that both daughters enjoyed. Nevertheless, what connects and separates them the most is their health and their sexuality. Oxymoronic as this may seem, the way they regard their physical impediments is different. While O'Connor made humorous remarks about her crutches, Hulga gives a much more serious meaning to her leg, even to the extent of considering it a part of her identity. As confirmed by Bieber Lake (130), Hulga gives her wooden leg a spiritual meaning, which turns out to signify her own virginity. The leg is Hulga's very essence. On the one hand, the accident happened when she was ten years old, and therefore, she had to learn how to live with disability since young. Although at the time the story takes

[7] Mainly connected to classical heroes and to tragedies such as *Hamlet*.

place she is portrayed as having lost all traces of shame thanks to her education "As a child she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer … (192), Pointer's request to show him the leg cause her conception of the world and her own self to break apart. She realizes that her education, a central part of her identity which has acted as a shield so far, is not useful in this situation**,** and being asked to take out her leg means opening herself in a spiritual sense. Because of what the leg means, she is extremely conscious about it. "But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away (192)". These lines show how the act of showing her leg means exposing her hidden self and insecurities to Pointer. Similarly, on the other hand, the leg also acts as a sexual symbol. The act of stealing the leg constitutes a symbolic rape. The reason for this is that she is a virgin who has just had her first kiss and, more importantly, has surrendered to Pointer's depraved desires. Once she has accepted his request, there is nothing left for her but emptiness, as her true being has been exposed. Convincing Hulga to show her and stealing it are the physical representations of what Pointer has achieved. Her inner self has been penetrated and played with. Apart from the connection between Hulga's leg and O'Connor's crutches, O'Connor can be linked to this through the comparison of the leg to a peacock's tail and her habit of keeping fowls as pets, and more deeply, with O'Connor and her sexuality. According to Link, O'Connor was a virgin like Hulga. Lastly, the link between Hulga's view of her leg as a symbol of her essence and O'Connor can be further connected through O'Connor's conception of the physical body as the embodiment of the spiritual realm, and furthermore, as a necessary tool to experience pain, and consequently undergo a process of spiritual evolution. (Oates, "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor" 47-49).

3.3- Manley Pointer: Religion, grace and mythoclasm

As pointed out before, two of O'Connor's motivations for writing were her Catholic faith and the desire to deconstruct the traditional image that had historically been given of the South. In order to analyze this, Pointer is taken as the leading thread. Pointer acts as the agent for divine grace, he is the vehicle that delivers that grace to Hulga. It could be said that O'Connor was driven by a religious sentiment which she wanted readers to

be aware of, and ultimately, share with her. However, she did so in a subtle way. She did want to raise religious awareness, but not to impose it. Also, her target was the Christians –Catholics and non-Catholics– (Cofer 7). What is unique about her writing is her particular approach. She is not what would be expected of a traditional Christian writer, but someone whose deep theological knowledge allowed her to be critical with how religion and its practice were understood. As Cofer explains, O'Connor did not approve of the way the Catholic Church approached the exercise of faith. She was critical with the Church's lack of interest in intellectual self-reflection and its interest in stablishing a somehow standardized cult consisting in "readymade" (sic) prayers (3). It is precisely from that critical vision that her interest in raising religious awareness springs. Her belief was that once readers are aware of their own faith, they can start that intellectual, introspective search for Christian spirituality.

In connection to her vision of the spiritual and the earthly, she thought that the way of penetrating the spiritual realm could not be direct. When talking about Christian writers in *Mystery and Manners*, she stated that "The real novelist … knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is" (163). This proves to be true, in the sense that she did not approach the Christian faith in the way other Christian writers did, but showing what is grotesque and unpleasing, but at the same time, possible to find in the real world. Not only that, the setting of her stories is also relevant. By placing them in the South, the relation she had with Protestantism can also be seen. According to Simpson, O'Connor differed from Protestant Evangelicals in a basic issue: While they tried to convert people to Christianism, she focused on those who were already Christians because she believed they needed to daily remember that they were dependent on God's grace (53). Since her scope was Christians in general, the South seemed to be the right place for her task. The fact that the South was mainly Protestant was not a problem for her. In this sense, Simpson argues that O'Connor willingly overlooked the differences between Catholics and Protestants and saw both groups as "cousins in Faith" (53). Moreover, Simpson argues that living in the Bible Belt helped her to deliver her message, as its inhabitants still held to the Christian faith, although that society was becoming more and more secular. Simpson also emphasizes that the difficulty of addressing a readership which was less familiar with the Bible than before motivated O'Connor to depict the world as it truly was.

