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### Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Justice

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Matthew Holland Bryant Cheney entitled "Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Justice." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Thomas F. Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen R. Dunn, William J. Hardwig, Katherine T. Chiles

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Justice

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Matthew Holland Bryant Cheney  
May 2013

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the memory of Irma Secoy Kleebe Young, who was born on the same year as Flannery O'Connor and showed me how to recognize the character of love.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First, I want to thank my family, all of whom have been extremely supportive throughout this entire process. This project absolutely would not have been completed without the caring yet motivating guidance of Tom Haddox and input from the rest of my encouraging and challenging committee, Bill Hardwig, Katy Chiles, and Allen Dunn. I also appreciate the comradery of my fellow graduate students in the UTK English Department. Above all, I want to thank my wife Ashley, who issued tolerance and love during so many busy weeks and late nights and unrestful weekends.

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study will be to begin to answer the question, “What is ‘justice’ in the work of Flannery O’Connor?” by approaching three stories—“The Comforts of Home,” “The Partridge Festival,” and finally “Everything that Rises Must Converge.” Each of these stories applies pressure to both individual and social conceptions of justice while fixating primarily on individuals’ just or unjust convictions and principles, usually in tension with those of their family or community. Flannery O’Connor’s work, while it seriously questions the possibility of “perfect” justice among a fallen humanity, exemplifies the paradoxes that arise from the contingency of our conceptions of justice based on her characters’ orientation to human conflict and suffering. My central claim will be that justice, in O’Connor’s work, is always preceded by a love ethic that transcends political realities and familial dysfunction, and because of this, political and governmental arbiters of justice are unable to achieve it completely.

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## INTRODUCTION: ON THE JUSTICE OF LARGE AND STARTLING FIGURES

For an ideal appealed to so fundamentally and fervently by most people, justice is paradoxically defined most notably by its absence, when it has been withheld or evaded. In “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundations of Authority,’” Jacques Derrida makes the distinction between law and justice by saying, “Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice” and “It is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), *there is justice*” (15). Although language, for Derrida, is slippery and bereft of essential meaning, always already caught in the process of signification and difference/deferral, “justice” stands apart from all other signs. It is impossible and possible at the same time. In a word championed by Flannery O’Connor, justice is a *mystery*.

For those who take seriously the fact that O’Connor was a devout Catholic, it may be tempting to see the notion of justice as already settled in the work of the Southern writer. Buttressed by divine command theoreticians from Plato (in the *Euthyphro*) to Robert Adams and Nicholas Wolterstorff, justice would refer exclusively to God’s justice, and all humanity would suffer in sin until submitting to God, rather than country or ideology, as the ultimate arbiter and source of justice. Yet, while we know from remembrances of friends and her published correspondence how seriously Flannery O’Connor approached her orthodoxy, her stories continually reject an easy ascription of moral or political principle. This is, of course, not to say that her work undermines her

stated mission to depict “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (*Mystery and Manners* 118), but it does complicate any attempt to claim her stories as overtly didactic parables or fables, as others have argued convincingly.<sup>1</sup> Characters who do bad things often go unpunished, any remotely likable character—however precious few they are—is likely to go bad by the end, and the least likable characters often demand a second look from the reader. Those who may appear to require sympathy reject it from well-meaning characters, those whom we feel deserve to die leave us reconsidering judgment upon their grotesque passing, and the civil embodiments of “law and order” are often the least just of all. “Outside or beyond the law,” as Derrida put it, Flannery O’Connor’s work violently and paradoxically explores the mystery of justice.

The purpose of this study will be to begin to answer the question, “What is ‘justice’ in the work of Flannery O’Connor?” by approaching three stories—“The Comforts of Home,” “The Partridge Festival,” and finally “Everything that Rises Must Converge.” Each of these stories applies pressure to both individual and social conceptions of justice while fixating primarily on individuals’ just or unjust convictions and principles, usually in tension with those of their family or community. Flannery O’Connor’s work, while it seriously questions the possibility of “perfect” justice among a

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<sup>1</sup> This includes John R. May, in his early study *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor* (Notre Dame Press, 1976), as well as Joyce Carol Oates, who, defining the “parable” somewhat differently, writes in *New Heaven, New Earth*, “Not meant to be realistic or naturalistic, [O’Connor’s] fiction should be read as a series of parables. Like the metaphysical poets, especially T. S. Eliot, she yokes together sacred and secular images by violence; it is the artistic arrangement of these images, in themselves grotesque, that leads to the construction of a vision that is not grotesque but harshly and defiantly spiritual” (145).

fallen humanity, exemplifies the paradoxes that arise from the contingency of our conceptions of justice based on her characters' orientation to human conflict and suffering. My central claim will be that justice, in O'Connor's work, is always preceded by a love ethic that transcends political realities and familial dysfunction, and because of this, political and governmental arbiters of justice are unable to achieve it completely. Before proceeding to the stories, I will situate this initial claim by clarifying my own definitions of the two words "justice" and "love," among the most debated words in the English language, then briefly introduce, and begin to answer the question, "How does talking about 'justice' help us understand the work of Flannery O'Connor?"

### **Justice and Love**

Perhaps nothing demonstrates justice's linguistic purchase more than the some twenty entries for the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The two primary headings for these demarcations address morality or "rightness," "the quality of being just," and the establishment and administration of law and civic authority, "Judicial administration of law and equity" (*OED*). For clarity, we often combine the word with a marker that refines its meaning and produces a hierarchy of terms: criminal justice, racial justice, retributive justice, distributive justice, representational justice, social justice, economic justice, environmental justice, transitional justice, or even poetic justice. Largely due to the contractarian, distributive principles put forth comprehensively by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* and the constant application and interpretation of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, the American conversation surrounding "justice" has largely involved rights-based conceptions concerned with what an individual citizen should, or should not, have the right to do or possess in a just society. Morality has sometimes been viewed as

tangential to this conversation of rights, some citing legislative failures as far reaching as prohibition and censorship. Yet despite attempts to reduce justice to the democratic process, moral considerations have a way of creeping into laws that have largely not been viewed as mistakes—murder comes to mind. An example of this involvement of morality recently would include the evolving notion of “hate crimes,” in which civic entities are even considering to what extent it is just to punish an individual’s motivations as well as their actions.

To borrow Edward Said’s term, I find a *contrapuntal* approach productive in reading political and moral concerns in these selections from O’Connor’s work. Philosophical theories of justice often carry with them principles and imperatives we see as moral while ultimately justified by their feasibility in social application. In *Frontiers of Justice*, Martha Nussbaum criticizes a basic assumption of the social contract tradition in terms of morality by saying, “The social contract tradition has one big advantage over the approach to basic justice I have just defended. Namely, it does not require human benevolence. It derives political principles from the idea of mutual advantage, without assuming that human beings have deep and motivationally powerful ties to others” (408). A key assumption I carry into this study of Flannery O’Connor is that, in fact, justice carries with it a teleological goal that relates to greater society and the establishment of just governance, but at the root of these principles we see also the moral motivations. The “benevolence” Nussbaum mentions here has to do, I feel, with a person’s capacity to love another person, which decidedly has more to do with morality than politics. My operating definition of justice, informed by all of these concerns, follows from the capabilities approach espoused most notably by Nussbaum and Amartya Sen: justice is

the situation in which individuals are afforded the opportunity to lead their life in a manner that allows them to achieve their own potential relative to their individual (cap)abilities, the degree to which they are allowed to lead the good life. This, of course, extends socially when we observe the phenomenon of a group that, following from some arbitrary characteristic as race or nationality, is limited in its pursuit of the good life. However, while I invoke Aristotle's *telos* for political process here in "the good life," I want to make a key distinction between his characterization of the good life and the vision I see operating in O'Connor's work. This has to do implicitly with one's commitment to a virtue of charity-love that is characterized differently from Aristotle's love by its involvement in the establishment of justice, as opposed to "happiness" or "pleasure." Cornel West, a figure who takes head-on the dual discussion of morality and politics, has famously defined justice as "what love looks like in public," and broadly, I think this reflects the Christian relationship between love and justice that I hold in reading O'Connor's stories. Yet, if we have taken up the impossible task of defining justice, and connected that ideal with "love," that will also raise the question of which love O'Connor claims as the basis of justice.

Each of the stories in this study concerns the idea of charity in some manifestation, and charity emerges as the predominant action of love. In "The Comforts of Home," Thomas's mother provides assistance to a young woman who has been in prison. In "The Partridge Festival," a young writer named Calhoun investigates a recent murder in an attempt to show the accused man, Singleton's, innocence in an exposé, which the writer sees as a charity project toward the murderer he labels a victim of "tribal" community governance. In "Everything that Rises Must Converge," the most

complex of the three, we see two events gesturing toward and against an ideal of charity: Julian's criticizing his mother's sense of charity with his ill-conceived project of just recognition and Mrs. Chestny's charitable offering of a penny to an African-American boy, which provokes the child's mother to violence against Julian's mother. In the Christian Bible, the translation of "charity" or "love" denotes the Greek word *agape*, perhaps characterized most completely in scripture by the Apostle Paul in the thirteenth chapter of the first letter to the church in Corinth: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love I am nothing" (*New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*). Stemming from Paul's claims here, St. Thomas Aquinas, also notably reworking Aristotle's notion of the virtues<sup>2</sup>, assigns charity as one of the three theological virtues along with faith and hope. Aquinas's treatment of the theological virtues reinforce his claim that humanity has a "natural inclination" to what he calls "supernatural happiness":

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's hierarchy of the virtues were split into those of "thought" and those of "character." Love, Aristotle's *philia* specifically, does not exactly amount to a virtue of thought or character, but exists in some other scope entirely. *Philia* may refer to the family in many cases, but Aristotle also assigns it to his notion of "friendship," which he defines as "reciprocated goodwill" (131). Rather than cultivating character or thought in a person, *philia* is primarily directed toward a reciprocal relationship ultimately concerned with the achievement of pleasure, and persons knowingly enter into friendship (and maintain familial ties) primarily as a means to achieve pleasure, or happiness. Happiness, to Aristotle, is one of the virtues of character, but the action of love, in this sense, is still more consciously self-interested than the *agape* love put forth by Paul and Aquinas.

First, certain supernatural principles are added to man's intellect which are received by divine light and these are the objects of belief with which *faith* is concerned. Second, the will is directed to its supernatural end...and this pertains to *hope*, and as to a certain spiritual union which transforms the will to that end—and this takes place through *charity*. (43)

So *agape*-charity in the Christian sense, and I would argue O'Connor's, emerges as both the quality of someone who expresses love toward others *and* who strives toward spiritual union with God. The ethical demands of *agape* may germinate outside of a Christian context—arguably, Nussbaum's "benevolence" does—but in the sense evidenced in O'Connor's stories, I will adopt Aquinas's and Paul's definitions as operational. This foregrounding of love is essential to Christianity in a way radically opposed to other traditions, Aristotle's for example. My analysis will focus more on the stories themselves rather than proof texting a combination of O'Connor's letters and essays as rubrics for reading the stories, but the fact remains that I do find the author's Christian commitment consistent with the action of charity, or lack thereof, in her stories. O'Connor's virtues are those of Aquinas and not Aristotle, and reading ethical investment in her narrative will inevitably raise some of the vexing tensions between these competing conceptions of what it means, really, to be and do "good."

Particularly in the first chapter regarding "The Comforts of Home," I will discuss in more detail how the virtues relate to the action of charity, but even further, each of the stories also shows the tensions between love for one's family (*philia*) and the charity-love (*agape*) I have just described that is directed both within and outside the family. One of the central tensions in understanding the ideals of justice in these stories has also to do

with the motivations stemming from a love ethic for one's family competing with the demands of society more generally, the *polis*, and by depicting those tensions as they play out in family relationships, O'Connor dramatizes remarkably the competing demands and allegiances between family and community.

### **O'Connor and Justice**

From reading her use of the word in the sense I have outlined above, it would seem that Flannery O'Connor was not all that interested in justice. Toward the push from Catholic presses for novelists to focus on the church's role in social justice, for instance, she expresses a marked disdain:

I came upon this typical sentence [in the Catholic press]: 'Why not a positive novel based on the Church's fight for social justice, or the liturgical revival, or life in a seminary?' ...A lot of novels do get written this way. It is, in fact, the traditional procedure of the hack, and by some accident of God, such a novel might turn out to be a work of art, but the possibility is unlikely. (*Mystery & Manners* 195)

It seems that social justice, as a novel's primary topic anyway, ranks among the subject matter that O'Connor sees as most likely amounting to "hack" work, but her claim here does not abhor "social justice" itself but "a *positive novel* based on the Church's fight for social justice." This reflects a further disdain for the idea of topical writing O'Connor expresses elsewhere in her letters, especially relative to the most prevalent social justice movement of her time, the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps the most often quoted letter to this end was written to Betty Hester in response to Eudora Welty's publication of "Where is the Voice Coming From?" a story published in *The New Yorker* just three



weeks after the murder of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers that depicts the psychological turmoil and hatred of his killer. Echoing her sentiment in the passage about the topical, O'Connor writes, "It's the kind of story that the more you think about it the less satisfactory it gets. What I hate most is its being in the *New Yorker* and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty South. The topical is poison. I got away with it in 'Everything that Rises Must Converge' but only because I say a plague on everybody's house as far as the race business goes" (537). I will take up "Everything that Rises Must Converge" in the third chapter, avoiding for the moment the oft-quoted "plague on everybody's house" line, but her caricature of the "stupid Yankee liberals" also points to a sense of "doing justice" in which O'Connor had definite commitments and perhaps just as many critics—in short, a concern with "representational justice."

In the introduction to his volume on O'Connor, Harold Bloom claims that the only thing preventing *The Violent Bear It Away* from ranking alongside Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* as the greatest American novels of the 20th Century is her "aesthetically disastrous" characterization of Rayber, one of O'Connor's noted intellectual characters who rejects the country sensibilities and religious fervor of his extended family. Bloom writes, "O'Connor despises Rayber and cannot bother to make him even minimally persuasive" (2). This critique, however grandiose in its framing, underscores the question of narrative judgment in relation to the grotesque form to which O'Connor was so committed. She writes in "The Fiction Writer & His Country," "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume

that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (*Mystery and Manners* 34). Having heard more secular scholars echo Bloom’s frustration with O’Connor’s intellectual caricatures, I can understand the distaste with being “shouted at” and painted as a “large and startling figure,” and perhaps the response is indicative of a failure in that project to reach the “hard of hearing” and the “almost-blind.” Admittedly, the intellectual characters—Rayber especially—tend to be flat to the extent that they lampoon both the character *and* the intellectual commitments. These might be seen as obvious straw men, and if these stories make direct arguments against these characters’ claims of justice in particular, then their flatness can be seen as a failure to accurately represent these characters’ philosophical correspondents in real life. It is a problem of representation. Yet while these accusations of representational injustice could be made by perhaps every category of person in her stories—and I know the intellectual characters’ flatness has a particular bearing on my analysis—the implicit claim that O’Connor’s work aspires to realism discounts the liminal space her work occupies between the allegorical and the “real.” At the expense of realism, O’Connor was more interested in the stark effect of her characters than in their easy correspondence to clearly discernable human events.

