“NOBODY OWING NOBODY NOTHING”:

READING FLANNERY O’CONNOR ANEW THROUGH

THE ETHICS OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

"Nobody Owing Nobody Nothing":
Reading Flannery O'Connor Anew Through the Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas

Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

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Emmanuel Levinas famously claimed ethics as the first philosophy, arguing that all metaphysical and epistemological claims should be built upon an understanding of an individual's nonreciprocal responsibility to the other. This dissertation argues that Levinas's ethics offers a framework and language through which to read anew the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Like Levinas, O'Connor's *oeuvre* insists upon the individual's nonreciprocal responsibility to the other. Through an explanation and exploration of some of Levinas's most important concepts—namely the *face-to-face encounter with the other*, *nonreciprocal responsibility*, *alienation*, *disruption*, *trauma*, and *sameness versus otherness*—this dissertation reveals how we can understand in new and significant ways the moral fabric and anthropological underpinnings of O'Connor's fiction.

Levinas's ethics helps us connect the characters' solipsism, the violence that populates the fiction, and the stories' moments of grace and conversion. Throughout O'Connor's fiction, isolated and estranged characters are challenged to accept responsibility for the other, whether the other is hired help, like Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person"; a grandson, like Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger"; or a violent criminal, like The Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In all three stories, the characters must encounter their responsibility to the other prior to having their personal

epiphanies. While they encounter a deeply mysterious and spiritual reality, they must first encounter their practical obligation to their fellow man before they can receive the grace of conversion. Levinas explains how this encounter with the other—this encounter with the other as truly *other*—is disruptive and even traumatic. But O'Connor's fiction, extending Levinas's ethics, also reveals how an acceptance of responsibility can become a gateway into personal fulfillment and even bliss.

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An Introduction

> "'And that's the way it ought to be in this world— nobody owing nobody nothing.'"
>
> --Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*

> "'…each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all"
>
> --Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is a fruitful critical lens through which to reread Flannery O'Connor's fiction. The terms and structure of Levinas's ethics offer a language and narrative framework that illuminate the moral landscape of the fiction. Levinas's claim that we are nonreciprocally and infinitely responsible for the other elucidates the fiction's moral and anthropological claims. Read anew through Levinas, seemingly disparate themes and concerns in the fiction appear intimately connected. We see how the fiction's preoccupation with characters' alienation is closely related to the moments of emotional and physical violence that populate the fiction. Perhaps most importantly, though, we see how consistently characters must accept their responsibility to the other prior to experiencing their personal epiphanies. Levinas's ethics helps us read O'Connor's intertextually, by connecting disparate stories; and his ethics helps us read the fiction as a whole, by illuminating both its anthropological conception of the human person and its moral vision. For O'Connor as for Levinas, the human person is always in relationship with the other, and the human person is always unequivocally responsible to the other.

For Levinas, "ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person" (Simon Critchley "Introduction" *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* 6). We encounter this responsibility through repeated *face-to-face encounters*, for the "face

is what forbids us to kill" (*Ethics and Responsibility* 86). Prior to any construction of language or reason, I encounter my infinite responsibility for the other. Levinas called ethics the *first philosophy*, for he believed all metaphysical, epistemological, and other interpretative claims are formed *after* our encounter with responsibility to the other. Levinas's phenomenology runs counter to the conventional Western conception of ethics, which is largely considered in the negative, e.g. What is one *not* allowed to do to the other? Levinas rejected this narrow conception of ethics as philosophically false and hyper-individualistic. He saw the Western tradition's relegation of ethics to a secondary philosophical mode of inquiry as responsible for the gravest tragedies of the twentieth century. Conversely, Levinas's ethics implies an anthropological belief that an individual never exists in isolation; an individual is always in individual in relationship with the other. This principle has extreme consequences, according to Levinas: I am not responsible for the other because of what he can or should do for me; I am not responsible for the other only if he accepts his responsibility for me; I am not responsible for the other to a lesser degree than I am responsible for myself. Instead, from my temporal perspective, I am nonreciprocally responsible to other regardless of what he does for me, regardless of his acceptance of responsibility for me, because "the other's right to exist has primacy over my own" (*Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers* 54).[1]

The fiction of Flannery O'Connor insists on the individual's nonreciprocal and infinite responsibility for the other. Although many characters in the fiction are alienated and self-absorbed, they experience a moral responsibility to the other. Though they

[1] *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers*, conducted and published by Richard Kearney, will be referred heretofore as *Dialogues*.

struggle with—and some even reject—this ethical obligation, the characters are offered pathways to self-realization since these encounters provide means by which the characters can identify themselves in terms of a relationship. This struggle with and acceptance of one's responsibility often occurs in the fiction's epiphanies. Largely absent in critical analysis is attention to the *relational* nature of these epiphanies. They force the protagonists to face their responsibility for the other; they act as counterweights to the characters' isolation and alienation; and they point to the moral landscape of O'Connor's fiction, a world that requires individuals to define themselves in relation to the other.

Rather than giving the key to a metanarrative interpretation of O'Connor, Levinas's ethics simply offers us a language to critically examine what O'Connor's fiction independently performs. It offers a lens through which to answer—not exhaustively, but in a direct interpretative direction—many questions the fiction raises. For example, why might Mrs. McIntyre from "The Displaced Person" bear a moral obligation to Mr. Guizac—and how should the reader examine this obligation? How does one understand the grandmother's statement from "A Good Man is Hard to Find": "You're one of my own children" (*Collected Fiction* 132)—and how does O'Connor's own statement that the grandmother realizes that "she is responsible for the man" make any narrative and interpretative sense (*Mystery and Manners* 111-112)? Why is the descent of the Holy Ghost in "The Enduring Chill" directly preceded by Asbury's decision to *not* make his mother read his letter? Why is Sheppard's personal epiphany in "The Lame Shall Enter First" established alongside his critical realization that he has been remiss in his parental duties? How does the crumbling plaster figure of the black

boy unite Nelson and his grandfather in "The Artificial Nigger"—and how does this reuniting lead to the grandfather's understanding of Paradise? Levinas's ethics provides a postmodern and phenomenological lens and language through which to begin to answer these and other significant questions.

O'Connor's fiction dramatizes varying aspects of Levinas's philosophy. Viewing the fiction as a whole, one can categorize the ethics into four separate, even if overlapping, narrative stages: first, the alienation and solipsism which result from ignoring one's relationship with and responsibility to the other; second, the trauma and disruption, violent or otherwise, that shakes the individual from his comfortable solitude; third, the face-to-face encounter during which the individual confronts his responsibility; and fourth, the ecstatic bliss instigated by the face-to-face encounter. No one short story dramatizes in detail this complete process; instead, individual stories focus on different moments within the larger experience. Taken as a whole, though, the fiction clearly tells the story of one who encounters his responsibility to the other. The characters' actions and the narrative's conflicts occur on a moral stage that understands the human person as always an individual in relationship.

In Critical Conversation

Although many writers have observed a compatibility or even connection between Levinas and O'Connor, little critical work has directly examined the relationship between the two. In fact, perhaps one of the only essays to focus solely on the two thinkers is Dan Wood's "Misfits, Anarchy, and the Absolute: Interpreting O'Connor Through Levinasian Themes." While I agree with the essay's central attitude—that the themes of Levinas are

an effective schema through which to re-understand O'Connor—Wood's application is greatly different than my own. First of all, the Levinasian terms Wood uses are "alterity, anarchy, and the absolute"; additionally, the article is primarily reader-response, as it is concerned with "a number of religious, moral, and imaginative distortions that Flannery O'Connor forces upon her implied readers" (33). While the ethical demands O'Connor's fiction places on the reader is a fascinating subject, this dissertation centers on the ethical and anthropological vision that underpins the fiction's narrative.

Even if few critics as of yet have dedicated extended space to the relationship between Levinas and O'Connor, many have recognized the potential. One example is Merold Westphal in his "The welcome wound: emerging from the il y a otherwise." In the article's closing paragraph, Westphal, responding to Levinas's ethics, says, "Such a phenomenology can be found, in its literary form, in the writings of Flannery O'Connor" (225). Many writers like Westphal have noted the relationship between the humanism and personalism of O'Connor's fiction and the ethical thought and formal structure of Levinas's philosophy.

Though few scholars have read O'Connor through Levinas's ethics, a number of critics have examined the fiction's ethical foundations. Perhaps the critical work closest in spirit and theme to this dissertation is Susan Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*, a book deeply concerned with O'Connor's exploration of human responsibility and interconnectedness. This present argument wholeheartedly accepts Srigley's claim that the "substance of O'Connor's moral vision…can be interpreted in the stories as an 'ethic of responsibility'" (10). Importantly, Srigley perceives the narrative tension between an individualistic understanding of the human person and an

understanding of the human person as always in relationship with his neighbor: "O'Connor's characters struggle fiercely…to discover the relation between self and other" (7). As this dissertation draws attention to, Srigley notes the consistent and meaningful relationship between the fiction's moments of grace and the characters' relationships with other people: "The moment of grace that O'Connor describes is often precisely the revelation of the interconnectedness of human lives and soul." While I agree with most of Srigley's claims about O'Connor's fiction, the overarching direction of her enterprise is distinct from my interpretative route. Srigley makes it clear in her introduction that she uses the fiction to understand O'Connor's religious thoughts: "Her ethical vision of responsibility opens a fruitful way of understanding her religious ideas" (4). Rather than going from the fiction to the theology, my dissertation works in the opposite direction, by using Levinas's ethical framework to understand the fiction as literature.

Another invaluable text for this dissertation has been Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.'s *The Art & Vision of Flannery O'Connor*. Brinkmeyer's book explores the post-Renaissance's philosophical tendency toward individualism and monologism; it claims O'Connor's fiction is a counterweight to this solipsistic propensity. Where Srigley's interpretation is ultimately religious in nature, Brinkmeyer's is philosophical and literary. This dissertation unreservedly accepts the book's summation of O'Connor's fiction as a "bulwark against the dangers of the isolated self" (8). Where this dissertation turns to Emmanuel Levinas, Brinkmeyer turns to Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic, linguist, and cultural interpreter. There are definite overlaps between the two thinkers; Brinkmeyer points out that Bakhtin "discusses the mind's turn inward, saying that it

embodies a destructive monologism that sees all unity within the single self" (4). As the following chapter will elaborate upon, Bakhtin's concern is intimately related to Levinas's criticism of the Western tradition's elevation of sameness over otherness. The difference in theoretical critic—Bakhtin and Levinas—explains the ultimate distinctions between this dissertation and Brinkmeyer's book. While my work is rooted in the philosophical, its ultimate concern is the ethical, something of less interest to Brinkmeyer.

In a thematically related work of criticism, *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism*, Henry T. Edmondson III finds at the core of O'Connor's philosophical thrust a rejection of hyper-individualism and solipsism. He argues that O'Connor agreed with Nietzsche that "the modern age is populated by 'last men,' individuals without faith, vision, purpose or valor. Her solution, unlike Nietzsche's, was a recovery of the concepts of good and evil, not their rejection" (xii). Although Edmondson's work is chiefly interested in the actual philosophy of Nietzsche and the modern understanding of nihilism—something this dissertation is not concerned with—Edmondson's belief that O'Connor's fiction is not only a rejection of a nihilistic hyper-individualism but ultimately a positive exploration of an opposing worldview is similar to my dissertation's claims. While much of the fiction takes pains to reveal and comment on the selfish and solipsistic characters, the moments of grace and mystery offer, not abstract arguments, but rather lived encounters with the beautiful if mysterious relational nature of human experience.

Finally I would like to highlight Richard Giannone's *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, another related and influential critical analysis of O'Connor. Giannone

emphasizes an aspect of O'Connor's fiction often overlooked, an aspect the final chapter of this dissertation analyzes in depth—joy. Giannone argues that often "the harshness of event hides O'Connor's great tenderness of spirit" (3). Giannone finds in the fiction a general "movement from *derelictio*, a being lost and abandoned, to *delectario*, the joy that will never cease" (4). While the space given to the two is largely uneven—the ecstatic joy of the fiction is often only hinted at and never expounded upon—this is the result of O'Connor's belief in the ultimate mystery of human and divine joy, a joy that, like our basic human ethical demands, cannot be captured in language.

Outline

While all of the fiction assumes an individual's responsibility to the other, they do not all approach this obligation in the same fashion nor do they focus on the same elements of this duty. Like a complex musical score, there remains a consistent thematic center to the fiction, while individual stories provide variations. This dissertation is structured on O'Connor's multi-layered dramatization of Levinas's ethics. After laying out the theoretical framework by conveying the concepts of Levinas's ethics that apply to my reading of O'Connor ("Chapter 1"), the dissertation then devotes a chapter to four major movements or aspects of the fiction's dramatization of the ethics. The chapters are organized more or less chronologically, along an interpretation of the narrative arc of Levinasian ethical experience.

"Chapter 2" explores how O'Connor's fiction dramatizes the alienation and solipsism that accompanies those individuals who reject their relational natures and, by extension, their responsibility to the other. In these stories, characters often view their

relationships in terms of power structures: economic, social, or otherwise. Although the chapter begins with a look at alienation in O'Connor's first published work, the novel *Wise Blood*, "Good Country People" and "The Enduring Chill" provide the extended critical examinations of relational isolation. The chapter concludes with a survey of the theme of alienation throughout many of O'Connor's stories.

After establishing a character's alienation, O'Connor's fiction often shakes up and problematizes the supposed isolation. "Chapter 3" explores trauma and disruption in O'Connor's fiction, trauma that is a necessary precursor to a true encounter with the other. Disruption shakes the individual from his comfortable solipsism and brings with it the suspicion of responsibility. This disruption can be mental, emotional, or physical, and all three of these levels are explored in the longest of O'Connor's short stories, "The Displaced Person." This chapter examines the disruption the Guizac family affords Mrs. McIntyre as she struggles with her interior sense of responsibility for the displaced family. This chapter also juxtaposes McIntyre's experience with the false sense of responsibility of Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First," a sense of responsibility lacking both trauma and a true encounter with the other.

"Chapter 4" considers the actual face-to-face encounter that both precipitates and instigates the character's encounter with and responsibility for the other. In these moments, the other is decontextualized, and what remains is purely other[2]. At times the

[2] 'Othering' in contemporary parlance refers to the act by which a dominant party extends power over a minority by highlighting the differences between the groups. The dominant party is simply defining the 'other' in relation to themselves: minority groups are "other" only in ways they are unlike the dominant party. Importantly, this is *not* how Levinas uses "other," since the otherness of the minority groups in these cases is not being understood on its own but only as it relates to a dominant party. Levinas argues that when the individual encounters the other *totally as other*, he also encounters the other's

other is perceived as threatening and unknown, but he is more importantly perceived as vulnerable. In these stories, the protagonist accepts his or her responsibility for the other, despite the anxiety and hesitation that often precedes these epiphanic moments. This chapter considers "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as its main fictional example, as the narrative's climax portrays both the grandmother's and The Misfit's encounter with the other. The story's doubling captures both possible reactions to trauma and an encounter with the other: further solipsism and acceptance of responsibility.

The fifth and final chapter examines the effect the face-to-face encounter has on the individual. When O'Connor's fiction chooses to take this subject into consideration, it tellingly emphasizes the characters' happiness and ecstatic bliss. Instead of the expected heaviness of burden, characters encounter a powerful joy that accompanies self-realization in the full context of the human person an individual in relationship. "Chapter 5" uses "The Artificial Nigger" as its central text. This chapter also demonstrates what O'Connor's fiction brings to Levinas's ethics, and by extension, to the entire field of ethics. By dramatizing the ethical encounter, O'Connor steps outside the questions of pure ethics—"How should one live?" or "How should one act in this situation?" or "What is moral?"—and attends to the *consequences* of ethics, to the consequences of accepting that life is a set of relationships with other human persons. Ethics in O'Connor is no longer a question of *what is* or *what is not* moral in a given situation; instead, it is an

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vulnerability and therefore his responsibility for him or her. This is distinct from our common understanding of the oppression of the other. This type of violence happens when, as one Levinas critic puts it, we "reduce the absolutely other to the other *of* the same" (Robbins *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* xv). This will be explained and explored in detail in "Chapter 1."

exploration of the absolute delight of accepting the charge to be thy “brother’s keeper” (*Revised Standard Version*, Genesis 4.9).

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Levinas & His Ethics

A brief sketch of Emmanuel Levinas's life is helpful not simply by providing a historical and philosophical context for his ethics; his biography also grounds his most important concerns in historical events significant to Flannery O'Connor's biography and fiction. Behind all of Levinas's mature ethics lies his personal and physical encounter with Nazism: he spent four years in a Nazi forced labor camp, most likely saved because of his adopted French citizenship. The entire rest of his family, excepting his wife and daughter hid in a Catholic monastery, were murdered. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Levinas's philosophy is primarily, even obsessively, engaged with a moral concern for the other. He perceived the mainstream Western philosophical tradition—even including Heidegger and other philosophical innovators in the first half of the twentieth century—as elevating *concepts* over *physical human beings*. Levinas believed that, if their philosophies did not necessitate Nazism, they at least permitted it.

While O'Connor's fiction seems rooted exclusively in American concerns and history—a fact many of her characters are proud of—larger historical events provide a crucial, even if subtle, backdrop to the narratives. In "The Displaced Person," the Guizacs, an Eastern European family, are fleeing from discrimination and displacement in Europe. Although never stated, it can be inferred they are Polish Catholics displaced by the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftereffects. Near the beginning of the story, Mrs. Shortley "recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people, all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in

here, a head there…" (196). Although Shortley comes to the outrageous conclusion that the Guizacs "could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place," the force of the visual imagery clearly establishes the Holocaust as a backdrop to the story. As Kathleen Lipovski-Helal points out, O'Connor began the short story first as a personal account of her own family and farm's interaction with Mr. Matysiak: "Mr. Matysiak had been a prisoner in a German labor camp during the war and had lived with his family in Displaced Persons (DPs) camps for six years before moving to America" (205). After Mrs. McIntyre, the owner of the farm from the fictional narrative, decides she does not want to employ Mr. Guizac, the short story becomes a contemplation of responsibility, as Mrs. McIntyre grapples with what she is obligated to do and what she is morally free to do.

As this dissertation argues, O'Connor's fiction is an extended meditation on ethical responsibility to the other. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in the story with the most overt discussion of moral obligation, "The Displaced Person," the fictional backdrop is the Holocaust. For both O'Connor and Levinas, the Holocaust is one of the most systematic and conscious rejections of responsibility to the other. The shadow of this historical event lies over the ethics and fiction, demanding from both adequate artistic and philosophical responses.

A Brief Biography

On January 12, 1906, Emmanuel Levinas was born in the Russian-occupied city of Kaunas, Lithuania; his family was middle-class and observantly Jewish. Although Levinas did not credit much of his earlier development as a thinker to religion, he did

reencounter his faith later in life. In fact, he has a large body of work exclusively religious. Nevertheless, Levinas made a strict division between his secular writing (philosophy and ethics) and his religious writing. Although he admits "they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration," he notes that it is "necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct methods of exegesis, as separate languages" (*Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers* 54).

After Germany took Kaunas during the First World War, Levinas's family moved to Karkhov, Ukraine, in 1915. This move, however, did not prove long-term, as the 1917 October Revolution sent the family back to a newly independent Lithuania. In 1923, Levinas chose to study at the University of Strasbourg; this began his lifelong relationship with France. He became a French citizen in 1931 and fought for the French army during World War Two. During his time at Strasbourg, Levinas read Edmund Husserl's seminal text *Logical Investigations*, one of the most important foundational works in the recently established phenomenological method. Discovering phenomenology, with its rejection of the Western philosophical tradition and its focus on lived experience, was a monumental moment in Levinas's philosophical development, one whose effects never wavered. He considered his method phenomenological to the end. In an attempt to study under Husserl, Levinas went to Friedberg from 1928 to 1929. Although Husserl's time at Friedberg came to an end shortly after Levinas arrived (on account of his Jewish origins), Levinas met Martin Heidegger and read his *Being and Time*, which Levinas considered one of the most important philosophical texts of all time.

Levinas was married in 1932 and had a daughter in 1935. Fighting for the French, Levinas was captured by Nazi forces at Rennes. He spent the next four years at a

Prisoner of War labor camp at Fallingbostel, most likely saved because of his French uniform. He was reunited with his wife and daughter in 1946 in Paris but was to discover that the rest of his close family was murdered in the Holocaust. After the war, Levinas became the director of ENIO (*ecole Naromale Isrealite Orientale*), a teacher-training program—and he kept this administrative position until the 1960s. After the publication of his *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Levinas went to teach at Poitiers. He also served as Professor of Philosophy at Paris-Nanterre and the Sorbonne.

The Ethics Summarized

Levinas's ethics is built upon one's nonreciprocal or asymmetrical responsibility to the other. Levinas argued that this responsibility is encountered through a face-to-face meeting with the other, when and where the other is understood and perceived completely as other. In this moment, the other is perceived as beyond comprehension, beyond reason, beyond language, and beyond our ability to formulate this relationship and responsibility purely through language. The responsibility is beyond reason for it precedes reason. The rest of philosophy, according to Levinas—metaphysics and epistemology—should proceed *after* this ethics of the other is understood. Hence, ethics is the first philosophy.

Using the term ethics with Levinas can be misleading, though. We might imagine a theoretical system by which we can judge individual acts, since ethics is normally concerned with "moral rules." However, it is more apt to say that Levinas was concerned with providing the foundation for ethics as a whole; therefore, there are no directives in his ethics. Jacques Derrida, a reader, admirer and sometimes critic of Levinas, praised

this particular characteristic of his ethics: "...let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose…moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 111). Understanding Levinas means understanding an individual's most primal relationship to the world, which is always rooted in an individual's relationship with other human persons. Rather than a systematic laying down of moral laws, Levinas's ethics is a phenomenology of encountering responsibility, an exploration of the experience of facing other persons.

Rejection of the Western Tradition & Ethics as the First Philosophy

Levinas rejected the bulk of the western philosophical tradition in both form and practice. He felt strongly that all of these systems—as disparate as Plato and Heidegger may be—emphasized the ego and its consciousness over the otherness of the other. In the philosophical tradition, the ego understands the other by relating the other to itself; but this is not understanding or accepting the other *as other*. As Levinas scholar Simon Critchley puts it, "Philosophy is defined by Levinas as that alchemy whereby otherness is transmuted into sameness by means of the philosopher's stone of the knowing ego" (17). This tradition views metaphysics or ontology—to ask the question "What is the nature of being or beings?"—as the foundation for philosophy, from which everything proceeds. This includes ethics. For Levinas, though, an individual's encounter with the other is more primal, in both the existential and developmental senses, than ontology: "…the ethical relationship with the other is just as primary and original (*ursrunglich*) as ontology—if not more so. Ethics is not derived from an ontology of nature; it is its opposite, a meontology which affirms a meaning beyond Being…" (*Dialogues* 62).

Instead of analyzing one's relationship with and potential responsibility for the other from a specific philosophical perspective, Levinas argued that one's relationship with the other, as well one's responsibility for him or her, should dictate all other philosophical understanding and methods. Ethics precedes ontology, and therefore ontology should rest upon an ethics.

Levinas argued that most of the Western tradition underhandedly assumes an individual's freedom as both preexisting and ranking higher in value than the same individual's responsibility to the other. But for Levinas, our confrontation with the other occurs first: "Even if I deny my primordial responsibility to the other by affirming my own freedom as primary, I can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand" (*Dialogues* 63). The philosophical tendency since the Enlightenment—and Levinas went so far as to argue that this problem was rooted in all intellectual thought since Parmenides—has been to focus on the individual. In this way, Levinas's philosophy acts as a counterweight, a reawakening of more primitive experiences than that of individuality.

O'Connor's fiction similarly stands up to a system that assumes the primacy of the individual, even if her own characters resist this moral landscape. Tarwater, from *The Violent Bear It Away*, speaks for many of the fiction's characters when he claims, "And that's the way it ought to be in this world—nobody owing nobody nothing" (51). This succinctly sums up the feeling of many of O'Connor's characters. The key word here, though, is "ought." Tarwater *wants* the world to be this way, so he asserts the philosophical primacy of the individual; but some inner or mental self recognizes this as a philosophical assumption and not an unquestionable fact.

Levinas pointed to specific historical examples as proof of the consequences of doing ontology before ethics, the consequence of focusing on the ego before recognizing its confrontation with the other: "If the moral-political order totally relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society, including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can no longer evaluate or discriminate between them…. This is why ethical philosophy must remain the first philosophy" (*Dialogues* 66). The absence of a means of measurement, an ethical basis for political discussion to rest upon, causes, or at least permits, Nazism and Stalinism. If ethics is a branch of ontology, and ontology has no ethical predecessor, then philosophical and ethical discourse is simply a language of power—and the other is considered only when it is beneficial to the political system or individual. For Levinas, though, there is something prior to language, ontology, politics, and even reason; this something is the revelation of the other.

The Face-to-Face Encounter

In phenomenological form, Levinas did not build up or understand one's responsibility to the other by appealing to a system of logic or a series of accepted abstractions. Instead, Levinas claims that our ethical responsibility is *encountered*—it is experienced rather than understood. This occurs during a face-to-face encounter when the other is presented and perceived as completely other. Levinas repeated himself throughout his works and interviews; his refrain runs as follows: "To be in relation with the other face to face—is to be unable to kill" (*Entre Nous* 10). It is impossible to overstate the emphasis Levinas put on the *physical* encounter with an actual living, breathing human person: "There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright

exposure, without defense…. There is an essential poverty of the face…. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (*Ethics and Infinity* 86). Encountering responsibility is not a theoretical process for Levinas but rather a physical meeting with a vulnerable and substantive human person. Because an encounter with a human person is the foundation for Levinas's ethics, he hardly discusses moral values or ethical principals. Ethics is always an encounter with another physical human being: "Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to exterior being" (Levinas qtd. in Critchley 15).

Levinas's understanding of the face-to-face encounter bears a natural connection to literature. Levinas often used the word "discourse" in place of "face"; he also used them interchangeably. In a few places, he even drew explicit connections between the two: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse" (*Ethics and Infinity* 87). Levinas's understanding of the relationship between "face" and "discourse" offers an interpretation of writing in general and fiction in particular. In general, although written text does not happen face-to-face, it is built upon an assumed oral discourse. In other words, texts assume the face-to-face. In this way, texts are means by which one encounters the face of the other. More specifically, fiction, as a dramatization of characters and relationships, has the special ability to both dramatize the face-to-face encounter with the other while at the same time exposing the reader to the fictionalized other.

Asymmetry or Nonreciprocal Nature of Ethics

One of the signatures of Levinas's ethics and his understanding of the individual's responsibility to the other is the asymmetry of this relationship and responsibility. My responsibility for the other is not contingent upon the other's recognition of his or her responsibility for me. I am responsible for the other, come what may. Furthermore, from my individual standpoint, I am *more* responsible for the other than he is for me, and I *more* responsible for the other than I am for myself: "In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other" (*Dialogues* 60). Levinas went on to explain the disproportion of the relationship when he claimed that the "ethical rapport with the face is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other." Levinas often used Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* when elucidating the nonreciprocal nature of ethics. The character Zosima's claim that "each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all" was the perfect description of our ethical responsibility (289).

The asymmetry of the moral edict rests less on outrageous claims and more on Levinas's understanding of *perspective*. It is common logic to take a moral claim and view it from the perspective of an unbiased outsider—or to consider its application it to all humans. For example, if a moral system claims that I cannot lie, then it follows that my neighbor also cannot lie. For Levinas, though, this was a philosophical predisposition we need to repress. When I speak of *my* moral responsibility, I can only speak of *my* moral responsibility. I cannot abstract the responsibility and universalize it. Universalizing is unsound on at least two accounts: first, it rests on abstraction, which is a

mental action that occurs *after* our recognition of responsibility; second, universalizing requires a view from *outside of the relationship*, outside of its intersubjectivity, and *outside* is not a place from which a relationship can be legitimately viewed. In explaining Dostoevsky, Levinas maintained that "[Alyosha] does not mean that every 'I' is more responsible than all the others, for that would be to generalize the law for everyone else—to demand as much from the other as I do from myself. This essential asymmetry is the very basics of ethics" (*Dialogues* 67).[1] Although I can mentally abstract the other's responsibility for me, this abstraction is not a function of ethics. In short, ethics can reveal to me my responsibility for the other, but ethics cannot reveal to me the other's responsibility for me.

Simon Critchley uses this concept of asymmetry to explain the title of Levinas's first full-length book, *Totality and Infinity*; this explanation, in turn, elucidates the concept of asymmetry. Critchley says, "When I totalize, I conceive of the relation to the other from some imagined point that would be outside of it and I turn myself into a theoretical spectator on the social world of which I am really part, and in which I am an agent" (13). Levinas saw the entire Western tradition as a tradition of totalizing, assuming its power to abstract. However, one cannot view an intersubjective relationship from the outside. It is simply not accessible, or if it is, it is bound to produce a distorted view. As a phenomenologist, "there is no view from nowhere" for Levinas, hence the conceptualized outside view—the universal view—cannot produce a real ethics (14). To a third party "intersubjectivity might appear to be a relation between equals, but from

[1] In his discussions of this particular scene from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Levinas does not distinguish between Alyosha, the story's protagonist and a follower of Zosima, and Zosima himself. In the novel, Zosima and his brother Markel both make claims about nonreciprocal responsibility, while it is Alyosha who relates Zosima's story.

inside that relation, as it takes place at this very moment, you place an obligation on me that makes you higher than me, more than my equal" (13-14). Levinas replaced the Western tradition's tendency to totalize with his own concept of *infinity*, which is an understanding that there is something about the other that exceeds reason and my ability to comprehend him or her. When I totalize the other, I ignore the otherness of the other, and I claim understanding where and when I do not have complete knowledge.