This is connected to her preference for a kind of prophet that is not heroic, but can be found in the real world: outcasts (Cofer 35). To this respect, Pointer serves as an appropriate example. He is an outcast and a nihilist, and also, together with Hulga, represents the opposite to Southern traditional values. Contrary to what it might seem, his being the opposite to those values does not characterize him as a bad character. He is an instrumental device that O'Connor uses for her other intention: To demystify the South. The concept of mythoclasm is key for the understanding of this. "Good Country People" undermines several of the notions associated with what the South allegedly meant. Two of them are the goodness of its peoples and the feeling of safety within rural communities. This is questioned by the easiness with which Pointer is able to penetrate the Hopewells' sphere and harm Hulga. Apart from that, he is a nihilist like Hulga. These two characters serve to undermine another of the clichés related to the South: that it is a religious space. Furthermore, even religious characters such as Mrs. Hopewell do not behave according to religious rules. She lies to Pointer about where her Bible is (178). Her daughter too, proves useful in that demystifying task. Apart from her atheism, she is the reversal of the Southern Belle. She is ugly, masculine, and, all in all, a grotesque freak. Finally, as Nadal remarks, these characters are the embodiment of prejudice and pride, features associated with the South, but which bear negative connotations (186). This further reinforces O'Connor's intention of depicting a different South from that of the traditional imagery.

4- Conclusions

This paper has analyzed how some of the characteristics of Flannery O'Connor's writing —religion and mythoclasm— are reflected and exemplified in her tale "Good Country People". O'Connor's religious impulse is seen in the epiphany that Hulga experiences. Moreover, the fact that Hulga is the recipient of grace reinforces the idea that the ones who show a wrong behaviour and act in an arrogant way are the subjects of divine enlightenment in O'Connor. Also, her desire to reach Christians in general can be seen in the fact that the characters of this tale are Christian, but most likely not Roman Catholics. Apart from religion, her desire to deconstruct the traditional image of the South is also reflected in this tale. She achieves that objective through the figures of Hulga and Manley Pointer. Hulga serves to deconstruct and parody the image of the Southern Belle while Pointer is used to put into question the clichés of the rural South as an idyllic and safe place, populated by good country people. Also, both of them are atheists, which further deconstructs the image of the South, traditionally regarded as the Bible Belt. Apart from those two characteristics, this tale reflects O'Connor's literary influences as well. Southern Gothic elements are found in this tale, especially in the figure of Hulga, grotesque and freak, and in the insanity, violence, fetishism, and sexual aberrations embodied by Manley Pointer. Also, other Southern Gothic characteristics present in the tale, dark humor and agrarianism, are reflected by the pun that the name of Pointer constitutes and the rural setting of the tale. A third influence in O'Connor, the Southern Renaissance, is present in this tale as well. This influence is shown in the above mentioned intention to re-examine the traditional South's image, and the intention to depict Southern society with a critical perspective. Additionally, a more personal approach is that Hulga has aspects in common with O'Connor. This comes represented by their academic education, common weak health, difficulties to walk, keenness on ugly clothes and the fact that both live on a farm with their mothers in the rural South.

Finally, taking into account all the elements discussed in the preceding analysis, it can be concluded that Flannery O'Connor's fiction brilliantly epitomizes the defining characteristics of Southern writing, as well as constitutes an original link between the literature of the Southern Renaissance and present-day "post-Southern" trends. It is revealing that O'Connor's violent plots, grotesque characters and revisionist approach have lost their marginal status in the literary canon to become paradigmatic elements in

the history of world literature. Her growing influence on contemporary writers demonstrates that her literary strategies and visionary impulse keep opening new paths to writers and readers of the 21th century.

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6- Annexes

Good Country People, by Flannery O'Connor

Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings. Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck. Her eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it. She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement, but when she did, her face came to a complete stop, there was an almost imperceptible movement of her black eyes, during which they seemed to be receding, and then the observer would see that Mrs. Freeman, though she might stand there as real as several grain sacks thrown on top of each other, was no longer there in spirit. As for getting anything across to her when this was the case, Mrs. Hopewell had given it up. She might talk her head off. Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong to any point. She would stand there and if she could be brought to say anything, it was something like, "Well, I wouldn't of said it was and I wouldn't of said it wasn't" or letting her gaze range over the top kitchen shelf where there was an assortment of dusty bottles, she might remark, "I see you ain't ate many of them figs you put up last summer."