In addition to Bloom’s critique, O’Connor’s characteristic use of “shock” and “shouting” to reach an audience of different beliefs has been further construed as an immoral, perhaps even unjust, representation of humanity. In his now classic 1962 essay, “Flannery O’Connor’s Devil,” postmodern novelist John Hawkes acknowledges and commends his Southern contemporary’s use of the grotesque in her work but questions

the severity of its judgment: “in the most vigorously moral of writers the actual creation of fiction seems often to depend on immoral impulse” (398). Hawkes describes this “immoral impulse,” which he sees as shared with Nathanael West, as the “demolishing syntax of the devil,” sadistically painting a distorted picture of reality that issues a judgment that may, given the moral position of the author, circumvent any moral implications in O’Connor’s stories. Hawkes’s essay still proves absolutely fascinating in its exploration of O’Connor’s literary parentage in Hawthorne and West, and O’Connor herself continued a fruitful correspondence with her fellow writer and expressed her appreciation for, and even encouraged, his critique of her work.<sup>3</sup> However, the question that inevitably arises from these claims of representational injustice is whether Flannery O’Connor depicts at least *some* aspect of human reality in her harsh stories or not. This amounts, really, to an indictment of the author as being perhaps malicious in her judgments, meaning she intentionally saw corresponding figures in the real world and sought to write characters that would shame and lambast those figures at her whim. I have already made the distinction between O’Connor’s sense of *reality* and a commitment to *realism*, and I wonder if part of the disconnect has to do with a perception of the author’s intentions. One might ask, “What right does *she* have to judge characters, who perhaps correspond to real people, in this way?” Working from this demand of authorial intent, one could, and should, also ask if intentions really matter in the judgment of an “immoral impulse” more than what we see on the page. For instance, if O’Connor did, in

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<sup>3</sup> Much of O’Connor’s letters to Hawkes are included in *The Habit of Being* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux; 1979) pp. 343, 359, 367, 399, 415, 443, 455, 470, 500, 537, 541, 548, and 553.

fact, make errors in representation, was it done intentionally (maliciously) or in good faith (honestly) toward the honest goal of portraying, as she says, “the action of grace”? If love matters in these stories, as I think it does, how do we reconcile the commitment to a grotesque, violent picture of reality that appears decidedly *unloving*, as Hawkes has pointed out?

I would argue that O’Connor’s narrative severity, rather than being immoral in itself, dramatizes a ratcheting-up of the human tendency to make immoral choices, whether one subscribes to the author’s belief in the doctrine of original sin or not. The problem of love and justice in these stories is difficult precisely because the *agape* imperative proves far more challenging than the use value emphasis of *philia* in the cultivation of human relationships or in the democratic process as an entirely satisfactory arbiter of “perfect justice.” It is decidedly riskier to engage with the suffering of the “large and startling figures,” which for O’Connor include those figures that happen to be members of one’s own family. By exploring the action of justice in O’Connor’s work, I hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion of how to characterize the violent writer’s harsh vision of reality by seeing if in the absence of “perfect justice,” we are able to discern the shape of the gap it leaves.

While numerous scholars have mentioned justice in passing during the rich half a century of writing on Flannery O’Connor’s work, at least three pieces have taken the ideal as a topic worthy of direct treatment. In *Before the Sun Has Set: Retribution in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor*, John Lawrence Darretta sees “justice,” exclusively retributive justice in his study, as the force driving O’Connor’s characters toward a “divine intervention” or “revelation”: “justice is initiated in the outside; it comes in the

form of an insolent individual, a brutalizing event, or an unexpected situation, which forces wrongdoers toward the brink of a revelation that is to expose them to their own malignant faults” (130). Certainly the redemptive action of violence in O’Connor’s stories has been a topic of valuable and ongoing discussion<sup>4</sup>, and Darretta’s labeling the actions of many characters as retributive, and even just, typifies violence in O’Connor’s work as dealt primarily to those who deserve it. Even so, I take issue with this notion of retributive desert, because I do not see the violence done to characters who are not, as it were, “wrongdoers” as just retribution; Mary Fortune from “A View of the Woods” and Mr. Guizac from “The Displaced Person” come to mind as Christological figures who face violent retribution as a result of the wrongdoings of those around them. However, the related question of the nature of guilt and innocence in O’Connor’s work does not often prove as easy to discern as to who “deserves” to suffer violence, but these are important questions that will have to be addressed for a discussion of moral and political justice in these stories.

In *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love*, Richard Giannone repeatedly connects his discussion of love to the ideal of justice, particularly in his section on the story “Revelation.” As I have also argued, Giannone sees the pairing of Christian love with O’Connor’s violent stories as revealing the true difficulty of *agape*, as he writes,

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<sup>4</sup>Recently, the conversation on O’Connor’s violence has taken shape most notably in the essays collected in *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism* (Eds. Hewitt and Donahoo, UTK Press, 2010), Gary M. Ciuba’s *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction* (LSU Press, 2011), and Susan Srigley’s edited collection *Dark Faith: New Essays on The Violent Bear it Away* (Notre Dame Press, 2012).

“Openness to suffering takes the narrative beyond the issue of human justice and transports the character beyond passive belief or unbelief to the sacramental foundation of faith. In its numerous and disturbing forms, the coupling of love with severity and hardship marks the mature nature of O'Connor's Christianity” (XV). Giannone approaches Ruby Turpin from “Revelation” as morally deficient in her characterization of justice because it flows from a commitment to “respect for other people’s rights to things and feelings” as opposed to “the law of love” (217). Whereas Niebuhr and Aquinas helped formulate the relationship of love to justice theoretically, Giannone’s application of love and justice has been very helpful in situating my claims within a comprehensive understanding of O’Connor’s work. However, where Giannone describes O’Connor’s ascription of theological love and suffering as ultimately “beyond the issue of human justice,” I see the reverse operating with love *contributing* to a sense of justice, admittedly in the virtue ethic tradition, that relates to O’Connor’s characters both morally and politically.

The most influential work on my claims of O’Connor and justice is the relatively unnoticed essay by political scientist and theorist John Roos, “Flannery O’Connor and the Limits of Justice.” Like Giannone, Roos’s discussion of O’Connor and justice takes “Revelation” as its focus and compares the ethical questions raised in the story to the book of *Job* in the Hebrew Bible and Plato’s allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. Calling Aquinas “O’Connor’s mentor,” Roos deftly articulates the relationship between principle and actions in terms of the philosophical exploration of “the soul” in light of political jurisdiction. While Roos discusses “Revelation” and Ruby Turpin with the methodology of formal close reading, his larger goal is to discern a consistent approach

to politics from O'Connor's work that adequately acknowledges her Christian faith in conversation with, rather than always already defiant towards, the western philosophical tradition. While Roos does not introduce a love ethic to his considerations, he maintains that O'Connor's work questions the totality of philosophical principle effectively:

"O'Connor attempts in her art to articulate a vision of the whole that avoids a Gnosticism that sees all materiality as dark and evil. She also claims...that philosophic knowledge never escapes sensual mediation and the particularity and partiality of the particular subject. Hence, she would reject the claim of any comprehensive, systematic philosophy of politics" (163). The "limits of justice" for Roos involve this sense that political systems are unable to exact the sort of complete justice that would have satisfied O'Connor, and while I see evidence of a productive and necessary role for political processes of justice in two of the three stories I will explore, I agree that O'Connor's depictions of civic justice are never complete.

At the outset of this introduction, I suggested that justice is most easily defined by the presence of *injustice*, and as Flannery O'Connor, perhaps with the exception of Ruby's vision in "Revelation," does not offer a picture of a just world in any of her stories, we will have to find the imperative for justice in the ethical shortcomings of those who falsely claim it as principle: Thomas, Calhoun, and Julian. But injustice in these stories can also be found outside the liberal conceptions of O'Connor's intellectuals, whose moral failings have been a minor critical industry these last five decades. Simply because Flannery O'Connor's work seriously questions the legitimacy and power of politics does not mean that her stories are not relevant to the enactment of judicial governance. As we will see particularly with "The Partridge Festival" and "Everything

that Rises Must Converge,” there are good and just reasons both for Singleton’s incarceration and for the immediate integration of buses in mid-century Georgia, despite the law’s inability to nullify the tragic and dysfunctional human relationships caught up in each of those depictions. In his essay “Everything that Rises Does Not Converge: The State of O’Connor Studies,” Robert Donahoo calls for “an increasing awareness of the mystery in [O’Connor’s] work and a generative, rather than mummifying, impulse” (250). It is my hope that by contrapuntally discussing moral and political imperatives in these three stories, and O’Connor’s work more broadly, we can perhaps see more interaction between the varying commitments to literary theory, Southern culture, theology, and Post-WWII American Literature that Donahoo claims have not sufficiently “converged.”

In Chapter One, “‘Daredevil Charity,’ the Family, and Unjust Order: ‘The Comforts of Home,’” I approach the story espousing my overarching claim of justice as flowing from a charity-love rather than the “order” appealed to by Thomas paradoxically from a standpoint of virtue. The story depicts a change in family dynamics with the death of Thomas’s father and his mother’s new interest in helping a formerly incarcerated young woman, which violently underscores the tensions in demands between the family and the *polis* in responding to human suffering. Chapter Two, “Collective Guilt and Justice as Farce: ‘The Partridge Festival,’” is concerned with the notion of community guilt in tension with the demands of nonconformity, especially the project of nonconformity toward his family enacted by Calhoun, one of O’Connor’s aspiring male writers in his early twenties. I will examine the different appeals to justice placed both by the town of Partridge and Calhoun, who attempts to show that a mentally ill killer of



six town festival organizers, Singleton, has been dealt with unjustly as a scapegoat for the town's sins. Ultimately, I hope to show that the story reinforces the claim that love must come before justice, but the story, more complexly than "The Comforts of Home," does offer a picture of the necessity of civic justice that particularly raises the role of conformity in adhering to a system of justice. In Chapter Three, "Transitional Justice and Retributive Recognition: 'Everything that Rises Must Converge,'" I discuss the role of recognition and retribution in the story as framed by the emerging field of Transitional Justice. I claim that Julian's appeals to "premises" and "principle" in practice amount to a weak attempt on his part to provide just recognition to the African Americans on the bus through an unwarranted project of sympathy-giving that manages to fall short of substantive recognition both morally and politically. The death of Mrs. Chestny in the end, I argue, further raises questions about the limits and motivations for retribution in light of an individual's expression of prejudice in response to past political injustice. This study will conclude with a brief "Coda," in which I raise a few lingering implications that may not have complete answers but require consideration nonetheless. Building on the question posed at the beginning of this introduction—"How does talking about 'justice' help us understand the work of Flannery O'Connor?"—the "Coda" will begin to answer its inverse—"How does Flannery O'Connor help us understand justice?"

## CHAPTER I 'DAREDEVIL CHARITY,' THE FAMILY, AND ORDER: "THE COMFORTS OF HOME"

*"In so far as justice admits the claims of the self, it is something less than love. Yet it cannot exist without love and remain justice. For without the 'grace' of love, justice always degenerates into something less than justice." – Reinhold Niebuhr*

Even if the title itself does not find much play in O'Connor scholarship, "The Comforts of Home" uses a familiar storyline in the Southern writer's catalog: an intellectual lives at home alone with his mother and the juxtaposition of down-home, trite common sense and rational abstraction produces awkwardness and tension between the two characters as they spiral toward a tragic, grotesque end. As in "Good Country People," "The Enduring Chill," and "Everything that Rises Must Converge," the intellectual progeny has it in mind to instruct the widowed mother's ways from traditional backwardness to modern forwardness. "The Comforts of Home" is no different in this respect, and when Thomas, this story's intellectual son, enacts his campaign of disapproval against his mother's decision to take a troubled young woman under her care, the battle is just as ideological as it is familial. Thomas, while he is literally going against his mother's plans, is simultaneously judging the entire endeavor of charity itself as only worthy insofar as it achieves order. However, the mother's relationship with Sarah Ham, aka "Star Drake," complicates the nature of charity-love by showing that it characteristically brings *disorder* and, in keeping with the title, *discomfort*. Because arguably the most prevalent sticking point in our debates about the character of justice is the dichotomy of means and ends, I begin this study by considering a story that vividly dramatizes the tension between a motivating commitment to charity

and the end ideal of order. “The Comforts of Home” ultimately demonstrates that justice is for O’Connor, in fact, *not* order by raising questions about the role of virtue in human relationships, both civic and familial. Thomas’s appeals to order are ultimately foregrounded by an approach to virtue that ignores a love ethic and mistakes the “comforts of home” for the civic ideal of order, concerned more with the lack of conflict than inculcating love among citizens. The good life in O’Connor’s work is neither the Kantian ability for a person to become autonomous nor entirely one’s movement toward an Aristotelian *telos*. O’Connor’s depiction of the good life, or tragic lack thereof, involves one’s ability to love another person. The horrific and grotesque action of her stories, including “The Comforts of Home,” are horrific and grotesque not only in their violence and their shrewdness; these stories also show individuals who, by circumstance or agency, are unable to offer charity-love toward another being. By considering the claims of charity-love from the mother and examining Thomas’s self-interested notion of virtue, I will argue that “The Comforts of Home” offers a glimpse into the demands and difficulties of acknowledging human suffering in light of competing ideals of familial comfort and civic order. In doing so, we begin to see the relationship of love to justice that helps us begin to articulate the relationship between morality and politics, a duality that has more often than not been seen as unrelated in O’Connor’s stories.

The central tension in the story comes when the mother, whose name O’Connor does not give us, reads about a young woman, Sarah Ham (alias Star Drake), in the paper who is in jail. The mother decides, after having a brief conversation with Star/Sarah and offering a box of candy as she did in her other previous “charity cases,” to arrange housing for the girl, help her find steady work, and offer the stability of family. The

concern of justice enters this situation in that the mother's motivation for reaching out to Sarah/Star in the first place is in reaction to a perceived injustice having been done to the young woman. With this in mind, the mother's acts of charity toward Sarah/Star can be read as an attempt to remedy this injustice. However, the extent of this injustice does not only rest in our reading of Sarah/Star's past. For the mother, the issue is a lack of access to home. After the woman is kicked out of her temporary housing for coming home drunk, Thomas urges his mother to take her to the jail, and the mother answers, "She doesn't need a jail or a hotel or a hospital...she needs a home" (130). Thomas, of course, expresses the real character of his position in his response: "She does not need mine" (130). I will visit Thomas's approach to the situation, the primary object of judgment in O'Connor's story, in detail later, but it is first prudent to consider the nature of Sarah/Star and whether she deserves the mother's charity as a victim of injustice or exists as some social free-loader, gaming the system for her own advantage.

If the driving conflict in the story is between Thomas and his mother, Sarah/Star catalyzes that conflict. Presumably, the home with Thomas and his mother was free of discomfort prior to her arrival, and the mother's decision to help Sarah/Star to this extent comes without precedent. The assumptions both Thomas and his mother make about the young woman completely determine their commitments in the ordeal. For Thomas, as refracted by O'Connor's characteristically distanced yet psychologically close narrator, we see from the very beginning that Star/Sarah is "the little slut" and a "moral moron...[born] without the moral faculty—like somebody else would be born without a kidney or a leg" (118). The mother invokes mercy for Sarah/Star's actions, claiming they are "something she can't help" or "just another way she's unfortunate...[she's a]

nimpermaniac” (117). The distinction here between these different characterizations lays not so much in the source of the woman’s dysfunction as its interpretation. The narrator, presumably conveying Thomas’s assessment from within, further colors the son’s judgment of Star/Sarah as uncontrollably bad:

He needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption, but blameless corruption because there was no responsible faculty behind it. He was looking at the most unendurable form of innocence. Absently he asked himself what the attitude of God was to this, meaning if possible to adopt it. (124)

Both the mother and Thomas see these issues as stemming from birth; the difference is one or the other’s prescription for dealing with the fact of this woman’s problems, from Thomas’s view, or suffering, from the mother’s view. However, despite this, the mother sees social institutions as augmenting Sarah/Star’s suffering rather than making it better, while Thomas dwells on the outward manifestations of the woman’s psychosis and what can be done to stop them, namely by ensuring she be put back in jail. The source of these issues matters in any attempt to read an imperative or indictment of justice in the story, and while both characters see Sarah/Star as having been born this way, what has transpired in the teenager’s life prior to the story also prompts Thomas’s and his mother’s reactions.