Levinas's phenomenological method, which led directly to some of his most distinctive ethical claims, finds a certain reciprocity with fiction in general and O'Connor in particular. All literature comes from a perspective, even stories told by the most seemingly objective third-person narrators. Critchley's explanation that for Levinas "there is no view from nowhere" can be aptly applied to fiction. In a more specific phenomenological sense, fiction, by its narrative nature, is more concerned with experiences and encounters than with philosophical systems or beliefs. Even when literature deals with philosophy, a philosophical method, or a philosophical belief, it is concerned with the *encountering* of these in a specific place and time by a specific character. In this sense, all fiction is phenomenological. O'Connor fiction, like Levinas's ethics, is less concerned with the logical justification of its moral claims than with an exploration of the experience of these moral claims.

Levinas's Understanding of the Other

One must contend with Levinas's use of *other* when reading his ethics. For Levinas, when I understand the other *completely as other*, it is then I experience my responsibility for him. However, this flies in the face of our contemporary use of "other,"

such as when we discuss how the "other" is marginalized and oppressed by those of the majority.[2] In simplified terms, the "other" is a byproduct of the process by which a majority group uses differences—of race, color, creed, etc.—in a minority group to gain power. For example, the "others" for Columbus and the European colonizers of North America were the Native Americans. Native Americans were not understood as other in the Levinasian sense; instead their "otherness" was based upon the European categories they failed to fit into: they were not white, they were not Christian, and they were not "civilized." The Native Americans' "otherness" was defined by European-ness.[3] Levinas would argue that the Europeans did not encounter the Native Americans' true otherness. Instead, the Native Americans were actually understood through *sameness*, through European-ness, since they were understood as "other" only in the ways they failed to be European.

In an attempt to explain this difference between other and "other," Gilbert Garza and Brittany Landrum return to Levinas's distinction between totality and infinity: "When one totalizes the Other, one reduces the Other to the same by likening the Other to oneself in describing him or her in relation to being" ("Ethics and the Primacy of the Other" 13). Totalizing is not an encounter with the truly other, which only occurs through an experience with infinity, an encounter that recognizes that the other exceeds

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[2] For purposes of this dissertation, I will refer to our contemporary use of "other" through the use of quotation marks. I will refer to Levinas's understanding of the other without quotation marks, since his other is recognized as a real person and not a manipulated abstraction or a fear of the unknown.

[3] There is a connection here to Derrida's *differance*, which observed that all linguistic constructions are understood only in relation to their opposites. The distinction for Levinas, though, is that the *real* otherness of the other can be encountered, even if the encounter is both pre-linguistic and always lying outside language and complete comprehension.

my understanding of him; the other exceeds my ability to speak about him; the other exceeds my ability to comprehend him or my responsibility to him. Without this concept of infinity, the other is reduced to "other," and the qualities of the "other" that make him different from me or the majority are those qualities that justify the use of power, violence, and oppression.

As opposed to power, Levinas spoke of infinity and true otherness in terms of love: "The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, to coinciding into sameness" (*Dialogues* 58). Although counterintuitive, the other is loved not when I recognize he is the same as me or when I see myself in him, but rather I love the other when I experience that he cannot be reduced to me or my ego.

Moral Responsibility as Essential to Self-Understanding

Because our encounter with the other is more primal than language or reason, it precedes our understanding of our very selves. Most philosophical and cultural systems begin with an understanding of the self and only after consider the individual's relationship with others. Levinas considered this poor logic because it disregards basic human experiential knowledge. We encounter the other before we have a conception of the self or the ego's "I." In a very practical and physical example, no human baby would survive without a relationship with an other, one who cared for and nurtured it.

It is important to note that Levinas's philosophy does not view the self as something objective or static even if inaccessible, as if the self were hidden and only available through a relationship to the other. Instead, Levinas argues that there is no self—no ego or individual "I"—without a relationship to the other; and there is no real

understanding of ourselves without a coming to terms with the responsibility we bear for others: "I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'" (*Dialogues* 62). Self-understanding, therefore, occurs most poignantly through an acceptance of that "inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other." The individual self is not separate from his or her responsibility to the other; therefore, it is one's understanding of this responsibility that is a gateway to self-understanding.

Isolation & The Trauma of One's Encounter with the Other

Although Levinas's ethics is obsessively concerned with the other, he understood the philosophical and emotional experience of isolation. Rather than bemoaning the inherent disconnectedness of human relationships, Levinas instead understood solipsism to be a necessary precursor to one's encounter with the other. In his essay "Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion," Jeffrey Bloeschl describes this function of isolation in Levinas's philosophy: "The isolated individual lives blindly for himself, as if the rightful and uncontested master over everything in his path. Yet this self-absorption is indispensable for the introduction of an appeal to transcend that darkness" (132). An individual's isolation is the crucial backdrop against which the other can appear as completely other. However, Levinas understood that to break from the prison of solipsism and accept one's infinite responsibility to the other is difficult and painful, both from a philosophical and experiential standpoint. This is why he often referred to the acceptance of one's responsibility to the other in terms of trauma and even violence.

Even though my relationship to the other is more primal than my understanding of self, my "natural" position is with the self, with all of its interests and possessiveness. When we return to the more primal relationship with and responsibility for the other, our self-interest is shaken: "This, in turn, means that the trauma calls me (violently) back to a proper identity determined before and outside being, so that the effort to take up the responsibility depicted there can also be understood as an effort to remain true to my self" (140). Levinas's sometimes confusing use of "man's natural state" is in tension with his own philosophy—and he admits it: "Ethics is, therefore, against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first" (*Dialogues* 60). Levinas is not considering or projecting a utopian world in which we all *desire* to put the other before ourselves; Levinas is considering the real world, in which our self-interest daily impinges upon on our acceptance of responsibility.

Understanding that our self-interested *nature* is in tension with our more primal responsibility leads Levinas to sometimes speak pessimistically about his own ethics or the individual's turn to responsibility. Although Levinas rejects the Western tradition's elevation of ontology over ethics, he understood that we often experience daily life in individualized ontological terms. In this way, his ethics proves a reproving counterbalance to our self-interest, but one that is difficult: "The other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake, in a state of vigilant insomnia" (*Dialogues* 63). The use of "haunts" and "insomnia" expressively reveal Levinas's understanding of the difficulties of his ethics. Despite this understanding, though, Levinas did not see the role of ethics to concern itself with the relative "lived" difficulty

of its arguments. He said he would "leave the whole consoling side of this ethics to religion" (108).

The "consoling side of ethics" is not limited to religion, though; Levinas himself admits this when he quotes at length from Dostoevsky throughout his ethical texts. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Zosima's acceptance of his nonreciprocal responsibility to the other—what Levinas saw as the perfect pronunciation of his own ethics—did not impinge upon or even distract Markel from his joy. While Levinas quotes Zosima's proclamations on ethics, the narrative in the novel focuses more on Zosima's deep sense of elation and his newly developed self-understanding. In the same way, O'Connor's fiction sheds light on this "consoling side of ethics," by imbuing moral responsibility with the same two characteristics as Dostoevsky's narrative: self-understanding and tremendous happiness. It may take trauma or physical violence to shake a character from his or her "natural" self-interestedness, but the result is self-knowledge and bliss.

Chapter 2

Rejecting Relationship: Solipsism & Estrangement

To call Flannery O'Connor's fiction a colossal case study in alienation and estrangement is hardly a stretch. The stories rarely develop characters with loving or mutually supportive relationships. We encounter characters isolated by physical disfigurements, such as prosthetic legs; characters isolated by abnormal sexual biology, such as hermaphrodites; characters isolated by age differences; characters isolated by terminal and non-terminal illnesses, both physical and mental; characters isolated by poor family relations; characters isolated by a complete absence of family relations; characters isolated by aggressive and passive-aggressive parent-child relationships; even characters isolated by their academic degrees.

For both Levinas and O'Connor, alienation is the logical conclusion to a rejection of the individual-in-relationship model and amounts to a denial of the relational nature of human experience. Alienation is not simply a tragic human phenomenon following the fragmentation of culture and history at the turn of the century and the two world wars; it is a direct result of ignoring or losing sight of one's responsibility to the other. Isolation is a falsehood, an insincere postmodern phenomenon that assumes the primacy of the individual; under the guise of authenticity, epistemology is left to the ego alone. On an experiential level, isolation and alienation are painful exactly because they are a misreading or skewed observation of reality and existence. As Levinas explained so aptly, the individual is only an individual because he is related to the other: "I am defined

as…a singular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other" (*Dialogues* 62). When the other is rejected, that "singular person" is fragmented.

O'Connor's fiction so often points to the temporal and false nature of characters' isolation. Although the stories paint genuine pictures of estrangement, they often take pains, both subtly and overtly, to point to the self-imposed nature of much of the alienation. Whether it is through their pride, contempt, immaturity, or simple blinding self-centeredness, O'Connor's characters play an active role in their estrangement. The fiction, taken as a whole, reveals estrangement to be a human construct, necessary only as a support to a fabricated hyper-individualism.

For Levinas, though, solipsism was not simply a false experience to be eradicated; he saw it as a necessary precursor to an understanding of the *otherness* of the other. In his essay "Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion," Jeffrey Bloeschl describes this function of isolation in Levinas's philosophy: "The isolated individual lives blindly for himself, as if the rightful and uncontested master over everything in his path. Yet this self-absorption is indispensable for the introduction of an appeal to transcend that darkness" (132). Estrangement in O'Connor's fiction works similarly, as it lays the foundational narrative and psychological groundwork for an encounter with the other. When self-absorbed characters encounter the other, they are offered possibilities of escaping from or beyond the ego. Estrangement in the fiction is not simply a comic device or a satire of the self-absorption of contemporary culture; instead, it is an essential experience upon which the rest of the narrative rests. When characters are faced with true encounters with the other, even though these encounters are often marked by fear and violence, they offer pathways to "transcend" the "darkness" of "self-absorption."

Because this chapter will focus almost solely on alienation and estrangement in O'Connor's fiction, it is the analysis least concerned with characters encountering their moral imperative for the other. When O'Connor's characters do begin to sense their responsibility for the other, as they often do, they experience this from a space of alienation and isolation; this breaking in upon a character's solipsism creates much of the narratives' conflicts. Just as O'Connor's fiction offers considerable time and space to the establishing and developing of her characters' estrangement, this dissertation provides time and space to the analysis and study of this estrangement.

This chapter begins with a brief look at O'Connor's first published work, her short novel *Wise Blood*. Haze Motes' complete and almost melodramatic alienation helps set the stage for the shorter fiction's more subtle representations of isolation. The chapter then turns to a more in-depth study of two of O'Connor's short stories, "Good Country People" and "The Enduring Chill," one from each of her two published collections of short fiction. Although the stories are studied as wholes, special attention is paid to the characters' experiences of alienation—and, in both cases, the narratives' ability to point to the temporal and false nature of isolation. The final pages of the chapter provide a brief survey of nine of O'Connor's other short stories from both published collections. The survey notes and briefly analyzes various ways O'Connor establishes isolation; this examination sheds light on some of the motives behind O'Connor's fixation on estrangement.

Wise Blood

Wise Blood is O'Connor's earliest published fiction, and it was her sole focus for her most formative years as a writer. This short novel contains the most complete and literal alienation in O'Connor's stories. Haze Motes, the story's protagonist, a bitter anti-Christian bent on converting people to his "Church of God Without Christ," has not a single family member or friend. Near the beginning of the novel we learn that:

> Haze had had two younger brothers; one died in infancy and was put in a small box. The other fell in front of a mowing machine when he was seven. His box was about half the size of an ordinary one, and when they shut it, Haze ran and opened it up again. (14)

The next paragraph continues Haze's reflection on death and funerals, while developing his fixation on coffins: "…he dreamed he was at his father's burying again. He saw him humped over on his hands and knees in his coffin" (14). The family tree is completed a few pages later, as we are witness to the memory of his mother's funeral: "He had seen her face through the crack when they were shutting the top on her. He was sixteen then" (21). Since his family is all passed away and his army partners are described as "not actually friends" but people "he had to live with," Haze is quite absolutely alone (17).

Haze's reflection of his mother's funeral connects his familial alienation with a more complex and psychological isolation; this connection is made through the image and symbol of the coffin. As he is sleeping on the train and remembering his mother's funeral, Haze can remember that the lid of the coffin:

> was falling dark on top of her, closing down all the time. From inside he saw it coming, coming closer closer down and cutting off the light and the room. He

> opened his eyes and saw it closing and he sprang up between the crack and wedged his head and shoulders through it and hung there, dizzy. (21)

A moment later, Haze calls out, "'I'm sick…I can't be closed up in this thing. Get me out!'" (21). The claustrophobia of the dream coffin is transferred onto the physical and psychological space of Haze's berth on the train. This transmutation effectively transposes Haze's literal and familial alienation onto the psychological and social landscape of Haze's character and world. Therefore, although the contrived estrangement is rooted in the literal fact that Haze has no family or friends, the novel develops the isolation psychologically and sociologically. This development sets the stage for O'Connor's short stories' subtle but intricate representations of estrangement.

"Good Country People"

After *Wise Blood*'s Haze Motes, O'Connor's fiction rarely deals with characters as absolutely alienated on a familial and friendship level; instead she complicates and develops the forms and causes of her characters' alienation. "Good Country People" is a particularly suitable story to begin a more detailed study of O'Connor's use and analysis of alienation. The story takes pains to establish a genuine foundation for Hulga's alienation, but its narrative and thematic focus work toward undermining the objective nature of her isolation. Despite her prosthetic leg, heart condition, and doctorate in philosophy—all three of which alienate her from the family farm and the larger society—the story emphasizes three separate elements that subvert Hulga's isolation: the bitter and self-imposed nature of her alienation, her unconscious desire to break out of her isolation, and the nihilistic philosophy responsible for her refusal to enter into relationships. The

first two demonstrate the falseness of Hulga's estrangement, and thereby confirm the relational nature of the human person O'Connor's fiction constantly outlines; and nihilism, first preached by Hulga but embodied most completely and cruelly by Pointer, reveals a profound contemporary threat to the moral imperative for the other, a threat O'Connor saw and wrote about poignantly. In the end, it is Pointer's complete and pitiless hyper-individualism that confirms for the reader—and perhaps Hulga herself—the dangers of ignoring one's responsibility to other human persons.

Although "Good Country People" satirizes the self-imposed and ideological sources at the root of Hulga's estrangement, the narrator is respectful, even if playful, when establishing the protagonist's isolation. Hulga's prosthetic leg and the subsequent difficulties it present would have been issues particularly close to O'Connor, who lupus consigned for large chunks of time to crutches. Similarly, the contrast between Hulga's rural family farm and her academic degree comes straight from O'Connor's experience. After college, an MFA from Iowa Writer's Workshop, and five months at Yaddo, the artists' community in New York, O'Connor was largely consigned to her mother's dairy farm in a very rural Milledgeville, Georgia, on account of her lupus. Additionally, we have no reason to disbelieve the seriousness of Hulga's heart condition; presumably she is bound for an early death. There is a respect in the narrative for Hulga, presumably borne from O'Connor's own experience with physical and alienating circumstances; but there remains at the heart of the story a barbed satire on the inability to distinguish between the temporal features of alienation and the nihilistic ideology that threatens the very basic structure of society.

Although Hulga may view her alienation as a result of her physical deformity, superior intelligence, or heart disease, the reader is made aware the roots of her estrangement lie elsewhere. The most obvious and comical cause of Hulga's isolation is her bitter but adolescent resistance to basic human relationships and simple civility. Much of Hulga's alienation is self-imposed, and self-imposed in a spirit of bitterness. At the table in the morning, we see that Hulga's "constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of the will and means to keep it" (273). Although readers may sympathize with Hulga's "constant outrage" at the realities her life, it is imperative we note how her blindness is imposed by an "act of the will." The narrative asks us to *feel* for Hulga, but it also asks us to look beyond her self-blinding. She is determined to retain her righteous indignation, despite the blindness it produces.

Hulga defends her self-inflicted alienation in the names of individualism and authenticity; however, her arguments ring hollow. When Mrs. Hopewell "needed someone to walk over the fields with her" and asked her daughter to join her, we are told Hulga's "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'" (274). Hulga's reaction to her mother's remark is revelatory: she, "standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM.'" Hulga claims her rejection of her mother's request is done in the name of personal authenticity: she will not change who she is in order to appease her mother or make the situation more socially acceptable. However, the physical description of Hulga, along with the form of her argument, reveal her self-absorption. Although the reader is told

Mrs. Hopewell "needed someone to walk over the fields with her," Hulga ignores this need for relationship, and instead makes the request all about herself and her identity. Additionally, Hulga's neck being "thrust slightly forward" comically imagines her as a stubborn child, not a brave defender of self-identity. And her final declaration, "'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM,'" is not the statement of an individual maintaining inner truthfulness; it is the whining of a brattish woman avoiding her mother's company.

A second way "Good Country People" undermines the objective nature of Hulga's alienation is through its revelation of the protagonist's desire, even if initially unconscious, for relationship. The supposed self-sufficiency and contentedness of Hulga's way of life is destabilized when she makes the decision to rendezvous with Pointer. After spending a significant amount of time criticizing the simplicity and naïveté of the boy, she decides to meet him. Hulga tells herself the relationship is a play of power, as her alleged mission is to seduce the simple country boy; however, her aloof indifference is subverted by her emotional reaction when she does not find Pointer at their designated meeting place: we are told she "had the furious feeling that she had been tricked" (284). Clearly the rendezvous means something for Hulga on an emotional level. And although the first kisses seem unimpressive to Hulga, once they are in the loft and continue kissing, Hulga becomes enthralled: "The girl at first did not return any of the kisses but presently she began to and after she had put several on his check, 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" (287). Her physical and emotional participation in the scene reaches a peak after Pointer has taken off her leg, as Hulga thinks "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." Her attempt to remain emotionally and intellectually distant dissolves at the first signs of physical affection.

Unlike the narrative's satire of Hulga's adolescent self-centeredness, the tone here is not one of mockery or comedy. The reader is not asked to laugh at Hulga's complete change of character and her desire to live with Pointer; instead we are asked to feel for Hulga. Our empathetic connection to Hulga is an argument for the social needs of a human being. Hulga does require relationship, and although the farm and her mother have not met this need, it is a need nonetheless. Even more than a statement about the social *needs* of the human person, the story points to the social *identity* of the human person. The prosthetic leg becomes a metaphor for Hulga's completeness, and just as she imagines Pointer putting on her leg every morning to make her physically complete, so having an intimate relationship would make her complete as a person. Levinas reminds us that we are a "self" only because of the other. Hulga experiences for a brief moment the possibility of being a real self, not the individualistic self she has childishly and bitterly projected through the first half of the story.

At the heart of the story's exploration of alienation is a more serious argument than its comic mocking of Hulga's adolescent self-centeredness and its revelation of her desire for companionship. O'Connor takes Hulga's reading of Heidegger and her stated nihilism with grave earnestness. O'Connor roots her criticism of Hulga's self-imposed alienation in her academic studies, not simply in her immature and bitter attitude. Mrs. Hopewell reads an excerpt of Heidegger when she picks up one of "the books the girls had just put down" and opened "it at random" (277):

> 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. (277)

Both Heidegger and Hulga disagree with science's evasion of Nothingness; for Heidegger, it is in our confrontation with Nothingness that we encounter real thought and authenticity. Hulga makes her alignment with nihilism clear when she tells Pointer later in the story, "I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing" (287).

Hulga's acceptance of nihilism is not tangential to O'Connor's criticism of her; in fact, nihilism is at the heart of the narrative's diagnosis. In one of her letters to "A," O'Connor famously wrote, "…if you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe" (97). The "gas" here is an allusion, in part, to the Holocaust's gas chambers, an image she used throughout her letters and stories. For O'Connor, the basic premises of nihilism—particularly its blinding hyper-subjectivity—necessarily discard any sense of responsibility for the other, for they discount objective understandings of personhood, relationship, and morality. They may result in the bitter alienation of a thirty-two year old woman; but they can also lead to the violent and brutal oppression of the other, as represented by the Holocaust's gas chambers.

In his book *Return to Good and Evil*, Henry T. Edmonson III argues that the primary goal of O'Connor's fiction was to combat nihilism, which O'Connor saw as a dominant and threatening cultural belief system: "O'Connor's interest, then, lies not in a debate with Nietzsche or any other philosopher, but in identifying and refuting the cultural influence of nihilism more generally understood and offering a remedy to a

world rapidly falling under its spell" (3). For Edmonson, O'Connor's remedy requires a return to an objective understanding of good and evil. In "Good Country People," while Hulga proudly labels herself a nihilist, it is really Manly Pointer for whom nihilism is not simply a label but a way of life. Pointer's uncomfortably talented impersonation of a "good country" person, along with his absolute absence of compunction while stealing the prosthetic leg, demonstrates real nihilism for Hulga. She understood nihilism on an intellectual level, and she was proud of this knowledge; but Pointer is utterly adapted to nihilism as a way of life. Pointer's disregard for anything or anybody and his detached fascination with physical disabilities demonstrate his complete self-centeredness. The absolute individualism by which he lives his life prohibits his ability to recognize his moral responsibility for the other. Potentially, though, Hulga's witnessing of Pointer's complete lack of conscience will enable her to break out of her own self-imposed isolation. More important than Hulga's change is the *possibility* of change the narrative opens up. Seeing the horrors of a true Nietzschean will to power gives Hulga the opportunity to reflect upon her commitment to nihilism. The story does not focus on Hulga's response to her encounter but rather on the encounter itself, but it does suggest the possibility of real change.

The narrative's resolution offers the clearest and most terrifying picture of nihilism. Just as Hulga abandons her adolescent indifference in the face of a physical relationship, Pointer's true nihilism becomes manifest. After he takes her leg and begins his descent down the barn loft, he stops:

> …he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had an 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 I'll tell you another thing, Hulga…you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (291)

Pointer's transformation from simple and caring country boy to detached and critical observer makes Hulga painfully aware that her own variety of nihilism is insubstantial. She posed as a distant and emotionless philosopher, but she clearly desired a meaningful relationship. Pointer's nihilism is genuine and tangible, unresponsive to the needs of the other because the other is not the self. The prosthetic leg Pointer steals becomes a symbol for Hulga's false commitment to nihilism. They are both excuses for a self-centered withdrawal into the ego, a solipsistic relinquishing of all emotional connection and responsibility for the other. But this act is pretense—it is artificial—and the charade conceals the relational nature of human existence only for a limited time. When faced with the possibility of relationship, Hulga chooses it immediately—only to come face to face with what Edmonson calls "the essence of nihilism itself, a concentrated and rarefied sample of the philosophy made incarnate" (76). The falseness and danger of Hulga's purported hyper-individualism is made manifest by Pointer.

In the end, immaturity and emotional hostility do not receive as harsh a condemnation as nihilism, since Hulga's angry childishness is undone so quickly by Pointer's physical and emotional attention. Pointer's real personality and his later actions demonstrate the ultimate consequence of hyper-individualism. If one believes "in nothing," then one is left only with the self; and the ego becomes the only means of judging all actions, ethical or otherwise. Since Hulga's own nihilism is so shallow, she may be saved by Pointer's theft of her prosthetic leg, since her panic at Pointer's actions may lead to an analysis of nihilism as a functional philosophy. This experience may lead

to self-reflection, which would include a renewed understanding of Hulga's responsibility to the other, particularly her mother. However, "Good Country People" does not expound upon any potential character change, since the story is more concerned with hyper-individualism and its consequent human and moral estrangement.

"The Enduring Chill"

Estrangement in O'Connor's "The Enduring Chill" is similar in many ways to Hulga's estrangement in "Good Country People," in the sense that the narrative establishes the reality of Asbury's alienation while simultaneously demonstrating its artificiality and self-imposition. While Asbury's illness is real, the story continuously subverts Asbury's immature and self-imposed isolation, drawing attention to its temporal and misleading qualities. This subversion is accomplished most clearly through the person of Dr. Block, the letter Asbury wrote his mother, and Asbury's artificial and melodramatic conception of Art. What "The Enduring Chill" develops that "Good Country People" does not is a possible remedy to the solipsism both stories satirize. The repeating images of and conversation about the Holy Ghost, the "new man," and Fr. Finn's statements about Hell offer a positive response to the story's dramatization of estrangement. These narrative elements lay the groundwork for a redemptive interpretation of the story's conclusion, as Asbury encounters both the Holy Spirit and his responsibility to the other, even if in limited ways.

Asbury's illness seems to provide the single objective character to his estrangement. He is certain he will die soon and, even though readers may not be as confident as Asbury in his diagnosis, it is hard to read over the sincerity of his belief.

Although the eventual discovery at the end of the story shatters Asbury's hopes of a terminal illness and his own vague sense of his martyrdom, the physical evidence of his sickness is recognized by everyone, even those who are initially skeptical. On a metaphoric level, the illness can stand for solipsism, the belief in an individual's absolute relational isolation. There is legitimacy to an individual's experience of solipsism, just as Asbury is indeed ill; but an individual's alienation is not objective or complete, just as Asbury discovers about his sickness. The pain and physical effects of his illness throughout the story are genuine, but his diagnosis of the symptoms is a false logical leap. Similarly, a person may experience relational estrangement as emotionally and palpably real, but the diagnosis of the symptoms as an objective form of solipsism is a false logical leap. Rejecting humanity's relational nature results in a stunted form of human existence, an isolation that is painful because it is false. Asbury's response to his illness, in this sense, is a manifestation of his self-imposed isolation. Similar to "Good Country People," when Hulga's artificial leg and her nihilism become mirror symbols for one another, Asbury's illness is both a cause *and* a result of his self-imposed isolation.

The juxtaposition of Dr. Block's character and beliefs with Asbury's is one of the story's most poignant subversions of the illness and estrangement. When Mrs. Fox exclaims, "'I'll take you to Doctor Block this afternoon,'" Asbury responds, "I am not…going to Doctor Block. This afternoon or ever'" (359). Asbury's initial response to his mother simply reinforces and repeats his determination to avoid all professional medical care, but the preceding fragment colors his resolve with a hyperbolic and petty melodrama. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fox's reason for appealing to the family physician is that Dr. Block "would take a personal interest in" Asbury. For Mrs. Fox, it is the personal

connection between the doctor and the family that is of utmost value; but it is exactly this sort of relational intimacy Asbury consistently shrinks from: "'I don't want him taking a personal interest in me.'" Asbury's determination to remain alone with his illness seems built on principal and willpower, but his nasty retort to his mother demonstrates the pettiness and falseness of his attitude and decisions.

Despite Asbury's insistence, Mrs. Fox manages to have Doctor Block examine him by ambushing him as he awakes from an afternoon nap. Doctor Block is Asbury's mirror opposite, which may be the reason Asbury maintains the Doctor is simple and unsophisticated. However, the consistent "personal interest" Block takes in Asbury, coupled with his intellectual humility, is the gateway through which the good doctor discovers the real root of the illness. During the first check-up, when Asbury haughtily declares, "'What's wrong with me is way beyond you,'" Dr. Block happily replies, "'Most things are beyond me… I ain't found anything yet that I thoroughly understood…' His eyes seemed to glitter at Asbury as if from a great distance" (367). This expression of humility is neither depressing to Doctor Block nor does it stop him from his vigilant care of Asbury; and it leads to his medical discovery, which proves Asbury's premonitions all false. Analogously, the discovery and healing of Asbury's spiritual and psychological issues—a discovery and transformation the end of the story recounts—will require this same intellectual humility.

Doctor Block's humility is comically juxtaposed with Asbury's childish sense of omniscience. First of all, Asbury has self-diagnosed himself, and without anything resembling medical knowledge or even familiarity, he refuses to be contradicted. Asbury approaches everyone and everything in the story with this stubborn and juvenile sense of

all-knowing. What Asbury sarcastically thinks about his sister after she called his sickness "psychosomatic" more aptly applies to Asbury himself: "There was nothing she was not an expert on" (380). In his *The Art & Vision of Flannery O'Connor*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. refers to Asbury's sense of knowing as a "monologic worship of self," in which Asbury sees "himself as the knower and arbiter of all things" (150). In this way, Asbury stands for the Western philosophical tradition Levinas argued against. As Levinas scholar Simon Critchley puts it, "Philosophy is defined by Levinas as that alchemy whereby otherness is transmuted into sameness by means of the philosopher's stone of the knowing ego" (17). Asbury either ignores or transmutes every type of otherness in the story—from his mother's cheery optimism to the racial otherness of the farmhands; from his sister's diagnosis of his illness to the real medical knowledge of Doctor Block; from his friend's Buddhism to Father Finn's cantankerous Christianity. Asbury has a definitive and final opinion on all things and all ideas "not Asbury," and they are conveniently interpreted through Asbury's ego. But far from praising the individualism entrenched deep in the center of Western philosophy's *modus operandi*, O'Connor mocks it by revealing its premises to be infantile, self-serving, and blindly proud.