They carried on their most important business in the kitchen at breakfast. Every morning Mrs. Hopewell got up at seven o'clock and lit her gas heater and Joy's. Joy was her daughter, a large blonds girl who had an artificial leg. Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated. Joy would get up while her mother was eating and lumber into the bathroom and slam the door, and before long, Mrs. Freeman would arrive at the back door. Joy would hear her mother call, "Come on in," and then they would talk for a while in low voices that were indistinguishable in the bathroom. By the time Joy came in, they had usually finished the weather report and were on one or the other of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese or Carramae. Joy called them Glycerin and Caramel. Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and

pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Every morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report.

Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a lady and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet. Then she would tell how she had happened to hire the Freemans in the first place and how they were a godsend to her and how she had had them four years. The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash. They were good country people. She had telephoned the man whose name they had given as reference and he had told her that Mr. Freeman was a good farmer but that his wife was the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth. “She’s got to be into everything,” the man said. “If she don’t get there before the dust settles, you can bet she’s dead, that’s all. She’ll want to know all your business. I can stand him real good,” he had said, “but me nor my wife neither could have stood that woman one more minute on this place.” That had put Mrs. Hopewell off for a few days.

She had hired them in the end because there were no other applicants but she had made up her mind beforehand exactly how she would handle the woman. Since she was the type who had to be into everything, then, Mrs. Hopewell had decided, she would not only let her be into everything, she would see to it that she was into everything

– she would give her the responsibility of everything, she would put her in charge. Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people’s in such a constructive way that she had kept them four years.

Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too. She would make these statements, usually at the table, in a tone of gentle insistence as if no one held them but her, and the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who had achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.

When Mrs. Hopewell said to Mrs. Freeman that life was like that, Mrs. Freeman would say, “I always said so myself.” Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her. She was quicker than Mr. Freeman. When Mrs. Hopewell said to her after they had been on the place for a while, “You know, you’re the wheel behind

the wheel," and winked, Mrs. Freeman had said, "I know it. I've always been quick. It's some that are quicker than others."

"Everybody is different," Mrs. Hopewell said.

"Yes, most people is," Mrs. Freeman said. "It takes all kinds to make the world."

"I always said it did myself."

The girl was used to this kind of dialogue for breakfast and more of it for dinner; sometimes they had it for supper too. When they had no guest they ate in the kitchen because that was easier. Mrs. Freeman always managed to arrive at some point during the meal and to watch them finish it. She would stand in the doorway if it were summer but in the winter she would stand with one elbow on top of the refrigerator and look down at them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly. Occasionally she would stand against the wall and roll her head from side to side. At no time was she in any hurry to leave. All this was very trying on Mrs. Hopewell but she was a woman of great patience. She realized that nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you get good country people, you had better hang onto them.

She had had plenty of experience with trash. Before the Freemans she had averaged one tenant family a year. The wives of these farmers were not the kind you would want to be around you for very long. Mrs. Hopewell, who had divorced her husband long ago, needed someone to walk over the fields with her; and when Joy had to be impressed for these services, her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, "If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all," to which the girl, standing square and rigid- shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, "If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM."

Mrs. Hopewell excused this attitude because of the leg (which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten). It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times. Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. Then she had gone and had the

beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga.

When Mrs. Hopewell thought the name, Hulga, she thought of the broad blank hull of a battleship. She would not use it. She continued to call her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way.

Hulga had learned to tolerate Mrs. Freeman who saved her from taking walks with her mother. Even Glynese and Carramae were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her. At first she had thought she could not stand Mrs. Freeman for she had found it was not possible to be rude to her. Mrs. Freeman would take on strange resentments and for days together she would be sullen but the source of her displeasure was always obscure; a direct attack, a positive leer, blatant ugliness to her face – these never touched her. And without warning one day, she began calling her Hulga.

She did not call her that in front of Mrs. Hopewell who would have been incensed but when she and the girl happened to be out of the house together, she would say something and add the name Hulga to the end of it, and the big spectacled Joy-Hulga would scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon. She considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga. However, Mrs. Freeman's relish for using the name only irritated her. It was as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact. Something about her seemed to fascinate Mrs. Freeman and then one day Hulga realized that it was the artificial leg. Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago.

When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it – Mrs. Hopewell was certain – because it was ugly-

sounding), she glanced at them and did not speak. Mrs. Hopewell would be in her red kimono with her hair tied around her head in rags. She would be sitting at the table, finishing her breakfast and Mrs. Freeman would be hanging by her elbow outward from the refrigerator, looking down at the table. Hulga always put her eggs on the stove to boil and then stood over them with her arms folded, and Mrs. Hopewell would look at her – a kind of indirect gaze divided between her and Mrs. Freeman – and would think that if she would only keep herself up a little, she wouldn't be so bad looking. There was nothing wrong with her face that a pleasant expression wouldn't help. Mrs. Hopewell said that people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not.