Star/Sarah’s experience in foster care and subsequent arrests have, whether by irritating her unfortunate predisposition or cultivating socially acquired deficiencies, resulted in her being psychologically unstable and unable to carry on a relationship with another human that involves neither some dramatic imposition nor sex. O’Connor,

however, complicates this scenario by making the reader trust the opinion of a lawyer, rather than the mother or Star herself, to assess this account:

The lawyer found that the story of the repeated atrocities was for the most part untrue, but when he explained to [the mother] that the girl was a psychopathic personality, not insane enough for the asylum, not criminal enough for the jail, nor stable enough for society, the mother was more deeply affected than ever. (121)

Like Rufus in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Star’s ethos is muddled by the confusion surrounding the origins of her condition; it is unclear whether we, as readers, are to believe that her circumstances made her this way or her nature or perhaps even “evil.” The 19-year-old former convict eventually admits that what she had initially said was untrue, but only because she is also a clinically compulsive liar made hopeless by therapists who had convinced her that “there was no hope for her” (121). We are forced to consider either the opinion of civic entities or motherly instinct as to whether Star/Sarah requires justice for having been wronged or punishment for doing wrong. Is Star/Sarah a victim or a perpetrator or both?

However one distinguishes Star/Sarah’s plight and background, we must clearly see that the mother’s decision to impart charity comes in response to a sense of injustice done to the girl, despite obvious risk to the mother’s and Thomas’s comfort. This decision reveals, I argue, an important assumption the mother carries into this situation. The true act of charity-love assumes the possibility of personal risk, or imposition at the least, on the part of the enactor. A key aspect of the mother’s charity-love lies in her appeal to Thomas along these lines, as she asks her adult son early in their debates, and

several other parts of the text, “suppose it were you?” (117). This question certainly has the potential to hit readers in different places, depending on their orientation to the author and/or their ethical commitments. For Christians, like Flannery O’Connor, this statement rings as a blatant appeal to the Christian Bible’s assertion of the Greatest Commandment, or at least the second part, “You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (*NRSV* Matthew 22:37-40, emphasis mine). The Christian idea of love, at least as espoused by Jesus in this passage, clearly emerges from a recognition of the “neighbor” as being just as worthy of love as one’s self, but the prerequisite for this self-love has to be that one, paradoxically, loves herself first. The Christian Greatest Commandment has also raised, and continues to raise, the question in orthopraxis of “Who is one’s neighbor?” Following from this explanation of love, one might see the central problem in “The Comforts of Home” as a disagreement among the characters as to who should be considered one’s primary neighbor, a family member or a woman who is clearly suffering, but this creates a false dichotomy in the assumption that *both* are not the proper answer to this question. I do not mean by this that O’Connor characterizes it as right to neglect one’s family at the expense of helping one outside the family, but certainly in this story we see Thomas’s appeal to his own needs as paling in comparison to those of Star/Sarah. The issue lies in the extent to which his “comforts” must be diminished in the process. Star/Sarah’s “neighborliness” in relation to Thomas and his mother, their obligation or imperative to help her, may also be determined by gender, and this lens has been explored most pervasively by others considering whether

or not Star/Sarah's gender has more to do with Thomas's self-interested virtue than the idea of charity.

Because it has received so little attention from scholars, I find it necessary to address how others have portrayed this act of "daredevil charity." The very few published discussions of Sarah/Star as a character, or even "The Comforts of Home" more generally, have characterized the woman's suffering as a result of her transgression from a normalized, gendered figure who, though she is victimized by patriarchy, refuses to maintain it passively. In *Revising Flannery O'Connor*, Katherine Hemple Prown underscores Star/Sarah as a distinctly feminine character oppressed by male dominance, in the form of both Thomas and of the social apparatuses to which she has found herself subjected. For Prown, Star/Sarah exists as the embodiment of the "frightening power of the female body" who eventually, through "sexual aggression" and her "unmediated sexual body," emasculates Thomas through her repeated advances (46-47). This assertion of a distinctly gendered power dynamic comes to full fruition when, according to Prown's reading, Thomas shoots Star/Sarah at the end of the story with "his fathers gun—the very symbol of phallic power—[assuring] that her body and with it her subjectivity will not simply be contained, but erased" (47). I certainly grant that gender plays an incredibly important role in this story by reinforcing Thomas's project of suppression, especially when one considers both the struggle with his father's voice in his head and his conversation with Sheriff Farebrother, who says, "[Your father]...never let anything grow underneath his feet. Particularly nothing a woman planted" (137). Despite this misogyny from the sheriff and the son's obvious complicity in these acts, Thomas ultimately responds negatively to Farebrother's tone regarding the women, as



evidenced by his reaction upon leaving the sheriff, who has just said, “Leave the latch off the door and keep out of my way—yourself and them two women too” (138). Fleeing the scene, Thomas expresses an affection for his mother distinctly tied to a disagreement with the degradation of her gender verbally: “The phrase, ‘them two women,’ stuck like a burr in [Thomas’s] brain—the subtlety of the insult to his mother hurting him more than any of Farebrother’s references to his own incompetence” (138). Sheriff Farebrother’s tone and diction here clearly bother Thomas specifically because they insult his mother, and “them two women” stings more than the attacks to his own masculinity because the insult both underscores the Sheriff’s lack of interest in the welfare of Thomas’s family and reflects his father’s previous ill treatment of the mother. If Thomas actively participates in the patriarchy, then that participation is reluctant at best.

I argue that Thomas acts on commitments not as closely related to gendered power dynamics as the most notable scholarship on this story contends. The question of love in the story works on a horizon more interested ultimately in the dichotomy between “family” and “society” than “male” and “female.” Thomas’s discontents have more to do with whether the imperative of neighborliness he owes Star/Sarah disrupts his appeals to order as the end of all virtue. However, this does not mean that gender does not indicate some aspect of Thomas’s dysfunction. I disagree with Prown’s reading more directly because of her outright misreading of the ending: Thomas shoots his mother, not Star/Sarah. The mother clearly leaps in front of the gun as Thomas fires, and, due to the narrator’s description of the end scene, we are offered a clearly-blocked assessment of the characters from the purview of Sheriff Farebrother, “[Thomas] had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl...Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to

collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew the nasty bit when he saw it" (142). This standing "slut" is not the mother. If in the story Thomas had actually killed Star/Sarah instead of his own mother, I would certainly be more likely to see this grotesque ending as a Cixousesque erasure of the aberrant female body, but he kills his mother, in whom the text indicates no Freudian libidinal investment, and in so doing rejects his mother's distinct project of love-based charity. Thomas describes his mother's endeavor clearly as "a mockery of virtue" rather than distinctly judging her charity as somehow inherently flawed because a woman carries it out—which contrasts with the deceased father who clearly saw charity as both weak and feminine.

Yet, the appeal to identification in the act of his mother's charity has at least something to do with gender, which may offer insight into Thomas's difficulty in adopting her position. Thomas's sexuality, I also agree, plays an important role in how we consider his process of rationalizing his course of action. After all, it proves even more difficult for Thomas to empathize with Sarah/Star because of her repeated sexual advances and flirtations, which include her appearing naked before him and assigning him the moniker "Tomesee." In contrast to Katherine Hemple Prown's focus on the female body of Star/Sarah, Marshall Bruce Gentry, also arguing for a certain primacy of sexed concerns in "The Comforts of Home," focuses more on the challenge to Thomas's sexually naïve masculinity. In "Gender Dialogue in O'Connor," Gentry deems Thomas's failure in the whole situation as the son "[botching] his consciously intended plans for incriminating a woman to demonstrate to himself how much he has in common with Sarah Ham and his mother" (66). For Gentry, this is in contrast with other male characters in O'Connor stories, such as Julian in "Everything that Rises Must Converge"

who “may ultimately fail because they finally reject the femaleness with which they engage in dialogue” (66). This rejection of “femaleness” on the part of other characters, I argue, has less to do with the process of identifying one’s own gender and more to do with the ability to identify with, or even love, another person at all, regardless of gender.

It would seem that in “The Comforts of Home” we actually see what I have labeled a distinctly Christian notion of charity in use explicitly without an appeal to divine command throughout the entire text. In O’Connor’s other stories with intellectuals living at home with their parents, the mother figures explicitly identify themselves as Christians who emphasize love and submission under God as crucial to what they see as being wrong with their grown children. Where Mrs. Hopewell wishes Joy/Hulga would marry a nice, simple man of God like Manley Pointer and Mrs. Fox wants Asbury to come to peace with God, even if it means allowing a papist into her home before the son’s impending death, Thomas’s mother simply wants him to recognize, or even love, Sarah Ham as himself. This does not have a textually explicit source in Christianity. Paradoxically, the most spiritually-oriented, although Gnostic, character in the text, aside from O’Connor herself as the implied author, is Thomas. In considering Star/Sarah during her first visit to the home, the narrator, after describing Thomas’s view of the 19-year-old as corrupt, shows the intellectual contemplating God’s character: “Absently Thomas asked himself what the attitude of God was to this, meaning if possible to adopt it” (124). With this passage, we see that Thomas at least believes in a God of some spiritual significance, or at least in the regulatory ideal implied by God, but other sections of the text complicate this tentative profession. If Thomas is a believer, he clearly tries to distance himself from the mystical aspects of religion. What he does believe in clearly,

and believes his mother to be naively denying, is the presence of evil in associating with suffering with the intention of love: “[The mother] proceeded always from the tritest of considerations—it was *the nice thing to do*—into the most foolhardy engagements with the devil, whom, of course, she never recognized” (118). The narrator goes on to clarify, “The devil for Thomas was only a manner of speaking but it was a manner appropriate to the situations his mother got into. Had she been any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil” (119). So O’Connor’s Thomas here evokes Aquinas’s intellectual virtue of moderation to govern the expression of the theological virtue of charity on the part of his mother, and in the son’s use of the virtues to stake his opposition to his mother, we begin to see the nature of their disagreement more vividly: “There was an observable tendency in all of [the mother’s] actions. This was, with the best intentions in the world, to make a mockery of virtue, to pursue it with such a mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous” (117). So for Thomas, his mother’s act of charity is both “mindless” and goes against the notion of virtue itself, but this raises the question of definitions. Do Thomas’s premises about the nature of virtue prove consistent and in keeping with his intellectual commitment to “Christian history”?

Though he indirectly evokes St. Thomas’s system of virtues in a critique of his mother’s actions, O’Connor’s Thomas uses “virtue” in a manner that appears to contrast the classical Thomist, and even Aristotelian, use of the word. Alasdair MacIntyre, a Thomist-Aristotelian thinker and the contemporary political and moral philosopher most readily associated with the interaction of the virtues with justice, defines virtue as “an

acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (*After Virtue* 178). For MacIntyre, and by extension Aquinas, virtues are the source and maintenance of “internal” goods that ultimately cultivate humans into their full potential of doing justice in the world, and a human being cannot consciously be morally good unless (s)he cultivates virtues which have been tested under the purview of a tradition (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 164-165). MacIntyre’s tradition-oriented, communitarian view of morality has been tested by scholars<sup>5</sup> tracing their lineage from the Enlightenment (a period MacIntyre views as an outright moral failure) who hold that consequences should outweigh purpose or motivation of an action. I argue that ultimately virtues underscore the motive of an act and therefore grant that, having cultivated these motivations, the consequences of an individual’s actions will be good in employing the virtues. Furthermore, in considering the nature of virtue in relation to a story explicitly concerned with the role of home and family, we are reminded of the account of virtue that predates Christianity, let alone the Enlightenment or even Aquinas.

Aristotle split the virtues into those of character and thought, and while the latter are primarily inculcated through teaching, the former develop through habituated good (*hairetos*) behaviors reinforced in the context of a family or *oikos*. Aristotle defines virtue in *The Nicomachean Ethics* as “a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (25). This “golden mean” comes about “neither by nature nor against nature.

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<sup>5</sup> John Rawls and Michael Sandel particularly.

Rather, we are by nature able to acquire [virtues], and we are completed through habit” (18)—a term incidentally very important to O’Connor as reflected in the posthumously titled collection of her letters, *The Habit of Being*, and her numerous essays and lectures on religion and writing. While we mainly see Aristotle’s more direct, pointed discussion of the household in *Politics*, in addition to his account of *philia* in binding the family, he outlines the purpose of the family in *The Nicomachean Ethics* as primarily to cultivate virtue in the service of future participation in the polis:

For since every *oikos* is part of a *polis*, and these [relationships of husband and wife, parent and child] are parts of an *oikos*, and the virtue of the parts must look to the virtue of the whole, it is necessary that both wives and children be educated with the *politeia* in mind, if the excellence of wives and that of children makes any difference with regard to the excellence of the *polis*. Necessarily, it does make a difference, since wives are half of the free citizens, and from children are generated the community of citizens (qtd. in Provencal par. 26).

From Star/Sarah’s associations with public institutions, it is clear that she has not cultivated the virtues to the point that would allow her to participate productively in the *polis*. Yet while the mother’s quest is grounded in charity-love, more properly characterized as the Koine Greek word *agape* than the older word *philia*, Aristotle’s emphasis fits the mother’s multiple appeals to Thomas, aimed at empathy but rooted in the home: “‘Think of all you have,’ she began. ‘All the comforts of home. And morals, Thomas. No bad inclinations, nothing bad you were born with.’ Thomas began to breathe like one who feels the onset of asthma. ‘You are not logical,’ he said in a limp

voice” (127). This final appeal to logic is then rooted in the embodiment of his father who would have “put his foot down,” to which the mother, “stiffened,” answers, “You...are not like him” (127). In the wake of his father’s death, which is manifested more prominently in the son’s hearing his voice, Thomas has clearly had to deal with a reworking of the family’s orientation to suffering and, by extension, the *polis*. The mother has clearly not chosen to use civic connections to eliminate interruption of outsiders on the order of the home. This transition has made it possible for the mother to go further than her typical box of candy response to suffering and offer their home to Star/Sarah, at whatever risk.

I have already, in the introduction, foregrounded the crucial differences between Aristotelian and Thomist virtue, but while I find Aquinas’s use of “love” as more operational than that of Plato’s student, Aristotle’s claims for how virtues are developed in a person have an important bearing on how we read Thomas’s appeal to “virtue.” Aristotle’s, let alone Aquinas’s, does not appear to fit with Thomas’s idea of virtue, which the young intellectual defines as “the principle of order and the only thing that makes life bearable” (119). He has mistaken the claim of balance, the mean, to indicate merely a lack of conflict, or “order.” If his mother’s “daredevil charity” truly exists as an excess, then his response is certainly a deficiency. Virtue, then, is only good in so much as it upholds this “principle of order,” but if we have defined virtue, then what is this version of “order”? For Thomas, order is inextricably connected with the idea of comfort, and this does more to weaken order than to strengthen comfort as a worthy goal. The narrator offers a description of Thomas’s sense of virtue immediately after the ideal of “order” is introduced as a product of his mother’s “saner virtues,” which include “the

well-regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served” (119). Several other items emerge in service to these comfort-bearing “virtues,” and the lack, or potential lack, of these items very strongly marks the points of *discomfort* catalyzed by Sarah/Star. When the story begins *in medias res*, Thomas contemplates the different items keeping him from going to a hotel in protest: “he needed his books, his typewriter was not portable, he was used to an electric blanket, he could not bear to eat in restaurants. His mother, with her daredevil charity, was about to wreck the peace of the house” (116). In Thomas’s final appeal to the mother before deciding to involve Sheriff Farebrother, his frustration is further augmented by a disruption in her usual coffee routine, as O’Connor writes: “[Thomas] might have been breakfasting with a sibyl. ‘You’ll have to use the canned cream this morning,’ [the mother] said pouring his coffee. ‘I forgot the other’” (127). This oversight has come in response to staying awake all night attending to Star/Sarah’s needs. Furthermore, the site of Thomas’s first encounter with Sarah/Star, before he hilariously, and rather disorderedly, “[covers] the three and a half miles into town in a little over four minutes” taking the woman home at the request of his mother, occurs over dinner, and O’Connor underscores this imposition on the mother’s “virtues” through the narrator’s description of Thomas during dinner. O’Connor writes, “his mother’s behavior throughout the meal was so idiotic that he could barely stand to look at her and since he could less stand to look at Sarah Ham, he fixed on the sideboard across the room a continuous gaze of disapproval and disgust” (124). I find it poignant that Thomas, contemplating the “idiocy” of his mother’s actions, chooses a spot in the physical home to direct his judgment. Refusing to face Star/Sarah’s suffering, he directs his gaze toward the physical piece of the home where that very dinner might have been



served, as if lamenting the loss of his comforts. The disorder of the home is reflected even to the furniture, and the order and the physical home itself is defamiliarized by the presence of Star/Sarah.