In fact, the only moment Asbury admits his own lack of knowing is at the story's close, when Block arrives with the real diagnosis; Asbury is faced with tangible knowledge that lies outside his ego. Asbury's encounter with knowledge that is other than his own ego is destabilizing and threatens his omniscience, and while this undermining of the individualized ego is disconcerting, the event lays the groundwork for an encounter with the other. If the individual is not permitted to pass judgment on all

things and people, even those in his own life, then there is a real world apart from him, a world of separate ideas and separate people. Although Asbury is frightened by this possibility, through Dr. Block we already see how this reality might be approached with humility, acceptance, and even joy: "'Most things are beyond me… I ain't found anything yet that I thoroughly understood…'" (367). Block says this with a happiness and lightness alien to Asbury's infantile conceitedness, but we must remember it is Block that makes the true and ultimate discovery about the illness. Humility and acceptance are the pathways to true understanding.

While Doctor Block's character and attitude provide an indirect destabilization of his estrangement, the letter Asbury wrote his mother—to be read after his death—is possibly the most overt example of the childishness that undermines the objective quality of his alienation; the letter demonstrates how Asbury's alienation is rooted in self-centeredness, a state in which he does not, or cannot, understand his responsibility to any one. The letter is supposed to be Asbury's act of authentic defiance, but instead it is a demonstration of his adolescent self-centeredness. In fact, the letter demonstrates the relationship between presuming a lack of responsibility toward everyone and the corresponding naïve and shallow condescension responsible for the presumption. Asbury assumes others' responsibility for him—particularly his mother—but he expects nothing similar from himself. In a Levinasian sense, one is always in relationship with another and therefore one is always already responsible for the other. Asbury is already in relationship with his mother, who fed, clothed, and raised him, but he understands responsibility largely in only one direction. O'Connor pokes fun at the shortsightedness of an ethics that presume the authority of the individual. Put into practice, the ethics only

works if and when the individual can presume upon most others accepting their responsibility toward said individual. This is juvenile egotism posing as individualistic authenticity.

The letter, written while Asbury was in New York, begins with an indictment of Asbury's childhood:

> "I came here to escape the slave's atmosphere of home…to find freedom, to liberate my imagination, to take it like a hawk from tis care and set it 'whirling off into the widening gyre' (Yeats) and what did I find? It was incapable of flight. It was some bird you had domesticated, sitting huffy in its pen, refusing to come out!" (364)

The ridiculously melodramatic tone, the adolescent metaphors of bird and flight, and the juvenile quoting of Yeats complete with citation permeate the entire letter. From a narrative standpoint, by the time the reader encounters this, he has already been witness to Asbury's home and Mrs. Fox, and there is nothing of slavery or burden about either. His mother is a doting, painfully positive, and perhaps overly involved parent, but we see no basis for Asbury's melodramatic declarations of pain and animosity. On top of this, Asbury has returned home and now depends upon his mother's personal and economic interest in him. The tone of the letter proceeds to a pitch of ridiculous rage, its hyperbole undermining its message: "'I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn't you kill that too? Woman, why did you pinion me?" In a certain way, this is an imaginative and comical rewriting of the Biblical story of the Prodigal Son. A son leaves home to pursue worldly pleasure and success; when he has depleted his savings—most likely savings from his mother—he

returns home to the economic safeguard of his family. Asbury, unlike the prodigal son, though, has no remorse or humility; instead, he blames his mother for his failings in New York.

The irony is that Asbury's childhood, his trip to New York, and his return home are all possible only because his mother has assumed her responsibility for him, despite the fact that he does not once contemplate his responsibility toward her. Through Asbury and his letter O'Connor satirizes the amorality and impracticality of hyper-individualism: a person is only free to pursue his self-centered ambitions if he assumes most others' responsibility toward him—but logically, this cannot be a universal law.

Perhaps the only thing Asbury feels beholden to is his vague but inflated concept of his duty of a writer, what he calls "his god, Art" (373). However, both his duty as a writer and his concept of Art are impersonal, amoral, lack intersubjectivity, and bring him no closer to a real human relationship. In his artistic responsibility to Art, Asbury is in fact responsible to no one—and being responsible to no one, Asbury can have no relationship with anyone. This is why his novels were "lifeless" and his plays "stationary." This point is emphasized in his research for his "play about the Negro" (368), the story's only extended recollection. Asbury decides to work for a few days with his mother's farmhands milking the cows, because he wants "to see how they really felt about their condition." The ludicrous assumption that being "around them for a while" will lead to any true sense of empathy or even understanding highlights Asbury's simplistic understanding of people.

Since Asbury cannot engage the black farmhands in real conversation or dialogue, he decides to demonstrate his companionship by lighting a cigarette, something expressly

forbidden by Mrs. Fox, and pressuring the others to smoke as well. As they all smoke together, we are privy to Asbury's dramatic and naïve perception of the scene: "It was one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing" (368). Asbury's use of "communion" corresponds to his quasi-religious notion of Art, but in the context of the story the effect is purely ironic: there is nothing about the moment that reveals a connection between Asbury and the workers on any level, let alone a level that supersedes their racial difference. Asbury's naïveté is reinforced when the two black workers get in trouble when "two cans of milk had been returned from the creamery because it had absorbed the odor of tobacco" (368-9). But Asbury is exhilarated by his false sense of "communion" with his black brethren, and he tries to continue the relationship and research the next day by encouraging the two to drink some fresh milk while working. He begins by drinking himself, but neither of the farmhands follows suit this time: "'That *the* thing she don't 'low." In spite of his false appeals to freedom—"'We've got to think free if we want to live free!"—he is not able to get either worker to drink the milk with him. What appears to Asbury a call to authenticity and racial defiance appears simply foolish to the two black farmhands—and it appears painfully shortsighted to the reader.

The pure childishness of Asbury attempting to "free" the black farmhands by encouraging them to drink the milk becomes something more than pure comedy when we reach the story's climax. When Dr. Block informs Asbury he has undulant fever, his mother explains, "'He must have drunk some unpasteurized milk up there,'" referring to New York (388). However, a reader, remembering the earlier incident with milk, understands Asbury contracted the disease at home during his failed attempts to inspire

and instigate the black workers to rebel. Once again Asbury's disease points towards its metaphoric meaning. The undulant fever stands for the harsh reality that lies behind a false sense of Art as god. While Asbury naively believed his research for his play had brought about a moment of "communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing," it had brought about nothing but the isolation that his disease inflicted upon himself.

Asbury's roles as failed writer and would-be progressive allow the short story to be read as a satire of the myth of the solitary and suffering artist, who creates "Art" in isolation and remains misunderstood by the common man. According to the myth, the artist's estrangement is a requirement, a foundation for his artistic authenticity. The artist's work speaks for and beyond the common man, who inevitably misjudges the genius of its creator. In O'Connor's narrative, Asbury has lived the life of the solitary artist in New York, but his financial circumstances and health issues, two common corollaries of the starving artist, have forced Asbury back to his family, which is bound to misinterpret and even degrade him. However, key aspects of the solitary artist myth are undercut by Asbury, who has not written anything of artistic worth and whose extreme solitude is self-imposed. Additionally, his terminal illness, which was supposed to forever stamp Asbury as a martyr and artist, is a non-fatal illness, caused by his own irresponsibility. As a satire of a particular kind of fabricated alienation—the myth of the solitary artist—the short story becomes a satire of self-imposed isolation in general.

While much of the story's energy is spent criticizing Asbury and undermining his self-inflated sense of personal and artistic estrangement, what separates "The Enduring Chill" from "Good Country People" is its exploration of a possible remedy to solipsism.

The narrative accomplishes this through the comical scene with Father Finn as well as the story's scattered but consistent commentary on the "new man" and the Holy Ghost. When Father Finn arrives and Asbury sends his mother out of the room, he begins the conversation by asking, "I wonder what you think of Joyce, Father?" (375). The question assumes a level of intellectual and academic camaraderie, a type of relationship the straightforward and cranky Finn cannot provide. After repeating the question on account of Father Finn being "'blind in one eye and deaf in one ear,'" Father Finn blandly replies, "'I haven't met him.'" The literary conversation both misunderstood and dismissed, Father Finn quickly follows up with his own question: "Do you say your morning and night prayers?" This comical back-and-forth is a microcosm of the scene, as Asbury continues to push the conversation in the direction of intellectual skepticism while Father Finn repeats basic Christian doctrines and questions, sometimes verbatim from *The Baltimore Catechism*. When the priest states that you "cannot love Jesus unless you speak to Him," Asbury responds smugly with, "The myth of the dying god has always fascinated me." Both individuals are determined to continue along their prearranged sets of questions and themes, and both make no attempt to understand the other. However, imbedded within this nearly slapstick scene lies Father Finn's commentary on alienation.

Near the end of the somewhat short conversation, in response to Asbury's claims that he does not believe in God, does not pray, and does not want the Holy Ghost, Father Finn angrily expounds:

> "Do you want your soul to suffer eternal damnation? Do you want to be deprived of God for all eternity? Do you want to suffer the most terrible pain, greater than

> the fire, the pain of loss? Do you want to suffer the pain of loss for all eternity?" (377)

Father Finn, unbeknownst to himself, begins his tirade in the form of the famous sermon in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The priest from Joyce's novel, during a retreat, focuses intently on the physical torment of Hell, in an obvious attempt to instill fear: "But the sulfurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance which is specifically designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury" (121). In a way, Father Finn is finally joining Asbury's conversation about Joyce—ironically, though, Finn's commentary about hell develops the concept of damnation far past the fear-mongering of Joyce's priest. Father Finn's picture of hell, while it retains an image of physical fire, focuses a lot more intently on the concept of alienation and loss.

The central fact of hell, its major characteristic according to Father Finn, is deprivation from God. He even extends this pronouncement by using the more ambiguous but personal phrase "pain of loss." Hell, according to Finn, is loss; it is deprivation not only from God but from all human persons. Hell is, therefore, solipsism, a rejection of the intersubjective nature of human persons. The irony is that Asbury is already in this hell: he has rejected all personal relationships and responsibilities in the name of artistic freedom and authenticity. Here too we grasp connections between Joyce and O'Connor, between Stephen Dedalus and Asbury Fox. Asbury rejects religion in the name of artistic freedom, like Stephen; but what he discovers is more constricting: an estranging and distressing retreat into the ego. Without a single human connection, Asbury is unable to create anything of artistic merit, and he finds himself physically and emotionally isolated, left to his adolescent fury and intellectual emptiness, circumscribed

by his childhood bed in his childhood house. Asbury is already experiencing hell, the pain of loss, but he is intent on seeing this reality as everyone's fault but his own.

Father Finn's statements about the Holy Ghost are also central to the story, as they connect the beginning of the story to its end, crucially putting the final scene into perspective. In terms of alienation and isolation, the Holy Ghost is a symbol of the Trinity, the Triune God: an indication that even God does not exist in isolation. Although monotheistic in general form, Christianity preaches a Triune God, three persons in one. One of the significant consequences of this theology is an understanding that all persons, whether human or divine, exist in relation other persons. References to the Holy Ghost begin early in "The Enduring Chill," first in a flashback to one of Asbury's experiences in New York. Asbury reflects on a lecture he attended with his friend Goetz, a lecture on Vedanta, the philosophical system based on the Vedas. During an informal discussion after the lecture, Asbury discusses his illness and impending death with a small group, including a Jesuit priest. When the discussion turns to self-fulfillment and salvation, Asbury asks the priest, "'And what do you say to that?'" (360). The Jesuit responds, "'There is,' the priest said, 'a real probability of the New Man, assisted, of course,' he added brittlely, 'by the Third Person of the Trinity.'" Although some of the Eastern spiritualists in the international group scoff at his remarks, Asbury is impressed, not so much with the theological statement, as with the Jesuit himself, who strikes him as "someone who would have understood the unique tragedy of his death." What is significant about this scene is how it establishes the possibility of salvation, self-fulfillment, and the "New Man," but it positions these possibilities as contingent upon the Holy Ghost.

The scene with Father Finn reintroduces the conversation about the Holy Ghost. After Asbury freely admits he does not say his prayers, Father Finn angrily replies, "'How do you expect to get what you don't ask for? God does not send the Holy Ghost to those who don't ask for Him" (376). In context of the scene, Asbury is flabbergasted by the comments, confused as to why Finn would assume he wants the Holy Ghost in the first place. The priest's statements work on another level, though, as they develop the story's theology: the individual must make an act of the will in order to change; he must ask for the Holy Ghost. A few lines later, Finn establishes another necessary precursor to the Holy Ghost and real transformation: authentic self-awareness. Finn asserts, "The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are—a lazy ignorant conceited youth!" (377). Despite being couched in the language and tone of a cantankerous old man, both of these theological points—that an individual must ask for the Holy Ghost and that an individual must be self-aware prior to the arrival of the Holy Ghost—set the stage for the story's final paragraph, as Asbury experiences self-realization and change, as well as a nascent understanding of responsibility for his mother.

Near the end of the story, when he is sure of his imminent death, Asbury gives Mrs. Fox the key to the drawer wherein is hid his letter of condemnation. She is confused by the gesture and places the key back on Asbury's bedside table. After Doctor Block's dramatic entrance informing Asbury that he is not terminally ill but only suffering from undulant fever, Asbury is left alone with this shocking epiphany. Significantly, Asbury's first act is to turn "his head, almost surreptitiously, to the side where the key he had given his mother was lying on the bedside table. His hand shot out and closed over it and returned it to his pocket" (382). Although this act may be initially

prompted by Asbury's realization he will not die today, it is also the beginning of his larger personal change, as he decides *not* to make his mother read his scathing letter, full of adolescent and self-centered fury. No longer convinced of his impending death and naïve martyrdom, Asbury is finally able to see the childishness of his actions. Whereas Hulga must come face-to-face with a true nihilist before recognizing her juvenile self-centeredness, Asbury must understand that his own ego is not omniscient. This epiphany promptly leads to his decision to keep his letter from his mother. This acceptance of responsibility, even if not fully acknowledged as such, paves the way for what becomes Asbury's more important and internal epiphany. Although there remains some resistance to the change, as in his gazing outside at the treeline that "formed a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming," it is apparent Asbury is ready internally for the change: "The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new." This is a direct reference back to the first Jesuit's statement that the Holy Ghost is necessary for the emergence of the New Man.

In the moment prior to the descent of the Holy Ghost in the story's final paragraphs, we learn that a "feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped" Asbury (382). On the one hand, this might give the impression that the Holy Ghost is descending and changing Asbury despite his personal protestations, despite his "cry" and "protest." This line, along with the weightiness of the next sentence, has confirmed for some readers and critics their suspicion that O'Connor's theology was essentially Calvinist: free will is of less importance than—and perhaps of no importance to—the power and movement of

God. In his "The Protestantism of Flannery O'Connor," Robert Milder claims that "The Enduring Chill" confirms O'Connor's Protestant theology:

> Where the grandmother chooses grace, Asbury and Mrs. Turpin are chosen by it—"singled out," as Mrs. Turpin says, randomly and with no apparent regard for penitence or even faith. Grace proceeds from the sovereign pleasure of an arbitrary, inscrutable God who saves whom He will, when He will, and whose offer of salvation can neither be declined nor withstood. (173)

For Milder, Asbury's free will plays no role in the eventual descent of the Holy Ghost; he makes no real choice. One of the reasons interpretations like this are inviting is because O'Connor chose not to expound directly upon her characters' epiphanies or their encounters with God. She leaves them out of the story since they exceed language. Regardless, O'Connor does include enough of a narrative foundation for a reader to recognize Asbury's role in his transformation.

First of all, we must return to a key but passing reflection of Asbury's on the story's opening page. In classic fashion, O'Connor cleverly connects the story's opening with its conclusion, through a foreshadowing only apparent in a second read. When Asbury's train arrives home in Timberboro, he is thrilled that his mother immediately recognizes the physical effect of his illness: "He was pleased that she should see death in his face at once. His mother, at the age of sixty, was going to be introduced to reality and he supposed that of the experience didn't kill her, it would assist her in the process of growing up" (357). When we read this passage alongside the story's conclusion, we can see that Asbury's premonitions were correct but misdirected: it is he and not his mother who is "introduced to reality"; the experience "didn't kill" him, and it "assisted" him, not

his mother, in his "process of growing up." Keeping this line in mind, we can see what is being "forced" upon Asbury in the final moments of the story is not God's grace but rather a vision of reality.

While the story's narrative arc points to the positive nature of the story's conclusion, the tale's theological levels also work in the same direction. Father Finn made an important statement earlier, claiming the individual *must* ask for the Holy Ghost; while the presentation of the priest is humorous and hyperbolic, his theological statements are sound. They demonstrate how the "escaping" of the "protest" is in fact Asbury's removal of any obstacle to the Holy Spirit's descent, in the sense that Asbury is allowing the protest to escape. In a letter to "A," O'Connor describes Asbury's change as a turn to humility: Asbury "undeniably realizes that he's going to live with the new knowledge that he knows nothing. That is really what he is frozen in—humility" (261). O'Connor expresses Asbury's epiphany in terms similar to the famous line ascribed to Socrates: "I know that I know nothing." Socrates' assertion of intellectual humility is almost exactly the same as Doctor Block's earlier admittance, "'Most things are beyond me… I ain't found anything yet that I thoroughly understood…'" (267)—and O'Connor's letter ties both Socrates and Block with Asbury's final epiphany.

Asbury's epiphany is not simply about understanding an individual fact or recognizing a personal idiosyncrasy; it is about seeing all of reality in a new light. In his *Flannery O'Connor, the Imagination of Extremity*, Frederick Asals argues that in this scene "a veil is pulled aside" so that Asbury can see "a glimpse of the full dimensions of Reality" (210). For Asals, this Reality contradicts and subverts the "deceptions of the ego." What is interesting to note is that the self and the ego are not subsumed, as in

Buddhism's teaching about the no-self. Early in the story, Asbury blithely rejects his Buddhist's friend's ideology of illusion; but the end of the story is not a demonstration of Buddhism's correctness. Levinas too did not consider the individual or the ego as empty terms—instead, they are incomplete by themselves, for every individual is already in relationship to the other. As the Spirit descends, Asbury is borne into a relationship—a relationship with a God that is himself a God-in-relationship—and he is salvaged from his self-centered alienation and condescending solipsism. In these final moments, Asbury becomes aware that this Spirit has always been there, like the "fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness has been poised over his head." The Spirit's perpetual presence concurs with Levinas and O'Connor's understanding of experience, since Asbury was always already in relationship, despite his pride and blindness.

A Survey of Alienation in Various Stories

"Good Country People" and "The Enduring Chill" are by no means the only stories with developed themes of alienation and isolation; perhaps they are not even the stories with the most alienated characters. They are, nevertheless, two stories that demonstrate well O'Connor's pattern of simultaneously portraying the reality of isolation alongside its artificiality. The experience of solipsism is palpable and genuine, and the reader is moved to empathy, especially in the case of Hulga. Despite the tangible nature of the alienation, the narratives both focus attention on the fact that Hulga and Asbury willfully, even if unconsciously, alienate themselves by means of their pride, condescension, self-pity, immaturity, and constructed philosophy. Most of O'Connor's

other stories also establish alienated protagonists. A quick survey of some of these stories is helpful for at least three reasons. To begin, a survey simply demonstrates the consistent and almost universal quality of isolation throughout O'Connor's fiction. Second, a survey will provide a look at the narrative ingenuity of O'Connor, as she uses various methods to isolate her characters. Finally and most importantly, a look at the distinctions in the fiction's alienation can develop our understanding of how O'Connor used alienation as a false and temporal reality, blinding persons from the relational nature of existence.

Julian from "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and Thomas from "The Comforts of Home" bear a striking similarity to the protagonists from the two previous stories, in the sense that their pride and condescension are their primary means of alienation. Although Julian has a mother he relates to on a daily basis, he clearly feels above her, from an educational and politically progressive standpoint; he feels the need to remind himself of his distance from her, a distance he determines is necessary as a prerequisite for objective observation. However, O'Connor brilliantly critiques this form of self-isolation in the name of impartiality:

> Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. (411)

In the name of objective distance, Julian withdraws into himself, a solipsistic repositioning. But Julian is anything but impartial, as the line directly after the passage

above notes: “It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity.” Julian is not an unbiased observer, attempting, in a practice of academic honesty, to view the scene as an impartial outsider; he is an exceptionally biased individual, descending into his own self in order to allow himself the freedom to criticize without being criticized.

The opening sentences to “Comforts of Home” function similarly to the description of Julian’s faux objectivity, as they demonstrate a purported distant and detached perspective fueled by bias and condescension: “Thomas withdrew to the side of the window and with his head between the wall and the curtain he looked down on the driveway where the car had stopped. His mother and the little slut were getting out of it” (383). The physical space from which Thomas is viewing the scene establishes an area of perspective objectivity: he is unseen in his observations as well as far enough away to see the scene clearly. But the second sentence undercuts any impartiality the first established. The phrase “little slut” introduces the reader to Thomas’s emotionally charged arrogance. He is not coolly assessing the situation from a theoretically sound distance; he is silently fuming against his mother, while childishly peeking out from behind a curtain. As with Julian’s introversion in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” O'Connor critiques the act of distancing as a means of ensuring objective analysis. Levinas points to the dishonesty of this move, since a removal from a relational perspective is a rejection of human experience. O'Connor demonstrates Levinas’s philosophical point by revealing the result of detached distance: instead of producing a clearer picture of the scene, Thomas and Julian’s emotional and physical distance only

disguise the entirely self-centered hyper-subjectivity through which they are viewing reality.

Both Julian and Thomas are isolated, despite having functioning relationships with their mothers. This situation of estrangement within the context of a family is a common narrative practice of O'Connor's. "Parker's Back" and "Greenleaf" are two additional examples of alienation set within operational families. The opening line of "Parker's Back" achieves this tension through irony, by depicting a scene of recent marriage—a setting associated with romance—but rendering Parker completely isolated: "Parker's wife was sitting on the front porch floor, snapping beans. Parker was sitting on the step, some distance away, watching her sullenly. She was plain, plain" (510). Parker is both present to the scene and "some distance away." His reflection that his wife is "plain, plain" gives an explanation for this distance, not in the sense of justifying his alienation, but rather by placing the blame on Parker's callous superficiality. Similarly, Mrs. May from "Greenleaf," despite living with her two sons and relating regularly with her farmhands, manages to alienate herself by choosing to view everything and everyone as being against her: "'Everything is against you,' she would say, 'the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you. They're all in league against you. There's nothing for it but an iron fist'" (321). Mrs. May's solution, her "iron fist," is one of the defining causes of her isolation, as it does not allow for any human relationship to flourish.

In a dark way, "A View of the Woods" initially seems to present us with at least one family relationship that is understanding and reciprocal. The spiteful and cantankerous old man of the story feels a strong bond to a single one of his

grandchildren, Mary Fortune: “She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive. Though there was seventy years’ difference in their ages, the spiritual distance between them was slight. She was the only member of the family he had any respect for” (336). Mary and her grandfather spend a significant amount of time together, and they seem united in their disregard for the opinion or respect of anyone else. They are mean-spirited, but they are mean-spirited together. However, the development of the conflict and the narrative’s conclusion undercut this positive reading of relationship. When the old man decides to sell the front lawn for a gas station, Mary is dumbfounded: “‘We won’t be able to see the woods across the road,’ she said” (342). This statement, along with the old man’s incredulous reply, “‘The view?’” reveals the chasm between the two. The old man is appalled that Mary is considering something as unpractical and superficial as the aesthetics of a “view”; for him, there is only progress and power, and a “view” has no place in his pragmatism. The absurdity of the grandfather’s earlier claim that “the spiritual distance between them was slight” culminates in the final scene, as the old man kills Mary while attempting to punish her, as he himself dies, presumably from a heart attack (336). The two characters tragically die moments apart from each other, each responsible for the other’s death, each alone in his and her understanding of the world.

While the age gap between the grandfather and Mary Fortune initially appears trivial in “A View of the Woods,” some of the fiction uses age as a means of alienating characters. General Sash from “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” is “a hundred and four years old,” isolated not just from the youth around him but also from his own self, since the general’s age and mental condition distance himself from his memories, and

thereby remove him from his past: “He didn’t remember the Spanish-American War in which he had lost a son; he didn’t even remember the son” (134, 135). Alienation in this story is relatively straightforward and absolute, as we are sadly witness to how old age progressively objectifies and depersonalizes individuals: they become artifacts of history, no longer persons. In a comedic yet poignantly sad moment—a coupling O'Connor excels at—we see General Sash quite literally displayed as a historical relic:

> Every year on Confederate Memorial Day, he was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historical documents. All of these were carefully preserved in glass cases so that the children would not put their hands on them. (139)

Despite the outward signs of reverence and respect bestowed upon Sash, his local society has objectified and depersonalized him and its relationship to him. Sash is a symbol of society’s history, a relic of its cultural pride, but he is not a person. The story’s dénouement resolves the alienation, but only through Sash’s death.

The problematic age gap is a lot shorter in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”: “They were fourteen—two years older than she was” (236). In this story, it is the two girls’ obsession with boys and their knowledge of basic human sexuality that establish a rift between them and the nameless female protagonist. The narrative also informs us that “neither of them was bright.” The protagonist, therefore, is both beyond the girls in terms of intelligence and maturity but exceedingly behind the two older girls in terms of common sense and experience of the world. She is a common character for O'Connor: a precocious and intelligent single child, closer in temperament and interests to the adult

world, but an adult world from which she is also barred on account of age and experience. She inhabits a natural space of isolation. Perhaps this is why she feels such an attraction to and connection with the hermaphrodite she learns about from other two girls after the fair. The alienation is more straightforward with the hermaphrodite, especially as we learn it was "a freak with a particular name but they couldn't remember the name" (245). "Freak" takes the place of the hermaphrodite's name, as the children's objectification is undisguised. Interestingly, the "freak's" claims that "God made me thisaway…and I ain't disputing His way" anticipates how O'Connor's use of the grotesque can become, besides a means of alienation, an avenue for an encounter with the true otherness of an individual.

In a completely different fashion, the child from "The River" is alienated through the irresponsibility and negligence of his parents. The story opens with the boy Harry being hastily dressed and pushed out of the door by his father, while his mother recovers from a hangover, something the story alludes to as a common occurrence. Harry's parents ignore their parental responsibility in favor of living a life of nightlife and parties. Harry is shoved onto the sitters, and even these do not always provide safety, let alone a real relationship: "Once he had been beaten up in the park by some strange boys when his sitter forgot him" (161). Harry's isolation is obviously not self-imposed, but it is instigated by a disregard for responsibility. O'Connor paints one of her most tragically affecting scenes when describing how the boy, four or five years old, wakes up on the weekend, hours before his parents, who are apparently sleeping off their night of drinking:

> The apartment was silent except for the faint humming of the refrigerator. He went into the kitchen and found some raisin bread heels and spread a half jar of peanut butter between them and climbed up on the tall kitchen stool and sat chewing the sandwich slowly, wiping his nose every now and then on his shoulder…. He decided they would be out cold until one o'clock and that they would all have to go to a restaurant for lunch. (171)

The physical scene is one of quiet and tragic isolation, reinforcing the deeper psychological alienation of the boy.

It is no wonder then that Harry is exhilarated when the preacher tells him that after his Baptism he will "be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ… You'll count" (168). Misinterpreting the religious statements he has no familiarity with, Harry thinks he "won't go back to the apartment then," he will "go under the river." He is surprised and dejected when he finds himself back in the apartment that evening. In a desperate attempt to free himself from his detached parents and his unbearable isolation, Harry returns to the river the next day, "to keep on going this time until he" finds "the Kingdom of Christ in the river" (173). The story's concluding image of the drowning boy is a poignant and sober commentary on the harrowing isolation caused by a rejection of responsibility.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is an appropriate story to conclude this conversation, as it introduces a new means of alienation—mental disability—while also pointing to the next chapter's topic: the unsettling suspicion of moral responsibility on the part of the unwilling individual. The story opens with Mrs. Lucynell Crater observing Mr. Tom Shiftlet walking to their home. The description of Lucynell's daughter—the

young Lucynell—establishes the daughter's mental disability: "The daughter could not see far in front of her and continued to play with her fingers" (145). Sophisticated intellectual ability (or at least a perceived sophistication) often alienates characters in the fiction, but O'Connor reverses the process in this story, using intellectual simplicity to isolate the daughter. The younger Lucynell is not aware of her mother's goal of marrying her off to Mr. Shiftlet, nor is she aware of Tom's abandonment of her once they are married. At the commencement of what is supposed to be their honeymoon, Shiftlet leaves a sleeping Lucynell at "The Hot Spot," making his getaway with a car and the seventeen-fifty from Mrs. Crater (154). Lucynell is alienated more than ever at the close of the scene, deserted and alone at a restaurant, miles from her mother and home.

The story's exposé on isolation and responsibility takes an interesting shift as Tom drives away alone from the sleeping Lucynell: "He was more depressed than ever as he drove on by himself… There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker" (155). Suddenly the alienated character is Shiftlet himself, not Lucynell; however, the reader can neither empathize with him nor believe his feelings of responsibility. The irony is too apparent: he has just abandoned his actual wife, claiming she was a hitchhiker he could not wait for; and somehow he now feels compelled to be generous. But his feelings have some reality, even if surface, since he proceeds to pick up a hitchhiker. When the young man refuses to enter into Shiftlet's conversation about the goodness of mothers, Tom states, "'My mother was an angel of Gawd… He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her'" (156). Shiftlet's use of "angel of Gawd," a repetition of the phrase used by a young man at the restaurant in reference to the young

Lucynell, makes it apparent he thinking about Lucynell as well as about his mother. The hitchhiker is angered by the comments and leaps out of the car, leaving Shiftlet, once again isolated.