Whenever she looked at Joy this way, she could not help but feel that it would have been better if the child had not taken the Ph.D. It had certainly not brought her out any and now that she had it, there was no more excuse for her to go to school again. Mrs. Hopewell thought it was nice for girls to go to school to have a good time but Joy had "gone through." Anyhow, she would not have been strong enough to go again. The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. She had a weak heart. Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about. And Mrs. Hopewell could very well picture here there, looking like a scarecrow and lecturing to more of the same. Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought this was funny; Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child. She was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense. It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like other people and more like herself – bloated, rude, and squint-eyed. And she said such strange things! To her own mother she had said – without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full – "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!" Mrs. Hopewell had no idea to this day what brought that on. She had only made the remark, hoping Joy would take it in, that a smile never hurt anyone.

The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, "My daughter is a nurse," or "My daughter is a school teacher," or

even, “My daughter is a chemical engineer.” You could not say, “My daughter is a philosopher.” That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans. All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but she didn’t like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men. She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity.

One day Mrs. Hopewell had picked up one of the books the girl had just put down and opening it at random, she read, “Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing – how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.” These words had been underlined with a blue pencil and they worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish. She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill.

This morning when the girl came in, Mrs. Freeman was on Carramae. “She thrown up four times after supper,” she said, “and was up twict in the night after three o’clock. Yesterday she didn’t do nothing but ramble in the bureau drawer. All she did. Stand up there and see what she could run up on.”

“She’s got to eat,” Mrs. Hopewell muttered, sipping her coffee, while she watched Joy’s back at the stove. She was wondering what the child had said to the Bible salesman. She could not imagine what kind of a conversation she could possibly have had with him.

He was a tall gaunt hatless youth who had called yesterday to sell them a Bible. He had appeared at the door, carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the door facing. He seemed on the point of collapse but he said in a cheerful voice, “Good morning, Mrs. Cedars!” and set the suitcase down on the mat. He was not a bad-looking young man though he had on a bright blue suit and yellow socks that were not pulled up far enough. He had prominent face bones and a streak of sticky-looking brown hair falling across his forehead.

“I’m Mrs. Hopewell,” she said.

“Oh!” he said, pretending to look puzzled but with his eyes sparkling, “I saw it said ‘The Cedars’ on the mailbox so I thought you was Mrs. Cedars!” and he burst out in a pleasant laugh. He picked up the satchel and under cover of a pant, he fell forward into her hall. It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it. “Mrs.

Hopewell!" he said and grabbed her hand. "I hope you are well!" and he laughed again and then all at once his face sobered completely.

He paused and gave her a straight earnest look and said, "Lady, I've come to speak of serious things."

"Well, come in," she muttered, none too pleased because her dinner was almost ready. He came into the parlor and sat down on the edge of a straight chair and put the suitcase between his feet and glanced around the room as if he were sizing her up by it. Her silver gleamed on the two sideboards; she decided he had never been in a room as elegant as this.

"Mrs. Hopewell," he began, using her name in a way that sounded almost intimate, "I know you believe in Chrustian service."

"Well, yes," she murmured.

"I know," he said and paused, looking very wise with his head cocked on one side, "that you're a good woman. Friends have told me."

Mrs. Hopewell never liked to be taken for a fool. "What are you selling?" she asked.

"Bibles," the young man said and his eye raced around the room before he added, "I see you have no family Bible in your parlor, I see that is the one lack you got!"

Mrs. Hopewell could not say, "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor." She said, stiffening slightly, "I keep my Bible by my bedside." This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere.

"Lady," he said, "the word of God ought to be in the parlor." "Well, I think that's a matter of taste," she began, "I think…"

"Lady," he said, "for a Chrustian, the word of God ought to be in every room in the house besides in his heart. I know you're a Chrustian because I can see it in every line of your face."

She stood up and said, "Well, young man, I don't want to buy a Bible and I smell my dinner burning."

He didn't get up. He began to twist his hands and looking down at them, he said softly, "Well lady, I'll tell you the truth – not many people want to buy one nowadays and besides, I know I'm real simple. I don't know how to say a thing but to say it. I'm just a country boy." He glanced up into her unfriendly face. "People like you don't like to fool with country people like me!"

“Why!” she cried, “good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go ‘round. That’s life!”
“You said a mouthful,” he said.
“Why, I think there aren’t enough good country people in the world!” she said, stirred. “I think that’s what’s wrong with it!”