If this story exists entirely under the banner of “the comforts of home,” it does not seem very comfortable at all for, actually, any of the characters. A comfortable home, obviously, does not equal a happy home, and O’Connor’s grisly end to the story projects a failure of the home to cultivate the virtue of justice in Thomas. This is not to say that comfort in itself proves inherently bad, but the “comforts” in the story, which I have already discussed as Thomas’s justification for order, lead to a relationship with his home that clearly marks obsession with, and fixation on, the sanctity and insulation of this domestic space. When his father’s gun goes missing from his desk after Sarah/Star has just been released from the hospital, the narrator conveys Thomas’s real concerns, saying, “He cared nothing about the gun, but the thought of Sarah Ham’s hands sliding among his papers infuriated him. Now even his study was contaminated” (134). This language, with its sexual implications of his study being “contaminated,” conveys an ideal of purity in the home that undercuts the Aristotelian purpose of the home and family as cultivating one’s virtues for participation in the *polis*. For Thomas, the home’s “order” is an end in itself that he finds more important than the preparation for interacting with society at large. However, it becomes clear through the narrator’s purview that Thomas’s primary justification for his opinions lies in his ability to discern rationally the situation.

Perhaps the most important lynchpin in all accounts of justice, including Aristotle’s, is the account of *how* one distinguishes the just from the unjust. I have already discussed the role of virtue in this story and deemed Thomas’s actions toward

Sarah/Star, namely his rejection of her presence in the home and failure to recognize her suffering, as unjust, but it now becomes prudent to dive further into the son's assumptions about distinguishing the just from the unjust, particularly that all individuals have the ability and potential to make rational choices. The inability—not refusal—on the part of Thomas to offer charity to Star/Sarah points to O'Connor's indictment of the primacy of rationality in contemporary characterizations of justice. If, as Niebuhr argues, love for one's neighbor leads to justice, and love, as an emotion, does not exist as a rationally explainable good, then the justice that results from this framework is not grounded in rationality, but in a commitment to the virtue of charity. However, this does not mean that rationality is evil or even problematic in itself. Rather, rationality can emerge as a tool used in the service of carrying out love. Here, as in her other stories, I argue, O'Connor raises the specific issue of the elevation of rationality in itself as the *telos* in the process of determining just actions rather than the commitment to virtue, which encourages a process that respects the worth of a human rather than that of an ideology. Order, or "peace" as it is also appealed to in the story, emerges as the logical conclusion of rationality rather than the ideal itself, and we have already seen that, at least for Thomas, order is inextricably linked with the subject of the story's title, comfort. While Thomas claims that his mother makes a mockery out of virtue, it is Thomas who makes a mockery out of rationality.

Flannery O'Connor's intellectual characters, especially Rayber and Joy/Hulga Hopewell, have become a popular target, if not sufficiently waylaid by her acerbic narrator, for scholars seeking to identify precisely why we see such a cruel eye cast on them by the author. Theologically oriented O'Connor scholars, such as Ralph Wood and

Carl Skrade, have linked the failure of these so-called “interleckchuls” to O’Connor’s opposition to liberalism in light of her Catholic faith and belief in the value of mystery. However, while these self-interested nerd caricatures often appeal to rational bases for their claims, rationality itself is not the full target of O’Connor’s narrative judgment. In his polemic *God and the Grotesque*, Skrade sees the grotesque as entirely concerned with revealing the limits of reason and rationalism, which he differentiates by defining reason as “man’s act of submission to truth and reality before the bar of the principles of non-contradiction (it is not possible for something to be and not be at the same time) and necessity (what is *is* necessarily)” and rationalism as “not only the philosophical movements referred to by that title but also the elevation of reason as defined to the position of dominance in the affairs of men. Rationalism is the deification of reason” (12-13 emphasis added for clarity). For Skrade, primarily a theologian writing to that audience in 1974, the primacy of reason throughout the “malaise of contemporary culture” ultimately amounts to an obsession with death that renders use unable to hope for, or aspire to, anything beyond the material. The grotesque functions then, particularly in O’Connor’s stories, as an artistic intervention that reveals to readers “a powerful testimony to the reality of the holy as it is experienced in non-rational ways which are beyond our analyzing and managing” (85). While I do not agree with the extent of Skrade’s scathing critique of rationalism or reason writ large, which I see as necessary and helpful tools but weak end goals in themselves, I find his definitions helpful in terms of navigating Thomas’s ideal ends with those of his mother. Thomas’s appeals to order, though perhaps still cheapened in their connection to mere self comfort, are linked strongly to a commitment to rationalism, to what can be discerned and controlled on a

material level, while the mother's commitment to charity attempts to move beyond the dominion of reason. A small, yet telling, example of this arises when the mother tries to persuade Thomas by saying, "Imagine, ...only nineteen years old and in that filthy jail. And she doesn't look like a bad girl...She looks like a wholesome girl" (119). Thomas replies coldly, "Wholesome people don't pass bad checks" (119). Thomas meets mother's intuition with evidence of material indiscretion. However, O'Connor's narrator complicates any indication that Thomas carries on in this way without questioning the source and expression of his commitment to reason. We also learn that Thomas, while he was not close to his father in real life, seems to accept his father's materially-driven approach to all matters while acknowledging his mother's approach as perhaps simply unobtainable. O'Connor writes, "Thomas had inherited his father's reason without his ruthlessness and his mother's love of good without her tendency to pursue it. His plan for all practical reason was to wait and see what developed" (121). This passage hints at Thomas trying to occupy a middle space that ultimately proves difficult to maintain in the face of the invasion into his ordered home, but the sequence of action indicated here also orients his resolution of what to do with Star/Sarah. While his mother leaves the home and ventures into the *polis* in order to confront and engage with suffering, Thomas must first calculate the extent of the situation before he is to act.

It is tempting to view Thomas under the same line of questioning that debates the value of rationalism at all, but I feel this would limit O'Connor's perhaps most dynamic intellectual character unnecessarily. After all, Thomas's namesake, Aquinas, absolutely viewed rationality and reason as key disciplines in discerning how one lives the good life in light of Christian teaching. I have already said that Thomas makes a mockery of

rationalism, but not as some farcical, blind adherent. Thomas has been a perhaps more difficult target for criticism as an intellectual, because it is so clear that irrational, unconscious, or perhaps even spiritual forces weigh heavily on his actions in the personage of his dead father's voice. When O'Connor writes, "The ghost of Thomas's father rose before him," the claim of Thomas's ability to assess the situation disconnectedly and rationally is compromised. Thomas's actual irrationality is further evidenced by his inability to follow through with his threats to leave the home and go to the hotel: "He seemed unable to take the first step that would set him walking to the closet in the hall to look for the suitcase. He was like a man handed a knife and told to operate on himself if he wished to live" (135). This perpetual anxiety that limits his mobility exposes the limits of his commitment to reason, because there really is no reason why a grown, educated man with gainful employment and conviction to do so should not be able to take his things and leave when he sees it as the right thing to do. The fact of Thomas's psychosis even causes us, rightly, to reconsider his guilt in his mother's killing and, by extension, the logic itself that would render him guilty. After all, it is the father's voice that yells "Fire!" as the mother jumps in front of Star/Sarah, who had been lunging at Thomas in self-defense. Before he concocts the plan with his father's gun, Thomas has essentially given up his notions to leave the home when he is urged, finally, to leave for a specific purpose. Interestingly, it is also his father's voice that ultimately prompts Thomas to leave the home and seek out Sheriff Farebrother as a civic solution to his domestic problem. The ordered demands of the polis are called on to restore the comforts of home.

The mockery of rationality continues in the person of Farebrother, whose limited perspective dominates the story's closing paragraph. The Sheriff's view of the grotesque scene at the end of the story is particularly telling in regards to the lack of civic ability ever to achieve what Niebuhr calls a "perfect justice" because it is a system not founded on the principle of "perfect love." He has even hoped to confirm the need for his presence in the severity of evil he sees before him, and in turn his ability to restore order, rather than inculcate a sense of "perfect justice." Furthermore, Farebrother's judgment of what constitutes the situation before him is heavily colored by belief in his ability to discern the situation empirically:

The sheriff's brain worked instantly like a calculating machine. He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl...As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. (141-142)

The calculations of a discerning civic authority standing over the domestic scene here defamiliarize the psychological turmoil the narrator has just put the reader through leading up to the gun's firing. This transports the scope of the story, again, from the purview of the family to that of the *polis*, which points to what I see as Thomas's real problem as it pertains to justice and the family. He has mistaken the civic ideal of order, achieved through jurisprudence and the rule of law, with, as Aristotle contends, that of the domestic sphere, the family, which inculcates the virtues of character so that the social concerns of the *polis* may prove more just. However, it remains to be seen what

the relationship of the mother's charity-love is to justice in light of these concerns. Are, in fact, the mother's actions toward Star/Sarah just? Does not Thomas have a point in questioning the risk she brings on the home in this endeavor?

While I have already discussed both the Christian appeal to love via the greatest commandment and further characterized love as a virtue that, in the case of O'Connor's story, is necessary before civic judgments can be rendered justly, the connection between charity and justice remains somewhat nebulous. I will conclude this discussion by briefly tracing the necessary relationship between charity and justice outlined most notably by Reinhold Niebuhr, whose liberal, Protestant characterization of these two slippery concepts, I argue, relates strongly to Flannery O'Connor's story, despite her conservative, Catholic ethos. Niebuhr, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, famously defined justice as an "approximation of brotherhood under conditions of sin" and, in his theological writings especially, sought to articulate the relationship between social jurisprudence and love in light of the extent of human error, which he distinguished as more symbolic than natural from a traditional doctrine of original sin. Contrary to the notion of order maintained by Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," Niebuhr's justice ethic does not grant that peace is achieved in an act of justice but rather a series of choices, sometimes weighed and considered through rational processes, which must be chosen justly in spite of risk. He famously critiqued what he called "Christian idealism" as a sort of utopianism that assumes the possibility of complete order in human affairs. In his 1950 essay "Justice and Love," Niebuhr writes, "The realm of justice is also a realm of tragic choices, which are seldom envisaged in a type of idealism in which all choices are regarded as simple. Sometimes we must prefer a larger good to a smaller one, without

the hope that the smaller one will be preserved in the larger one” (29). In other words, the commitment to justice involves admitting that perfection is not possible in a world where suffering is a daily, harsh reality. However, the commitment to love, in Niebuhr’s account, means willingly encountering this suffering in spite of results and, perhaps even, at the risk of compromising one’s individual autonomy.

In the end, “The Comforts of Home” depicts Thomas’s process of encountering this love made possible by the departure of his staunchly rational father and his mother exposing him to, or at least not sheltering him from, human suffering for the first time in the personage of Star/Sarah. O’Connor depicts Thomas’s initial ruminations on the love he has for his mother: “Thomas loved his mother. He loved her because it was in his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became nothing but pure *idiot* mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control” (118 emphasis mine). Thomas accounts for the love here expressed by his mother as “natural,” in spite of the fact that he cannot fully experience that love because it is “idiot mystery,” beyond his materially connected comprehension. However, his observations of his mother’s love later revise the first: “his mother seemed bowed down by some *painful* mystery that nothing would make endurable but a redoubling of effort. To his annoyance, she appeared to look on *him* with compassion, as if her hazy charity no longer made distinctions” (122 emphasis mine). We never know whether or not the son ever understands himself as needing compassion, but we see through the judging, ordered vision of Sheriff Farebrother that “The killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other’s arms,” which seems an unlikely possibility prior to the shooting (142). While Thomas simultaneously has seen



his mother as the object of his frustration, her “daredevil charity” appears to have cultivated the virtue of charity and justice in her son by some measure. Farebrother’s reckoning of the pair “about to collapse into each other’s arms” suggests that a love between then two, however catalyzed by violence, has been made possible by the sacrifice. Thomas’s education in virtue from his mother ends tragically when his father, whether in spirit or psychosis, yells “Fire!” and the mother sacrifices her life for the sake of “the little slut.” We know, due to Flannery O’Connor’s brilliant rendering, what Sheriff Farebrother cannot and does not know, that Thomas is more than a killer and Star/Sarah is more than a slut.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **COLLECTIVE GUILT AND THE QUESTION OF CONFORMITY: “THE PARTRIDGE FESTIVAL”**

As we have seen in “The Comforts of Home,” the tension between justice and charity in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction largely come about under the auspices of a character encountering suffering in the public sphere and making sense of that suffering in light of familial responsibility. Star/Sarah has been mishandled by civic authorities and the only possibility available in the narrative for her to find the good life comes about through a charitable intervention of Thomas’s mother. While the mother’s actions ultimately prove more just than Thomas’s endeavors, Star/Sarah’s presence risks not only the enactor’s homely “comforts,” but also jeopardizes the family’s safety. We will see later in “Everything that Rises Must Converge” that Julian Chestny is unable to account for the suffering of—or injustice done to—African Americans beyond the symbolic realm of his different fantasies for punishing his mother’s racism. “The Partridge Festival” has been largely overlooked by readers of Flannery O’Connor’s work, but it similarly questions the process of justice as it relates to the family and the demands of the wider community. Calhoun, O’Connor’s intellectual in this story, sees the ideals of his family—civic contribution, participation in community traditions, carrying out a legacy of local business leaders—as counter to his own. In seeking justice for Singleton, a complicated and tragic member of the Partridge community, Calhoun conflates the binary of conformity and nonconformity with that of justice and injustice by deeming Singleton’s mass murder of six local officials as just retribution and claiming the killer’s incarceration for this murder as an act of scapegoating on the part of the community. By

examining Calhoun's quest for nonconformity, and his defense of Singleton's crimes, we begin to see how O'Connor further complicates different claims of justice in light of community tradition—in this case the Partridge Azalea Festival—and one's obligation to adhere to those important cultural rites.

The story depicts a variant of O'Connor's typical intellectual-writer protagonist in Calhoun. Like Asbury in O'Connor's "The Enduring Chill," the twenty-three year old writer sees his status as an artist as his preeminent concern, but unlike Asbury's, Calhoun's initial engagement with injustice seems to have merit, at least as conveyed by O'Connor's narrator. The town of Partridge has its annual Azalea Festival coming up, and in the lead-up a community pariah, Singleton, causes a disturbance by refusing to purchase the obligatory festival badge, effectively refusing any affiliation with the most important tradition of his community. In response, the officials of the festival perform a farcical mock trial for this cultural crime, and Singleton is put on public display in a stockade, then locked for a time in an outhouse with a goat. In retribution for this humiliation, Singleton kills five of the festival officials and one innocent bystander—his bullet was meant for the mayor—ten days before the festival's beginning. Foregoing a trial, the court interns him in Quincy, the state asylum. Calhoun, generally viewing the death of the Azalea festival officials as a non-issue, sets out to lambast the town of Partridge for its mistreatment of Singleton and, ultimately, show that the killer was left with no choice and dealt with unjustly by officials both prior to and following the killing.