Shiftlet's feelings of responsibility and his pangs of guilt both point to another common experience in O'Connor's fiction: the suspicion, often uncomfortable, that one may in fact be responsible for another human person. In many of the scenes described in this chapter, characters are blithely unaware of their responsibility for the other, as they are so incredibly alienated. But O'Connor's fiction is not just about alienation; it is not even primarily about alienation. Instead, isolation is a disconcerting effect of ignoring the relational nature of human experience. The next chapter will examine stories and scenes in which characters begin to face their moral imperative for the other. Since this requires a complete turn—a conversion—it is often a painful realization, resisted with an uneasy firmness.

Chapter 3

Trauma & Disruption: Truly and Falsely Encountering the Other

In what may seem a tension or contradiction, Emmanuel Levinas considered hyper-individualism—the narcissistic focus on the ego's self-interest—a necessary precursor to an encounter with the other and responsibility. The absolute interiority of estrangement highlights the otherness of the other, which prohibits our labeling of the other as "same." Jeffrey Bloechl explains this tension in Levinas's philosophy when he notes that "self-absorption is indispensable for the introduction of an appeal to transcend that dark existence" ("Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion" 132). Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's characters' understanding of responsibility and their personal epiphanies are contingent upon their earlier solipsism, their "dark existence." For example, Mrs. McIntyre's estrangement in "The Displaced Person" facilitates her encounter with responsibility. Against the backdrop of her practical self-centeredness—her extreme interiority—Mr. Guizac's status as European, Catholic, and Polish speaker cannot be perceived as anything but absolute exteriority, or other. Bloechl goes on to say, "In other words, in order for absolute exteriority to reveal itself as absolute exteriority, there must first be extreme interiority" (133). O'Connor's use of alienation, this extreme interiority, works in much the same way, by preparing the character for the extreme exteriority of the other.

On account of this dramatic shift from "extreme interiority" to "extreme exteriority," Levinas sometimes referred to an encounter with the other as *traumatic* or *disruptive*. Bloechl helps explain how this trauma can work either positively, by pushing

the individual toward relationship and responsibility, or negatively, by persuading the individual toward deeper solipsism: "The trauma which awakens me to the fact that I am always already responding leaves me no alternative but to somehow take up that fact more consciously, whether in the mode of care for the other person or in a more selfish retreat into my own concerns" (133). Encountering the face of the other can lead to deeper isolation, or it can lead to an understanding of responsibility; regardless, it is bound to be traumatic and disruptive, as it tears through the comforts and self-interests of the solitary ego.

Throughout O'Connor's fiction, characters' encounters with their responsibility for the other are precipitated by—or are concurrent with—trauma and disruption, sometimes in the form of physical violence, sometimes in form of psychological disturbance. The physical violence in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Greenleaf," "Good Country People," "The Displaced Person," "The Comforts of Home," "Parker's Back," and "A View of the Woods" all provide characters with traumatic disruptions, which are in part disruptions to their self-interested solipsism. The psychological violence and struggle in "The Displaced Person," "The Artificial Nigger," "Good Country People," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Enduring Chill," "Parker's Back," and "The Lame Shall Enter First" similarly provide characters with disruptions to their self-assured solitude. These performances of trauma are gateways into an understanding of the other as other—and this understanding, in turn, presents the character with the possibility of accepting responsibility for the other.

Conversely, O'Connor's fiction also highlights characters whose understanding of the other is *not* precipitated by trauma; these characters' charity inevitably turns out to be false, self-serving, and hollow. Reading O'Connor anew through Levinas allows us to see how the fiction distinguishes between real and false encounters with moral responsibility. For O'Connor, violence—Levinas's *disruption*—is a necessary precursor to true encounters with the other and responsibility; without trauma, characters' alienation is never truly overcome. A lack of psychological or physical disruption in the fiction indicates the charity is based on sameness, since the otherness of the other has not been experienced or accepted. These characters often think or even act selflessly, but their devotion lacks foundational and metaphysical roots. Despite their charity, their calculations are still based upon implicit assumptions about the authority of the individual. In short, these characters use their egos to perceive the other as completely knowable and therefore the same, and they reject the otherness of the other, since it infringes upon the comforts and authority of the individual self.

Coming on the heels of an analysis of estrangement, this chapter will analyze disruptions to characters' alienation, breakings in upon the solitary authority of the ego. Despite the disruption being a call to a deeper and truer understanding of human experience, it is difficult and unsettling. This trauma sets the stage for a real encounter with the face of the other, which will be discussed in the following two chapters. "The Displaced Person" is the primary example of Levinasian trauma in this chapter, as Mrs. McIntyre's encounter with her responsibility for the displaced person and his family causes intense mental dispute and moral conflict over responsibility for the other; McIntyre rebels emotionally and logically against the nonreciprocal nature of her

responsibility for Mr. Guizac. Additionally, this chapter juxtaposes an analysis of Mrs. McIntyre's disruption with a self-centered, self-serving, and false understanding of responsibility, a construction of ethics unaccompanied by violence. Sheppard's false and hollow feelings of charity for Rufus Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First" are unassisted by trauma and disruption. Sheppard's understanding of responsibility is insubstantial because it is not nonreciprocal; he never encounters the otherness of Rufus, seeing only the boy's difficult situation and his own status as economic and spiritual savior.

"The Displaced Person"

"The Displaced Person" revolves around the arrival of the Guizacs—a Polish family displaced by World War Two—at Mrs. McIntyre's rural dairy farm. The beginning of the story follows the perspective of Mrs. Shortley, the wife of the farm's dairyman. Her xenophobic fear of the Guizacs is closely related to her anxiety that Mr. Guizac, an industrious worker, will replace Mr. Shortley, a lazy and indifferent employee and husband. After Mrs. Shortley's death, the narrative perspective shifts to Mrs. McIntyre, as she struggles between her desire to dismiss Mr. Guizac and her vague but powerful sense that she is responsible for him and his family. After Mr. Guizac dies in a tractor accident, a death Mrs. McIntyre is indirectly responsible for, the farm declines and McIntyre's health precipitously deteriorates. She becomes bedridden, mute, and blind, left to the care of a single caretaker, forgotten by all friends and acquaintances, except Father Finn, the same priest who initially convinced Mrs. McIntyre to take in the displaced persons.

"The Displaced Person" is O'Connor's most overt dramatization of an encounter with Levinasian responsibility. What is implied or subtle in most stories takes concrete form here; Mrs. McIntyre directly confronts, and struggles with, her moral obligation to Mr. Guizac and his family. Her rational logic finds no reason for her to be responsible to the Polish displaced persons, but she continually and obsessively *experiences* her obligation to the family, even if she fights it right up to Guizac's death. As such, "The Displaced Person" is a perfect story through which to examine O'Connor's dramatization of Levinasian trauma and disruption. McIntyre's psychological, emotional, and eventual physical struggle with her responsibility for the displaced persons is the central focus of this chapter's literary analysis.

Xenophobia lays the groundwork for McIntyre's emotional disruption and trauma, but ironically, xenophobia is also essential to her encounter with responsibility. It is Mrs. Shortley's fear of the immigrants, which Mrs. McIntyre initially rejects but later adopts, which disallows Guizac to be perceived the "same"; this is a necessary component of McIntyre's recognition of her responsibility toward him. When McIntyre begins to distrust Guizac, the presence of Shortley, despite her death, is immediately felt: "Mrs. McIntyre remembered Mrs. Shortley's words: 'He understands everything, he only pretends he don't so as to do exactly as he pleases'" (223). Although McIntyre had ignored these sorts of statements while Shortley was alive, they suddenly return to her when her own feelings toward Guizac begin to deteriorate. Because Guizac's otherness is chiefly expressed and experienced through the xenophobia Shortley articulates and McIntyre later espouses, it is helpful to analyze its major components.

The xenophobia has a number of definable roots: the Guizacs' place of origin (Europe), their religion (Catholicism), and their language (Polish). The fact that they look like the majority of Caucasian Americans is disturbing to Shortley, as she reflects that the "first thing that struck her as very peculiar was that they looked like other people" (195). Their sameness in physical appearance may prove a stumbling block to their status as other. However, Shortley's suspicions of their barbarity—a common characteristic of otherness—are confirmed later in the same scene, when "Mrs. McIntyre held out her hand" to Guizac, and he "bobbed down from the waist and kissed it." Shortley is horrified by the liberal and vulgar act—but she is immensely pleased by Guizac's demonstration of his otherness. The Guizacs' status as European also lies at the root of Shortley's xenophobia: "Every time Mr. Guizac smiled, Europe stretched our in Mrs. Shortley's imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil's experiment station" (205). Europe's "evil" is synonymous with the Holocaust, even though Shortley never uses the label. In spite of the Guizacs' Polish nationality—enemies of Hitler—Shortley still distrusts them, since if "they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?" The humor of Shortley's irrational statement betrays a deeper and darker representation of xenophobia's logic; its validity is judged by its ability to instill fear, especially if and when the object feared can be viewed as other.

Another important aspect of Mr. Guizac's otherness is his language. The Slavic language is initially presented playfully, as McIntyre and Shortley call the family the "Gobblehooks," since "them's last name was something that only themselves and the priest could pronounce" (196). Guizac's Polish language is both a signal of his

otherness—a sign that transcends his physical looks, since these make him seem "same"—and a source of power: he can speak without being understood, while his grasp of English increases throughout the story. In a frightening blending of symbols and fear, Shortley transposes her fear of the Holocaust onto her fear of the unknown Slavic language: "She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words…. She saw them all piled up in a room. All the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel" (209). The Guizacs' use of the Polish language is the single tangible sign of their otherness. European and Catholic characteristics can go disguised in America, since they are not physical traits; but when Guizac speaks, his origins are unavoidably tangible.

Shortley's xenophobia, ironically, plays a role in McIntyre's encounter with responsibility to the other. For Levinas, we truly encounter our moral duty when the other is perceived completely as other. When the other is perceived as *same*, the root of "charity" is essentially self-love: I love what is like me because it is like me. In these cases, the other is simply a part of me. However, when the other is purely other, I have the opportunity to encounter a true and selfless responsibility to him. In the case of "The Displaced Person," this is why McIntyre's adoption of Shortley's xenophobia happens simultaneously with her unsettling sense of responsibility for the displaced persons.

After Mrs. Shortley dies, it is the older farmhand, Astor, who first takes up Shortley's role of emphasizing Guizac's otherness. As a minor character, Astor plays the middleman between Shortley and McIntyre, ensuring the Guizacs' otherness makes the narrative transition. When McIntyre has an extended conversation with Astor about the farm, its past, present, and future, Astor comments on the Guizacs' otherness, even if

ambiguously: "'In Pole it ain't like it is here… They got different ways of doing" (216). When pressed to clarify, Astor replies even more obliquely: "'It warn't like it was what he should ought or oughtn't do…. It was like what nobody else don't do.'" The xenophobia and fear Shortley spread to the farm lies at the root of Astor's comments. Essentially, what is wrong with Mr. Guizac is his difference, especially as it translates into actions. Astor's concern with this otherness is underscored by his next comment, which is an attempt to sum up his thoughts on the matter: "'We ain't never had one like him before is all.'" Astor's terse synopsis of the situation makes it clear that he—and by extension the rest of the farm and town—cannot place Guizac into any of the culture's preexisting racial categories. It matters not that he is white, like McIntyre and the Shortleys; his difference cuts through the established racial categories. In short, Guizac might be white, but he still is entirely other.

In front of Astor, McIntyre dismisses the old man's vague fears, but her own anxieties have already begun. In the very next paragraph, McIntyre reflects upon her relationship with Guizac:

> There was a certain stiffness about his figure that seemed to make it necessary for her to approach him slowly, even in her thoughts. She had decided this was because she couldn't hold easy conversation with him. Whenever she said anything to him, she found herself shouting and nodding extravagantly and she would be conscious that one of the Negroes was leaning against the nearest shed, watching. (216)

McIntyre's reflection makes it clear the language barrier, in addition to its ability to make her look foolish, lies at the heart of her own anxieties about the displaced person. She

believed she cannot know someone if she cannot communicate with them. This theme extends beyond simple language when Guizac's means of perceiving the world comes into question. McIntyre's fear of the other is integral to her encounter with responsibility, since it prohibits her labeling of Guizac as same, and thereby offers a gateway to her understanding of responsibility for the displaced person. The struggle and tension in McIntyre's relationship with Guizac, both exteriorly and psychologically, reveal the authenticity of her engagement with the disruption and trauma inherent in facing the otherness of the other.

While Shortley and McIntyre's xenophobia relate to a universal anxiety regarding the other, O'Connor was also commenting on a very contemporary American fear. In a piece in the *Paris Review* titled "Reading Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Islamophobia," David Griffith reveals the connection between the xenophobia in "The Displaced Person" and the post-World World Two prejudices of America. In fact, the title of the story itself comes "from the Displaced Persons Act, which, between 1948 and 1952, permitted the immigration of some four hundred thousand European refugees into the United States" (Griffith). However, as Griffith points out, the bill was "discriminatory…toward Jews and Catholics, " since "the Act stipulated that, in order to be eligible, one must have entered Germany, Italy, or Austria before December 22, 1945"; this "ruled out 90 percent of the remaining Jewish people displaced by the war" and "the many Catholics who'd fled their largely Communist countries after the December 22 deadline." As the title of the article implies, Griffith connects the American prejudices of post-World War Two with contemporary American sentiments and policies regarding those emigrating from Muslim states.

One of the successes of "The Displaced Person" is its blend of universal and local, its analysis of something as topical as a political bill—O'Connor tended away from the topical—and its examination of the persistent fear of the outsider in human societies. But rather than a satire of xenophobia, both past and universal, reading O'Connor anew through Levinas helps us recognize the narrative connection between a fear of the other and a recognition of responsibility to the other, the connection between McIntyre's anxiety concerning Guizac's status as a non-American and her inner conscience warning of her responsibility to this man. In this way, "The Displaced Person" explores the connection between othering and the other: the former can be a gateway to the latter. Obviously this is not always the case, as the example of Shortley reminds us; and for McIntyre too, any real overcoming of her fear of Guizac happens after his death. Nevertheless, the story reveals how, in moments of extreme xenophobia, the very same justification for the othering can become the means by which the xenophobia is overcome.

McIntyre attempts to frame her desire to dismiss Guizac in purely economic terms; however, this cover-up offers an interpretative key to understanding her inner struggle. McIntyre's argument is that she appreciated having the displaced person on the farm because he saved her money; she now wants to dismiss him for the long-term financial good of the farm and farmhands. She repeats variations of this argument throughout the narrative, especially to Father Flynn: "'I don't have any obligation to him. My obligation is to the people who've done something for their country, not to the ones who've just come over to take advantage of what they can get'" (239). One of the obvious reasons to disbelieve McIntyre's repeated argument is because Guizac remains a

positive economic factor for the farm through the entirety of the story. However, McIntyre's external preoccupation with economics offers an interpretative key for understanding her unconscious relationship with the displaced person and his situation. To understand this, one must consider the story's commentary on McIntyre's marriage to the Judge, her first husband.

McIntyre wants everyone—including herself—to believe her marriage to the Judge was simply a matter of economics. We are first presented with this narrative in part I: "Mrs. Shortley had heard that she had married him when she was thirty and he was seventy-five, thinking she would be rich as soon as he died" (208). Though this hope never pans out, since the Judge dies in debt, what is important here is the idea of McIntyre marrying for money. When we are with McIntyre in part II, we receive the same storyline—but with an addition. We learn that she "had married him when he was an old man and because of his money" (218). This is a repetition of Shortley's reflection; however, the sentence does not end there. It continues, without punctuation, "…but there had been another reason that she would not admit then, even to herself: she had liked him." There are two significant aspects of the second half of this sentence. First, there is a deeper motivation than economics to McIntyre's actions, even if money does play a role; second, McIntyre refuses to consciously acknowledge this non-practical reality, even to herself. Her exterior and constructed self is a pragmatic woman, concerned about practical things, like money and running a farm smoothly. Frivolous things like romance—or later, nonreciprocal responsibility—are not practical. But this is a constructed and false self, as McIntyre's marriage with the Judge makes clear: "The three years that he lived after they married were the happiest and most prosperous of Mrs.

McIntyre's life." McIntyre married, at least partly, on account of love or affection, and the result was happiness. But McIntyre's conscious self rejects this narrative of love and happiness in favor of a self-portrait of practicality and pragmatism.

McIntyre's relationship with the Judge, and her internalizing of the relationship, provide a model through which we can read her relationship with Guizac. Although McIntyre persists in her thoroughly practical and economic mindset, we understand there are deeper and more profound elements to her actions and motivations. She claims she has no responsibility toward Guizac, and she claims her decisions needs to be economically focused; but, whether or not she wants to admit it, a reader understands her inner life to be richer than the presentation of a hard, frugal, and practical widow. When she says to Flynn that she is "not theological," she "is practical," we sense the same false dichotomy in her reflections on her marriage to the Judge (225). In the case of the marriage, McIntyre believes she must have been either practical or romantic; there can be no overlap—and in the case of Guizac, she must be practical or theological; there can be no overlap. But these are false dichotomies, as her marriage to the Judge was a blending of practicality and affection. Although McIntyre claims she is always practical, the basic statement she repeats throughout the same scene with Flynn—"There is no moral obligation to keep him, she kept saying under her breath, there is absolutely no moral obligation"—is itself *not* a practical question; it is a theological, or at least ethical, statement.

Before Shortley's death and before she discovers Guizac's plan to marry his niece to her farmhand Sulk, McIntyre is not concerned with her moral responsibility for the displaced person, but she is also unhindered by Shortley's xenophobia. When Guizac's

otherness is presented, or at least hinted at, she also must come to terms with her obligation to him. Ironically, before she fears his otherness, he is not even a person to her: "She didn't know anything about him except that he did the work. The truth was that he was not even real to her yet" (219). These lines come from the very last paragraph before the major conflict arises, when McIntyre observes Guizac and Sulk's preparations for the young man's marriage to the displaced person's niece, still in Europe. When McIntyre confronts Guizac about his "illicit" marriage plans for Sulk, she finally sees Guizac as a person, a physical and describable human being:

> Monster! she said to herself and looked at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. His forehead and skull were white where they had been protected by his cap but the rest of his face was red and bristled with short yellow hairs. His eyes were like two bright nails behind his gold-rimmed spectacles that had been mended over the nose with haywire. His whole face looked as if it might have been patched together out of several others. (222)

This passage adeptly pairs McIntyre's fear and loathing of Guizac's otherness—represented by the "Monster" in the opening line—with her recognition of his physicality, denoted by the detailed description of his facial features. Ironically, as soon as Guizac becomes an object of fear, he also becomes a physical person, and therefore a potential object of love. Shortley lays the groundwork for the othering of Guizac, but she never encounters her responsibility for him. But for McIntyre, Guizac's status as other becomes a gateway for her recognition of his true otherness; as such, it causes a disruption in her hyper-individualistic world. McIntyre is torn from her comfortable

moral universe where she is at the center, to an alternate moral universe, based on not a single point of gravity, but two points of reference: relational reality.

McIntyre's almost violent struggle with her responsibility for Guizac is also rooted in the basic unfairness of it, at least unfairness according to an individual-centered moral system. The inequity reflects the inequity in Levinas: "In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own" (*Dialogues* 60). McIntyre expresses this moral dilemma best when arguing with Father Flynn. In her first argument with the Catholic priest, the narrator's observation of McIntyre's thoughts set the scene: "There is no moral obligation to keep him, she was saying under her breath, there is absolutely no moral obligation" (225). After Flynn's appeal to her humanity— Guizac has "'no where to go'"—McIntyre distances herself from the displaced person's situation: "'It in not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has no where to go… I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world" (226). McIntyre's second argument with Flynn follows the same format as the first, as she states her non-ethical relationship with Guizac's situation through the simple sentence, "I don't have any obligation to him" (229), but she bolsters her approach by appealing to the economics of her own situation: "She told him how the people who looked rich were the poorest of all" (230). However, her decision to make this a matter of economics undercuts the larger thrust of her argument, since the reader is already aware McIntyre uses economics as a cover for deeper relational matters. Keeping this in mind, the strange end to the second conversation makes sense: "Finally she asked him if he thought she was made of money and the old man suddenly let out a great ugly bellow as if this were a comical question." Although McIntyre is upset at Flynn's lack of seriousness, her question is quite comical: there is absolutely nothing to

do with economics in McIntyre's reasoning. She understands she is in an ethical debate—hence her repeated use of "obligation" and "responsibility"—and to frame the argument in terms of finances is amusing, at the very least to Father Flynn and the reader.

Levinas's ethics and McIntyre's feelings of responsibility run counter to most ethical systems of the past four hundred years. Most post-Enlightenment discussions of personal or moral responsibility are set in the *negative*: I am morally bound *not* to do certain things to you. I cannot kill you. I cannot steal from you. I cannot do things that infringe upon your freedoms. But Levinas's ethics is in the affirmative: I bear an *active* responsibility for you. This affronts us because our entire systems of thinking—our philosophies, our ethical conversations, and our basic common sense—are rooted in a hyper-individualistic frame of reference. Descartes's "Cogito Ergo Sum" signaled the myopic focus on the self and the ego. To be told we must *act* for someone else—not that we must refrain from inhibiting him—offends our moral sensibilities. Confronted with an argument against our basic moral common sense, we might repeat with McIntyre, we have "no moral obligation to" act for the other, "absolutely no moral obligation" (225). Levinas's ethics builds upon a phenomenology of the face-to-face encounter, and so all arguments for the primacy of the individual, the ego, or the self are simply set aside to make way for an ethics that recognizes we are all *already in* relationship.

In McIntyre's case, she is not analyzing two different ethical systems; she is not weighing her responsibility for her own self against her possible responsibility for the other. Instead, she is simply *experiencing* her responsibility for Guizac and his family's wellbeing. McIntyre is not confronted by a linguistic argument for her responsibility for the displaced person—in fact, neither Father Flynn nor O'Connor even attempt this—she

is simply challenged and threatened by an existential knowledge that she bears responsibility for this stranger from another continent. The fact that the ethical struggle is interior and psychological is established by the first line following her second argument with the priest: "When the visit was over, she felt let down, though she had clearly triumphed over" Father Flynn (230). In short, McIntyre has yet to convince herself she is not responsible for Guizac and his family. This interpretation is supported by the fact that she can never, over the course of month, actually dismiss him: "There was no reason Mrs. McIntyre should not fire Mr. Guizac at once but she put it off from day to day" (231). It is one thing to claim indifference and ethical non-responsibility to an audience, but it is something altogether different for McIntyre to convince herself. Logic seems to be on her side; the legal system is on her side; the rest of the farm is on her side; the town is on her side. But her experience of Guizac both as other and as a physical person provides an existential counter to logic and legality.

McIntyre's inner struggle is best represented by her deteriorating health, a sign of the trauma and disruption caused by encountering the true otherness of Guizac and her responsibility for his otherness. Mr. Shortley first notices the physical decline: "She looked as if something was wearing her down from the inside. She was thinner and more fidgety, and not as sharp as she used to be" (230). We might be correct to distrust Mr. Shortley's perspective and blame his bias, but we are also aware of McIntyre's inability to sleep well: "This was too much for her and she woke up and didn't sleep again for several nights" (231). The relationship between her inability to accept her responsibility for Guizac and her deteriorating health is confirmed at the end of the story, since after Guizac dies, McIntyre's health fails entirely; she is eventually bed-ridden, mute, and

blind. Her deteriorating health is a physical sign of the inner trauma McIntyre's encounter with the other causes. Disruption, while disconcerting, is a necessary means for confronting the true otherness of the other—and this confrontation, in turn, makes it possible for one to encounter responsibility for the other.

"The Displaced Person" lays out no logical argument for McIntyre's responsibility for Guizac, nor does the story make a lofty claim for a universal responsibility for the other. Instead, the power of the ethical position comes in two forms. The first is McIntyre's own inner struggle with her responsibility—she is never able to convince *her own self* that she is free of moral obligation. The second is Father Flynn's appeals to McIntyre's empathy; these appeals are rooted in the fundamental physicality of Guizac and his family. In short, Flynn's argument is that the Guizacs are physical human persons with physical needs. After McIntyre lays out her argument against Guizac to Flynn, his only true response to the debate is to note that Guizac "has nowhere to go" (225). Of course this does not convince McIntyre, and she retorts by pointing out that she "didn't create this situation." But Flynn's point remains true, independent of the accuracy of McIntyre's claim; if she fires him, he "has no where to go." According to an individualistic moral system, this appeal has no bearing. It is contested successfully by a simple shrug of the shoulders. But Flynn appeals to McIntyre's *relationship* to Guizac and her sense of responsibility based on this relationship. To paraphrase, McIntyre says, "I bear no responsibility for him"—while Flynn's Levinasian response is "Here is a vulnerable body with physical needs." Levinas's description of ethics is particularly useful here: "Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to exterior being" (Levinas qtd. in Critchley 15).

Father Flynn is arguing, "Here is an exterior being," and, while McIntyre scoffs at this logic, she is struck by its existential power.

"The Displaced Person" is a significant example of how O'Connor's fiction dramatizes the trauma caused by encountering both the other and the nonreciprocal nature of responsibility. However, there are a few other connections to Levinas's ethics in the story, particularly in the narrative's climax and conclusion. The final scene contains an altered version of the face-to-face encounter; additionally, the final development of McIntyre's character points to a positive, albeit tragic, outcome of Guizac's death. In the very seconds leading up to the gruesome climax, all three observers—McIntyre, Mr. Shortley, and Sulk—all fail to act to save Guizac. Sulk jumped "silently out of the way," Mr. Shortley turned "his head with incredible slowness" and stared "silently over his shoulder," and McIntyre initially thought "she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but…she had not" (234). It is not clear whether or not any of the three could have prevented Guizac's death; however, they bear a responsibility in their absolute lack of an attempt to help. In the moment of Guizac's death, the story tells us that McIntyre "had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever." The instantaneous recognition of guilt in face of their moral negligence is an unconditional victory for a moral understanding of responsibility for the other. Although all three could say, "But I didn't *do* anything to kill Guizac," the fact that they did not make an active effort to save the man's life contains its own existential powers of persuasion.

Like Flynn's argument earlier, the guilt the three share in their non-action is rooted in the physicality of Guizac's human body. The same sentence that demonstrates

their guilt, their "collusion," continues: "…and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone" (234). In poignant and vivid sound imagery, O'Connor points to the vulnerable and physical nature of both Guizac as a person and the moral negligence of the three observers. Their lack of action is the sound of a man's spine breaking. Just as no formal syllogistic logic was formulated earlier to prove McIntyre's responsibility to keep Guizac employed, so too is no logic presented to *prove* McIntyre's responsibility in the displaced person's death; instead, the guilt is simply recognized, *viz a viz* a face-to-face encounter and the overwhelming evidence of his physical body. In the face of this existential proof, all three understand intimately and instantaneously their responsibility for Guizac: "That evening, Mr. Shortley left without notice to look for a new position and the Negro, Sulk, was taken with a sudden desire to see more of the world" (235).

Is McIntyre's final and complete realization of her responsibility for Guizac too late and therefore simply a tragic epiphany? On the one hand, yes, it is too late for her to save the man and do him any real physical or economic good; however, her recognition bears fruit through its tragedy. One can read this story in purely tragic terms: the deteriorating health of McIntyre and the dissolving of her farm are simple comeuppance, not a space for character growth. However, recognizing responsibility is a positive experience, even amid tragedy, and if McIntyre can overcome her guilt and shame, she is on a path to, at the very least, a more true understanding of the world and human existence. Although painful, Guizac's death rips her from her hyper-individualism, and though she remains in relative physical alienation at the story's close, she has been offered a look into the true relational nature of human existence. Two narrative means of

reading the story's dénouement as positive lie in Shortley's death in part I and Father Flynn's commentary on the peacocks' symbolism. These narrative interpretations are supported by O'Connor's comments about "The Displaced Person" in one of her letters.

Shortley's death at the end of part I prefigures McIntyre's final moments. When Shortley is driving in the car away from the farm, she has an epiphanic moment, even as she dies. Little specific detail into her experience is given, beyond the simple fact that "she had had a great experience" (214). However, her physical actions during her stroke elucidate the situation. Her physical action as she dies is an attempt to draw everything to herself: "She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs into herself" (213). A few lines later we see that she is "clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself, Mr. Shortley's head, Sarah Mae's leg…" Shortley's final moments are spent attempting to draw everything to herself, not in a fit of selfishness but rather in an all-encompassing embrace. Throughout the story, Shortley had been concerned with her family's wellbeing, but her concern was filtered through an often bitter, xenophobic lens; readers are not tempted to sympathize with her attempts to keep her lazy husband employed. However, her final action is one of love, a physical, non-linguistic embrace that extends eternities beyond her earlier self-interested familial devotion. Shortley's death and epiphany, especially amid the pain of her stroke, prefigure McIntyre's own tragedy and epiphany.