His face had brightened. “I didn’t intraduce myself,” he said. “I’m Manley Pointer from out in the country around Willohobie, not even from a place, just from near a place.”
“You wait a minute,” she said. “I have to see about my dinner.” She went out to the kitchen and found Joy standing near the door where she had been listening.
“Get rid of the salt of the earth,” she said, “and let’s eat.”
Mrs. Hopewell gave her a pained look and turned the heat down under the vegetables. “I can’t be rude to anybody,” she murmured and went back into the parlor.
He had opened the suitcase and was sitting with a Bible on each knee.
“I appreciate your honesty,” he said. “You don’t see any more real honest people unless you go way out in the country.”
“I know,” she said, “real genuine folks!” Through the crack in the door she heard a groan.
“I guess a lot of boys come telling you they’re working their way through college,” he said, “but I’m not going to tell you that. Somehow,” he said, “I don’t want to go to college. I want to devote my life to Chrustian service. See,” he said, lowering his voice, “I got this heart condition. I may not live long. When you know it’s something wrong with you and you may not live long, well then, lady…” He paused, with his mouth open, and stared at her.
He and Joy had the same condition! She knew that her eyes were filling with tears but she collected herself quickly and murmured, “Won’t you stay for dinner? We’d love to have you!” and was sorry the instant she heard herself say it.
“Yes mam,” he said in an abashed voice. “I would sher love to do that!”
Joy had given him one look on being introduced to him and then throughout the meal had not glanced at him again. He had addressed several remarks to her, which she had pretended not to hear. Mrs. Hopewell could not understand deliberate rudeness, although she lived with it, and she felt she had always to overflow with hospitality to make up for Joy’s lack of courtesy. She urged him to talk about himself and he did. He said he was the seventh child of twelve and that his father had been crushed under a tree

when he himself was eight years old. He had been crushed very badly, in fact, almost cut in two and was practically not recognizable. His mother had got along the best she could by hard working and she had always seen that her children went to Sunday School and that they read the Bible every evening. He was now nineteen years old and he had been selling Bibles for four months. In that time he had sold seventy-seven Bibles and had the promise of two more sales. He wanted to become a missionary because he thought that was the way you could do most for people. “He who losest his life shall find it,” he said simply and he was so sincere, so genuine and earnest that Mrs. Hopewell would not for the world have smiled. He prevented his peas from sliding onto the table by blocking them with a piece of bread which he later cleaned his plate with. She could see Joy observing sidewise how he handled his knife and fork and she saw too that every few minutes, the boy would dart a keen appraising glance at the girl as if he were trying to attract her attention.

After dinner Joy cleared the dishes off the table and disappeared and Mrs. Hopewell was left to talk with him. He told her again about his childhood and his father’s accident and about various things that had happened to him. Every five minutes or so she would stifle a yawn. He sat for two hours until finally she told him she must go because she had an appointment in town. He packed his Bibles and thanked her and prepared to leave, but in the doorway he stopped and wring her hand and said that not on any of his trips had he met a lady as nice as her and he asked if he could come again. She had said she would always be happy to see him.

Joy had been standing in the road, apparently looking at something in the distance, when he came down the steps toward her, bent to the side with his heavy valise. He stopped where she was standing and confronted her directly. Mrs. Hopewell could not hear what he said but she trembled to think what Joy would say to him. She could see that after a minute Joy said something and that then the boy began to speak again, making an excited gesture with his free hand. After a minute Joy said something else at which the boy began to speak once more. Then to her amazement, Mrs. Hopewell saw the two of them walk off together, toward the gate. Joy had walked all the way to the gate with him and Mrs. Hopewell could not imagine what they had said to each other, and she had not yet dared to ask.

Mrs. Freeman was insisting upon her attention. She had moved from the refrigerator to the heater so that Mrs. Hopewell had to turn and face her in order to seem to be

listening. “Glynese gone out with Harvey Hill again last night,” she said. “She had this sty.”

“Hill,” Mrs. Hopewell said absently, “is that the one who works in the garage?”

“Nome, he’s the one that goes to chiropractor school,” Mrs. Freeman said. “She had this sty. Been had it two days. So she says when he brought her in the other night he says, ‘Lemme get rid of that sty for you,’ and she says, ‘How?’ and he says, ‘You just lay yourself down acrost the seat of that car and I’ll show you.’ So she done it and he popped her neck. Kept on a-popping it several times until he made him quit. This morning,” Mrs. Freeman said, “she ain’t got no sty. She ain’t got no traces of a sty.”

“I never heard of that before,” Mrs. Hopewell said.

“He ast her to marry him before the Ordinary,” Mrs. Freeman went on, “and she told him she wasn’t going to be married in no office.” “Well, Glynese is a fine girl,” Mrs. Hopewell said. “Glynese and Carramae are both fine girls.”