Calhoun, like Julian in his approach to African Americans, dwells on the symbolic, or even mythological, representation of a perceived victim of injustice while simultaneously committing himself to a course of justice that ultimately falls short. In

O'Connor's economy, Calhoun's campaign proves unsuccessful more broadly due to its lack of a discernible love ethic both toward his family and, ultimately, Singleton. In this chapter, I will outline the different claims to justice, and their varying degrees of merit in the narrative, by examining Calhoun's motives for—and the effectiveness of—his method of retributive poetic justice, those of his reluctant comrade Mary Elizabeth, and the legitimacy of “guilt” claims attached both to the town of Partridge and to Singleton, whom Calhoun practically deifies as a brave nonconformist. Admittedly, “The Partridge Festival” raises more questions of justice than it answers, which may account somewhat for O'Connor's dissatisfaction with the story that she referred to as “a farce” (*The Habit of Being* 404). However, I argue that the story reworks the critique of civic justice as *imperfect*, evidenced by Farebrother in “The Comforts of Home,” by demonstrating that at a certain point, there may be a role after all for civic entities in protecting community members' ability to pursue the good life. For instance, it becomes evident during Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun's visit to the insane asylum that Singleton's incarceration is necessary. Yet, the issue of Singleton's nonconformity and Calhoun's obsession with it applies pressure to the question of whether or not one can cultivate the good life outside of the collective, and in rejecting the collective actions of both his family and the town of Partridge, Calhoun mistakes conformity itself for injustice and fails to see that it is not conformity itself that is the problem, but what one conforms to.

In first examining Calhoun's motives, we inevitably find that his reasons for sympathizing with Singleton and wanting to laud the killer's “nonconformity” are completely involved with his relationship to his family. As in “The Comforts of Home” and “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” the family offers a countering outlook to the

writer-intellectual's convictions, but the family here is specifically an extended family, rather than the tense child-to-parent relationships among Thomas, Julian, and their respective mothers. Calhoun's parents have little to no bearing on his life as he presently lives it, but their dismissal helps to determine the young writer's project nonetheless. O'Connor writes, "When he [Calhoun] had explained to his parents that he despised their values, his parents had looked at each other with a gleam of recognition as if this were what they had been expecting from what they had read...his father had offered to give him a small allowance to finance the flat. He had refused it for the sake of his independence" (425). This sense of independence becomes the ideal Calhoun ultimately cannot achieve, as we will see, but this raises the question of what, exactly, he endeavors to be independent from in his extended family. After Calhoun refuses his parents' money, the narrator further characterizes the nature of this "independence":

in the depths of himself, he knew it was not for his independence but because he *enjoyed* selling. In the face of a customer, he was carried outside himself; his face began to beam and sweat and all complexity left him; he was in the grip of a drive as strong as the drive of some men for liquor or for women; he was horribly good at it. (425)

Paradoxically, at its inception Calhoun's independence is just an idealized stand-in for the pleasure he derives from selling "air-conditioners, boats, and refrigerators so that for the other nine months he [can] afford to meet life naturally and bring his real self—the rebel-artist-mystic—to birth" (424). So in order for him to be his "real self," Calhoun must presumably first step outside of his *unreal* self, his commercial self. Yet, O'Connor's description of Calhoun's feeling as a salesman is characterized more as

reluctantly fulfilling vocation than laborious necessity. Calhoun “*enjoyed* selling,” but he does not see this enjoyment as producing anything worth labeling as an “achievement,” as indicated by his using his achievement scroll awarded by his employers as a dartboard.

However, we learn from the story’s beginning, and echoes at the end, that any achievement in business, for Calhoun, amounts to conforming to the hero of both his extended family and the town of Partridge. “The master merchant,” as the narrator has him, is Calhoun’s great-grandfather, whom he looks very much like. As if it would please him, Calhoun’s Aunt Mattie, upon her nephew’s arrival, says, “Your great-grandfather would have been delighted to see you taking an interest in the festival, Calhoun. He initiated it himself, you know” (421). Later, she adds, “As you get older, you’ll look more and more like Father [Calhoun’s great-grandfather]... You have his ruddy complexion and much the same expression” (423). To clarify for his aunts, who have presumably not been told directly that Calhoun “despises their values,” Calhoun says, “I’m a different type entirely” (423). Perhaps the greatest tension in the story, and the resolution, comes from the fact that Calhoun *is* decidedly the same type. In the wake of Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth’s horrific encounter with the *real* Singleton and their realization that perhaps Partridge has a point in ostracizing the man, the young writer is faced again with the image of his great-grandfather:

[A] miniature visage rose incorrigibly in [Mary Elizabeth’s] spectacles and fixed him where he was. Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him. (444)

Not only does Calhoun finally recognize his connection to his great-grandfather, he is described by the narrator as “undistinguished as an iron link,” the epitomized symbol of conformity. Michael Kreyling, seeing the question of conformity and individuality as the central tension in the story, writes, “Calhoun is the deepest conformist of them all, never so much the ‘chained’ rebel than when he rebels from the most philistine grounding available to him, one utterly confident in its secular wisdom” (13). Calhoun’s venture to separate from his family, as O’Connor had it, proves to be a farce, because the young salesman’s project is premised on his and Singleton’s “individuality.” But this raises the question: what is the relationship of conformity to justice as it is appealed to in this story?

While we have seen that conformity, from Calhoun’s standpoint, stems from his family, the question of Singleton’s nonconformity comes directly in relation to the Azalea festival, a cultural custom of the town that annually reinforces the significance and vibrancy of the community. Failing to conform to the patterns of the festival, Singleton breaks laws that exist outside the jurisdiction of the court, and Singleton’s punishment of the stockade has, indeed, come also outside of realm of civic law and enacted by the cultural, or perhaps even tribal, court of the Azalea Festival officials. Yet, Calhoun has extrapolated his critique of Partridge’s treatment of Singleton to even the civic process that sent the man to the insane asylum in response to the mass shooting. Discussing the dangers of demystifying judicial processes in relation to primitive culture, René Girard warns in *Violence and the Sacred* that while judicial systems are inherently concerned with vengeance, they are essential to lessening violence in society:

Centuries can pass before men realize that there is no real difference between their principle of justice and the concept of revenge. Only the transcendental

quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence. This is the case no matter what the consecrating institution may be.

Only by opting for a sanctified, legitimate form of violence and preventing it from becoming an object of disputes and recriminations can the system save itself from the vicious cycle of revenge. (24)

According to Girard, one must conform to a system—“[A]cknowledged by all”—of sanctioned, systematized judicial process in order to appease the processes of revenge, such as those depicted by O’Connor in her story—Singleton is punished for not buying the badge, Singleton punishes those who punish him for not buying the badge, the state punishes Singleton killing the festival officials, Calhoun attempts, however farcically, to punish the entire town of Partridge for their treatment of Singleton. Girard shows here that this cycle is not ideal, but the only thing that presents a possibility for ameliorating violent cycles is to sanction some kind of agreed-upon system of vengeance, or even “violence.” By saying that Singleton’s only “sin” was to be a nonconformist, after all a noble idea in the young writer’s economy, Calhoun assumes that conformity of any form is unjust, while we have already seen that his attempts at nonconformity prove ineffective. In the story, O’Connor depicts the necessity, of some civic entity legitimized by the collective, but “The Partridge Festival” also demonstrates that while these processes are necessary to limit violence and uphold the possibility for citizens to seek out the good life, we cannot pretend that the system escapes the unloving, imperfect process of retribution.

Calhoun invokes “justice” twice in the story, and the first of these instances modifies the nature of his work in Partridge. In assigning blame for Singleton’s plight, we



have already seen that Calhoun conflates the values of both the town of Partridge and his family, whom he clearly sees as complicit. As such, his extended family also becomes the object of his judgment. This is evidenced by the exchange with his two aunts after declaring that he has come to Partridge to write:

“Well,” his Aunt Bessie said, “that’s fine. Maybe you’ll be another Margaret Mitchell.”

“I hope you’ll do us justice,” his Aunt Mattie shouted. “Few do.”

“I’ll do you justice all right,” he said grimly. “I’m writing an expos....” He stopped and put the pipe in his mouth and sat back. It would be ridiculous to tell *them*. (424)

In response to his aunt’s shouting appeal to representational justice, Calhoun answers with a “grim” claim to retributive justice, and it becomes clear that his idea to write the novel is tipped more *against* his family and Partridge than *for* Singleton. The “you” Calhoun uses here applies to the entire town of Partridge, his family included, and it becomes clearer and clearer that when he rejected his parents’ values, Calhoun had conformity in mind. In Calhoun’s economy, conformity specifically denotes a belief in the shared cultural rite of the Azalea Festival and, by extension, Singleton’s incarceration. I have already discussed the comparisons between Calhoun and his great-grandfather, the patriarch of the Azalea Festival, and the connection between town and family ultimately comes through his ancestral likeness, the merchant and Partridge leader he particularly does not want to conform to. Aunt Bessie, further reinforcing Calhoun’s distaste with his family’s “values,” adds, “He would either have been one of the prominent men shot or he would have been the one to subdue the maniac” (422-423).

Calhoun would prefer to think himself unrelated to these doings, even if he would have presumably been martyred in the name of the festival or a hero that saved lives. Rather, O'Connor's writer sees himself as a distant observer, the nonconforming, truth-telling artist with the ability to transcend the criminal justice system with his writing in order to exact retribution on the proponents of the Azalea festival. However, the retributive nature of his project does not remain the only motivation for the "justice" of his proposed novel. Calhoun feels guilty.

Aside from the guilt he ascribes to the community and his family, Calhoun has his own guilt fueling the campaign. We learn immediately after the narrator discusses the achievement scroll turned dartboard of Calhoun's first encounter with Singleton in the newspaper: "As soon as he had seen Singleton's picture in the paper, the face began to burn in his imagination like a dark reproachful liberating star" (425). A bit earlier in the story, O'Connor writes, "[Calhoun] expected to write something that would vindicate the madman and he expected the writing of it to mitigate his own guilt, for his doubleness, his shadow, was cast before him more darkly than usual in light of Singleton's purity" (424). The "doubleness" and "shadow" that warrants reproach and liberation is the joy he receives from his "pay the bills" lifestyle as a salesman, which as we have already seen is further layered in the shadow of his great-grandfather. Certainly, this sense of guilt comes somewhat from Calhoun's dissatisfaction with the baseness of his life as a master of salesmanship, what Michael Kreyling characterizes as "the fatal gene of American modern life" (11) in relation to O'Connor's story. Singleton is the living embodiment of Calhoun's conviction that his family's values are not satisfactory, the proof that his unhappiness in salesmanship as a "conforming" or "materialistic"

enterprise is valid. However, hovering over all of these considerations is the fact that the action of this guilt ultimately does not help Singleton in any way, and this characteristic unhelpfulness highlights the absence of a virtue of charity-love that would actually make Calhoun available to identify with Singleton-as-real instead of Singleton-as-myth. In other words, this is more about Calhoun's quest for nonconformity than Singleton's "unjust" suffering, and furthermore, the primary effect of Calhoun's relationship with Mary Elizabeth, the nonfiction writer with a similar fervor against Partridge, further underscores the individualism of his project.

Having been thrust into one another's company by Calhoun's aunts, perhaps nothing could have shocked Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth more than the fact of their shared disgust with the Azalea Festival: "They walked the next two blocks in silence but both appeared shaken" (434). Calhoun's project, viewed in the most sympathetic light, might be seen as an attempt to rectify his affiliation with his family's historical prominence in Partridge. However, Mary Elizabeth, likewise, comes to her writing from a place of guilt as well. The narrator never says this directly, but we can assume that Mary's Elizabeth's father, from whose courthouse office her and Calhoun critique the Azalea Festival Beauty Pageant, works in some capacity for the same court that sent Singleton to the asylum. Mary Elizabeth reveals that, like Calhoun, she views Singleton as "a scapegoat" and, even, "a Christ-figure," although she quickly sidesteps this characterization saying, "I mean as myth" (435). Rather than feel encouraged by the fact that they are each not alone in their opinions and their shared impulse to exact justice through writing, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth begin a farcical exchange of one-upmanship aimed at proving one's seriousness to the other. For example, when Mary

Elizabeth suggests that perhaps Calhoun would like to watch the bikini-clad contestants of the Miss Partridge Azalea pageant, he says “fiercely,” “Listen...get this through your head. I’m not interested in the damn festival or the damn azalea queen. I’m here only because of my sympathy for Singleton” (435). It seems that they each had conceived their endeavors as happening within their own control, and the possibility of a second disrupts that control. But why, after all, are these two not initially willing to work together? If their aspirations were toward justice for Singleton, it would seem that Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun would be inclined to work together for the sake of the cause, but they each initially reject the community of the other and take turns belittling one another’s approach. However, this hesitance further underscores the limits of nonconformity as a means for justice by showing that in order to work in community toward a goal, some amount of conformity is inevitable. In fact, by rejecting one another’s shared goal in expressing their “sympathy” for Singleton, we see that their project, in fact, has more to do with self-interestedness than working by any means necessary on behalf of Singleton to expose the town of their guilt.

Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth’s attempted action of justice involves an event that neither, at least at first, feel requires them to encounter Singleton: their writing. Through writing, they feel they can convey what has happened to Singleton in a way that has real consequences, however ambiguous these consequences might be beyond bringing about a sort of collective shame on the town. Reflecting on his trip to main business area in Partridge, and his inability to find any citizens sympathetic to his project, Calhoun strengthens his resolve in using his education to appease his guilt: “No one [in Partridge] had a thought for Singleton, who lay on a cot in a filthy ward at Quincy. The boy felt

now in a concrete way the force of his innocence, and he thought that to do justice to all the man had suffered, he would have to write more than a simple article. He would have to write a novel; he would have to show, not say, how primary justice operated” (432). Mary Elizabeth, regarding the Azalea Festival Beauty Contest, offers a similar sentiment, saying, “I’m going to finish it off with one swift literary kick” (434). Elaborating on Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun’s confidence in their method, Robert Brinkmeyer says that the nature of seeing writing as sufficient answer to Singleton’s plight is revealing, in itself, in its depiction of the characters’ limitations:

The story suggests in Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth that the artistic impulse, if not firmly rooted in concrete experience and an openness to self, holds out a destructive temptation: to isolate oneself in one’s own image of the gifted artist, and to cultivate that image further by assuming a superior stance to others (including the “others” within) that leads to a self-conception even more limited and distorted. (156)

The notion that by writing their respective works Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth can exact any kind of actual justice is thwarted most notably by both their initial refusal, as Brinkmeyer says, to root their work in “concrete experience.” In fact, at Mary Elizabeth’s suggestion that they go and visit Singleton at the asylum, O’Connor writes, “The suggestion was appalling to him; for some reason he could not at the moment understand, it struck him as unthinkable” (436). Not only does Calhoun dehumanize Singleton in his convictions by relegating him to a mythological place of self-affirmation, the writer is “appalled” by the idea of meeting this man he feels “sympathy” for. Neither Calhoun nor Mary Elizabeth, at least as we are shown in the story, keeps with their project once they

*have* a concrete experience with Singleton himself, a “spider-like” man who embodies a traumatizing kind of madness that leaves Mary Elizabeth perversely ogled and Calhoun seeking a “more tolerable image” of his fellow man.