The redemptive nature of Guizac's death for McIntyre is probably clearest when read against one of the earlier conversations between Father Flynn and McIntyre. In an effort to demonstrate her lack of responsibility, McIntyre lays out, once again, her

argument logically. Flynn is disinterested in the debate, distracted as he is by the peacocks. When one of the birds "raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise," he is absolutely mesmerized (226). Frustrated with the "idiotic old man," McIntyre attempts to return the conversation to Guizac by saying, "'He didn't have to come in the first place.'" Completely ignoring her comment, the priest retorts ambiguously, "'He came to redeem us.'" Who is Father Flynn referring to? Taken at face value, he is referring to the displaced person; however, this makes little sense to McIntyre or the reader. Within the context of the comic conversation, Flynn is most likely returning to an earlier moment in the discussion, and he is therefore referring to the peacock or Christ, who have come to represent each other, at least according to Flynn—earlier in the scene he said, "Christ will come like that!" after viewing the majesty of the bird. However, from a thematic and interpretative standpoint, Flynn's comment about redemption *does* refer to Guizac, even if it makes little sense in the context of the conversation. As a foreshadowing, Flynn prophesies that Guizac will play a redeeming role in the characters' lives.

O'Connor's own statements about her story confirm the redemptive role of Guizac. In response to what was most likely a criticism of "The Displaced Person" by "A," O'Connor replied: "The displaced person did accomplish a kind of redemption in that he destroyed the place, which was evil, and set Mrs. McIntyre on the road to a new kind of suffering…. Isn't her position, entirely helpless to herself, very like that of the souls in Purgatory?" (*Habit of Being* 118). On the one hand, this is simply an outside and authorial interpretation, and a defensive one at that; but O'Connor's own comments coincide with Flynn's earlier statements about the displaced person coming to "redeem

us." Even a light reading of O'Connor's oeuvre reveals the fiction writer's overt and subtle use of foreshadowing in almost every story. McIntyre's painful redemption lies in her being ripped from the self-assuredness of a individual-rooted moralism, first through her existential confrontation with her responsibility for Guizac and later through her experience of her ethical negligence in the innocent man's death.

Whether McIntyre is redeemed at the story's close, religiously or ethically, is not particularly important to the story's exploration of ethical responsibility. What is significant is the widow's traumatic—first psychological and then physical—encounter with her responsibility for Guizac and his family. McIntyre's rebellion against a nonreciprocal and relational responsibility for the displaced person demonstrates her encounter with his true otherness. Levinas did not argue that a true encounter with otherness would guarantee an acceptance of responsibility; it simply offers an authentic potential for this reality. This potential is nonexistent when trauma and disruption are ignored in favor of a complacent and self-righteous "love" of the other.

"The Lame Shall Enter First"

The characters from Flannery O'Connor's fiction who encounter responsibility for the other do so amid the crucible of trauma and disruption, torn from an alienation borne of hyper-individualism. In face of this interpretative assertion, one might pose a legitimate question: What about those characters who seem quite sure of their responsibility for the other at the story's commencement, those characters who seem certain of their moral obligation without the need for Levinas's experience of trauma? O'Connor criticizes these characters and reveals their senses of responsibility to be

rooted, rather than in an encounter with the vulnerability and the otherness of the other, instead in a self-serving and inaccurate perception of the other. Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First" is the quintessential example. On the one hand, he is devoted to helping those less fortunate than himself, and he volunteers considerable time attempting to provide motivation and opportunity for the unfortunate Rufus Johnson. Regardless, the narrative clearly indicts Sheppard, questioning the very principles that lay the foundation for his selfless charity. In the final analysis, Sheppard's feelings of charity and selflessness are rooted in his conception of himself as secular savior, not in the otherness of Rufus. For Sheppard, Rufus is a knowable and static object for whose problems his intellect and ego have the solutions; but charity rooted in this type of understanding is false and misguided, and it blinds Sheppard to his actual responsibilities as a father—and surrogate mother—for his own son. It is not until the story's conclusion that Sheppard experiences the trauma and disruption necessary for his understanding of responsibility—this experience, in perfect Flannerian and Levinasian fashion, leads him to both recognize and accept his responsibility for his son, even if this epiphany is too late to save the boy's life.

The story's opening paragraph focuses on Sheppard's observation and analysis of his son, Norton. The boy's practical and self-centered personality dooms him to "be a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company" (445). Opposed to Norton's egocentricity, Sheppard's dreams for his son are simple and altruistic: "All he wanted for the child was he be good and unselfish." On the surface, these are incredibly idealistic goals for a child, far above the pragmatic and economic concerns of most parents. The opening scene continues to demonstrate Sheppard's belief in a

responsibility for the other. When he asks Norton, who is eating a piece of cake for breakfast, "'Norton…do you have any idea what it means to share?'" Norton misunderstands him and assumes his father wants some of the cake—Norton replies, "'Some of it's yours." (446). Sheppard's swift response to Norton's confusion demonstrates the broad-mindedness of his conception of responsibility: "'Some of it's *his*.'" Sheppard's certainty in Rufus's *right* to their cake puts him in tension with most of O'Connor's characters, who either ignore or fight their responsibility for the other. Sheppard's volunteer work seems to validate the practicality of his lofty ideology: "On Saturdays he worked at the reformatory as a counselor, receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about" (447). On the surface, Sheppard appears to be a terrific practitioner of Levinasian ethics, a man who acts on the implicit premise that the other requires our direct and selfless action.

However, even in the examples stated above, the narrator subverts the inherent goodness of Sheppard's actions and motivations through an ironic voice that both presents Sheppard's selfless acts and simultaneously mocks them. When Sheppard reflects that all "he wanted for the child was he be good and unselfish," the sentence follows up with, "and neither seemed likely" (445). The narrator pairs up Sheppard's encouraging aspiration with his entirely dismissive parental attitude. Sheppard's hopes for his son may be framed in selfless terms, but his trivializing of Norton's potential is insupportable, especially since his son is only ten years old. Additionally, when the narrator mentions Sheppard's volunteer work, again the second half of the sentence calls into question the first. When we learn that Sheppard receives nothing for his volunteered Saturdays "but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about,"

we are privy to the condescension that fuels his charitable acts (447). It is not as if Sheppard believes in responsibility but does not act upon it; instead, it is that Sheppard's actions are built upon a self-centered perception of himself as savior, not a true understanding of the otherness of the other.

More than the narrator's sarcastic presentation of his good deeds, it is Sheppard's tragic and arrogant misunderstanding of his son, Norton, that subverts the goodness of his charitable actions. In his attempt to make the boy empathize with Rufus, Sheppard says, "You don't have a grandfather who beats you. And your mother is not in the state penitentiary" (447). The mention of a mother causes Norton to break down, as he retorts, "'If she was in the penitentiary,' he began in a kind of racking bellow, 'I could go seeeeee her.' Tears rolled down his face…" Norton's swift emotional breakdown makes it apparent to the reader that much of his suffering is rooted in his mother's death and her absence in his life; juxtaposed with our reaction is Sheppard's, which comes across as particularly ignorant and cruel: "This was not normal grief. It was all part of his selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child's grief should not last so long. 'You're going on eleven years old,' he said reproachfully." Sheppard's response is first and foremost ignorant: that a boy of ten would still miss his mother is absolutely normal. Beyond ignorant, though, Sheppard's response calls into question his sense of responsibility altogether. Normal or not, his son is grieving, and a father's role is to console; but Sheppard sees his role as didactic orator: "'If you stop thinking about yourself and think what you can do for somebody else,' Sheppard said, 'then you'll stop missing your mother'" (448). This statement perfectly combines Sheppard's sense of responsibility for the other with his ignorant misunderstanding of his son. This

combination calls into question the basic motivation of his responsibility, a responsibility that is only fully realized at the story's conclusion.

Two other moments in the story emphasize Sheppard's reckless misunderstanding of Norton, a flippancy for which Sheppard is completely responsible. The first is the reference to Sheppard's need to "whip" Norton when Rufus first begins his stay at their home. Even though Sheppard "did not believe in whipping children, particular in anger," he "had done both and with good results. He had had no more trouble with Norton" (460). The tragedy of this abuse lies less in the violence than in the parental misunderstanding: Norton had reacted vehemently to Rufus's stay only when he realized Rufus "was going to sleep in his mother's bed." Norton's attachment to his mother and his grief at her absence—the driving forces in his young life—are dealt with dismissively by Sheppard with physical violence. Later, when Rufus is accused the second time of vandalism, Norton's role in the alleged crime needs to be addressed, since both boys claim to have been at the cinemas when the crime was committed. Instead of speaking directly with Norton, though, Sheppard goes straight to Rufus. Sheppard chooses to accept Rufus's claim of innocence, in a show of "parental" trust. After leaving Rufus's bedroom, "Norton sat up and beckoned to him" (469). Instead of obtaining Norton's story, or simply responding to the boy's need, Sheppard decides he cannot go to his son right then, since it might look to Rufus as if he is questioning his story. Therefore, Sheppard "saw the child but after the first instance, he did not let his eyes focus directly on him…. He turned quickly and went back into his own room." Once again, Sheppard ignores his actual parental responsibility on account of a false sense of responsibility to

the other. He dismisses Norton's true need in order to bolster his own image as foster parent.

If Sheppard shows scant attention to Norton, it is undeniable he spends significant time attempting to help Rufus Johnson. Can he be committed to his responsibility to the other on the one hand, and irresponsible on the other? The answer is more complicated. Sheppard's irresponsible relationship with his son points to his entire misconception of responsibility and the other. At the root of the error is Sheppard's assumption that the person of Rufus—his background, his problems, his potential as a person—is a knowable object, and therefore he can grasp Rufus. Levinas reminds us that the other and our relationship to the other is "irreducible to comprehension" (Critchley). In short, he is converting the otherness of Rufus into sameness, through simple psychologizing and indulgence in a savior complex. Similarly, he assumes he *knows* his own son and his son's problems—Norton is simply selfishly attached to his dead mother—and he assumes his argument to Norton to repress his guilt in masculine fashion is a caring and viable solution. For Levinas, true responsibility is accepted when the otherness of the other is completely encountered—not understood, encountered. For Sheppard, he loves when he understands, or least thinks he understands; in the end, this type of love is simply the love of understanding, a self-referential love of the ego, a solipsistic individualism parading as charity.

Sheppard's superficial understanding of Rufus is best seen through his trite psychologizing of the boy's issues: "The case was clear to Sheppard instantly. His mischief was compensation for the foot" (450). Here again the narrator's voice mocks the naiveté of the faux intellectualism, as Sheppard simplifies the intricacies of the boy's

life into a simple "compensation" complex. One can read Sheppard here as a criticism of simplistic and misguided Freudianism. Apparently one of the O'Connor's correspondents, Cecil Dawkins, read Sheppard as such; even though we do have not her letter, we have Flannery's response: "…where did you get the idea that Sheppard represents Freud? Freud never entered my mind and looking back over it, I can't make him fit now" (*Habit of Being* 490). To defend Dawkins, it seems he saw Sheppard as a caricature of Freud, one who takes a multifaceted issue and finds a simple and unrelated "compensation" complex. What Dawkins may not have known is that O'Connor was an admirer of Freud, as the rest of the letter makes clear: "Freud was a great one, wasn't he, for bringing home to people the fact that they weren't what they thought they were" (491). Whether Freud is or is not the source of the criticism is not the point; instead, the root of the problem is Sheppard's naïve belief that he can fully *know* Rufus, that he can reduce the otherness of the boy to a series of simplistic psychological diagnoses. Sheppard can only understand his responsibility to the other if he relinquishes his need to *know*.

Sheppard's vain belief in his intellectual ability to *know* Rufus is best verbalized in a conversation while Rufus was still in the reformatory. In the middle of their exchange, Sheppard confidently states, "'There are a lot of things about yourself that I think I can explain to you'" (450). Despite O'Connor's statements to the contrary, this line sounds a lot like a Freudian reading of Rufus; it even sounds similar to O'Connor's own statements about Freud, that "he was a great one…for bringing home to people the fact that they weren't what they thought they were" (*Habit of Being* 491). But it is clear that Sheppard's naïve statements are being comically criticized as both ill-informed and

condescending. When Rufus replies that "Satan" makes him do what he does, Sheppard psychologizes this religious statement: "Maybe I can explain your devil to you" (451). Here is Sheppard converting otherness to sameness: he takes what is other in Rufus's self-diagnosis—the religious statement about the devil—and converts in into a language and framework he understands, namely modern psychology. Rufus's rather bizarre and logically inconsistent presentation of Christianity is not supported by the story, but neither is Sheppard's glib disregard for all things spiritual or metaphysical. The science that he looks to as *the* metanarrative, both the hard and soft sciences, comes up grossly short in explaining the psychological and metaphysical complexities of both Rufus and Norton.

The telescope Sheppard purchases in order to stimulate Rufus's latent scientific potential is a symbol for Sheppard's hyper-reliance on the modern sciences and the conception of knowing built from this system. The act of buying the telescope, Sheppard's analysis of Rufus's use of the telescope, and the telescope itself all demonstrate the severe limitations to Sheppard's understanding of the boy and the inherent limitations of the sciences. When Rufus begins to use the telescope, Sheppard's

> face was flushed with pleasure. This much of his dream was a reality. Within a week he had made it possible for this boy's vision to pass through a slender channel to the stars. He looked at Johnson's bent back with complete satisfaction… The shoe would be ready next week… The shoe was going to make the greatest difference in the boy's attitude. (459)

Sheppard's own analysis above is the easiest to criticize: Rufus does not care about the stars; he loses interest in the telescope and astronomy soon thereafter; and the shoes do

nothing but make Rufus angrier. Sheppard's misreading is juxtaposed with his face "flushed with pleasure" and his smug "complete satisfaction."

But there is a deeper criticism here, represented by the telescope. The hard sciences offer no understandable explanation to Norton about his mother, nor do they offer an explanation for Norton's grief. In the same scene with the telescope, in response to Sheppard's statement about the possibility that "'you, Rufus, will go to the moon,'" Rufus responds, "'I ain't going to the moon and get there alive…and when I die I'm going to hell'" (461). This leads to Rufus's explanation of hell as a place where the damned "'gnash their teeth while they burn...and it's everlasting darkness.'" This may be the first time Norton has heard concrete talk about an afterlife, and so he begins asking about his mother: "'Is she there?' he said in a loud voice. 'Is she burning up?'" Rufus's description of hell and the afterlife has a concreteness to it Sheppard's modern explanation does not. Sheppard tells Norton that "'your mother's spirit lives on in other people and it'll live on in you if you're good and generous like she was.'" Sheppard's explanation sounds hollow, and Norton's "pale eyes [harden] in disbelief." Sheppard tries to follow up his explanation with the hard truth: "'She doesn't exist.'" As might be expected, Norton chooses to believe Rufus's darkly religious tale over an equally dark scientific story about nonexistence. But the point is that both stories do not offer acceptable explanations about existence, death, and grief to Norton. The hard sciences, represented by the telescope, can teach us about the stars, but they come up short in explaining the most essential metaphysical questions about existence. The story is not criticizing the sciences themselves but rather a hyper-reliance on them as the saviors of knowledge and understanding. The mysteries of basic human existence cannot be

assumed knowable in scientific terms. Just as Sheppard's shortcoming in dealing with Rufus is rooted in his assumption that the boy is knowable, so too does his conception of science come up short in assuming life and existence are knowable scientific objects of analyses.

The story's consistent labeling of Sheppard as secular savior supports its criticism of Sheppard's ego and his interpretation of the knowability of people and existence. Sheppard's connection to religion begins with an observation he makes early in the story, in relation to his role as therapist at the reformatory: "He had never been inside a confessional but he thought it must be the kind of operation he had here, except that he explained, he did not absolve" (449). By his own estimations, Sheppard is a secular priest, using his knowledge and training instead of blind faith. Rufus picks up on Sheppard's self-perception when he mentions to Norton, "'He thinks he's Jesus Christ!'" (459). Later, near the story's conclusion, Sheppard adopts religious language himself, telling Rufus, "'I'm going to save you'" (474). The story uses Sheppard's presentation as secular savior to demonstrate the blind faith he puts in his own powers of understanding and redemption. He has completely disposed of one system of understanding—religious faith—in the name of truth and modernity, but he has simply refocused his faith on the modern conceptions of self, understanding, and secular redemption.

Sheppard's naïve role as secular savior sheds light on the story's complex distinction between "goodness" and "truth." On the one hand, what Sheppard is attempting to do is good: to help a disadvantaged child. No one is perfect, in both motivation and act, so why do both Rufus and O'Connor criticize Sheppard so harshly? The beginning of an answer lies in Rufus's claim about goodness versus rightness—and

it is fully developed in Sheppard's epiphany in the story's conclusion. In the middle of the story, Rufus complains to Norton about his father. Feeling defensive, Norton makes a halfhearted argument: "'He's good,' he mumbled. 'He helps people'" (454). Rufus's response is a key, not only to this story but to O'Connor's work as a whole: "'Good!' Johnson said savagely. He thrust his head forward. 'Listen here,' he hissed, 'I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right*!'" For O'Connor, what is important to a person's actions are its roots, including their metaphysical roots. A person's goodness can be measured by his actions—like Sheppard's charitable actions toward Rufus—but his rightness depends upon the foundation from which those actions are built. For Rufus, Sheppard is not right because he is an atheist; the story indicts Sheppard, not so much because of his religious beliefs, but rather on account of his negligent and self-centered assumptions about other people and his assumed role as redeemer. Sheppard provides economically for his son and attempts to help disadvantaged children; for this he is good. But he believes in his ego's ability to comprehend the other and to provide for the other's need; for this he is not right.

O'Connor is not making an abstract argument against charitable actions, an argument that might undermine basically all secular charity, for truly, can motivation ever be pure? Instead, the story is a demonstration of the ineffectiveness of charity rooted in inaccurate metaphysical principles. Rufus's distinction between goodness and rightness is reminiscent of one of O'Connor's more shocking statements from one of her essays in *Mystery and Manners*: "When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber" (226-227). The same relationship between Rufus's goodness and

rightness is presented here between "tenderness" and "the source of tenderness." The source of tenderness is a reference to tenderness's metaphysical roots; detached from these roots, tenderness becomes terror. When virtues are separated from their metaphysical roots, they no longer function as virtues; they can even have the opposite effect. Tenderness become terror. In the case of Sheppard, his goodness, detached from its metaphysical roots, becomes wrongness. Sheppard's self-serving charity rejects the unknowability and therefore the agency of Rufus—and so it is wrongness.

A close reading of the story's conclusion demonstrates the futility of charity when it lacks metaphysical roots. The narrative's ending also validates the connection between trauma and moral obligation for the other, as Sheppard finally recognizes his responsibility amid the traumatic disruption the event affords him. In the final scene, Rufus is accused a third time of vandalism. This time, he allows himself to be caught and arrested. Before being taken away in a police car, Rufus manages to let Sheppard know he committed all three crimes. The effect of the ordeal is clear: "Sheppard remained there, bent slightly like a man who has been shot but continues to stand" (481). Sheppard's pain is established by the sentence's analogy with physical violence. Sheppard's first reaction is to silently defend himself: "His every action had been selfless, his one aim had been to save Johnson…" At this point, Sheppard is prepared, through the trauma, for his epiphany and personal development, but he is initially burdened by his shame and attempts to defend his actions, even to himself. But his recognition of responsibility for the other, namely his son, pushes him past his self-centeredness toward true revelation. In an attempt at self-defense, Sheppard states, "'I did more for [Rufus] than I did for my own child.'" He repeats the sentence again—but this time he "heard his

own voice as if it were the voice of his accuser. He repeated the sentence silently." Sheppard's defensiveness, born of shame, leads to a clarifying image of his relationship with his son.

Sheppard's recognition of responsibility is paired with a face-to-face encounter, even though it occurs in his mind's eye: "Norton's face rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief" (481). This encounter with the face of Norton is the first time he *sees* Norton, for he now understands his son's grief as something real. The trauma of the scene offers enough disruption in the self-righteousness and self-sufficiency of Sheppard's conceptions of the individual and responsibility, and it forces him outside his solipsistic perspective to search for answers. This movement beyond his hyper-individualism leads him to view himself with clarity: "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself." These two sentences succinctly sum up Sheppard's epiphany. While he was selfless, in the sense of not always acting in direct self-interest, his charity was rooted in a system completely defined by his ego and his needs. Real charity is rooted in an understanding of ethics and existence as relational realities.

Tragically, the epiphany is too late to save Norton, whom he finds next to the telescope, "just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space" (482). More than O'Connor's love of tragic endings, and more than a desire for a dramatic conclusion, perhaps Norton's suicide intensifies the extreme futility of Sheppard's empty charity. In itself, it will not offer an avenue to a real recognition of responsibility for the

other. This can happen only through trauma and disruption, and even these do not ensure convenient conclusions.

Although both "The Displaced Person" and "The Lame Shall Enter First" contain recognitions of responsibility for the other, this chapter focused more on the trauma, or lack thereof, necessary for a true encounter with the otherness of the other. For Mrs. McIntyre, it is her xenophobia, borrowed from Mrs. Shortley, which provides a gateway to Mr. Guizac's otherness and her responsibility for him. For Sheppard, his unwillingness to engage the otherness of Rufus and his confidence in understanding the boy prohibit his encounter with his responsibility to the other—until the final scene's trauma affords him the mental and philosophical space to see the world from outside his hyper-individualistic standpoint. The next chapter focuses on the actual face-to-face encounter between the grandmother and the Misfit and its effect on both of them. This next chapter will act as the central link to the entire dissertation, as it will connect earlier discussions of alienation and trauma—through the characters of the grandmother and the Misfit—while also pointing to the following chapter's analysis of the joy of accepting responsibility for the other.

Chapter 4

The Face-to-Face Encounter: Responsibility Opposing Deeper Solipsism

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" holds a significant place in a discussion of Flannery O'Connor and Emmanuel Levinas. While the story contains the most clear and physical face-to-face encounter in O'Connor's fiction, it also develops the three other narrative stages of Levinas's ethics as read in O'Connor: alienation, a suspicion of responsibility paired with both emotional and physical trauma, and ecstasy as a result of accepting responsibility. However, it may not be initially apparent how "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" relates to responsibility; and this is troubling, considering responsibility lies at the heart of Levinas's phenomenological examination. On the surface, the grandmother's encounter with The Misfit does not seem to be concerned with responsibility, and her epiphany and possible transformation seem unrelated to any moral imperative. However, O'Connor's own statements about the grandmother's final comments to The Misfit—"'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!'"—clearly ground the grandmother's revelation in terms of moral responsibility (*The Complete Stories* 132). O'Connor said that the grandmother realizes that "she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship" (*Mystery and Manners* 111-112). This chapter will connect both the face-to-face moment in the story and O'Connor's statement about responsibility to the dissertation's ongoing Levinasian.

Another reason "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is central to a discussion of Levinas's ethics is that the climax of the story involves a *shared* experience of responsibility. While O'Connor's stories are consistently about relationships and a moral

imperative, and while the epiphanies are often contingent upon a character's acceptance of responsibility for another, generally the epiphanies happen for and within a single character. In this story, however, both the grandmother and The Misfit existentially experience their responsibility for each other. The trauma of the scene leads the grandmother to an acceptance of her responsibility—and then to ecstasy—but a confronting of moral obligation leads The Misfit to escape deeper into his projected assertions of solipsism. As Levinas's ethics explains, the trauma necessary for a recognition of the other as other can lead to "care for the other person or in a more selfish retreat into my own concerns" (Bloechl 133). The grandmother clearly responds in the former respect, and The Misfit in the latter.

Although this chapter is built around an analysis of the shared face-to-face encounter with the other by the grandmother and The Misfit, its place within the larger argument allows us to build upon earlier chapters while also pointing to the next. This close reading of the "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" places the story within the analyses of the previous two chapters. First, both the grandmother and The Misfit are estranged characters; it is against this extreme interiority that their extreme exteriority—their respective otherness—is juxtaposed in the narrative's climax. Second, the story incorporates the disruption and violence so common to Levinas and O'Connor; both the physical and emotional trauma break through, even if only momentarily, the estrangement of each character. Finally, this chapter will also point to the next chapter's focus—the ecstasy elicited by an individual's acceptance of responsibility—as it examines the grandmother's epiphany, final statement, and death.

Summary and Beginning Interpretation

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, and it largely follows the perception and experience of a unnamed grandmother as she accompanies her son and his family on a car ride from hometown Georgia to a vacation destination in Florida. The grandmother is a superficially pleasant busybody, a hypocritical Christian, and a manipulator of most situations. After a largely uneventful morning ride and a stop for gas and lunch, conflict ensues when Bailey, the grandmother's son, accidently runs the car off the road, flipping the vehicle; no one is severely injured, but all are shaken. It is at this moment of need that the Misfit, a dangerous and recently escaped convict, and two of his henchman arrive. This coldblooded but not entirely unsympathetic killer proceeds to have the entire family shot in the woods, while he himself engages the grandmother in a ongoing conversation about his life and his theological quandaries. While the grandmother hopes to escape her family's fate, and while she is left last, in the end The Misfit personally shoots her three times in the chest after the grandmother reaches out and touches him tenderly.

Although the differences between the grandmother's and The Misfit's reaction to grace and responsibility lie at the heart of the story, the two characters are, oddly enough, quite similar. In fact, their similarities help highlight their most significant differences at the story's close. There are at least two meaningful similarities between the odd pair, both of which relate closely to Levinas's ethics. The first connection between the grandmother and The Misfit is their alienation. The grandmother inhabits a slowly disappearing space and class in the developing South. Interestingly, it is only The Misfit—courteous in speech and action, respectful of age and class—who reciprocates

the grandmother's formality and classism. Meanwhile, The Misfit's name, his backstory, and his relationships to both society and legal authority are all obvious indications of his own alienation. The second connection between the characters is their inability to recognize their responsibility for the other—at least through the majority of the story. The grandmother's lack of moral responsibility is epitomized by her reaction to the "pickanniny," while The Misfit's well-mannered but cruel murders underscore his misinterpretation of ethics and responsibility. An exploration of these two similarities underscores our reading of Levinas's ethics throughout O'Connor's fiction, and it also helps put the grandmother's and The Misfit's opposing reactions to grace in the story's climax in their proper contexts.

The story immediately establishes the grandmother's alienation within the family. The narrative opens with the grandmother's attempt to convince her son Bailey to vacation in Tennessee instead of Florida. When she mentions that "'Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida,'" her son does not even react to her attempted manipulation: "Bailey didn't look up from his reading" (117). She immediately tries a different approach with Bailey's wife, her daughter-in-law. The result, however, is exactly the same. When the grandmother points out that the "'children have been to Florida before,'" the "children's mother didn't seem to hear her." The adults do not engage the grandmother in debate or conversation; they do not even acknowledge her appeals. Meanwhile, the children demonstrate their estrangement from the grandmother, not through the adults' silence, but rather through brazen behavior. When their mother remains silent, John Wesley asks, "'If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay home?'" Without giving the grandmother time to reply, John Wesley's

sister, June Star, answers for her: "'She wouldn't stay at home to be a queen for a day… Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everyone we go'" (117-8). The children's disrespect is simply a different form of the adults' silence; both make it clear the grandmother's position in the family is as outsider.

The grandmother's familial estrangement is one sign of her deeper alienation from the present culture. She idealizes a social order that is not only fading but already gone. The juxtaposing of the mother's and the grandmother's dress at the beginning of the story highlights, both comically and seriously, the differences between the two worlds. The mother is described as "a young woman in slacks," something the narrator, close to the emotion and ideology of the grandmother, disapproves of—even if O'Connor's use of the third-person allows the narrator to simultaneously mock the disapproval[1] (117). The mother's indifference toward social order and proper dress is juxtaposed by the description of the grandmother on the day of the trip. After noticing again that the mother "still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief," the narrator notes the grandmother's "white cotton gloves." The description continues:

> …navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. (118)

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[1] In a reading of this story now available in audio, O'Connor reads the phrase "young woman in slacks" with obvious and comic discontent. O'Connor reproduces the disapproving tone of voice of the grandmother in her reading, but she does it comically and thereby subverts the disapproval. O'Connor's personal feelings about the phrase is made obvious by her consistent wearing of "slacks" (O'Connor "A Good Man is Hard to Find" *Paris Review Blog*).

The intended comedy of this elaborate description is signaled by the very next line, which ends the paragraph: “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.” This line functions on multiple levels. It foreshadows the eventual accident, the grandmother’s death, and her position on the side of a highway; in a first reading, though, the line mainly acts as a sarcastic subversion of the grandmother’s pompous thought process.

This comic juxtaposition of the mother’s and the grandmother’s outfits is an outward example of the grandmother’s personal and emotional estrangement from the present south. Her later story about being “courted by Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia”—whose major courting strategy is his delivery of a watermelon every Saturday with his initials, “E.A.T” cut into it—has all the marks of an idyllic pre-Civil War South (120). O'Connor builds in the grandmother’s oblivious racism and classism, since the punch line of the story revolves around a “nigger boy” who, seeing the watermelon one Saturday with the initials E.A.T., assumes he must eat it. This image of the South is intensified later when the grandmother begins her recounting of a story about a nearby plantation. The setting is regal, Southern, idyllic—and hyperbolic: “She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden” (123). The image is both complete and exaggerated. The falseness of her story is made obvious as she consciously adds to the truth, throwing into the story a “‘secret panel…where all the family silver was hidden,’” even though we are told she was “not telling the truth but wishing she were.” In a suggestive moment of narrative creativity, the grandmother says that the silver was hid

"when Sherman came through." This addition to the story labels the Civil War the marker between before and after, between past and present—between what the grandmother so desperately clings to in her white gloves and what the rest of the family has already accepted as reality.