“Carramae said when her and Lyman was married Lyman said it sure felt sacred to him. She said he said he wouldn’t take five hundred dollars for being married by a preacher.”

“How much would he take?” the girl asked from the stove.

“He said he wouldn’t take five hundred dollars,” Mrs. Freeman repeated.

“Well we all have work to do,” Mrs. Hopewell said.

“Lyman said it just felt more sacred to him,” Mrs. Freeman said. “The doctor wants Carramae to eat prunes. Says instead of medicine. Says them cramps is coming from pressure. You know where I think it is?”

“She’ll be better in a few weeks,” Mrs. Hopewell said.

“In the tube,” Mrs. Freeman said. “Else she wouldn’t be as sick as she is.”

Hulga had cracked her two eggs into a saucer and was bringing them to the table along with a cup of coffee that she had filled too full. She sat down carefully and began to eat, meaning to keep Mrs. Freeman there by questions if for any reason she showed an inclination to leave. She could perceive her mother’s eye on her. The first round-about question would be about the Bible salesman and she did not wish to bring it on. “How did he pop her neck?” she asked.

Mrs. Freeman went into a description of how he had popped her neck. She said he owned a ’55 Mercury but that Glynese said she would rather marry a man with only a ’36 Plymouth who would be married by a preacher. The girl asked what if he had a ’32 Plymouth and Mrs. Freeman said what Glynese had said was a ’36 Plymouth.

Mrs. Hopewell said there were not many girls with Glynese's common sense. She said what she admired in those girls was their common sense. She said that reminded her that they had had a nice visitor yesterday, a young man selling Bibles. "Lord," she said, "he bored me to death but he was so sincere and genuine I couldn't be rude to him. He was just good country people, you know," she said, "— just the salt of the earth."

"I seen him walk up," Mrs. Freeman said, "and then later – I seen him walk off," and Hulga could feel the slight shift in her voice, the slight insinuation, that he had not walked off alone, had he? Her face remained expressionless but the color rose into her neck and she seemed to swallow it down with the next spoonful of egg. Mrs. Freeman was looking at her as if they had a secret together.

"Well, it takes all kinds of people to make the world go 'round," Mrs. Hopewell said. "It's very good we aren't all alike."

"Some people are more alike than others," Mrs. Freeman said.

Hulga got up and stumped, with about twice the noise that was necessary, into her room and locked the door. She was to meet the Bible salesman at ten o'clock at the gate. She had thought about it half the night. She had started thinking of it as a great joke and then she had begun to see profound implications in it. She had lain in bed imagining dialogues for them that were insane on the surface but that reached below the depths that no Bible salesman would be aware of. Their conversation yesterday had been of this kind.

He had stopped in front of her and had simply stood there. His face was bony and sweaty and bright, with a little pointed nose in the center of it, and his look was different from what it had been at the dinner table. He was gazing at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo, and he was breathing as if he had run a great distance to reach her. His gaze seemed somehow familiar but she could not think where she had been regarded with it before. For almost a minute he didn't say anything. Then on what seemed an insuck of breath, he whispered, "You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?"

The girl looked at him stonily. He might have just put this question up for consideration at the meeting of a philosophical association. "Yes," she presently replied as if she had considered it from all angles.

"It must have been mighty small!" he said triumphantly and shook all over with little nervous giggles, getting very red in the face, and subsiding finally into his gaze of complete admiration, while the girl's expression remained exactly the same.

“How old are you?” he asked softly.
She waited some time before she answered. Then in a flat voice she said, “Seventeen.”

His smiles came in succession like waves breaking on the surface of a little lake. “I see you got a wooden leg,” he said. “I think you’re real brave. I think you’re real sweet.”
The girl stood blank and solid and silent.
“Walk to the gate with me,” he said. “You’re a brave sweet little thing and I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door.”
Hulga began to move forward.
“What’s your name?” he asked, smiling down on the top of her head.
“Hulga,” she said.
“Hulga,” he murmured, “Hulga. Hulga. I never heard of anybody name Hulga before. You’re shy, aren’t you, Hulga?” he asked.
She nodded, watching his large red hand on the handle of the giant valise.
“I like girls that wear glasses,” he said. “I think a lot. I’m not like these people that a serious thought don’t ever enter their heads. It’s because I may die.”
“I may die too,” she said suddenly and looked up at him. His eyes were very small and brown, glittering feverishly.
“Listen,” he said, “don’t you think some people was meant to meet on account of what all they got in common and all? Like they both think serious thoughts and all?” He shifted the valise to his other hand so that the hand nearest her was free. He caught hold of her elbow and shook it a little. “I don’t work on Saturday,” he said. “I like to walk in the woods and see what Mother Nature is wearing. O’er the hills and far away. Picnics and things. Couldn’t we go on a picnic tomorrow? Say yes, Hulga,” he said and gave her a dying look as if he felt his insides about to drop out of him. He had even seemed to sway slightly toward her.
During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.