In the end, the guilt that Calhoun feels is tangential to his desire to write the exposé, and his contention that the entire town is guilty for the murders of the six citizens *and* the unjust incarceration of Singleton will have to be explored as well. Who, exactly, is guilty of what, and more importantly to Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, who deserves just retribution for their guilt? Three variations of guilty parties emerge in O’Connor’s story, and really none of them can be totally guilty at the same time: the town of Partridge, Singleton, or some combination of the two. Aside from the at points painfully obvious invocation of the scapegoat symbol<sup>6</sup>, Calhoun’s sense of Partridge’s role in the murders underscores the tension between the possibility of communal and individual guilt. Upon his trip to the small business district of Partridge, Calhoun’s convictions are tested by the opinions of various community members, several who have known—or known of—Singleton their entire lives. Calhoun’s Aunt Bessie has already claimed, shortly before changing the subject abruptly, that Singleton is “innocent” on account of his mental illness, and the town even applies pressure to Calhoun’s claim of conformity by expressing differences on that point. One conversation with a soda jerk is telling in this regard, as Calhoun begins by calling the dead man going by in a funeral procession guilty, saying, “They have innocent as well as guilty blood on their hands” (427).

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<sup>6</sup> O’Connor has Singleton placed in an outhouse turned holding cell with a live goat. Calhoun refers to the scapegoat several times in buttressing his claims to locals.

Presumably, the “innocent” blood here refers, in Calhoun’s economy, to Singleton and the guilty blood refers to their own. However, complicating the writer’s self-conceived Socratic inquiry in town, the soda jerk rebuts, claiming individual fault: “‘It wasn’t no *they*,’ the boy said. ‘One man did it all. A man named Singleton. He was bats.’

‘Singleton was only the instrument,’ Calhoun said. “Partridge itself is guilty.’...The boy looked at him as if he were mad. ‘Partridge [sic] can’t shoot nobody,’ he said in a high exasperated voice” (427). The soda jerk has a point, and Calhoun flees from him just as he does from a barber and a child with a Coke bottle who also disagree with him. Taking emphasis off of the cultural event of the mock trial and Singleton’s time in the stockade, the boy turns Calhoun’s focus to the aspect of Singleton’s involvement with the Azalea Festival that he would rather ignore, that the man whose “purity” he sees as redemptive did, in fact, shoot those people. The notion of Singleton as a “Christ-figure,” as Mary Elizabeth suggests, does not hold up in this regard, but the figure of the scapegoat, if conveyed somewhat heavy-handedly by O’Connor, fits better.

In *The Scapegoat*, Renè Girard outlines what he terms the “stereotypical” action of social persecution in terms that seem very relevant to O’Connor’s troubled ascetic:

Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of the mediator. It bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body. If the wrongdoers, even the diabolical ones, are to succeed in destroying

the community's distinctions, they must either attack the community directly, by striking at its heart or head. (15)

Singleton has followed Girard's course here. When he refuses to buy an Azalea Festival badge and subjected to a farcical trial, public humiliation in the stockade, and brief incarceration in an outhouse with a goat, this can be seen as several other examples of deviance coming to a head. We are not meant to feel that it was the *just* thing for the town to place the mentally unstable man in the stockade when he did not purchase a trinket for the town festival. However, there are hints from Calhoun's ill-fated trip to interrogate the town citizens as to the extent of Singleton's deviance for normative Partridge behavior: he was perceived to have had money that he rarely if ever spent, he "clipped coupons," he comes from a respectable family but is perhaps the product of an extramarital interracial affair<sup>7</sup>, he never performed maintenance or renovations on the house he inherited from his prominent Partridge family, he did not attend church, he cut his own hair, and he was rumored to have solicited prostitutes. The town, in retaliation, would also try to make him spend money, as the Calhoun's barber says, "Another time...somebody went out there and put a dead cat in his well. Somebody was always doing something to see if they could make him turn loose a little money" (432). Calhoun, of course, defends Singleton's way of life by claiming that the man "was not a materialist" (432). In the story, if we trust the narrator, we are faced with three facts

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<sup>7</sup> The barber, in conversation with Calhoun, says, "One of the Singleton girls gone off on a nine-months vacations and come back with him. Then they all died off and left him their money. It's no telling what the other half of him is. Something foreign I would judge." Then the narrator adds, "His tone insinuated more" (431).



about Singleton outside of Calhoun's delusions of the man's preeminence: the man was a social deviant who repeatedly did things that did not conform to the ways of Partridge and was at times ridiculed and bothered for doing them; he killed five Azalea festival officials and a bystander with a gun in broad daylight; and when visited by Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, he acted like a crazy person. The fact that he had not killed, as far as we know, until after his public humiliation as retaliation for nonconformity suggests that it was the incident with the Azalea festival badge that catalyzed his psychological willingness to kill. Following Girard, Singleton attacks the "heads" of the community that have made him a scapegoat, but his subsequent confinement after the killings seems like the only course. This seems especially true in light of his encounter with Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, who ironically posed as his family members in order to gain access to him.

Even if it bears out that the asylum is the only feasible destination for Singleton in light of the murders, O'Connor leaves the weight between innocence and guilt for his own condition unanswered, and all we know for sure is that Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth's form of retributive poetic justice aimed at the town would not have brought justice to bear on the situation. Answering a question from John Hawkes, whom we will remember as her postmodern novelist friend who has accused her of immoral motivations in her depiction, O'Connor elaborates on her bizarre man in the asylum from the story she did not particularly care for:

The divine is probably the sum of what Singleton lacks and thereby suggests, but as he stands I look on him as another comic instance of the diabolical. I think that perhaps for you the diabolical is the divine, but I am a Thomist three times

removed and live amongst many distinctions. (A Thomist three times removed is one who doesn't read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis.) Fallen spirits are of course still spirits, and I supposed the Devil teaches most of the lessons that lead to self knowledge. (439)

These "distinctions" O'Connor alludes to involve a more demarcated notion of what apparently Hawkes has called "the divine," particularly the Trinity and other manner of spiritual entities including angels and demons. However, her appeal to "self knowledge" I think helps underscore the ethical purchase of Calhoun's story. As we have already seen, the self Calhoun faces in the end is the merchant, salesman embodied by his great-grandfather, but this raises the question of whether that is such a bad thing after all. The only moments of possible enjoyment in the story come when Calhoun discusses his selling, and the assumption keeping him from accepting that role is that it would be better to be an artist. He cannot fathom the idea of being connected with his family. Beyond the trade, perhaps some amount of conformity, as Girard claims, is inevitable, and should we choose to conform to something aside from what our family has taught us, we should ensure that it is both real and just, as opposed to symbolic and self-interested.

### CHAPTER III

## TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND RETRIBUTIVE RECOGNITION: “EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE”

As with the less critically popular story “The Comforts of Home” and “The Partridge Festival,” O’Connor offers an exploration into charity, the family, and civic order in transition with the title piece of her posthumously published short story collection, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. The story has become one of O’Connor’s most popular among scholars, and this is undoubtedly due in part to a popular historical investment in the American Civil Rights Movement and, by extension, O’Connor’s artistic reaction as an educated, famous, and white Southerner, coming to prominence entirely during the span of the Movement’s greatest successes. For my purposes, this period marks perhaps the largest shift in public policy in terms of social, rights-based conceptions of justice in America since the abolition of slavery, and any project concerned with locating a consistent ethic of justice would be profoundly suspect to ignore this public exploration of justice happening in the writer-in-question’s beloved backyard.

The use of the word “justice” itself was largely fueled by the religious leaders of time, especially Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr., calling for a sense of equality being endowed by God to all humans through scripture, to believers, and by the US Constitution, to citizens. King’s theology, for example, was largely influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr’s assertion that “perfect justice” should be the *telos* of social relationships. Furthermore, “perfect justice” cannot be brought about without a grounding in “perfect love” virtue first in the individual, then extended socially by means

of more socially just, or at least equal, public policy. However, while the majority of grassroots civil rights organizing formed in the context of Judeo-Christian motivations or leadership, Flannery O'Connor, a famously orthodox adherent to her Catholic faith, was famously unimpressed with the appeals to liberal and progressive theology as the panacea for relationships between persons of different races in her Southern context.

I will not engage here in the hotly contested debate about the state of O'Connor's memorial ethos as bigot or saint or somewhere between, as numerous scholars<sup>8</sup> have done with varying degrees of success. I will instead consider "Everything that Rises Must Converge" as a story that distinguishes the author's approach to race—especially as evidence in her later work—as politically situated and catalyzed but ultimately concerned more foundationally with individuals' just or unjust responses to one another within their transitioning political context. In other words, the context matters, but it is not O'Connor's main point. Some readings have explored more thoroughly the story's historical moment primarily through examining closely O'Connor's correspondence with close friends regarding the Civil Rights Movement, the spiritual implications of

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<sup>8</sup> See Julie Armstrong, "Blinded by Whiteness: Revisiting Flannery O'Connor and Race" in *Flannery O'Connor Review* I(2001-2); Timothy P. Caron, "'Backwards to Bethlehem': Evangelism in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" in *Struggles Over the Word* (Mercer U P, 2000); Frederick Crews, "The Critics Bear it Away" in *The Critics Bear it Away: American Fiction and the Academy* (Random House, 1992); W.A. Sessions, "'The Hermeneutics of Suspicion': Problems in Interpreting the Life of Flannery O'Connor" and Marshall Bruce Gentry, "O'Connor as Miscegenationist" both in *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism* (UTK Press, 2010); Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); and Ralph C. Wood, "The Problem of the Color Line" in *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2004).

“convergence” both as it relates to the discordant Chestny family and racial integration, while other readings seek mostly to articulate the scope of O’Connor’s grotesque judgment of her characters—Julian, as one of her characteristically pompous intellectuals (in the vein of Joy/Hulga Hopewell or Rayber), and Mrs. Chestny, as one of O’Connor’s self-righteous Southern women (Mrs. Hopewell or Ruby Turpin). My approach, while necessarily keeping these crucial aspects of the text in the background, focuses instead on incompatible principles of, or appeals to, justice as evidenced in the words and deeds of Julian, his mother, and the unnamed African American mother on the city bus. Though Julian believes that his endeavor on the bus to be in closer proximity to African Americans provides a just sense of recognition for past wrongs, his claims of justice prove more retributive toward his mother than effective in recognizing his black counterparts. By framing the concerns of retribution and recognition in light of familial obligation, we begin to see that the space “Everything that Rises Must Converge” occupies in the political landscape also, like “The Comforts of Home” and “The Partridge Festival,” speaks to the role of family in navigating that territory.

Because the story is inescapably framed in a situation of shifting ideas of justice, I will evoke some of the language and ethical debates posed by the emerging field of Transitional Justice. Despite the fact that these debates have largely taken place in the realm of foreign policy and international law, they raise questions fitting to the situation even within the confines of our relatively intact US democracy. “Everything that Rises Must Converge” ultimately demonstrates that civic law and order, while both necessary and crucial, does not and cannot account for the foundational treatment of one person to another as human beings: sons, mothers, and others. Where the law has transitioned to a

more just treatment of citizens, the citizens themselves must now transition to meet the ideal set in force by law. O'Connor's characters, none of them, appear to be transitioning very well in this story, and in the writer's characteristically grotesque sights we noticeably do not find an overtly didactic story, telling readers how whites should quit their racism and blacks should be absolutely affirmed in their struggle for equality. It is just not that easy. Rather, Flannery O'Connor complicates the horizons of justice in considering racial inequality in the context of families whose personal claims of justice come to a head at the very site of the Civil Rights Era's most public conversation of justice and race, the vehicle literally in transition.

Most discussions of justice in political, moral, and ethical philosophy have been concerned with defining the word for the purposes of abstract theorization, a sense of defining a key premise in order to construct a more broad conception of what is morally, politically, and ethically "just." Transitional justice, however, has come about as a field more directly concerned with the process of nation states shifting their political and governmental frameworks, usually in the wake of mass genocide or totalitarian despotism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines transitional justice as involving "the philosophical, legal and political investigation of the aftermath of war." The questions surrounding transitional justice are necessarily more applied than theoretical, though the discussion has moved in recent years from a focus on case studies and policy formation to more philosophically fueled questions of the legitimation of law or moral imperatives brought about by seismic political shifts. The two most classic case studies in transitional justice include the war crime tribunals at Nuremberg following World War II and the end of apartheid in South Africa, which famously brought about the

South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission formed under the auspices of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In the example of the Nuremberg Trials, of course, the court sought retributive action toward Nazi officials through capital punishment, often hangings, while the South African TRC opted for what Tutu referred to as “restorative justice,” in most cases granting amnesty to perpetrators of government-sanctioned violence under apartheid in exchange for a true account and recording of their involvement. Once past injustice has been recognized and sufficiently acted upon, there comes the question of rebuilding and legitimizing some new governmental establishment that both improves on the past system and, more importantly, gains the consent of citizens. Ruti Teitel describes the theoretical course of this step as following one of two possible trajectories: “Either political change is thought necessarily to precede the establishment of the rule of law or, conversely, certain legal steps are deemed necessarily to precede a political transition” (3). These two premises Teitel goes on to label as either “realist” or “idealist,” meaning that those who see the establishment of political power as preceding the law believe people will only take the establishment of the new law seriously once the “force” of law commands them to do so (realists) or there is a possibility that citizens will see law as legitimate without established, political authority in place (idealists). In the case of “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” O’Connor’s narrative depicts a situation in which the force of law has been established with the widespread desegregation of public spaces, but the matter of recognition and retribution characteristic of the early stages of transitional justice has not been settled, at least as evidenced by the Chestnys. Needless to say, in the wake of federal legislative changes—catalyzed by the efforts of the Southern Christian Leadership Commission, the NAACP,

and others—national law was changed to reflect the ideal of equality under law before the beliefs of most white Southern citizens were ready to meet them.

### **A Family in Transition**

While the desegregation of buses was a done deal legally that citizens did not imagine would be changed soon, a *fait accompli* in spite of our often sentimentalizing the struggle, in O'Connor's story, the concerns of just recognition and retribution for past wrongs play a pivotal role in reading the ethical purchase of the story in terms of justice. But because the story is not as overtly political in its ultimate concerns as other readings have suggested, that will raise the question of where, exactly, in the narrative these concerns come into play. Unlike Star/Sarah in "The Comforts of Home" or Singleton in "The Partridge Festival," there is not a clear figure in the "Everything that Rises Must Converge" who explicitly embodies human suffering as it has been corralled by civic institutions and confronted by the stories' protagonists. Instead, O'Connor goes to great pains to equalize, or "converge," the characters in notable ways: the first African American man on the bus is dressed very well, the mother who hits Mrs. Chestny is famously wearing the same hat as her white counterpart, the Chestnys live in a part of town that is hinted as being more diverse, and the fact that they all ride the bus in the first place suggests that none of them owns a vehicle. Who, exactly, is demanding to be recognized and whose actions have warranted retribution? To the first question of recognition, it seems the character most concerned with this is Julian, who paradoxically tells his mother that African Americans do not need her sympathy while, ironically, the nexus of his campaign against his mother's prejudice is that she *recognize* her black counterparts on the bus as equals, a pedagogical endeavor that we know from the story's



beginning is doomed to failure. Furthermore, the sort of recognition Mrs. Chestny eventually offers, the shiny new penny to the boy on the bus, proves deeply offensive to the recipient (or at least his mother), and, like the mother's box of candy in "The Comforts of Home," emblemizes the sort of "Old South," paternalistic approach to race we are not meant to view sentimentally. The penny, featuring the face of Lincoln and the smallest form of physical currency in the United States, symbolizes brilliantly a cheap, thoughtless charity that falls far short of both just recognition and substantive reparations. The question of retribution comes into play as a response to this act of incomplete charity, when the African American mother strikes Mrs. Chestny on the head with her purse, finishing the corporal, turned capital, punishment already begun verbally by Julian before even boarding the bus.