Against the grandmother's evocation of an idyllic south—full of beautiful plantations, courteous courters, ignorant but comic blacks—are the actual setting and characters from the story. The family's lunch and rest stop provide an excellent backdrop for noting the stark differences between the grandmother's idealized memory of the south and its present reality. The family stops at the Tower, "a part stucco and part wood filling station and dance hall" (120). This less than idyllic setting is run by Red Sammy: "His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt" (121). The narrator's tone of voice, while spurred by humor, is one of condescending disgust, unhindered by any need to idealize the present south. Red Sammy's physicality accentuates the humor of the scene as the grandmother and Red Sammy, both frustrated with the present, discuss "better times." Sammy waxes nostalgic: "'Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more'" (122). These types of clichéd but frustrated elevations of the past resonate with the grandmother. She enters the conversation and tells Sammy that "in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now." The comic combination of these two characters—one with her "collars and cuffs" of "white organdy trimmed with lace" and the other with "his stomach" hanging "like a sack of meal swaying"—does more than produce humor: it subverts the entire conversation about past and present completely. Everything about

Red Sammy—his job, his store, his restaurant, and his physical appearance—clearly delineates him as a member of the present society, further from the grandmother's idealized Southern past than her daughter-in-law, who bears of the brunt of her disapproval. The grandmother finds an easy believer in her ideology, and she lets him join her company, despite the outrageous incongruity; but this reveals the falseness of her vision and memory. Her quick acceptance of Sammy as an ideological ally belies the seriousness of her belief system, since nothing about Sammy—his appearance, setting, or occupation—have any place in the grandmother's vision of the south.

While the story juxtaposes the settings of the past and present—the majestic plantation and Sammy's stucco building—so too does it juxtapose the generational opinions and ideology concerning the south. John Wesley's statement sums up the youthful arrogance and indifference toward a post-Civil War south: "'Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground…and Georgia is a lousy state too'" (119). The grandmother's response is perfect even if cliché: "'In my time…people were more respectful of their home states and their parents and everything else.'" This conversation is between grandson and grandmother, while the generation in between is completely silent on the matter; neither Bailey nor his wife ever correct the child, take the grandmother's side, or simply engage in the conversation. This middle generation may not be as brazenly disconnected to place and home as their children, but it most definitely is not rooted in the south like the older generation.

Remarkably, it is only The Misfit who respects the grandmother's concerns about formality and respect. He clearly respects the grandmother for her age, wisdom, and position within society. When Bailey curses at his mother after her recognition of The

Misfit, it is the convict who comes to her rescue: "'Lady,' he said, 'don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don't mean. I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway'" (127). As a counterweight to the children's disrespect for age and tradition, The Misfit speaks about his parents with filial pride: "'God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold.'" When he remembers he does not have a shirt on, The Misfit reveals his genuine modesty: "'I'm sorry I don't have a shirt on before you ladies'" (129). While The Misfit's genteel manners and soft speech create a bond between himself and the grandmother, the reader is tremendously disconcerted by his unaffected courtesy. He is a coldblooded killer, and he does not deny this; this pairing of ruthlessness with good manners unsettles, not just our feelings for The Misfit, but the entire universe of civility and respect. If the ideals of Southern deference and respect can coexist alongside a complete lack of respect for the life of a human being, then the ideals are empty, or at least suspect.

Even more important than his understanding of the grandmother's sense of good manners, The Misfit is related to the grandmother through his personal estrangement. Besides laying the foundation for his eventual encounter with responsibility, these unsuspecting connections to the grandmother help emphasize their eventual opposing responses to disruption, grace, the other, and responsibility. Unlike the grandmother, The Misfit's alienation is not rooted in generational misperception or age but instead in his relationship to society and the legal system, as well as his perceptive and authentic grappling with existential and theological questions. The Misfit's name demonstrates his position within society: he does not fit in normal society, nor does he abide by social expectations. Near the end of the story, when The Misfit reveals the reasoning behind his

moniker, he shifts the meaning of "misfit," extending it beyond a simple expression of social exclusion: "'I can't make what all I done wrong fit what I gone through in punishment'" (131). This explanation pits The Misfit against the legal system and society at large. It might be difficult for a reader to sympathize with The Misfit's story, since by the time we hear it we have witnessed, from a distance, multiple murders executed on his orders; but the grandmother's physical gesture and her final words demonstrate her understanding of The Misfit's plight and her place within the society responsible for his plight.

Additionally, The Misfit is alienated by his intense and unorthodox—or perhaps too orthodox—engagement with religious themes and realities. While the grandmother professes Christianity and frequently pleads to The Misfit to pray, it is clear her faith is superficial and a matter more of place—the South—and less of truth or belief. The grandmother's hypocritical Christianity is comparable to the approach taken by Mrs. May, from O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf," who "thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, although she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (316). Mrs. May's insouciance regarding the truth or untruth of religion is the grandmother's insouciance—and the insouciance of so many of the hypocritical Christians who populate O'Connor's fiction—and it is in stark contrast to The Misfit's approach to the same topics. For The Misfit, the truth or untruth of religious dogma is *exactly* what matters. In reference to Jesus and his supposed ability to resurrect others and himself, The Misfit claims, "'If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him" (132). Undoubtedly the grandmother

never engaged the principles and dogmas of her Christian faith with anything close to The Misfit's intensity. In her non-fiction and fiction alike, O'Connor consistently points out the superficiality and hypocritical faith of her south—a "Christian" people that fought to retain slavery and still fought in her day to deny blacks anything resembling full citizenship. But there is nothing of artifice about The Misfit's engagement with the Christian story or its principles. He is an agnostic in a Christian land, but ironically, he is the only one to take religion seriously.

The Misfit's authentic grappling with religion and his purpose in life is one reason he is such an engaging and, unexpectedly, relatable character. In his "Flannery O'Connor's Misfit and the Mystery of Evil," John Desmond argues that The Misfit is rebelling against the mystery of evil or the basic human condition: "The Misfit feels the mystery of evil in his bones, and he finds it incomprehensible…. [H]is mental suffering, his sense of guilt, and his questioning cannot be ignored or dismissed, because it reflects a spiritual condition that is both fundamentally human and conspicuously modern in temper" (145). Despite the bizarreness of The Misfit's background and actions, what draws readers to him is a sense of understanding and camaraderie: we too sense a disproportion between suffering and guilt, between the relative innocence of people and their tragedies. However, even in The Misfit's genuine theological struggles, we sense a problem with his methods, an error in his approach. As Desmond points out, "…the Misfit seems more interested in personal vindication rather than communal justice" (146). As honest and unaffected as The Misfit may be, he is a hyper-individualist. This is manifest in his refusal to accept any answer to the problem of evil that does not pass directly through his own ego.

For example, the grandmother offers a number of answers to his queries, and although they are religious clichés—"Have you tried praying?"—and although the grandmother herself does not believe her own requests, The Misfit refuses these clichés, not because they are clichés, but because they require humility, an understanding that answers to certain questions may be beyond one. In this regard, Desmond refers to The Misfit as a "supreme rationalist": "…the Misfit cannot admit the need of a power beyond logic and human justice that is, one can believe, more than commensurate to the mystery and power of evil" (146). In the end, this epistemological pride is the ultimate cause of The Misfit's estrangement, not his prison sentence or his religious authenticity.

The core of the Misfit's religious and intensely existential problems is epistemology: he cannot prove or know for certain whether Jesus rose from the dead. For the Misfit, the resurrection is Christianity's key, for if Jesus rose it would prove his power and the truthfulness of the faith; but if he did not rise, then Christianity is built upon a false foundation. This dialectic is not an abstract question of the mind; instead, the Misfit claims that how one answers this question should determine every other life choice:

> "If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." (132)

The latter option, that of obtaining pleasure through "meanness," sounds eerily similar to Manly Pointer from "Good Country People," who takes the falseness of all faiths as a given; he, like the Misfit's logic asserts, uses his time to do "some other meanness" to

those he meets. The Misfit, unlike Manly, though, is not epistemologically confident of religion's fallaciousness; he cannot disprove faith unless he can disprove the Resurrection. Herein lies the problem with The Misfit's philosophical method: just as he would have needed to *see* the Resurrection in order to believe it, so too must he *see the absence* of the event to disprove religion. The Misfit's epistemology is founded upon direct proof through the senses; however, since the contended event happened nearly two thousand years earlier, the Misfit is necessarily left to doubt:

> "I wasn't there so I can't say he didn't," The Misfit said. I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would have known."

Not only is a leap of faith not an option for The Misfit, so too are all other approaches to knowing that do not involve direct sensual experience. The Misfit's logic is both circular and frustrating: he cannot know for certain Christ did *not* rise. His angry fist on the ground exemplifies his logical and emotional position.

In his unwavering search and need for direct evidence, and his disregard for all leaps of faith, The Misfit is a fine example of general Enlightenment thinking, which put superstition and religion aside in favor of reason and proof. His hyperbolic doubt, in which everything must be disbelieved except for that which has been directly experienced, is reminiscent of both Descartes and Hume. These thinkers narrow their means of knowing—their frameworks for epistemology—and doubt most forms and objects of knowledge. The Misfit's problem is their problem too: even if we recognize that one side cannot be proved, it also cannot be disproved. Therefore, The Misfit jumps to an illogical conclusion, an epistemologically unstable position by his own standards,

but he lives his life as if he knows for certain. His refusal to admit of anything beyond his hyper-individualist framework "casts him into a posture of moral self-sufficiency and isolation" (Desmond). The Misfit represents both the good and bad of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment epistemology; he is authentic in his desire *to know*, but he limits the means of *knowing* by his myopic pride. He claims that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then "it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody." But a few moments later, he admits he is not sure Jesus did *not* rise from the dead; however, clearly he lives his life if the claims made about Jesus are false. While The Misfit seems smugly agnostic, he actually lives his life by following the tenants of an unproven atheism.

In addition to the grandmother and the Misfit's comparative alienation, they are similar in their inability to perceive their responsibility for the other. Their collective moral blindness sets the stage for the drama of an authentic encounter with the other and its ethical imperative. The grandmother may seem a relatively considerate even if meddlesome woman: she offers to hold and comfort the baby in the car; she takes time to tell the children stories during the trip; and she engages all of the characters in the story within conversation. These attributes and actions of the grandmother's, however, are a product of her clinging to the fading ideology of southern propriety and civility. This southern ideology is itself rooted in a blatant disregard for the other, particularly black Americans. The grandmother's unashamed and flagrant racism is best captured in her observation, both physical and verbal, of the "pickaninny."

This short but powerful moment in the story is preceded by the grandmother's scolding of the two children. When John Wesley calls Tennessee a "'hillybilly dumping

ground'" and Georgia a "'lousy state,'" June Star affirms his opinions by responding, "'You said it'" (119). The grandmother calmly rebukes these juvenile expressions of derision by comparing the present time with her own childhood: "'In my time…children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then.'" Interestingly, the grandmother's argument does not rest on Tennessee's or Georgia's positive attributes but simply on the properness or improperness of verbally insulting your home state, independent of the state and independent of the state's relative goodness or badness. But what is most telling is that the grandmother, distracted by a scene outside the car, continues her dialogue, without any break whatsoever, by commenting, "'Oh look at that cute pickaninny!'" O'Connor clearly pairs the grandmother's southern dedication to her home state with her blithely racist comment about the little black boy, whom we learn later is not wearing pants. If the grandmother's southern ideals do not directly produce her racism, they at least support it and offer it no resistance. They are not mutually exclusive belief systems.

The use of the word "pickaninny" is particularly apt, since the diction reveals important aspects about the grandmother and the larger society's racism. As Robin Bernstein tells us in his *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, the pickaninny "was an imagined subhuman juvenile who was typically depicted outside, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence" (34). Often the pickaninny is pictured without pants. Although not always naked, "the figure is always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain" (35). The grandmother's disregard for the human pain of the situation she witnesses, along with her excited reaction, puts her ideology squarely in this linguistic and social ideology. The

grandmother's enthusiastic observation reflects her inability to empathize with the boy, which is internally justified by her unconscious or conscious decision to see the boy "merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence."

When June Star notes that the black boy "'didn't have any britches on,'" the grandmother, in faux sympathy, responds, "'He probably didn't have any… Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do'" (119). Her derogatory use of the word "nigger" aside, the grandmother's response might be taken as understanding, or at least a movement toward understanding. Perhaps she is attempting to inform her grandchildren about the poverty of certain people in their local society. But, like a few lines before, the grandmother moves from one sentence to the next without break, and the second sentence undermines the first: "'If I could paint, I'd paint that picture.'" This statement is significant on many levels. First, there is the irony and comedy of the grandmother's self-perception of herself as artist or potential-artist. To re-present a scene, in a novel or a visual medium, implies a level of understanding. An artist paints what he sees in order that others may see too. But the grandmother does not "see" the reality in front of her. Second and more importantly is the callousness of grandmother's expression. She is not concerned with the *person* in front of her, but rather with her imagined representation of the scene. The boy without pants in front of her is not a boy at all, but rather an object for visual objectification, fodder for her own "creative" endeavor. The grandmother's statement about painting the scene fits perfectly with the perpetuated representation of the "pickaninny": a maligned but happy black child, immune to pain. The grandmother's insensitivity to her ethical responsibility or even human empathy result, in part, from her disregard for the physical body of the boy she is seeing.

In a strange sense, it is this inability to see physical human persons as vulnerable bodies that plagues the more authentic but exponentially more violent Misfit. His genuine and active engagement with meaning, philosophy, theology—even ethics—occurs purely in the abstract. For Levinas, it is metaphysical abstraction that allows for a disregard for our responsibility for other people—for the vulnerable human bodies—we encounter. As Critchley reminds readers of Levinas in his "Introduction" to the *Cambridge Companion*, Levinas's "ethics is lived in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other. It is because the self is sensible, that is to say vulnerable, passive, open to the pangs of both hunger and eros, that it is worthy of ethics" (21). It is this vulnerable human body that the Misfit ignores or looks past, interested instead, ironically, in the epistemology and metaphysics of ethics. His genuine grappling with religion and the purpose of life is wrapped up in whether or not he can prove Jesus's resurrection. Meanwhile, his Southern civility only intensifies his callous and unfeeling reaction to the death of these human persons in front of him.

Nonetheless, The Misfit's problem, while logical in nature, is at least partially rooted in his inability to respond empathetically to the deaths around him—while, on the other hand, the grandmother's increasing sensitivity to these deaths prepares her for her moral epiphany. O'Connor's moral argument—if it can be termed an 'argument' at all—is not rooted in logical syllogisms or extended feats of philosophical demonstrations; like Levinas, O'Connor's argument is phenomenological in nature, as she presents a moral situation with multiple human reactions. As Levinas scholar Simon Critchley reminds us, "ethics is otherwise than knowledge" for Levinas ("Introduction" 11). We do not reason ourselves to our responsibility for the other; we experience it. The Misfit's problem is

not simply the narrowing of his epistemological categories but also his implicit interpretation of knowledge as primary, to the detriment of those human persons around him. The Misfit does not allow his experience of the deaths of vulnerable bodies around him to affect his relationship with them or change his ethics at all.

Juxtaposing the grandmother's and The Misfit's reactions to the physical deaths illuminates The Misfit's callous insensitivity to the physical and emotional pain of those around him; in fact, because O'Connor places the violence far from her narrative's focus, readers are encouraged to see the haunting dissimilarity in reaction to the murders rather than focus on the physical violence itself. Readers understand Bailey and John Wesley are killed when we hear "a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence" (129). It is in the space of this silence that we note the first of the grandmother's truly human reactions: "The old lady's head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. 'Bailey Boy!' she called." While we can validly read much of her later religious argument with The Misfit as self-preservation, there is tenderness in her reaction to her son's death. Her reaction of piercing sadness is followed up by the Misfit's observation: "'I was a gospel singer for a while.'" Clearly, and nearly comically, the reader can see that The Misfit is unmoved by the sound of the pistol as he is unmoved by the death of a human.

This same pairing of extreme reaction with callous indifference follows through to the next three killings. When we read that "there was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report," The Misfit has no reaction whatsoever, as the very next line is a question unrelated to the auditory description, a question that allows him to continue his philosophical and religious conversation: "'Does it seem right to you,

lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?'" (131). There is irony, of course, in the fact that The Misfit's question about punishment is set within a scene of his own cruel wrongdoing; but what is also significant is his lack of human or empathetic reaction to the "piecing scream" and "pistol report." Meanwhile, the Grandmother ignores his question and simply exclaims, "'Jesus!'" This exclamation can be seen in its religious light, as a form of prayer; most likely, though, it is simply an exclamatory reaction to the tangible tragedy. It clearly demonstrates the grandmother's empathetic response to the killings happening around her. The fragility of the human body is made manifestly clear. The Grandmother's and The Misfit's opposing reactions begin to distinguish their significant differences in terms of the moral imperative: while both begin the story entrenched in lived ignorance of their responsibility to the other, the Grandmother's experience of the deaths of her family members makes her vulnerable to an experience of responsibility for The Misfit—what O'Connor called "grace"—while The Misfit's callous disregard for the vulnerable human bodies around him ensconces him deeper in his moral disregard.

The Misfit's inability to be moved by the vulnerability of his victim's physical bodies plays a decisive role in his inability to accept responsibility to them. His concerns are conceptual and abstract, while he ignores the bodily material matter directly in front of him. Interestingly, this devaluing of the physical is related to O'Connor's commentary on Southern Protestantism, what she called the "Protestant temper—approaching the spiritual directly instead of through matter." Critic T. W. Hendricks goes as far as arguing that the

> real tragedy of the Misfit, in O'Connor's view, is that he lives in a community that has stopped believing that matter can be a means of grace. If matter cannot be a means of grace, grace cannot act through ordinary human beings, such as a silly old woman. Consequently the Misfit cannot appreciate the grandmother's 'humanness.'" ("Flannery O'Connor's 'Spoiled Prophet'" 141)

Hendricks's focus on the religious dimension of the text, a dimension O'Connor was surely invested in, is deepened through a reading of Levinas. It is not simply that The Misfit rejects the material in favor of the spiritual; it is that the Misfit has not truly encountered the true vulnerability of the human body. Although it is true to say The Misfit does not see the grandmother as a possible "means of grace," it is truer to say he does not truly see her a physical person. It is this blindness that allows him to kill without compunction.

The two characters' disparate reactions to death and killing help develop the narrative's rising action, which builds toward the Grandmother's epiphany and ecstatic recognition of responsibility for The Misfit—the moment of grace—alongside The Misfit's rejection of moral responsibility. Both of these reactions exist within a powerful and physical face-to-face encounter. At this point, it is helpful to elaborate on some of O'Connor's own statements about grace and how it functions in her stories. Her explanations position grace exceptionally well within the present conversation about Levinas's ethics. Grace in O'Connor's fiction is never a personal or individualistic encounter; instead, it is experienced within relationship.

Grace & The Face-to-Face Encounter

Considering her short life and the relative brevity of her work, Flannery O'Connor discussed her own fiction quite extensively, not shy to reveal authorial intentions and personal interpretations. In a letter to "A," she famously summed up her artistic ambition by declaring, "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it" (*Habit of Being* 275). Throughout her many published letters and essays, O'Connor writes copiously about the mystery and actions of grace, both in terms of the real world and in her fiction. Much of her discussion of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" revolves around her statements and beliefs regarding grace. One letter to John Hawkes makes this clear: "The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering" (389). For O'Connor, the climax of the story—from its violence to its spiritual epiphanies—is built upon the presence and action of grace.

The quoted letter to Hawkes also makes clear an additional aspect of grace in O'Connor's fiction, a consistent characteristic she did not talk about as often or explicitly, but an attribute that so clearly connects her conceptions of grace with Levinas's ethics: the relational nature of grace, constantly at work throughout her fiction. On the one hand, grace is a gift from God for an undeserving individual, and O'Connor's fiction does not deviate from nor put into tension this Catholic theological understanding; however, her fiction extends or develops a theological understanding of grace by tying its action so closely to the presence or actions of other human persons. While O'Connor shies away from narrating the direct presence of God, she draws our attention instead to the other

human persons in the stories, persons from which the moments of grace derive. Instead of meeting God in the loneliness of the wilderness or the alienation of a mountaintop, O'Connor's characters experience grace as a direct result of their relationships with other human persons.

The relational nature of grace in O'Connor's fiction correlates to two other significant aspects of grace in her stories: suffering and responsibility. So often, the grace O'Connor's characters encounter is built upon either their own suffering or viewing the suffering of others. In the latter case, this viewing of suffering becomes a gateway for an acceptance of responsibility for the other. This acceptance is so tied to the fiction's expression of grace as to be part of the moment of grace itself. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Artificial Nigger" are quintessential examples of O'Connor's blending of grace and responsibility, but "The Enduring Chill" and "The Lame Shall Enter First" also explicitly pair the characters' experiences of grace with their acceptances of responsibility. It is not until Asbury accepts his responsibility to his mother that he experiences the grace of the descent of the holy ghost; and it is not until Sheppard truly perceives his son's grief for the first time that he is open to the grace of transformation and humility.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother's recognition of responsibility, instigated or directly caused by the actions of grace, is couched in her developing relationship with The Misfit. She recognizes him as other when she hears his story and is unable to contextualize him or place upon him a specific social label. This sets the ground for the grandmother's face-to-face encounter with The Misfit, which leads to her physical reaching out to him. Meanwhile, the Misfit, entrenched in his

authentic but struggle with religion and morality, is threatened by the Grandmother's touch, as it is a reminder of the physicality of human beings. Both the Misfit and the Grandmother are torn from their isolation and moral ignorance; while the Grandmother's response demonstrates her acceptance of responsibility, the Misfit's murdering of the grandmother demonstrates his decision to descend into a deeper solipsism, from which the cry and touch of a human person cannot affect him.

While the threat to her and her family's lives offer the grandmother sufficient trauma and disruption to appropriately set the stage for an understanding of the other and responsibility, it is The Misfit's story that truly allows her to see him as other. While storytelling is normally considered an opportunity for empathy, in the sense that the listener can begin to *understand* the speaker, storytelling also provides space for the listener to see the speaker as other. When demonstrating unique particularities and idiosyncrasies, the strong storyteller offers a presentation of self that resists social categories, resists contextualizing. In the case of The Misfit, the story of his childhood and adult life resists the easy categories the grandmother had earlier used to understand the escaped convict. In the very beginning of the story, the grandmother does not perceive The Misfit as a person or even a criminal; instead he is a character in a fearful story, a character the grandmother tries to use to convince Bailey to go to Tennessee instead of Florida. The Misfit, and the fear associated with him, are defined by his actions: she tells Bailey to "'read here what it says he did to these people'" (117). She vaguely refers to him as a "'criminal like that.'"

The grandmother's conversation with Red Sammy in the middle of the narrative does not alter or develop her understanding of The Misfit. She brings him up in the

conversation, but only as a symbol of what is wrong with society. He remains a largely figurative image, a stand-in for the problems with present culture. When their car crashes and The Misfit appears in person, no longer a pawn in a family quarrel or an example in an argument, the difference between *the person* of The Misfit—the physical person in front of her—and her *use of* The Misfit is expressed by the Grandmother's "peculiar feeling": "The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew…but she could not recall who he was" (126). The grandmother cannot recognize the physical person in front of her because she had only considered The Misfit in her terms, for her needs. He was the reason they should go to Tennessee; he was a symbol of the dying South. But now that the person of The Misfit is in front of her, the grandmother does, even if a little, recognize him; this recognition culminates a few moments later, when she shrieks, "'You're The Misfit!... I recognized you at once!'" (127). While this statement is still definitely entrenched in the grandmother's stereotypes about criminals and social lowlifes, this recognition foreshadows her later epiphany of The Misfit as "'one of her babies,'" as a person for whom she is responsible (132).

While the grandmother's recognition of the Misfit in person develops her understanding of him, it remains limited, since she still sees his identity solely within a set of contexts: he is a criminal; he is a criminal who has power over her; and although she would not admit it to his face, he is a criminal who exemplifies what she sees as wrong with the world at large and the South in particular. These contexts provide a resistance to her experience of responsibility. For Levinas, one's "relation to the other" is "irreducible to comprehension" (Critchley 12). By this logic, false senses of comprehension—when individuals feel they *know* others—offer a resistance to a true

experience of responsibility. This happens often through our ability to *contextualize* others. If I comprehend you as a teacher, doctor, social worker, or CEO, I set up a barrier between the more primal and incomprehensible relationship between us. You, therefore, must be decontextualized in order for me to experience my responsibility for you; you must be stripped of your social identity, your occupation, your socioeconomic identity. One of the most significant ways the grandmother is forced to decontextualize The Misfit—or to begin to—is when she listens to his story. Instead of creating an empathetic bond, the story's more important role is how it disallows the grandmother to apply a convenient social label for The Misfit.

To the grandmother, The Misfit is a criminal. This label assumes The Misfit did something worthy of his imprisonment, and that he knowingly did this act or acts; if he did not do said acts, or if he did not knowingly commit them, then he is innocent and not a criminal. But The Misfit's story frustrates this binary. One the one hand, he clearly tells the grandmother that the state's averred charges—the murder of his father—are false, since his "'daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu'" (130). When the grandmother suggests he stole something, he responds, "'Nobody had nothing I wanted.'" Additionally, The Misfit's very moniker derives from the unfairness of his punishment: "'I call myself the Misfit,' he said, 'because I can't make all I done wrong fit what all I done through in punishment.'" But when the grandmother claims, after hearing and apparently believing his story, that "'they put [him] in by mistake,'" The Misfit is clear about his wrongdoing: "'Nome,' he said. 'It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me.'" Putting aside The Misfit's interesting commentary on the governmental and criminal system's power of paperwork—a process by which what you put on paper is

true—it seems The Misfit is not a simple innocent victim of the system. He sincerely tells the grandmother, "'Nome, I ain't a good man.'" So The Misfit is neither consciously aware of his crime nor is he certain of his innocence; this complexity begins to wear down the binary distinction between guilty and innocent in the grandmother's conception of criminals and The Misfit.

The grandmother's desire to contextualize The Misfit is further frustrated by his civility and the miscellaneous stories The Misfit tells to develop his background. To begin, The Misfit was clearly taught his Southern manners, an education that still bears a mark on his bearing and language. When the grandmother claims that he must come from good blood, The Misfit's response offers a corrective to June Star and Bobby Lee's disdain for home, family, and convention, by energetically praising his parents: "'God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold'" (127). He frames his admiration in the language of cliché and hyperbole, which is traditional. The Misfit's listing of occupations also resists the grandmother's contextualization. It is almost as if the very number of them, especially with their disparities, are directly working against the grandmother's attempt to label him as a *type* of person:

> "I was a gospel singer for a while…. I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet…. I even seen a woman flogged." (129-130)

While we might have imagined The Misfit performing physical labor, we most likely would not have guessed he would refer to the ground as Mother Earth, nor would we have imagined him as a gospel singer or an undertaker. And perhaps most unbelievable

is the image of The Misfit as husband—twice. These disparate images of The Misfit's occupations do not simply disallow the grandmother or readers to label The Misfit's occupation; they resist all labels of "criminal."

It is interesting to note here that Levinas did not primarily think of the face-to-face encounter as one of physical seeing, although the physical meeting of the other is necessary. Critchley reminds us "the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception of vision, but is always linguistic" (12). This is made clearest when we see how Levinas often substituted the word *dialogue* for the word *face* in his later works. In this way, speaking in general and storytelling in particular are means by which we most experience our true ethical relationship with the other. As such, the entire conversation between The Misfit and the grandmother is an extended face-to-face encounter, one that culminates in a physical face-to-face moment.

The Misfit's storytelling, besides its ability to frustrate the grandmother's natural desire to contextualize him, also presents the grandmother with her responsibility for him, since her final statements before her death are rooted in her epiphany that "she is responsible for the man before her," as O'Connor said it (*Mystery and Manners* 111-112). It is important to note the ways in which the grandmother is, or could be, responsible for the Misfit. In its deepest Levinasian sense, the grandmother is responsible to The Misfit because he is a physical and vulnerable human person with whom she is in relationship; but she does not experience this profound existential truth until the story's climax, when she comes face-to-face with The Misfit as other, after he is decontextualized, when linguistic and personal space is made for the person of the other apart from his status as "criminal." There is another level on which the grandmother is responsible for The

Misfit, a social level. The grandmother believes in and exists within a view of a hierarchical society: there are clearly those of high blood juxtaposed with the "trash." Those on the lowest rung of society are racial minorities and the poor. The Misfit's litany of occupations clearly identifies him as a poor white man. The wholesomeness of the grandmother's image of the south, replete with plantations with "six white columns across the front" and comic black workers who misunderstand language, is not so wholesome when viewed through the lens and narrative of those rejected by the system (123). In this sense, the grandmother comes to recognize that she is responsible to The Misfit in a relatively realistic and tangible way, by promoting and sustaining—and continuing to fight for—the very system that unfairly or inaccurately produced the social situation in which The Misfit was born and raised. She may not be personally responsible for The Misfit's actions, and the story does not seem to make an effort to relieve The Misfit of the free choice of his actions, but the grandmother is responsible for the social setting in which The Misfit's childhood and development took place.