She set off for the gate at exactly ten o'clock, escaping without drawing Mrs. Hopewell's attention. She didn't take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic. She wore a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt, and as an afterthought, she had put some Vapex on the collar of it since she did not own any perfume. When she reached the gate no one was there.

She looked up and down the empty highway and had the furious feeling that she had been tricked, that he only meant to make her walk to the gate after the idea of him. Then suddenly he stood up, very tall, from behind a bush on the opposite embankment. Smiling, he lifted his hat which was new and wide-brimmed. He had not worn it yesterday and she wondered if he had bought it for the occasion. It was toast-colored with a red and white band around it and was slightly too large for him. He stepped from behind the bush still carrying the black valise. He had on the same suit and the same yellow socks sucked down in his shoes from walking. He crossed the highway and said, "I knew you'd come!"

The girl wondered acidly how he had known this. She pointed to the valise and asked, "Why did you bring your Bibles?"

He took her elbow, smiling down on her as if he could not stop. "You can never tell when you'll need the word of God, Hulga," he said. She had a moment in which she doubted that this was actually happening and then they began to climb the embankment. They went down into the pasture toward the woods. The boy walked lightly by her side, bouncing on his toes. The valise did not seem to be heavy today; he even swung it. They crossed half the pasture without saying anything and then, putting his hand easily on the small of her back, he asked softly, "Where does your wooden leg join on?"

She turned an ugly red and glared at him and for an instant the boy looked abashed. "I didn't mean you no harm," he said. "I only meant you're so brave and all. I guess God takes care of you."

"No," she said, looking forward and walking fast, "I don't even believe in God."

At this he stopped and whistled. "No!" he exclaimed as if he were too astonished to say anything else.

She walked on and in a second he was bouncing at her side, fanning with his hat. "That's very unusual for a girl," he remarked, watching her out of the corner of his eye. When they reached the edge of the wood, he put his hand on her back again and drew her against him without a word and kissed her heavily.

The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. When the boy, looking expectant but uncertain, pushed her gently away, she turned and walked on, saying nothing as if such business, for her, were common enough.

He came along panting at her side, trying to help her when he saw a root that she might trip over. He caught and held back the long swaying blades of thorn vine until she had passed beyond them. She led the way and he came breathing heavily behind her. Then they came out on a sunlit hillside, sloping softly into another one a little smaller. Beyond, they could see the rusted top of the old barn where the extra hay was stored.

The hill was sprinkled with small pink weeds. "Then you ain't saved?" he asked suddenly, stopping.

The girl smiled. It was the first time she had smiled at him at all. "In my economy," she said, "I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God."

Nothing seemed to destroy the boy's look of admiration. He gazed at her now as if the fantastic animal at the zoo had put its paw through the bars and given him a loving poke. She thought he looked as if he wanted to kiss her again and she walked on before he had the chance.

"Ain't there somewheres we can sit down sometime?" he murmured, his voice softening toward the end of the sentence.

"In that barn," she said.

They made for it rapidly as if it might slide away like a train. It was a large two-story barn, cook and dark inside. The boy pointed up the ladder that led into the loft and said, "It's too bad we can't go up there."

"Why can't we?" she asked. "Yer leg," he said reverently.

The girl gave him a contemptuous look and putting both hands on the ladder, she climbed it while he stood below, apparently awestruck. She pulled herself expertly through the opening and then looked down at him and said, "Well, come on if your coming," and he began to climb the ladder, awkwardly bringing the suitcase with him.

"We won't need the Bible," she observed.

“You never can tell,” he said, panting. After he had got into the loft, he was a few seconds catching his breath. She had sat down in a pile of straw. A wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles, slanted over her. She lay back against a bale, her face turned away, looking out the front opening of the barn where hay was thrown from a wagon into the loft. The two pink-speckled hillsides lay back against a dark ridge of woods. The sky was cloudless and cold blue. The boy dropped down by her side and put one arm under her and the other over her and began methodically kissing her face, making little noises like a fish. He did not remove his hat but it was pushed far enough back not to interfere. When her glasses got in his way, he took them off of her and slipped them into his pocket.

The girl at first did not return any of the kisses but presently she began to and after she had put several on his cheek, she reached his lips and remained there, kissing him again and again as if she were trying to draw all the breath out of him. His breath was clear and sweet like a child’s and the kisses were sticky like a child’s. He mumbled about loving her and about knowing when he first seen her that he loved her, but the mumbling was like the sleepy fretting of a child being put to sleep by his mother. Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings. “You ain’t said you loved me none,” he whispered finally, pulling back from her. “You got to say that.”