The story depicts a bus that has already been integrated with no outward invective from the white riders, whom in several instances express distaste and/or discomfort for the situation but do not seem resolved to challenge the law or cause a fuss. No "The South will Rise Again!" sentiment can be found, even as Mrs. Chestny appeals to Julian to "know who he is," namely the descendant of an honorable Southern family. She says to Julian, as they wait for the bus, "You remain what you are...Your great grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves" (6). Julian, of course, reminds his mother that there are no more slaves, and she, painfully for the reader, responds by saying, "They were better off when they were...It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (7). In reading these echoes of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in Mrs. Chestny's claims, the inclination might be to deservedly call her a racist and set out to discern whether or not O'Connor sufficiently dispatches her narrator

to judge this woman's bigotry. Yet, rather than judge the woman herself, O'Connor's narrator instead focuses on articulating the self-righteousness of Mrs. Chestny's son, Julian, with his premises of equality certainly correct but profoundly unsettling nonetheless because of his execution of those premises. O'Connor's choice of Julian as a focalizing character in the story complicates the majority judgment of the Civil Rights Movement as always already *just* in its course and shifts the focus of the story away from the bus they ride on and toward those riding therein. As I have argued with "The Comforts of Home" and "The Partridge Festival," justice is only justice for O'Connor when preceded by love. The demands of the charity-love imperative do not disappear in transition, but the story at hand further dramatizes the inability of law, however just in its framing and necessary at the social level, to transition humans sufficiently into more just relations with one another. Ironically, the most loving example in the story can be found in the woman who has just finished lauding the virtues of "separate but equal."

Despite her ignorance and obvious racial prejudice, the narrator depicts Mrs. Chestny as a loving mother who, while a wholesale subscriber to racial inequality, appears to have made great sacrifices to support her son. Julian, by way of narrative focus, characterizes his mother's love toward him as embodying the sort of "mother's guilt" complex so common in depictions of mother/son relationships: "the law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things" and "Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet,' she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town" (4). In the process of infantilizing Julian's mother, the narrator has revealed what Mrs. Chestny has actually

done for Julian, and we get a sense that the “making a mess of things” judgment may not be the whole story. Also, the purple hat Mrs. Chestny wears on the bus, and that later becomes the most vivid symbol for “convergence” in the story, is an object of great debate at the story’s beginning. Mrs. Chestny is clearly conflicted over the cost of the hat, and resolves to take it off before Julian ultimately tells her to keep it on. If the mother were the selfish, manipulative woman Julian makes her out to be, then why would she be so obviously concerned with, perhaps even embarrassed by, the price of her hat, having contemplated returning it to the store saying they “could pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty” (5)? Why try to offer encouragement continually to her son, as “disenchanted with [the world] as a man of fifty” (12), who is both irritable and without many job prospects?

This woman, again, is certainly a racist embodying the level of pervasive ignorance Civil Rights proponents were working tirelessly against at the time the story takes place, but should this completely eclipse the fact that she has remained dutiful to her son despite his obvious condescension? In the end, of what consequence is Julian’s quest to enlighten his mother when the bus has already been integrated and the laws have already changed outside either of their control? This is the ironic moral quagmire of the story—that in a fictive setting in which the author has at many turns shown the inadequacy of justice without charity-love as its foundation, how do we answer the character embodying the qualifications of bigotry that are so obvious looking back to the mid-20th Century? The only other options O’Connor offers in this transition to “convergence” do not ultimately prove satisfactory either: Mrs. Chestny’s self-martyred

son, who mistakes sympathy for recognition, and the unnamed African American mother on the bus, who mistakes reactive violence for just retribution.

Because he cannot shoulder the burden of receiving his mother's charity, the reality of *his* situation, Julian instead shifts to an ideological game of chicken with his mother over their respective responses to their African American counterparts. Readers are only offered Julian's motivations and rationalizations in this, but Wayne Booth's assessment in *A Rhetoric of Irony* summarizes this conflict nicely:

The mother does not see real 'Negroes,' for example, only the stereotypes that her childhood has provided her with...But Julian does not see real people either; instead he sees only the stereotypes that his liberal opinions dictate...Similarly, neither of them can see the other: Julian cannot see his mother for what she is; she cannot see what a miserable failure she has helped to create in him. (165)

Clearly, Julian Chestny considers himself an enlightened participant in the transition from Jim Crow to integration, but the narrator's treatment of him taints the intellectual's ethos even more, at points, than his own actions, which will certainly have to be considered as well. As Julian and his mother wait for the bus, O'Connor's narrator shows him reeling from his mother's reminder of their Southern, white, aristocratic heritage and labels his attempts at correcting Mrs. Chestny: "There was in him an *evil* urge to break [his mother's] spirit" (8 emphasis mine). It seems Julian is not just one of O'Connor's intellectuals being shown his own mistakes from a presumed place of moral superiority; the son's project has begun with an "evil" urge. In several instances, beyond this declaration of evil, the reader is also warned that Julian's purview does not necessarily

convey an objective reckoning of the events on the bus. He often spends more time in what the narrator labels “the inner compartment of his mind” and adds, “This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of whatever was around him” (10). For a character so involved with his mother’s reaction to the new realities of integrated buses, he is markedly preoccupied with the abstract, theoretical underpinnings of the situation than the real, relational concerns put forth by his mother.

In a way I think aptly addresses Julian’s ethos in the story, Michael Sandel, during his opening lecture to students enrolled in his popular “Justice” course at Harvard, warns of what he calls “the personal risk” of pursuing philosophical principles: “There’s an irony; the difficulty of [political and moral philosophy] consists in the fact that it teaches what we already know...it makes what we know strange. Philosophy estranges us from the familiar...but once the familiar turns strange, it’s never quite the same again” (“Justice”) While Julian never utters any direct quotations from the western philosophical tradition— nor is he depicted poring over his books like other O’Connor intellectuals— his commitment to “principle,” even in the midst of a momentary acknowledgment of his mother’s “innocence” before she is struck by the black woman’s purse, points to his estrangement from the familiar: “For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before *principle* rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh” (17 emphasis mine). Lest his resolve be swayed by her “innocence,” he pivots back on the superiority of his principle of justice, which in the context of the story refers to his mother’s retribution for condescension toward the African American family. The narrator reinforces Julian’s commitment to principle by underscoring his separation of

love from the equation entirely. For Julian, love has a way of blinding one's judgment to the point of eschewing reality: "Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother" (12). Love, it seems, would get in the way of the process of justice as Julian sees it, which does not operate from the premise of love but of principles<sup>9</sup>. Even earlier in the story, the narrator conveys Julian's assessment of his mother's worth in light of philosophical reasonableness: "The old lady was clever enough and he thought that if she had started from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her. She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which [Julian] had never seen her set foot" (11). In light of Julian's "mental bubble," the "fantasy world" ascribed to the mother by the narrator reads even more ironically. Readers certainly should not disagree with Julian's assessment of his mother's "premises," having heard her defenses of slavery and segregation more generally. The more important question remains whether what the son offers warrants his self-established place of moral superiority. The fact that he views his mother along these terms of "principle" and "premise" raises the question of what, exactly, *his* premises are and whether they are ultimately maintained.

### **Recognition**

Rather than see race relations as a situation in which human beings are learning to live in one another's midst, Julian sees it as an extended thought experiment premised on

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say, of course, that love itself cannot be a principle. It is just not Julian's principle, and the fact that he is adamant about its removal from his project is telling.

recognition for victims of past wrongs. This approach, in terms of social justice, is markedly different from the concerns of distributive justice, especially as espoused by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, which has dominated the conversation of social justice over the last forty years. Distributive justice, as formulated by Rawls, concerns itself more with the establishment of just societies through systems committed to fairness as an overarching operating principle, and Rawls primarily ensures fairness through the “difference principle,” which “holds that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society” (13).

O’Connor’s story, while framed in the context of a struggle for social equality, hints at the notion of material reparation at several points, but while Julian certainly sees fairness as an operating principle, the action of his strivings for justice largely prove immaterial. In other words, the young intellectual sees unfairness in the comments of his mother and other riders on the bus, but his appeals to fairness, within the scope of the story, have no distributional possibility.

In contrast to distribution, recognition is concerned with political structures that have already done damage to certain groups and does not exclusively refer to material social goods. Sparked in application by Desmond Tutu’s “restorative justice” in South Africa after apartheid and theorized notably by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, recognition has emerged as a step in the course of justice as important as distribution and retribution. Summarizing the shift in political philosophy toward a notion of recognition, Axel Honneth nods to Rawls’s “justice as fairness” while summarizing a shift in premises: “Here it is no longer the elimination of inequality that appears to represent the

normative aim [of political justice], but the avoidance of humiliation or disrespect; ‘equal distribution’ or ‘equality of goods’ no longer form its central categories, but ‘dignity’ and ‘respect’” (351). Presumably, after rights have been equalized and social goods are within fair reach of all citizens, there remains the issue of victims of injustice not being sufficiently *recognized* socially by perpetrators, or at least participants, in the same injustice. In practice, this has more often amounted to truth commissions and state endeavors, such as national monuments or holidays, to raise awareness of past injustice rather than material reparations or redistribution. Justice, in the sense of *doing* justice to an event in verbal reckoning or artistic replication, also has to do with recognizing, fully and justly, what has happened. As a painter might not “do justice” to the beauty of a sunset or the horror of battle, in the process of recognition, one might not “do justice” to a past injustice, thus unjustly making that injustice unremembered and, thus, as Santayana warned, more likely to be repeated. In “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” reparations and redistribution are not a possibility among the characters, but Julian’s project seems, above all, to get his mother to recognize the injustice done to African Americans.

The word “justice” itself is invoked twice in the story, and the first instance comes as Julian revels in the fact that the first African American has entered the bus on their trip. O’Connor writes, “Julian kept his paper lowered to watch [a large ‘Negro’ get on]. It gave him a certain satisfaction to see *injustice* in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three-hundred miles” (12 my emphasis). What, exactly, is the injustice in operation here? African Americans are both allowed on the bus and can sit anywhere, but the narrator’s



ascribing “injustice” to the situation seems to refer more to the white passengers’ responses to the man’s entry and, more specifically, Mrs. Chestny’s reaction to the man entering the bus. Upon seeing the man, Mrs. Chestny whispers to Julian, “Now you see why I won’t ride on these buses by myself” (12). For Julian, the combination of prejudice and fear espoused by his mother amounts to injustice, and he spends the remainder of the bus ride trying to rectify this lack of recognition. The son attempts to bestow recognition to the African American riders primarily by sitting near them: “When he got on a bus by himself, he made it a point to sit down beside a Negro in reparation as it were for his mother’s sins” (8). Rather than provide any kind of substantive reparation for the injustice that has been done to these people, Julian’s focus, whatever his honestly held conscious intentions, seems more on his feeling like his hands are clean in the matter. Ralph Wood, in *Flannery O’Connor in the Christ-Haunted South*, goes even further by saying that Julian “turns a rightful demand for racial justice into a wrongful demand for moral congratulations” (116). In other words, by trying to recognize the African American riders on the bus, he seeks recognition himself.

Julian follows principles that, he claims, separate his emotions from his judgment, but he ironically sees sympathy as a sufficient means of recognition that answers the moral orthopraxis of his system. Once the African American man is seated with a newspaper, Julian makes it a point to switch seats and continue his ironic project of “reparations,” all the while motivated by a sense that “he had openly declared war on [his mother]” (13). However, this does not go according to plan, as the man remains “entrenched behind his paper” (13). The narrator adds, “He was either ignoring the change in seating or had never noticed it. There was no way for Julian to convey his

sympathy” (13). So according to Julian, above and beyond more equal hiring practices, educational opportunity, voting rights, fair trials instead of racially prejudiced juries, or any of the other myriad, incalculable social injustices being done to African Americans in the early 1960s, the most effective way to offer “reparations” and recognition to these people is through mere sympathy, and under the premise of instructing his mother toward the right “premises” at that. Sympathy is not justice any more than feeling guilty is the same as correcting one’s behavior, and it generally denotes a person who does not *need* sympathy expressing it to one who does.

Of course, sympathy can be genuinely offered and received, but we know from the narrator that this is not the case for Julian. Commenting on the young intellectual’s expectation that the African Americans on the bus *need* his sympathy, Wayne Booth writes, “Julian’s liberal abstractions lead him to expect all Negroes to want his sympathy and interest, and to conform to his stereotyped demand that they ‘rise’...But they insist on dwelling in a totally inaccessible world” (166). Sympathy expressed to a stereotype does not amount to sympathy expressed genuinely, and the black man’s “annoyed look” suggests that he sees this as well as we do. The man does not want Julian’s sympathy; he wants to read his paper and does not, as Du Bois writes in the opening of *The Souls of Black Folk*, want to be “in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye[d] curiously or compassionately,” and asked, in one way or another, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (3). The man’s rejection of Julian’s sympathy actually points to a paradox of just recognition in terms of equality that O’Connor demonstrates productively in this story: to be *recognized* justly means, in this example, to be ignored.

Julian, however, does not also extend the sympathetic imperative toward his mother in the wake of the man failing to reward his sympathy: “[Mrs. Chestny] continued to gaze at [Julian] but she did not take advantage of his momentary discomfort. Her eyes retained their battered look. Her face seemed to be unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure had risen. Julian allowed no sympathy to show on his face. Having got the advantage, he wanted desperately to keep it and carry it through” (13-14). Though Julian “allows no sympathy,” alluding to the fact that may in fact feel it, having “declared war” on his mother’s prejudice, he cannot afford to recognize her obvious physical suffering. This passage may be read comically here as a cartoonish mother annoyed by her son’s actions if we did not know of her recent health issues and the fact that she will soon face death at the hands of both her son and her unnamed African American counterpart on the bus. Julian’s project of recognition has been retributive in its aim the entire time.

### **Retribution**

In the terms of transitional justice around which I have put forth this discussion, “Everything that Rises Must Converge” ultimately emerges as more of a war tribunal with Mrs. Chestny as defendant rather than an exemplification of Tutu’s restorative justice, all parties seeking to fully recognize past wrongs and move on. In his monograph, *Before the Sun has Set: Retribution in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor*, John Lawrence Darretta even declares, “Retribution is what Flannery O’Connor’s fiction is about... Her characters, for example, compulsively search out a doom that is commensurate with their guilt or strain for understanding to clarify their behavior” (1). Readings of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People,” for example, are often framed in terms of the protagonists’ desert for their comeuppance in the end of

their stories: Did the Grandmother *deserve* to die? Does Joy/Hulga Hopewell *deserve* be left blind and legless in a hayloft by a nefarious bible salesman? Above and beyond social justice or distributive justice in light of transition, the story primarily serves as a rumination on the nature and limits of retributive justice.

Julian has set out to teach his mother “a lesson,” but the lesson is not toward cultivating a more just view of society in his mother. Rather, as we have seen, it flows from what the narrator calls an “evil” urge. After his failure to convey his “sympathy” to the man with the paper, Julian’s fantasies of retribution toward his mother by replicating his proximity to African Americans and, even, forcing her to be closer to them: “He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend an evening. He would be entirely justified but her blood pressure would rise to 300” or “ He imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. He toyed with that idea for a few minutes and then dropped it for a momentary vision of himself participating as a sympathizer in a sit-in demonstration” (15)<sup>10</sup>. Surely he does not think she will be moved from the sick bed to racial repentance; these are fantasized as acts of punishment.