The grandmother's social recognition of moral responsibility for the Misfit sets the background for her existential and Levinasian encounter directly at the narrative's climax. She clearly has a physical face-to-face encounter, through which she experiences The Misfit as other. It is important to first note the dialogue and description that lead to this epiphanic and Levinasian moment. We can notice a distinct change in the grandmother after she "witnesses" the deaths of the last members of her family, since listening to the "pistol reports" is auditory witnessing. Unlike her earlier reactions to the murders, the grandmother loses her sense of fear at the end. After The Misfit's powerful monologue in which he accuses Jesus of throwing "'everything off balance'" by raising

"'the dead,'" the grandmother suddenly and ambiguously says, "'Maybe He didn't raise the dead'" (132). While the narrator tells us she did not know "what she was saying," this is perhaps the first time the grandmother is truly engaging The Misfit's religious and metaphysical conversation. Her religious considerations before were vacant, a collection of spiritually empty appeals to The Misfit to pray to Jesus, uttered to save her skin.

The Misfit, either reacting to the grandmother's genuine entrance into the conversation or continuing in what is a solipsistic soliloquy, develops the emotional intensity in his storytelling. A little after he hits "the ground with his fist," The Misfit's voice is deeply affected by his passion: "'Listen lady,' he said in a high voice, 'if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.' His voice seemed about the crack" (132). The Misfit's emotional involvement in his argument—what began as respectful but almost disinterested conversation—mirrors the grandmother's own change, as she truly engages in the debate and person in front of her for the first time. This paralleling is clearest in the sentence that moves straight from the statement about The Misfit's voice seeming "about to crack" directly into the second part of the sentence: "and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant." The sound of Misfit's voice and the raw power of its emotion—its anger, its doubt, its personality—instigates the grandmother's change and the clearing of her head. This appeal to the power of sound sets the stage for the more visual encounter between the two in their physical face-to-face moment.

While the sound of The Misfit's voice is important—like the preceding sounds of the pistol—it is the visual face-to-face encounter which prompts her epiphany, her recognition of responsibility: "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he

were going to cry. 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!'" (132). This simple statement is a testament to the power of empathy, as the grandmother's inviting words of recognition clearly spring from her viewing of the Misfit at his most vulnerable. Levinas argued that a true face-to-face exists exactly as in this moment, when an individual sees the vulnerability of the other. Meanwhile, the Misfit is unable to free himself from the constraints of a struggle for power, as his projected weakness runs the risk of upsetting his control. He must remain "The Misfit," and the grandmother must remain both "the grandmother" and his victim. He must continue to unambiguously contextualize the grandmother: she is a good woman, a lady, and she is his victim. Therefore, he shoots her.

The Misfit reacts to more than the grandmother's change in tone; he reacts to her physical contact: "She reached out and touched him on the shoulder" (132). The grandmother's lines introduce a sense of solidarity between not only the grandmother and The Misfit, but between all human persons; but it is less this appeal to human solidarity and more the physical touch that causes The Misfit to spring "back as if a snake had bitten him" and shoot "her three times through the chest." What did the Misfit feel or understand through the grandmother's touching of his shoulder? O'Connor tells us that his "shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness" (*Habit of Being* 389). The grandmother's humanness implies her physical vulnerability, and her vulnerability implies The Misfit's responsibility for her. This moment with the grandmother, however, is more than simply with the grandmother: it is about all of The Misfit's other victims; all of these were interactions with physical bodies. Suddenly the pure abstraction of The Misfit's metaphysical musing and fuming comes face-to-face with the lived experience of

another human person, through a simple touch on the shoulder. If he considers the grandmother a person to whom he owes responsibility, then so too must he owe responsibility for the sundry others he has killed or injured. Hence the Misfit's emotional and physical reaction—his springing back and his three pistol shots—make perfect sense, since he must destroy any evidence of his responsibility to the other.

It is imperative to see the connection between the grandmother's physical touching of The Misfit and her acceptance of responsibility for the man. Her recognition of him as "one of her own" does not exist within an abstract sense of relationship, as if she recognizes the *invisible ties* of their kinship; instead, the grandmother accepts the physical body in front of her, and it is in this acceptance that she consents to her moral responsibility. The relationship between one human body and another is never simply about emotional or psychic connection; it is about the physical wellbeing of one individual being recognized by another. In this Levinasian framework, O'Connor's interpretation of these lines—an interpretation that might otherwise seem tangential—makes perfect sense. O'Connor claimed that the grandmother realizes "that she is responsible for the man before her" (*Mystery and Manners* 111-112). Both trauma and epiphany are paired with an understanding of responsibility for the other. The grandmother does not simply find inner peace and an acceptance in the face of the death, although this is true; and the trauma does not exist for the sake of narrative shock or resolution, although it does function this way. The trauma works toward shaking the grandmother awake from her natural solipsism, which in turn frees her to see the other, the other with whom she is already in relationship and therefore bears a responsibility

toward. The grandmother's personal moment of growth—in part her ability to face death—happens *within* her relationship with The Misfit.

While many critics read an active and transforming grace in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," this is by no means a unanimous interpretation. In his article "'One of my babies': The Misfit and the Grandmother," Stephen Bandy sums up the dissenting interpretation by arguing that "if one reads the story without prejudice, there would seem to be little here to inspire hope for redemption of any of its characters" (107). By "prejudice," Bandy is referring to both Christian dogma and O'Connor's personal statements about her story. In reference to the grandmother's final statements, Bandy calls it

> quite straightforward: the Grandmother, having exhausted all other appeals to the Misfit, resorts to her only remaining (though certainly imperfect) weapon: motherhood. Declaring to the Misfit that he is one of her babies, she sets out to conquer him. Perhaps she hopes that this ultimate flattery will melt his heart, and he will collapse in her comforting motherly embrace. Such are the stratagems of sentimentality. (110)

The grandmother has not changed at all; her final statement is simply another attempt to gain power and save her life. According to Bandy, "It is surely straining the text to propose that the Grandmother has in this moment 'seen the light.'"

Most negative interpretations of the grandmother's "epiphany" are rooted in a question similar to Bandy's: Is there enough in the narrative itself—apart from theology or the author's interpretation—for an unbiased reader to believe the grandmother could possibly have changed? Bandy's answer, like others', is a definitive no. Not all of these

critics agree on the meaning of the grandmother's final statement, but they all agree it is not personally transformative or salvific. For example, in "A Cloak of Grace: Contradictions in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,'" Kathleen G. Ochshorn points out that when the grandmother calls The Misfit one of her own children, she is being quite literal, since he "by that time is wearing Bailey's shirt, the yellow one with the blue parrots." For Ochshorn, "the grandmother appears to be insisting on what is not real or true, as she has throughout the story."

While these negative readings point out legitimate problems with a simple interpretation of the grandmother's epiphany, they all fail to recognize how the encounter with The Misfit—the discussion and the personal sharing in a physical space—contains within itself the seeds of the grandmother's genuine change. Reading O'Connor anew through Levinas's ethics gives us a helpful lens through which to read the text in this way. The grandmother's physical encounter with the vulnerability of the human body through the murders, her listening to the story of The Misfit's life, and her inability to contextualize The Misfit as a knowable other all serve as narrative clues for the grandmother's transformation.

Another way of exploring a positive interpretation of the grandmother's final words is to examine the description of the grandmother's face after she has died. This description and interpretation brings us to the final narrative segment of this dissertation, that of the bliss that follows the acceptance of responsibility. The grandmother's death scene, along with the explicit epiphany of Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," help point to O'Connor's addition to Levinas and the entire conversation regarding ethical responsibility. To accept one's responsibility for the other—and by extension, for *all* of

the others—is a monumental and seemingly daunting feat. Levinas called it a difficult truth. However, the grandmother is never happier or freer than in her last moment; the *burden* of responsibility ends up being both light and ecstatic.

This interpretation is observable when The Misfit's two accomplices return from the woods and stand "over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (132). The reference to the grandmother as a child is indicative of her transformation, particularly in the Christian belief that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18.3). It is also no coincidence that the grandmother is staring directly up at the sky, at the heavens. But the most poignant piece of this description is the grandmother's "face smiling." This sign seems less a statement about a possible afterlife, toward which the grandmother might believe she is headed after death, and more about the aftereffects of her earlier epiphany—the one that led her to her final words, her words of solidarity and tenderness. Whatever led the grandmother to understand her responsibility for The Misfit also led to bliss—or, in a perhaps more direct way, the understanding of responsibility for The Misfit is *itself* what led to the bliss. The pairing of the two—recognition of responsibility and bliss—is subtle but significant. In the same way that The Misfit as other exceeds the grandmother's comprehension, so too must her ecstatic bliss exceed the reader's comprehension.

Chapter 5

Othering, Faux Responsibility, & Ecstasy

If "A Good Man is Hard to Find" required some introductory remarks regarding its relationship to responsibility, Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" needs little preliminary explanation. Mr. Head's responsibility for his grandson Nelson drives the narrative: responsibility is the impetus for their trip to Atlanta; it is responsibility that is betrayed when Mr. Head denies knowledge of Nelson; and it is true responsibility both characters accept in the narrative's resolution, which allows their personal relationship to be rectified. However, "The Artificial Nigger" is not analyzed here on account of its easy relationship with Levinas's ethics; instead, what is essential to "The Artificial Nigger" is its extension beyond the ethics—its development of what the ethics leaves unexamined: the ecstatic effects of accepting responsibility for the other.

Levinas's ethics is challenging in its simplicity and boldness. Making no attempt to set up a metaphysical system that might provide a theoretical undergirding for his ethics, Levinas simply argues that our encounter with responsibility for the other is one of the most foundational human experiences. His ethics poses particular problems for individualistic cultures and philosophical frames of thought. This is true for the Western tradition in general and American thinking in particular. Levinas was aware of the hardness of his ethics, but he made no attempts at compromise or understatement. Instead he simply said he would "leave the whole consoling side of this ethics to religion" (108).

This dissertation argues that some of O'Connor's stories play the role of "the consoling side of this ethics"—and none more clearly than "The Artificial Nigger." Like the grandmother's smile at the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Mr. Head's epiphanic bliss—the bliss that makes him feel "ready at that instant to enter Paradise"—is intrinsically connected to his confrontation with and acceptance of responsibility. This narrative cause-and-effect is rooted in the logic of Levinas's phenomenology: to accept responsibility for the other is to accept reality as it truly is, a set of relationships and not individuals; and to accept reality as it truly is is to encounter joy. In "The Artificial Nigger," O'Connor grounds Mr. Head's joy in the healing of his relationship with God; but even here, at one of the most overtly religious moments in her fiction, the relationship between God and man is only able to be repaired *after* man's relationship to man is rectified—after Mr. Head's denial of responsibility for his grandson is repaired.

Additionally, "The Artificial Nigger" is an excellent story to analyze in depth in this final chapter, as it explores various aspects of Levinas's ethics. It provides an insightful look into the difference between our contemporary usage of othering—expressed by Mr. Head's racism—and Levinas's use of other. It also explores significant differences between false and true senses of responsibilities. The narrative clearly demonstrates how the false senses of responsibility, along with the acts of othering, are in fact manifestations of self-love; they are at their root narcissistic, and so their logical end is an implicit acquiescence to solipsism. Additionally, like much of O'Connor's fiction, this story also explores the trauma necessary for a true encounter with the other. This occurs through the mediation of the titular artificial nigger, a crumbling plaster figure of a "happy" black boy. Through this figure Nelson encounters his responsibility for black

America and Mr. Head encounters responsibility for Nelson—only then does Mr. Head encounter mercy, the theological force that rectifies his relationship with God.

This chapter will examine three motifs from the story that can be read through the lens of Levinas's ethics—three narrative problems that at their root are philosophical and ethical in nature. First, the story is a fascinating look at the differences between sameness and otherness; the story, like Levinas's ethics, notes how problems occur when we prioritize sameness and define everything in relationship to ourselves. In order for Mr. Head to truly encounter his responsibility for Nelson, he must encounter Nelson's otherness. Second, the story provides a remarkable look into *othering*[1], and it juxtaposes this othering with a more genuine encounter of true otherness. Third, the story presents us with an example of faux responsibility, a false sense of moral obligation that is juxtaposed with a real encounter with responsibility in the narrative's resolution. The story's climax—the encounter with the plaster figure of the black child—speaks to and resolves all three of these issues.

Sameness vs. Otherness, Trauma & Solipsism

"The Artificial Nigger" makes a point often to note the intense physical similarities between Mr. Head and Nelson. Before the pair even makes its way to the train junction, we are told that Nelson's face is

> very much the same shape as the old man's. They were grandfather and grandson but they looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age,

[1] As defined in Chapter 2, *othering* is "the process by which a majority group uses differences—of race, color, creed, etc.—in a minority group to gain power."

> for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it. (251)

The narrator begins with the most obvious and physical of the similarities, the shape of the faces. From here the comparisons, while remaining physical, become slightly more abstract: they seem close in age because of Mr. Head's "youthful expression" and his grandson's "ancient" "look." These corporeal parallels work toward pointing to the emotional and temperamental resemblances: both characters are proud, spiteful, aloof, and inwardly self-doubting. In the very same scene, when Mr. Head, in an effort to knock Nelson's ego down a little, tells him that Atlanta will be "'full of niggers,'" Nelson "made a face as if he could handle a nigger" (252). His grandfather retorts by pointing out that Nelson "'ain't ever seen a nigger.'" On this matter, Nelson cannot win—but instead of conceding the loss, he changes the subject, and points out that Mr. Head "'wasn't up very early.'" Earlier we were told that Mr. Head likes to get up earlier than the boy, as a way of asserting his authority and physical capabilities. But this morning, Nelson awoke first, for the same reasons as his grandfather: to begin the day one up on him.

Nelson and Mr. Head are comical doubles. They look alike; they bicker alike; they are antagonistic and see granting the other anything as a form of weakness. When Mr. Head tells Nelson to sit "'right there'" on the train, Nelson quips, "'I heard you…It's no use in you yelling'" (253). When Mr. Head tells Nelson to put the ticket in his "'pocket and don't lose it or'" he may "'have to stay in the city,'" Nelson, understanding his grandfather's opinion of city life, finds the most hurtful response he can muster: "'Maybe I will'" (254). More than a comical application of the *doppelganger* trope, the

similarities between Mr. Head and Nelson prove an obstacle in their relationship, particularly in terms of Mr. Head's perception of his responsibility for his grandson. Levinas saw our the philosophical preference for sameness over otherness as a stumbling block in an individual's perception of the other and his responsibility for him. If we prefer sameness over otherness, we have two ways of dealing with the other: we can perceive the other as another version of ourselves, which is essentially a complex version of self-love; or we can see the other in terms of his differences from us. Both of these options prohibit a true encounter with the other, an encounter that admits lack of comprehension. For Mr. Head to truly encounter his responsibility for Nelson, he will have to see the boy as other.

Mr. Head's terrible moment of betrayal—a moment analyzed in depth later—is rooted in the pair's doubling, in their physical similarities. When Mr. Head timidly arrives at the scene with Nelson and the irate woman, he is forcefully accused: "'"You sir! You'll pay every penny of my doctor's bill that your boy has caused. He's a juve-nile delinquent!'" (265). When Mr. Head says, "'This is not my boy,'" the women's reactions are crucial: "The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him." The strangers' perception and knowledge of the betrayal is rooted in the pair's familial and physical resemblances. Mr. Head's duplicity reveals what elevating sameness over otherness truly is: a disguised form of self-love; and since this scene makes the sameness *physical* sameness, it reveals the disguise as a poor disguise.

The betrayal affords both Nelson and Mr. Head the trauma necessary for a true encounter with the other, even though the encounter does not happen immediately. After

Mr. Head sees the effect of his denial on Nelson—represented by the "two small eyes piercing into his back like pitchfork prongs"—he gains self-awareness and recognizes the weight of his actions (266). The grandfather reflects on how his grandson "was not of a forgiving nature but this was the first time he had ever had anything to forgive. Mr. Head had never disgraced himself before." He reacts physically to his betrayal as his "face as they walked on became all hollows and bare ridges." When Nelson, who is following his grandfather at a distance, refuses to drink water from the same spigot, "disdaining to drink where his grandfather had," Mr. Head "lost all hope." While trauma is often a catalyst for change and epiphany in O'Connor's stories, what is important about this story's disruption is how it drives a necessary wedge between grandfather and grandson; it forces Mr. Head to view Nelson as something other than another version of himself. In short, relational trauma breaks up the sameness between grandfather and grandson, and while it does not automatically put Nelson into the category of other, it makes this perception a possibility.

Before this can happen, though, Mr. Head must face the painful possibility of solipsism; this is an essential step because it makes the differences between Mr. Head and Nelson complete. No longer is his grandson a familial reflection of himself; instead he is a distinct individual, with the possibility of having no relationship with him at all. This is the fear Mr. Head faces and recognizes in the moments directly after his betrayal. After perceiving "the boy's steady hate," Mr. Head "knew that now he was wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before" (267). This new "place" is a refiguring of his relationship with his grandson, as the sentence continues: "a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the

end." Mr. Head's conflating of his relationship with his grandson with his entire life and future life is no exaggeration, since they are each other's only family member and friend. For the Levinasian self, there is no individual self, but only a self-in-relationship. Mr. Head is always Mr. Head-in-relationship-with-Nelson, so if the grandson forever refuses to forgive his grandfather's denial, Mr. Head will always be a fragmented or incomplete version of himself.

The physical distance between Nelson and Mr. Head is symbolic of a number of things, literal and psychological. First of all, Nelson cannot bear to be close to his grandfather, and even though he follows him, he makes sure to follow "twenty feet behind him" (267). As they continue their journey, "Nelson made no move to come nearer to Mr. Head." The literal space between the two characters represents the space the betrayal opened. From Mr. Head's perspective, this space also reveals the future solipsistic life he now fears. Mr. Head's experience of this unbridgeable relational chasm is best expressed when he is close enough to Nelson to see "his face bloodless under the gray hat. His eyes were triumphantly cold" (268). Mr. Head's reaction and reflection bespeak a painful potential isolation: "Mr. Head turned slowly. He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation." All three of these analogies are powerful in their own right, but the third speaks most to this present conversation. In the Christian narrative, when man sins, the most painful effect is his severance from his relationship with God. But man's relationship to God is most often severed through an undoing of man's relationship to man. It is no coincidence that one of the first extended Biblical narratives is Cain's killing of Abel. And if we look to man's first sin, God did not punish

Adam and Eve until both took no action to claim responsibility for their own sins and the sins of their partner. With a damaged relationship with his neighbor, man is never in perfect relationship with God. All of this is felt by Mr. Head and expressed in his understanding of what "what man would be like without salvation."

The betrayal and ensuing relational chaos offer Mr. Head the necessary trauma through which he can both recognize and accept his responsibility for the other. While the beginning of the story—and by extension the entirety of their relationship since Nelson's birth—pairs the two characters and focuses on their sameness, the betrayal forces Mr. Head to see that they are not different versions of one another. While Mr. Head must wait until the scene before the plaster figure, he is ready for the action of God's grace.

Othering vs. Otherness

"The Artificial Nigger" provides us a complex and fascinating rendering of learned racism. While many of O'Connor's stories pivot on the hypocritical racism of their white characters, none portray an education in racism in as much detail and lucidity. The story is a clear look at the difference between *other*, in Levinas's sense, and *othering*, the process by which a majority group claims authority over a minority group. What allows O'Connor to capture this initial moment of learned racism is the simple fact that Nelson has never seen a black person. It is clearly implied he has heard Mr. Head speak about them often, since, when he warns Nelson at the beginning of the narrative that Atlanta will "'be full of niggers,'" Nelson "made a face as if he could handle a nigger" (252). But Mr. Head's next line is essential to the later scene on the train: "'You ain't

ever seen a nigger.'" This lack of experience allows readers to witness Nelson's first perceptions of a black person, an observation that will be aided by the presence and experience of his grandfather.

The scene of learned racism takes place after Nelson and Mr. Head board the train. While Mr. Head begins loudly explaining everything about the train to Nelson, the grandfather is suddenly silent: "Suddenly Mr. Head's serene expression changed. His mouth almost closed and a light, fierce and cautious both, came into his eyes. He was looking down the length of the car. Without turning, he caught Nelson by the arm and pulled him forward. 'Look,' he said" (254). Readers familiar with the story are aware Mr. Head is looking at a black man coming toward them, and Mr. Head's reactions—his expressing changing, his mouth closing, the "fierce and "cautious" light in his eyes, and his catching of "Nelson by the arm"—are his responses to the black man. However, the narrator chooses to relate the rest of the vignette from Nelson's perspective, and since Nelson does not understand his grandfather's reaction, the narrator does not explain. The narrator's alignment with Nelson's perspective continues through this short scene, helping readers understand the process of learned racism, of studying and mimicking the act of othering.

The vignette continues with a description of the man Mr. Head is so affected by: "A huge coffee-colored man was coming slowly forward. He had on a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin in it" (254). The narrator's use of the word "coffee-colored" is especially poignant and effective. There are two related reasons for the use of the word: first, Nelson does not recognize the man approaching as a "black" man, since he has never seen one—and second, the narrator relays the scene from Nelson's

perspective. Both of these practical reasons for choosing "coffee-colored" over "black" are related to a more important and enlightening point O'Connor is making: not many "black" people are actually *black*. As readers we understand that the term is a catchall term for any darker-skinned person who appears to be of African descent. Many of our terms for racial distinctions are, quite literally, black and white; but these umbrella terms do not capture racial distinctions well at all. On a literal and physical level, the black man coming towards the duo is not black, but neither is Nelson *white*. Our color terms for race are naïve oversimplifications, ineffective means of discussing the complexities of race.

Nelson's initial reaction to the black man and his accompanying group is more significant than Mr. Head's clichéd fear and tension. Other than a passing comment that "two young women" accompanying the man were "both coffee-colored," Nelson's observations of the group is focused on their clothing, style, and attitude (255). We learn that the man's stomach "rode majestically under his buttoned coat"; that "he held the head of a black walking stick that he picked up and set down with a deliberate outward motion each time he took a step"; that he "had a small white mustache and white crinkly hair." We learn about the two women, that one was "in a yellow dress and one in a green"; and we hear them speak "in low throaty voices." While the description fixates on the novelty of the scene, its originality for Nelson is *not* rooted in the color (or race) of the passengers. Their elegance and propriety is what piques the boy's interest. That they are coffee-colored is part of Nelson's conscious observation of the scene, but it is clearly only of minimal significance. The boy's naïve and natural curiosity is juxtaposed with his grandfather's simultaneous reaction to the same scene: "Mr. Head's grip was

tightening insistently on Nelson's arm." Nelson's curiosity is translated into fear in the person of Mr. Head.

Directly after the trio marches through the train car, "Mr. Head's grip on Nelson's arm" loosens, and he asks the boy, "'What was that?'" (255). Nelson's response and reaction to the question are critical: "'A man,' the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted." Nelson's reference to the black man as simply "a man" is both his way of snidely responding to what he perceives as an unintelligent question *and* the narrative's way of pointing out a basic human truth: the black man is "a man." The two meanings are interrelated: without exactly knowing it, Nelson has made a logical dismissal of Mr. Head's question and his racist ideology. Nelson's naïve but innocent "intelligence" *is* being "insulted" through Mr. Head's question, which the readers perceive as rooted in the ignorance of racism. However, since Nelson himself does not realize how his response is a viable rebuttal to his grandfather's belief system, he is still vulnerable to the upcoming education on racial differences. His innocence is what protects him—in the sense that he does not yet know he is *supposed* to react differently to a "coffee-colored" man—but it also makes him vulnerable, since he is not aware his response is a logical argument against his grandfather's beliefs about race.

At this point, the grandfather takes on the role of educator. Instead of simply replying to Nelson's ignorance with a statement or explanation, he responds instead by asking another question: "'What kind of a man?' Mr. Head persisted, his voice expressionless" (255). Everything else hinges on this question and the distinction Mr. Head is both implying and trumpeting: it is not enough to call someone a man; rather, it

depends what "kind of man" they are. Living with Mr. Head must have made this clear in theory to Nelson, but he had never seen or experienced this distinction. And even though his initial inclination is to overlook or minimize the physical difference of color, he is dependent on Mr. Head, who Nelson understands as a wiser and more experienced man. That is why Mr. Head's question begins to fill Nelson with a "sudden foreboding," even though he still cannot make the racial connection. He answers twice more, both times focusing on physical aspects of the man other than his color or race: he first classifies him as a "fat man," and then an "old man." After a dramatic pause, Mr. Head offers the "real" answer: "'That was a nigger,' Mr. Head said and sat back."

This vignette sheds light on the essential distinctions between Levinas's understanding of other and the act of racial othering. For Levinas, it is fundamental that the other is perceived as beyond comprehension; in fact, this is what makes the other *other*: the very fact that his or her uniqueness cannot be made absolutely comprehensible through language and reason. In prejudiced acts of othering, like Mr. Head's actions here, the opposite happens: the "other" is made completely comprehensible through his defining characteristic, which is the fact that he is not white. While Mr. Head's fear of the other is apparent, his follow-up question-and-answer session with Nelson is marked by smug confidence. After he makes his proclamation "'That was a nigger,'" he "sat back" (255). Mr. Head considers himself an expert on this matter, just as he assumes he understands the black man. Through the label of "nigger," the grandfather is claiming the black man as knowable. This is an obvious mark of othering that distinguishes it from Levinas's encounter with the other. Scholars Garza and Landrum speak to just this distinction when they point out, "When one totalizes the Other, one reduces the Other to

the same by likening the Other to oneself in describing him or her in relation to being" ("Ethics and the Primacy of the Other" 13). Mr. Head is not claiming to have experienced the incomprehensible otherness of the black man; instead, he is making the black man knowable by defining him in relation to himself: the man is not white.

Nelson's reaction to being told the "coffee-colored" man is in fact "a nigger" offers a prescient look into the process of learned racism (254, 255). First we note the boy's surprise: "Nelson jumped up on the seat and stood looking backward to the end of the car but the Negro had gone" (255). It is obvious Nelson's preliminary observation of a black man did not fit his preconceived notions. Mr. Head uses this surprise and its implied ignorance against the boy, mockingly saying, "'I'd of thought you'd know a nigger since you seen so many when you was in the city on your first visit,'" referring to Nelson's birth in Atlanta, a fact *Nelson* has been using against his grandfather. Because Nelson's negative emotional reaction to his grandfather and the situation will eventually be projected onto the anonymous black man, it is imperative to analyze it. The boy feels betrayed; he feels ashamed; he feels ignorant; and he feels foolish. On the one hand, he thinks he has been duped; but on the other hand, he is coming to the realization that he does not understand "the world" as much as he thought he had; this is a painful realization for anyone: "The boy slid down into the seat. 'You said they were black,' he said in an angry voice. 'You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don't tell me right?'" This reaction, both the physical and the verbal, capture the multifaceted emotional and psychic reaction of the boy. His initial sliding "down into the seat" connotes both confusion and resignation; Nelson's ego has taken a

hit. But when he shoots back at his grandfather, he speaks in "an angry voice." His ignorance is not the only thing to blame; his grandfather misled him.

Nelson's reactions before and after learning the race of the "coffee-colored man" are understandable enough; O'Connor captures them exceptionally well, but they are relatively straightforward. It is, however, Nelson's next reaction and his further introspection that make this scene so evocative. At the present moment, Nelson is angry and upset at his grandfather for not adequately explaining race and color, and he is angry and upset at himself for not understanding them adequately. Rather than a logical emotional reaction, such as continued anger at Mr. Head or a moment of personal self-reflection, both the betrayal and the self-loathing are projected onto the black man:

> Nelson turned backward again and looked where the Negro had disappeared. He felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them. He looked toward the window and the face there seemed to suggest that he might be inadequate to the day's exactions. (255-256)

Intuitively, Nelson understands that the black man's racial difference allow him to be a scapegoat for his own doubts and ignorance. He revisits the scene in his mind, now adding the racial prejudices he has heard from Mr. Head his whole life—and Nelson sees the scene markedly different. In the modified recollection, the "Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him" (256). This leads to the climax of the vignette: the fact that Nelson now "hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate." Nelson is discovering and experiencing something of the world of his grandfather and the world of

white adulthood: collective hatred of another race. This hatred has an important aftereffect: the unification of the haters, in this case, Nelson and Mr. Head. They have been at odds all morning, but their collective scapegoating of the black man brings them together. Nelson now understands his grandfather, while he also understands he "might be inadequate to the day's exactions." This line implies a reliance on Mr. Head, the same man who just introduced the boy to the illogical hatred of an entire group of people based on skin color—or, more precisely, based on the linguistic label we use to talk about skin color.

Faux Responsibility, Guilt & the Suspicion of True Responsibility

While the entire narrative revolves around Mr. Head's understanding of his responsibility for Nelson, the story clearly distinguishes the grandfather's self-centered perception of responsibility that marks the first two-thirds of the story from the responsibility that is accepted, by both Mr. Head and Nelson, at the story's close. The mark of Mr. Head's initial understanding of responsibility is its self-centeredness; his faux responsibility is a form of self-love. Just as the grandfather and grandson's doubling is a signal of Mr. Head's self-love, so too is his faux responsibility marked by narcissism. Even after he has denied Nelson and is overwhelmed by the weight of his guilt, it takes time—and eventually a mediating symbol of suffering, a symbol both literary and literal—for Mr. Head to see Nelson as other and to accept his responsibility for him.