She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and then down at a black ridge and then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes. She didn’t realize he had taken her glasses but this landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.

“You got to say it,” he repeated. “You got to say you love me.”

She was always careful how she committed herself. “In a sense,” she began, “if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it’s not a word I use. I don’t have illusions. I’m one of those people who see through to nothing.”

The boy was frowning. “You got to say it. I said it and you got to say it,” he said.

The girl looked at him almost tenderly. “You poor baby,” she murmured. “It’s just as well you don’t understand,” and she pulled him by the neck, face-down, against her. “We are all damned,” she said, “but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation.”

The boy’s astonished eyes looked blankly through the ends of her hair. “Okay,” he almost whined, “but do you love me or don’tcher?”

“Yes,” she said and added, “in a sense. But I must tell you something. There mustn’t be anything dishonest between us.” She lifted his head and looked him in the eye. “I am thirty years old,” she said. “I have a number of degrees.”

The boy’s look was irritated but dogged. “I don’t care,” he said. “I don’t care a thing about what all you done. I just want to know if you love me or don’tcher?” and he caught her to him and wildly planted her face with kisses until she said, “Yes, yes.”

“Okay then,” he said, letting her go. “Prove it.”

She smiled, looking dreamily out on the shifty landscape. She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try. “How?” she asked, feeling that he should be delayed a little.

He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. “Show me where your wooden leg joins on,” he whispered.

The girl uttered a sharp little cry and her face instantly drained of color. The obscenity of the suggestion was not what shocked her. As a child she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer; she would no more have felt it over what he was asking than she would have believed in his Bible. But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away. “No,” she said.

“I known it,” he muttered, sitting up. “You’re just playing me for a sucker.”

“On no no!” she cried. “It joins on at the knee. Only at the knee.

Why do you want to see it?”

The boy gave her a long penetrating look. “Because,” he said, “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else.”

She sat staring at him. There was nothing about her face or her round freezing-blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, “All right,” it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.

Very gently, he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly

jointure where it was attached to the stump. The boy's face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, "Now show me how to take it off and on."

She took it off for him and put it back on again and then he took it off himself, handling it as tenderly as if it were a real one. "See!" he said with a delighted child's face. "Now I can do it myself!"

"Put it back on," she said. She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again. "Put it back on," she said.

"Not yet," he murmured, setting it on its foot out of her reach. "Leave it off for awhile. You got me instead."

She gave a little cry of alarm but he pushed her down and began to kiss her again. Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at. Different expressions raced back and forth over her face. Every now and then the boy, his eyes like two steel spikes, would glance behind him where the leg stood. Finally she pushed him off and said, "Put it back on me now."

"Wait," he said. He leaned the other way and pulled the valise toward him and opened it. It had a pale blue spotted lining and there were only two Bibles in it. He took one of these out and opened the cover of it. It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it. He laid these out in front of her one at a time in an evenly-spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess. He put the blue box in her hand. THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE, she read, and dropped it. The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask. He stopped and pointed, with a smile, to the deck of cards. It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card. "Take a swig," he said, offering her the bottle first. He held it in front of her, but like one mesmerized, she did not move.

Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. "Aren't you," she murmured, "aren't you just good country people?"

The boy cocked his head. He looked as if he were just beginning to understand that she might be trying to insult him. "Yeah," he said, curling his lip slightly, "but it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week."

"Give me my leg," she said.

He pushed it farther away with his foot. “Come on now, let’s begin to have us a good time,” he said coaxingly. “We ain’t got to know one another good yet.”
“Give me my leg!” she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily.

“What’s the matter with you all of a sudden?” he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. “You just a while ago said you didn’t believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl!”
Her face was almost purple. “You’re a Christian!” she hissed. “You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all – say one thing and do another. You’re a perfect Christian, you’re…”
The boy’s mouth was set angrily. “I hope you don’t think,” he said in a lofty indignant tone, “that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!”
“Give me my leg!” she screeched. He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box back into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg and then she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends. He slammed the lid shut and snatched up the valise and swung it down the hole and then stepped through himself. When all of him had passed but his head, he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration in it. “I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things,” he said. “One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way. And you needn’t to think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don’t stay nowhere long. And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,” he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” and then the toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.
Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture, digging up onions, saw him emerge a little later from the woods and head across the meadow toward the highway. “Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday,” Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. “He must have been selling them to the Negroes back in there. He was so simple,” she said, “but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple.”

Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. "Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could."