The narrator employs “justice” a second time in the story when Mrs. Chestny’s absurd purple hat famously appears on the head of an African American woman on the

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, this is the only fantasy from the story flowing from Julian’s principles that, if enacted, *could* sufficiently bring about just recognition both politically and personally for African Americans during the struggle for desegregation which, despite the inevitability of integration depicted in O’Connor’s story, was in reality still working rather slowly through the “all deliberate speed” mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

bus. Reveling in the fact that his mother has on the same hat as the unnamed mother, he wants to make sure she knows that he knows the hats are the same, but he also has a moment of discomfort in his celebration:

The blue in [the hats] seemed to have turned a bruised purple. For a moment, [Julian] had an uncomfortable sense of [his mother's] innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh. His grin hardened until it said to her as plainly as if he were saying aloud: Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson.

(17)

In this passage, “justice,” “punishment,” and “principle” are one in the same and each equivalent to retribution. The fact in and of itself that the African American woman has on the same hat is, for Julian, punitive proof that his mother’s statement regarding rising “on their own side of the fence” does not hold up. However, his celebration of the hat does not affect his mother for as long as he believes it should, and its gesture toward “rising” ultimately only proves, as Alice Walker’s mother says, that “Black folks have money to buy foolish things with now too” (qtd. in Walker 50). Having been notably shaken by the hat, Julian’s mother next becomes more enamored with the cuteness of a little boy whose mother would rather he stay on his own side of the fence.

In “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” the story’s most prominent African American character, much like Julian’s “annoyed” man with the newspaper, does not seem interested in collecting recognition from white oppressors. She, like the man with the newspaper, is trying to ride the bus with her son without incident. Furthermore, pressuring the binary of oppressor and the oppressed, O’Connor’s unnamed African-

American mother rejects the possibility of forgiveness in the face of Mrs. Chestny's act of offering the coin to the boy, and this strikes the nerve of moral ambiguity numerous scholars have pointed to with the ending of this story as symbolically retributive, New South doing away with Old South. However, I do not see the death blow of the mother's purse as ambiguous in the context of this story. Without a trial she could understand or a real consideration of her own racist mindset, Mrs. Chestny is killed physically for her act of epistemological condescension. To say that the African American mother's action of retribution toward Mrs. Chestny is unjust is to identify an important ethical demand of this text and highlight the real subversiveness of O'Connor's social commentary therein. The principle of equality here is not, as I have said, concerned as much with distribution or rights; equality in this story demands equal responsibility for one's actions in spite of social injustice. In other words, O'Connor's story, while more narratively concerned with Julian's self-absorption and his stereotypical, unjust use of African Americans in his project to reform his mother, demands that black exceptionalism and physical retribution for past wrongs are unjust as well. The cultivation of the virtue of justice is violated in *both* pairs of mothers and sons riding on the integrated bus.

At this point, one might argue that we cannot completely judge what the African American mother has done in the story because we, left to Julian's purview, have been narratively shielded, perhaps unjustly, from her consciousness and motivations. In other words, we may fault O'Connor for not giving her black character a voice and instead leaving the young boy's mother in the reader's mind as "[A] giant of a woman. Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out. The downward tilt of her large lower lip was like a warning sign: DON'T TAMPER WITH ME" (16). Knowing the end

of the story, the narrator is spot on here, but if I have decided to judge this fictional woman's actions as unjust, then why trust O'Connor's narrator, primarily concerned with the thoughts and motivations of a young white man clearly afraid of the African Americans he encounters, for my characterization? Alice Walker, while not completely letting O'Connor off the hook in her essay on her fellow Southern writer, offers an insight with this question in mind:

That [O'Connor] retained a certain distance (only, however, in her later, mature work) from the inner workings of her black characters seems to me all to her credit, since, by deliberately limiting her treatment of them to cover their observable demeanor and actions, she leaves them free, in the reader's imagination, to inhabit another landscape, another life, than the one she creates for them. This is a kind of grace many writers do not have when dealing with representatives of an oppressed people within a story, and their insistence on knowing everything, on being God, in fact, has burdened us with more stereotypes than we can ever hope to shed. (52)

Presumably, had O'Connor dispatched her narrator to convey the thoughts of her black characters more explicitly, she might have fallen into "the problem of representation," overstepping her bounds as an artist of limited purview. The unnamed mother's actions in the story are just those—actions—and in reading justice in this story, she can be viewed equally as a victim of social injustice and as a perpetrator of unjust violent retribution. The reader sees what Mrs. Chestny does and may gauge whether her punishment is just, regardless of the perpetrator.

Whether Mrs. Chestny's being beaten with a purse should be viewed as a just act of retribution also relies on how we characterize her giving the child the shiny penny. The incident has essentially been read from two extremes, and in some ways these extremes depend upon the extent one reads Mrs. Chestny sympathetically or her action symbolically. John F. Desmond sees the penny as further proof that O'Connor's white characters reject the salvation of what he calls the "mystical community": "The story dramatizes the violent convergence of different visions of history and the self-inflicted spiritual violence suffered by those who resist accepting their identity within the corporate unity" (68). By offering the penny, in other words, the mother again rejects the humanity of African Americans as unequal with her own, and this symbolic rejection of their worthiness of entering the "mystical community" heralds a self-inflicted spiritual violence. However, reading Mrs. Chestny's action very sympathetically, Ralph Wood does not mince words defending her action: "To view the gift of the pretty penny as anything other than blameless is to indulge in the same vicious moralizing that Julian pours on his mother as she lies fatally stricken by the black *furiosa*" (118). While I have also read Mrs. Chestny sympathetically, calling her the most loving character in the story, and claimed that the unnamed mother's violence is unjust, I still see Julian's mother as acting on ignorant racial stereotypes that are decidedly *unjust*, but the question here is whether her ignorance, which is even called "innocence" at several points in the story, warrants retribution. I do not believe I am "vicious[ly] moralizing" when I say that while Mrs. Chestny was killed by both her son's unloving campaign against her and the African American mother's unwarranted violence, Julian's mother does not, in the end, emerge



entirely blameless, having both raised Julian and provoked the boy's mother by engaging with him against her obvious wishes.

In the end, we are left to read between the lines of judgment and suffering as to an ideal form of justice, because none of O'Connor's characters offer a picture of "perfect justice." Julian may have the correct diagnosis in his acknowledgment of racial injustice writ large, but his prescription of applying sympathy from a position of ignorant moral superiority is clearly the most severe object of narrative judgment in the story. The African American mother on the bus, while justifiably trying to teach her son not to accept the ignorantly paternalistic charity of some white people, finishes off the murder of Mrs. Chestny begun by her own son, unjust lethal retribution for a singular, non-lethal act of ignorance. Then of course there is Mrs. Chestny, who loves her son unconditionally yet, while demonstrating love more fully than any other character, has still ultimately failed to inculcate in Julian the virtue of justice grounded in charity-love, which Julian needed more than he knew on the bus that day. Because the story, like "The Comforts of Home" in particular, is framed within the confines of a broken family relationship existing within the context of broken political relationships outside of the family, "Everything that Rises Must Converge" suggests that the only viable starting point for a just society is within a small system of filial love that cultivates the virtue of justice in an individual. We see this hope in that at least one point in the story, Julian has an opportunity to see his mother's suffering and react, and the fact that there is at least the possibility that he will enters what the narrator calls "the world of guilt and sorrow" shows that despite his deliberate, "evil" campaign against his mother, their love for one another has the ability to pull him out of his "mental bubble" and eventually beg "the old

lady” whom he begrudged to join on the bus, yelling as she dies, “Darling, sweetheart, wait!” (22).

Politically, I argue O’Connor’s story depicts retribution as an unsuccessful continuation of the cycle of oppression, in which one group proves a winner, the other a loser, and the condition is maintained until the loser strengthens to the point of overtaking the winner. In the end, the story continues to warrant an ethic of charity-love on the individual level, both *philia* (for family) and *agape* (for the other), but it also calls into question the merits of retribution in the first place. In the considerations of transitional justice, I find that restorative justice proposes a model that holds potential to avoid the judgment in the story around the ideal of justice, and introduces a concept that is difficult to swallow yet consistent with the unsettling nature of Mrs. Chestny’s death. Writing on the limits of retributive justice in political transition, Mark Amsutz argues for a commitment to “political forgiveness”: “[Since] retribution assumes that reconciliation can occur only after legal justice has been achieved, such a paradigm allows little or no room for political forgiveness. The restorative justice paradigm, by contrast, emphasizes the renewing of relationships through reconciliation based in part on truth telling, contrition, and even forgiveness” (153). Perhaps it seems odd to see an appeal to forgiveness in the writings of Flannery O’Connor, whose narrative voice rarely forgives wrongdoing, but in the end it goes along with the limits of civic justice we have seen in the other stories I have discussed as well. By replacing Mrs. Chestny’s grotesque racism with revelatory contrition, Julian’s selfishly rendered premises with love, and the unnamed mother’s violence with forgiveness, however difficult, the tense-integrated bus looks toward a chance at something better than convergence: justice.



## **CONCLUSION**

### **CODA: OF O'CONNOR'S JUSTICE AND THE REST OF US**

I would like to close this study by very briefly acknowledging a few lingering questions and implications for this discussion of justice in Flannery O'Connor's work. For instance, if the character of much of what I have said has been in relation to a distinctly Christian conception of love and justice, then that will inevitably raise the question of whether or not any of this need apply to anyone who is not a Christian but still finds merit and worth in O'Connor's fiction. This evokes the seminal and unresolved debate in O'Connor criticism regarding the primacy of theology subsuming all other concerns that populate the theoretical landscape of literary studies. "Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Justice" has not settled, or really attempted to settle, that debate, and I wonder if the tensions that arise in these conflicting readings are actually one of the most important things her work adds to the landscape of Twentieth Century American Literature. Above all, O'Connor's work reminds every reader, whatever their belief, that it is above all most important to know that there are mysteries we cannot completely comprehend: mysteries beyond both the totalizing attempts of systematic theology and the rigorous discipline of philosophical inquiry.

At the core of these readings, I have defended a Christian notion of charity as foregrounding any coherent possibility for justice in O'Connor's work, despite the use of seemingly unloving means to get there: all of the unlovable, ridiculous persons, horrific violence, and unresolved narrative injustice. In his introduction to *Battling to the End*, Renè Girard underscores the difficult path of nonviolent charity-love that comes with the notion of justice, tempered with charity, I have found helpful in discussing justice in

O'Connor's stories: "We can all participate in the divinity of Christ so long as we renounce our own violence. However, we now know...that humans will not renounce it. The paradox is thus that we are starting to grasp the Gospel message at the very moment when the escalation to extremes is becoming the unique law of history" (xvi). It seems that in seeking justice we must acknowledge that this is both difficult and, from Girard's standpoint, that it even proliferates violence through the demystification of civic and cultural structures. I want to be very clear that I do not think the appeal to charity-love lacking in Thomas, Calhoun, Julian, and others would have been easy to achieve, or even probable. There is also the important question of the feasibility of charity-love that evokes a radical *unselfing* that has much deeper implications in the conversation of moral responsibility in ethics and political philosophy more broadly, a conversation I have largely left unengaged in discussing these stories.

The imperative of charity-love in the pursuit of justice, for example, may be an ideal that an individual, given a certain view of the human condition, is unreasonable. Owen Flanagan, in *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*, offers such a view of the human disinclination toward the possibility of the others-centeredness implicit in charity:

The picture of persons as by nature rational egoists who enter into social relations for purely instrumental purposes and who come to value social relations gradually and only to the extent that such relations are productive of their own good narrowly conceived—call it the classical picture—not only is the prominent philosophical psychology within certain (but not remotely all) segments of the contractarian and liberal traditions, but also is thought in certain quarters to be

simply true and vindicated by psychology, economics, and other human sciences.

(108)

Flanagan's position of psychological realism, premised in large part by the "classical picture" conceived here, maintains that by fixating on ideals, especially justice, we miss the different, smaller yet crucial ethical appeals in individual personality that are informed by human proclivity rather than human possibility. People work for "their own good narrowly conceived" and this would make, in addition to charity, the sort of benevolence appealed to by Martha Nussbaum, for example, in the capabilities approach unlikely at best. My feeling is that Flanagan offers a fair picture of human tendency and that oftentimes in chasing ideals an individual is prone to keep eyes forward on the prize rather than the ground they tread and the path they have worn, the reality of their endeavor. However, while O'Connor also seems quite invested in depicting the short-sightedness and self-centered tendency of humans, she seems to offer a different argument about what to do with it that while situated religiously, and motivated by divine command, I feel has allies elsewhere.

Nussbaum, in discussing the benevolence imperative in a capabilities approach to justice, admits that this course may not be realistic, saying, "Only time and effort will answer this question" (410). However, she goes on to confront the question of benevolence's *real* potential to aid in the achievement of justice by saying, "It seems that the extension of benevolence is at least possible, and that people's conceptions of what they owe to self and others are actually very fluid. It is clear, for example, that the general public culture of the United States teaches many things that militate against benevolence: that the poor cause their poverty, that a 'real man' is self-sufficient and not

needy” (412). In other words, whether or not it is realistic, benevolence, and I would add *agape*, is at least possible, and this possibility is in spite of a person’s inherent, as Nussbaum says, neediness. Of course, there are cases in which a person’s psychosis or trauma may limit them from being capable to love another person in the full sense that would allow them to, for instance, feel remorse for wrong acts or identify with another individual’s pain. As we cannot deny from the example of Singleton in “The Partridge Festival,” there may be an important role for social institutions in limiting the harm a violence a sociopathic individual has the capacity to inflict on a community. Yet, we will never know to what extent Singleton might have refrained from violence had he been spared the public shame of the pillory and outhouse.

I have largely refrained from utilizing O’Connor’s essays and letters as a roadmap to understanding her philosophy, focusing more on the principles as evidenced by the stories but, nonetheless, informed by theo-philosophical positions it does not appear the author would have wholly disagreed with. However, I see an important answer to the position of Flanagan and other proponents of the “classical picture” that lessens emphasis on ideals. In the famous passage from “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” where she describes most completely her conviction “that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious,” O’Connor adds, “Such a writer will be interested in what we don’t understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than probability” (*Mystery and Manners* 42). O’Connor, regarding justice, does not mistake the impossible for the improbable, and while we may find answers and glimpses of this mystery outside of a devotion the Christian imperative of charity-love, this conception is still more radical than Nussbaum’s benevolence. In other words, it may not

be requisite to subscribe to a Christian framework in order to achieve the imperative of charity in justice I have espoused in O'Connor's work, but it helps. The mystery of justice lies in the fact that while we idealize it and seek to define it, though it may be indefinable as Derrida contends, its possibility remains a productive course for our attention, and cuts to the core of our tensions in reading the stunning and radical work of Flannery O'Connor.



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## **VITA**

Matthew Bryant Cheney was born in Knoxville, TN. He attended Farragut High School in Knoxville and went on to undergraduate studies at Carson-Newman College (now Carson-Newman University) in Jefferson City, TN, where in 2008 he graduated with his BA in English and a minor in Applied Psychology. From 2008 to 2011, Bryant Cheney coordinated the Bonner Scholars Program at Carson-Newman, a four-year intensive service learning and leadership development program for low-income and first generation college students supported by funding from the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation in Princeton, NJ. In 2011, Bryant Cheney enrolled in the Masters Program in English at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, where he also worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and Associate for the First-Year Composition Program teaching and assisting in English 101 and 102 classes. He graduated in May 2013 with his MA in English, having concentrated on 20th Century American Literature and Literary Theory. Matthew is continuing his graduate studies in the Doctoral Program in English at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, KY.