To understand Mr. Head's faux responsibility, it is essential to look at the opening paragraphs of the story. Before we are introduced to the setting, conflict, or any minor characters, readers are faced with a comical and scathing presentation of Mr. Head's

inflated self-image. After Mr. Head awakens to "discover that the room was full of moonlight," he sees a reflection of the moon in his mirror, "paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter" (249). The humorous notion that Mr. Head might believe the moon awaits his command or "permission" is ridiculous. As the story continues, we understand that Mr. Head is not delusional enough to believe he has power over impersonal natural powers, but instead we recognize this moment for what it truly is: representative of the way Mr. Head *feels* about the gravitas of his life. In a continuation of the room's description, the narrator notes that the "straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order," and "Mr. Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant." While ostensibly presenting us with the physical scene, this exposition continues the hyperbolic presentation of Mr. Head's inflated pride. The entire room, even the room's reflection caught in the mirror, stands at his attention, awaiting the orders of "some great man." The story employs a common Flannerian narrative technique, a strategy that allows her to write in third-person, while filtering the description through Mr. Head's consciousness. This allows the narrator to both reveal the scene through Mr. Head's eyes—and thereby reveal his character and self-image—while at the same time mock Mr. Head's ridiculousness.

The story's second paragraph clearly connects Mr. Head's pride with his sense of responsibility. The paragraph returns to the narrative's focus on the moon: "Mr. Head could have said to [the moon] that age was a choice blessing and that only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" (249). The comedy is extended, as now Mr. Head feels in a position to not

only offer advice to the moon, but to offer advice about old age. While this sentence continues the narrative's characterization from the previous paragraph, it has an added element: Mr. Head's perspective of himself as "suitable guide for the young." The pairing of the two aspects of Mr. Head's character and belief system—his comically inflated pride and his sense of himself as a guide for the young—reveals the relationship between Mr. Head's ego and his sense of responsibility for Nelson. In short, the two are the same: Mr. Head's sense of responsibility for Nelson is an extension of his false sense of superiority. In this way, far from his sense of responsibility being rooted in an acceptance of Nelson as other, this faux responsibility is in fact simply a version of self-love. This self-love is ultimately revealed for what it is in the denial scene.

The denial scene also reveals another key mark of Mr. Head's initial sense of responsibility for Nelson: its bitterness and antagonism. The power struggle between the two characters demonstrates how much of Mr. Head's faux responsibility is an assertion of his own self. When Nelson "lay sprawled in an exhausted fit of sleep," Mr. Head "watched him silently" (263). Here he concocts the plan to hide a little ways off, so when Nelson eventually wakes up, he will not see his grandfather. Mr. Head's own sense of the childishness and spitefulness of his plan is revealed when the narrator, before even telling us about the plan, first tell us that Mr. Head "justified what he was going to do on the grounds that it is sometimes necessary to teach a child a lesson he won't forget particularly when the child is always reasserting his position with some new impudence" (264). This sentence is loaded with interpretative implications. First, and most obviously, the use of the word "justified" demonstrates Mr. Head's recognition of the plan's logic as faulty, since it needs justification. Second, the phrase "teach a child a

lesson" roots the plan, at least superficially, on grounds of imparting knowledge to Nelson; and since the entire trip has been an extended attempt at teaching a lesson, this single lesson can be seen as synecdoche for, not just Mr. Head's lesson-teaching, but for the story as a whole. Third, as Mr. Head sees Nelson's trouble as the boy's assertion of "his position," Mr. Head is also conscious of the power struggle at the root of both their relationship as a whole and Mr. Head's sense of his responsibility. It is Mr. Head's obligation to quash Nelson's assertions. This is not moral obligation; it is simple an assertion of ego.

After Nelson awakes, runs off thinking he has lost his grandfather, and crashes into the group of pedestrians, Mr. Head follows as quickly as he can; however, his reaction to the scene of distress foreshadows his eventual verbal denial. When he sees "a scene that" stops "him altogether," Mr. Head "crouched behind a trash box to watch and get his bearings" (264). Mr. Head's first impulse is to *not* go to Nelson's rescue. The narrator buries this selfish passivity under the excuse of "watching" and "getting his bearings"; but alert readers have already noted Mr. Head's false justification at the beginning of this scene, and they see this for what it is: a grandfather's decision *not* to help his grandson. Even before the spoken denial, this passivity swiftly undermines all of Mr. Head's sense of responsibility for Nelson; everything about his motivations for the trip, which was ultimately to disenchant Nelson to city life, dissolve when Mr. Head is faced with bearing some pain or hardship or humiliation on his grandson's part.

The physical description of Nelson in the scene emphasizes the boy's vulnerability and confusion. We see that "Nelson was sitting with both legs spread out," and a few lines later, we are told that several "of the women were plucking at Nelson's

shoulder but the boy seemed too dazed to get up" (264). While this empathetic portrayal of Nelson's helplessness does not eventually translate into Mr. Head accepting his responsibility for the boy, it does affect the grandfather: "Something forced Mr. Head from behind the trash box and forward, but only at a creeping pace" (265). The emphasis on Mr. Head's speed—or at least perceived speed—continues when we read that Mr. Head "came on so slowly that he could have been taking a backward step after each forward one." Here we see a suspicion of responsibility, real responsibility, which is so often met initially with hesitancy and sometimes anger in by O'Connor's characters. The attention to physical detail that emphasizes Nelson's youth and weakness reaches a peak when we are told that he "caught [Mr. Head] around the hips and clung panting against him." At this point, Mr. Head seems to have everything he needs to accept his responsibility for Nelson: a tangible and physical confrontation with the responsibility, and a moment in which to claim it. But in his denial, he reveals his sense of responsibility to be self-serving and flimsy.

In the seconds leading up to Mr. Head's denial of Nelson, we are given a window into the overriding reason Mr. Head will claim no knowledge of his grandson: fear, particularly fear of authority. The slowness with which Mr. Head approaches Nelson in the first place is attributed to the fact that he had "never in his life been accosted by a policeman" (265). The woman whom Nelson ran into and supposedly injured begins her tirade by exclaiming, "'Police! Police!'" Later she questions, "'Where is an officer?'" Mr. Head's fear of authority is directly linked to his denial, since the sentence prior to his verbal denial begins "Mr. Head sensed the approach of the policeman from behind." This leads to the one of the story's climaxes: "'This is not my boy," he said. 'I never seen him

before.'" This moment is a retelling of Peter's denial of Christ after Jesus's arrest. He too follows at a distance and with caution; and when asked directly, he too says, "'I do not know the man'" (Matthew 26.72). The gravity of Mr. Head's denial is emphasized by the exaggerated reactions of the other characters in the scene. Mr. Head "felt Nelson's fingers fall out of his flesh." Since "flesh" is a standing metaphor for familial relations, this "falling out of the flesh" can refer to both Mr. Head's denial of his grandson, as well as Nelson's rejection of his grandfather. The reaction of the group of women, who had been calling for a policeman, justice, and money, is even more dramatic: "The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him." The phrase "image and likeness" refers directly to both the physical similarities between Nelson and Mr. Head and the general familial relationship, but it also bears a religious connotation, in that the human person is "made in the image and likeness" of God. In this sense, Mr. Head's denial is not only a rejection of his responsibility for his grandson; it is a rejection of our shared humanity, which rests on our shared place in God's family.

The effect of the denial is immediate for everyone—the women calling for justice, Nelson, and for Mr. Head himself. However, even though Mr. Head understands he has done something wrong, he still does not accept responsibility for Nelson. He suspects a real responsibility is lacking, and he even begins to understand it, even if for the first time; but without a real acceptance of it, the only true effect the scene has on Mr. Head is guilt: "Mr. Head began to feel the depth of his denial. His face as they walked on became all hollows and bare ridges. He saw nothing they were passing but he perceived that they had lost the car tracks" (266). Clearly Mr. Head *understands* the wrong he had done and

how he has severed his relationship with his grandson, but this understanding is distinct from an acceptance of responsibility. The effects of guilt are all negative. We see Mr. Head "lost all hope." His "face in the waning afternoon light looked ravaged and abandoned." Ultimately, this sort of guilt, even if attached in part to an understanding of wrongdoing, is still self-centered. I feel guilty because *I* did something wrong, and now *I* am embarrassed. It is the guilt of a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar: he feels guilty because he has been caught. This type of guilt is reliant upon an understanding, or at least a beginning sense of real wrongdoing, but it is rooted in the wrongdoing's affect on the offender and *not* the victim. The mark of real guilt and change is a focus on the other—when responsibility for the other is accepted fully.

In narrative terms, O'Connor distinguishes between these two types of understanding through their effect upon her protagonist. In the selfish understanding of wrongdoing—like in the moments after Mr. Head's denial of Nelson and leading up to the story's resolution—the effect is guilt, restlessness, and continued self-centeredness. Mr. Head rightly despairs, but he despairs because of how *his* life and its future have now been altered. In an authentic reaction to wrongdoing, the effect is not guilty moaning but joyful and ecstatic acceptance of responsibility. Joy is the true mark of accepting responsibility. O'Connor both extends the personal implications of Levinas's ethics and reverses our common understanding of moral obligation: joy comes from accepting responsibility.

Authentic Responsibility

Mr. Head's problems are at least threefold: he must learn to see Nelson, whom he has always seen as a double and an extension of himself, as other; second, he must learn to see Nelson as other in a way distinct from his normal practice of othering, as in his racism; and third, he must experience responsibility in a way distinct from the self-centered guilt that first arises after his denial. Before exploring Mr. Head's acceptance of responsibility for Nelson in the narrative's resolution, it is vital we first look at responsibility from a second perspective: Nelson's. While the narrative voice speaks mainly from Mr. Head's perspective, and while the bulk of the narrative's focus on responsibility relates to Mr. Head, the story's resolution offers a double moment of encountering moral obligation, like in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." It is almost as if the story's doubling of the grandfather and grandson throughout the narrative forces it to double its encounter with responsibility. To understand Nelson's role in the climatic scene in front of the plaster figure, we must first look at Nelson's experience with black characters in Atlanta's slums.

When grandfather and grandson get lost, they wander into a poor black neighborhood: "Nelson saw a colored man. Then another. Then another. 'Niggers live in these houses,' he observed. 'Well come on and we'll go somewheres else,' Mr. Head said" (260). In a break from the usual pattern, the narrative voice follows Nelson's perspective here; this is first signaled by the phrase "Nelson's skin began to prickle." What Nelson notes in the rest of the scene is the poverty of the neighborhood: "There were colored men in their undershirts standing in the doors and colored women rocking on the sagging porches. Colored children played in the gutters and stopped what they

were doing to look at them." It is clear Mr. Head does not react to the scene in an empathetic or even sympathetic way, for his reaction is to sarcastically say to Nelson, "'Yes…this is where you were born right here with all these niggers.'" Since Mr. Head's reaction is clearly not one of compassion, the scene's empathetic focus on the poverty of the black community must come from Nelson's perspective. What will eventually develop into an acceptance of responsibility for the black community begins with Nelson's encounter with this black community, where black children play "in the gutters."

Nelson's physical encounter with the other extends to his encounter with the black woman he asks for directions. The description is corporeal and sexual:

> Up ahead he saw a large colored woman leaning in a doorway that opened onto the sidewalk. Her hair stood straight out from her head for about four inches all around and she was resting on bare brown feet that turned pink at the sides. She had on a pink dress that showed her exact shape. As they came abreast of her, she lazily lifted one hand to her head and her fingers disappeared into her hair. (261)

While there are signs of poverty here—most notably the absence of shoes—economic distress is overpowered by sexual markers. We see the "woman leaning in a doorway"; she is "resting on bare brown feet"; her pink dress" "showed her exact shape"; they come "abreast of her"; and "she lazily lifted one hand." This interpretation is supported by the very next paragraph: "Nelson stopped. He felt his breath drawn up by the woman's dark eyes. 'How do you get back to town?' he said in a voice that did not sound like his own." The woman has power and control over Nelson; however, unlike in the earlier scene, when Nelson felt that the black man on the train had walked past to spite him, Nelson

accepts the woman's power wholeheartedly: "He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face" (262).

It is Nelson's encounter with the black community—from its impoverished children playing in the gutters to the black woman he asks for directions—that sets up his own encounter with responsibility for the other later in the story. The black woman's response to his question, while comedic, is the gateway for his later epiphany. In response to his question of how to "get back to town," the woman replies, "'You in town now'" (261). While the woman understands what Nelson means, her response is more than humor; it points to a logical flaw in the boy's assumption. Nelson, without reflection, distinguishes between white and black Atlanta, and it is obvious white Atlanta is the "real" Atlanta. This is reminiscent of Nelson's earlier point on the train that the black man is simply "a man." Nelson's embarrassment here bears the germ of his later epiphany, when he will accept responsibility for black America.

We must now turn our attention to the story's resolution, as the two characters, estranged through Mr. Head's denial of Nelson, stand in front of the plaster figure of the black child. Why are the two white characters united through the despicable image of a black boy, full of stereotypes? Is this their shared racism again? And if not, are their epiphanies and relational resolution based upon the misery of an entire race? In particular, Mr. Head's seemingly insensitive and asinine response to the figure—"'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one'"—seems to invite a healthy skepticism of either O'Connor's intention to present this as resolution or as a satisfactory resolution to the story as a whole (269).

Perhaps a good place to begin is by comparing and contrasting the image of the plaster figure with the "pickanniny" from "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In "A Good Man," we never see the black child; we learn of him through the second-hand descriptions and reactions of the grandmother and her two grandchildren. Therefore, the grandmother is able to depict the black boy in a way that it safely remains within the definition of pickanniny: "an imagined subhuman juvenile who was typically depicted outside, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence" (Bernstein 34). The scene in this story is different for two key reasons: first, the narrative describes the figure first-hand, and second, the figure is not, obviously, an actual black person. For both of these reasons, the plaster figure can be read as a deconstruction of the pickaninny: a physical and metaphorical representation of the falsity of the popular image of the happy and go-lucky black boy.

The narrative never attempts to confuse the figure with reality, since "the plaster figure of a Negro" is our first introduction to the image. After being told that the "Negro was about Nelson's size," the narrative tells us that "[the figure] was pitched forward at an unsteady angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked" (268). This sentence brilliantly deconstructs the popular image of the pickanniny, while also pointing to the humanity of that which the image is supposed to represent. The comparison—the "Negro is about Nelson's size"—humanizes the image by comparing it to the only boy in the story; at the same time, though, the sentence points to the falsity of the image by noting that the figure "was pitched forward" and that "the putty that held him to wall had cracked." Not only does this descriptive detail outline the artificiality of the pickanniny as a cultural image, it also helps point out the debilitating effects of the use of the image

and other instances of paternal racism; even the physical image itself cannot hold its own story straight without falling apart. The description ends by remarking that the black boy "held a piece of brown watermelon," a final emphasis on both the extreme use of stereotype involved in cultural perceptions of black Americans as well as the falsity of these perceptions.

This subtle process of both humanizing and deconstructing is more obvious two paragraphs down. The focus on the figure's smile achieves the narrative's two-fold process: it presents the cultural image of the pickanniny by commenting on the fact that the figure was "meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners," but it immediately undercuts the strength of this cultural image by noting that the happiness of the smile is challenged by the "chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at" (268). In short, the smile is artificial, like the entire image. Herein lies the importance of the story's title. Although O'Connor was often asked to change the name, she refused. This is because the title emphasizes the heart of the story: the deconstruction of the artificiality of racial constructs. O'Connor's narrators never use the word "nigger" on their own. They say "Negro," unless they are borrowing the term from one of their characters. So just as the plaster figure deconstructs the image of the pickanniny, so too does the title of the story deconstruct—or point to the narrative's deconstruction—of the term "nigger."

The plaster figure is a symbol of suffering—or at least Nelson reads it as such. To get a better understanding of Nelson's reaction to the figure, as well as the figure's role in the narrative as a whole, it is helpful to look at an earlier unpublished version of

the story[2]. While the final published version of the story tells us little about Nelson's emotional reaction to the figure[3], an earlier version presents us with a tremendously insightful line: "[Nelson] but could never forget, he burned with anguish for the artificial nigger." What this simple sentence implies is that Nelson intuitively grasps what the previous few paragraphs took pains to point out: as the figure is a deconstruction of the image of black America, it invites an emotional reaction to the appalling treatment of the black child. Nelson does not see the boy's intended smile, but instead his "wild look of misery" (268). This version of the story also allows us to see the moments earlier in the black part of town as foreshadowing of this moment. Nelson has seen first-hand the mistreatment of black America that very day, and he recognizes their misery as he stands in front of the figure. Although the moments in the story told from Nelson's perspective are limited, it is viable to read this moment as a moment of encountering the other—and through it, encountering responsibility for the other. On the same day that Nelson learns to be racist, he also learns to empathize and claim responsibility for the other.

This reading is supported by O'Connor's own interpretation of the story, as she made clear in a letter to Ben Griffith. After explaining that she received a letter asking about the symbolism of Mr. Head and Nelson, O'Connor goes on to deny the letter writer's symbolic interpretation, and instead comments on the plaster figure, which she said was meant to "suggest" the "redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all"

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[2] I would like to sincerely thank the Georgia College and State University for allowing me to spend time in the Flannery O'Connor Special Collections, pouring over, among other material, unpublished versions of many of O'Connor's most iconic stories. I would also like to thank the Mary Flannery O'Connor Charitable Trust for giving me permission to use pieces of these unpublished drafts in this dissertation.

[3] It seems that O'Connor chose to shift most of the narrative focus and voice on Mr. Head in the final version of the story. In this way, we lose some of her explication of Nelson and his emotional reactions.

(*Habit of Being* 78). The parallels to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are enlightening: like the grandmother's need to witness (through storytelling) the suffering of The Misfit in order for her see him as other, the pair from "The Artificial Nigger" need to witness the suffering of the plaster figure in order to see each other as other. In this way, the plaster figure becomes a symbolic stand-in or mediator between the two characters. Mr. Head needs to find a way to see Nelson as other, and he finds an avenue through the overt otherness and suffering of the figure and black America. The resolution of the characters' relationship is beyond argument: "They could both feel [the figure] dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (269).

We must address Mr. Head's seemingly callous statement about the plaster figure, a statement that appears to undermine any sense of the characters overcoming their racism. It is imperative to understand both the intent behind Mr. Head's statement and his tone of voice. After Mr. Head and Nelson stand and witness the suffering of the plaster figure, Mr. Head observes that "Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence" (269). This type of observation is reminiscent of the opening of the story's mockery of Mr. Head's inflated self-image; this is highlighted by the opening of the next sentence: "Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement." However, what he finds himself saying is "'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.'" This proclamation works on a few levels. First, it essentially subverts Mr. Head's self-image; instead of a "wise" statement, we get a comedic one. Mr. Head's pride has been weakened through his denial. The sentence also works on an important secondary level. The first proclamation, that they "ain't got enough real ones here" is true, in the sense that the black American is not treated as real.

From a white perspective, they actually do not have enough real ones. In this way, the second line, that they "got to have an artificial one," implies that they need to have an artificial one in order to justify their treatment of black America. This, once again, harkens to the story's title. The "artificial nigger" refers to the understanding of the artificiality of the image of the black American, an artificiality the text works to deconstruct.

In her "Constructing Black Sons: William Faulkner's 'Barn Burning' and Flannery O'Connor's 'The Artificial Nigger,'" Jennie J. Joiner argues that Nelson becomes the narrative symbol for racial otherness, an otherness I would argue Mr. Head must confront in order to both accept responsibility and encounter bliss. Joiner contends that the grandson becomes "the artificial nigger" who stands "in for the racial others against whom Mr. Head" defines himself (31). Interestingly, Joiner claims that "Nelson not only recognizes a reflection of himself when confronted with the lawn statue that most critics read as the 'artificial nigger' of the story, but he understands that he is, in fact, the 'artificial nigger' to whom his grandfather refers and to which the story's title also refers." In this way, Mr. Head's acceptance of responsibility for Nelson is also the beginning, even if inchoate, of his potential acceptance of responsibility for his black fellow Americans. Although readers may be concerned with the narrative's lack of resolution regarding Mr. Head's deep-seated racism, a multilayered symbolic reading of the plaster figure—the figure as a deconstruction of black America, Nelson's recognition of this deconstruction, and then Nelson's taking on of the role of the black boy, the "artificial nigger"—helps us grasp an implied resolution to the racial conflict with which O'Connor so clearly foregrounds the story.

Mercy & Ecstasy

Levinas was aware of the difficulty of his own ethics. It is an ethics that defies our contemporary individualistic frames of thinking—defies some of the most basic tenets of Western tradition's reliance on reason and abstraction. It is an ethics that claims I am unequivocally responsible for you because I am in relationship with you, but that I cannot claim your responsibility for me, since *your* responsibility can only be understood from *your* perspective. In an interview, Levinas said that he would "leave the whole consoling side of this ethics to religion" (*Dialogues* 108). While Levinas did not mean this in a dismissive way, considering he was a practitioner of Judaism and wrote extensively later in life on religion, he did mean to say that the "consolation" of his ethics lies outside philosophy itself.

Mr. Head's experience at the end of the short story is O'Connor's most extended commentary on what Levinas called the consolation of ethics. While the grandmother's "face smiling up at the cloudless sky" at the end of "A Good Man" hints at this ecstasy, the end of "The Artificial Nigger" expounds on it (132). Generally, the fiction avoids direct representation of both mercy and bliss because, among other things, these are events experienced directly between individuals and God, and therefore, they can only be understand in and through the experience itself, not through verbal representation. Another reason the narratives avoid such investigation is to leave space between narrator and author: the interpretative space between O'Connor as Catholic and the narrator as wry satirist is a fruitful one, a space that accounts for, in part, the multiplicity of interpretations and a continued interest in her fiction. However, as Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. contends, it "is possible…to view the narrator of the 'Artificial

Nigger'…as a close embodiment of the authorial perspective that is merely implicit in other works" (*The Art & Vision of Flannery O'Connor* 81). While Brinkmeyer's statements are rather sweeping, they do seem to ring true as regards the end of the story. O'Connor's break in narrative strategy affords us a unique glimpse into the relationship between responsibility and ecstasy.

Mr. Head's epiphanic bliss is developed through his experience of *mercy*, more particularly God's mercy and His forgiveness of sin, Mr. Head's betrayal of his grandson. However, before Mr. Head can experience God's mercy, and before his relationship with his God is rectified, his relationship with his grandson must be reconciled. Mercy is first used to describe the rectification of man's relationship to man, since when the pair stands in front of the false figure, Mr. Head and Nelson "could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (269). Only later, in the story's penultimate paragraph, are we told, "Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again." This is what eventually leads to Mr. Head feeling "ready at that instant to enter Paradise."

Mercy is the theological force that repairs the relationship between God and man; in this story, mercy eventually opens the door for the repairing of the relationship between Mr. Head and God. Importantly, mercy is not earned or deserved; it is granted gratuitously. There is an asymmetry in the relationship between God's mercy and man's action, just as there an asymmetry in an individual's relationship to the other in Levinas's ethics. Mercy is God's asymmetrical response to His responsibility for man. The chronology of events in the "The Artificial Nigger"—their cause-and-effect relationship—is essential to the story's exploration of mercy, responsibility, and bliss.

Mr. Head's relationship to God cannot be repaired or even examined prior to his repairing of his relationship with Nelson; and this cannot happen prior to an admitted responsibility for the plight of black America, a complete reversal from the beginning of the story's overt racism. Once this is acknowledged and accepted—through the symbolic mediation of the plaster figure—the grandfather and grandson's relationship can be resolved; and only then can Mr. Head's relationship with his God be resolved. In a Levinasian sense, Mr. Head is not an individual: he is an individual-in-relationship; and only once his temporal relationships are in order can his relationship with God be put in order. This ordering happens through the action of grace.

Prior to his experience of bliss, Mr. Head's pride must be "covered" and "consumed"—this happens simultaneously through his recognition of his sinfulness and through the mercy that forgives this sinfulness: "He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it" (269, 270). Pride is not only self-love or a sense of self-satisfaction; pride, as a focus on self, is a rejection of man's relational nature. It is in this way that pride is the worst or most primal of the theological sins: it is a skewing of reality as it is, an attempt to gain individual pleasure or satisfaction. Mr. Head's comical pride at the start of the story becomes more serious and problematic in this light. However, when Mr. Head's pride is consumed, he can see his being-in-relationship with Nelson, which carries with it his responsibility for the child. With this primary relationship in order, Mr. Head can see his being-in-relationship with the rest of mankind, which leads to his hyperbolic but theologically significant statements about claiming all of humanity's sin: "He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his

own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no Sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own" (270). There is no logical explanation for this claiming of sins, but the ethics Mr. Head is encountering is not based on philosophical syllogisms; it is based on phenomenological experience. Once his relationship with humanity is in order, Mr. Head can see his being-in-relationship with God, which carries with it, not God's sense of disappointment and his judgment, but God's asymmetrical responsibility toward Mr. Head, expressed through his mercy.

When all three of these sets of relationships—Mr. Head and Nelson, mankind, and God—are in order, Mr. Head is given a momentary glimpse of the profound beauty of accepting reality as it is. This is experienced and expressed through the human emotion of joy, even if it is a deeper and more intense experience. We are told that Mr. Head "felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (270). Paradise here is the space of both unutterable ecstasy and the experience of all relationships being in order. Nowhere else in O'Connor's fiction (and perhaps no where else in her non-fiction) is she as explicit about the ultimate effect of accepting responsibility for the other. In short, the effect is an experience of Paradise. What Levinas relegates to religion O'Connor accomplishes through literature: a consolation of the hard but beautiful truth of man's relational nature and the responsibility we all bear to be our brothers' keepers.

A Conclusion

There is a second important way in which the ethics of Levinas can be applied to literature in general and Flannery O'Connor's fiction in particular. This concerns the face-to-face encounter between *reader* and other, and the ethical responsibility the reader experiences. Levinas used the term *discourse* in place of face throughout his ethics; he explained this conflation by comparing the two: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse" (*Ethics and Infinity* 87). In this way, reading literature has the possibility of exposing the reader through written discourse to an encounter with the other. This experience can happen on two levels. First, a reader can encounter a responsibility toward fictional characters; through an effectual emotional, imaginative, and intellectual response, a reader can accept his responsibility to the characters, proper to their existence as creative extensions of the artist. Second, a reader can encounter a responsibility toward people the fictional characters point to, symbolically or by suggestion, in real life. Often this encounter of responsibility is either shallow or simply not present in storytelling, since we are asked to sympathize or empathize with characters who are likeable, characters who, on some level, are *like* us—or at least like what we perceive ourselves to be. We are also asked to dislike characters easily disliked, as they represent people or ideas we find disagreeable. But, in Levinasian terms, this is not an encounter with the other, and it does not promulgate responsibility, only self-love.

But in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the process is not so simple. One of the hallmarks of O'Connor's stories is that readers are presented with dislikeable

protagonists, characters eerily similar to persons we encounter in the real world. The characters are recognizable but definitively other. O'Connor does not present these characters simply in order for us to laugh at or mock; in fact, readers may become uncomfortably aware that they are being asked to *love* every character. The challenge and opportunity of O'Connor's fiction is to learn how to love the fictional characters, and through them to love the similarly disagreeable, or even despicable, persons we meet in real life.

O'Connor's characters, even when exaggerated, map easily onto an array of real life persons. We recognize immediately the hypocritical and busybody relative in the grandmother from "A Good Man is Hard to Find"; the conceited rudeness of the intellectual in Hulga from "Good Country People"; the naïve and bratty child in Asbury from "The Enduring Chill." We understand the figure of the feared immigrant in the Guizacs from "The Displaced Person" and the criminal in The Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find." We might find it easy to laugh at these characters by skimming the surface of the fiction, but a more intent reading exposes us to the opportunity and difficulty of loving them—and, by extension, the opportunity and difficulty of loving the persons they suggest in real life. This is exactly what the fiction both asks of and allows us to do. The stories offer us the privilege to learn to love the marginalized of fiction and society, those we find ways to distance ourselves from: in other words, the other. The fiction does not do this through finger-wagging or didactic moralizing; instead, the attentive reader finds himself empathetically immersed in the world of the characters, with all their foibles, idiosyncrasies, and tribulations. Engaging O'Connor's fiction is, in part, the process of learning to love.

In one of the fiction's most brilliant but chilling lines, The Misfit, in response to the grandmother's declaration of his name, says that "it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (127). The Misfit's line is directed at us too, as readers. In one sense, it would have been better if we "hadn't of reckernized" who he signifies in real life, because now, like the grandmother, we are bound to encounter our responsibility to him. Perhaps it would be better if we "hadn't of reckernized" the grandmothers in our lives, the Asburys, the Hulgas, and the Guizacs. The experience of responsibility can be perceived as a burden, a burden we might well have ignored. But perhaps as the grandmother finally realizes, and The Misfit cannot understand—perhaps our recognition of Flannery O'Connor's characters in our real lives, even if hard and complex, is ultimately liberating, even ecstatic. Perhaps when we accept our nonreciprocal responsibility to them, we can say, like Mr. Head, that "no sin" is "too monstrous" for us to claim as our own, but that we simultaneously feel "ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (270).

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