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Symbols of Salvation:

Sunday School Flannery O'Connor Style

“She looks like an angel of Gawd” (O'Connor 60). The boy at the Hot Spot exclaims where Mr. Shiftlet is ready to leave his new wife asleep at a counter as a faceless hitchhiker. Mr. Shiftlet has a chance to receive salvation, but his greed for the materialism of a car and his own being overlooks the sense of redemption that Lucynell Crater offers Shiftlet's life. Flannery O'Connor is stating that we are putting material possessions such as the car before morality, salvation, and the God Almighty of her deep southern and Catholic upbringing. At that moment, Mr. Shiftlet has the chance to redeem his life and all that he has done wrong. Lucynell is described as an angel of Gawd (God) and should be considered an allusion to the holiness that an angel of God represents. O'Connor doesn't use the basic Sunday homily to teach the value of salvation in her stories. Rather she masks the lesson of salvation in grotesque characters. She writes that salvation is offered in any guise, action, or form. O'Connor shows in her work that salvation is rarely offered in the form of mass consumption in the church, but rather she shows the reader that choices we make in our lives can decide our eternal fate.

O'Connor commented on her beliefs in "The Living Novel: A Symposium", "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (Sparrow, "Flannery O'Connor").

Before going too deep on the outcome, some mention has to be given to O'Connor's characters and the descriptions of those characters. O'Connor's technique is a simple one. "In

The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” the characters names are a reflection on who they really are inside. The name Shiftlet implies that this character should be watched closely because he is probably shifty. O’Connor uses the grotesque, the fact the character suffers a deformity like a missing limb, to symbolize the character has a hole in their moral character. Mr. Shiftlet is missing part of his arm. “His left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him” (O’Connor 47). These are the descriptions of poor Mr. Tom Shiftlet, a one-armed carpenter in search of a con, as he approaches the house of Miss Crater. Shiftlet forms a crooked cross with his half arm and his full arm, an image that alludes to Shiftlet being a savior figure. The crookedness reminds us that in this quasi-savior there is a dishonesty (crooked) that comes with Mr. Shiftlet. The cross is also the Christian symbol of salvation. It also represents the need for salvation for these two souls. It is the first significant symbol of salvation in the story. Therefore the purpose of Mr. Shiftlet missing part of his left arm is established in the story, yet we are to pity him at first since carpentry almost requires two arms. Is it coincidental that Mr. Shiftlet’s profession is also the same profession that Mark refers to Jesus as in the New Testament (Mark 6:3)? No, Shiftlet’s profession is another reinforcement of the symbolism of being a pseudo-savior.

Shiftlet almost calls out who he really is as well during the first exchange with Miss Crater. “Nothing is like it used to be, lady” he says, “The world is almost rotten” (O’Connor 49). Miss Crater agrees with him. This shows they both realize the rottenness from within their own selves. We are led to wonder what his own real identity is later in the exchange when he tells Miss Crater that she all she knows he could be lying about his own identity.

Miss Crater’s body also shows symbolism for lacking a good moral perspective. She has a mouth of missing dentition, a fact we find out about as she is gumming a seed in the story.

Since Miss Crater's deformity is associated with the mouth, we should take notice of the words she speaks.

The physical deformities allow us some meaning as the story progresses, but they also serve as a religious meaning of a soul in need of salvation. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" Shiftlet forms a cross with his half arm and his full arm to suggest that he might be the savior Miss Crater has been looking for to marry Lucynell and take her away. The author describes the cross is crooked to assign an evil double meaning to this symbol. Not only is Shiftlet a savior/anti-Christ figure but he is also someone who might harm for his own self-gain, making him a devil like figure as well. O'Connor uses this savior/demon character in this work as well as many of her other works. Miss Crater's missing dentition is an obvious metaphor for the evil of the words that come out of her mouth that allow her to barter Lucynell for a car. "One of O'Connor's most effective literary techniques was the use of the grotesque, and particularly the depiction of odd and freakish characters" (Brinkmeyer 176). Once again the importance of religion is exposed in O'Connor's writings.

The material warning that O'Connor makes begins to take place as Lucynell is bartered for a car. The reader is challenged at first to decide whether or not Miss Crater is a nurturing mother or an evil woman who must be tired of raising a mentally retarded, deaf-mute. If the role she plays is the nurturing mother, then the hole would be the emptiness she feels from failing to find Lucynell a husband. After Mr. Shiftlet looks around and the talk turns of Lucynell, it is clear the name Crater is a metaphor for a hole in the moral soul of Miss Crater. Both Mr. Shiftlet and Miss Crater are guilty of making the car a more important item than a human being. In setting up this scenario, we see the idea of unconventional salvation begins to be played out. O'Connor

shows that we are given chances in life to redeem our actions, and if we don't take those chances the outcome tends to get worse.

Miss Crater succeeds in convincing Shiftlet to marry Lucynell and take her away. It had nothing to do with Miss Crater's description of Lucynell to Shiftlet. "She is the sweetest girl in the world. I would give her up for nothing on earth. She's smart too. She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe. I wouldn't give her up for a casket of jewels" (O'Connor 52). All this talk is a sales pitch-a plea-to take Lucynell away. Once Mr. Shiftlet looks around and notices the old Ford sitting close to the house, it begins to sway to both their desire for material possessions. Lucynell becomes the helpless victim in the bartering process, unable to speak and fend for herself and her rights. Miss Crater's material desire is that for her home, and Mr. Shiftlet becomes focused on the one item he has desired to own for most of his life, a car. Mr. Shiftlet is able to acquire more out of the shifty deal with Miss Crater when he requests additional money to continue with the marriage. We begin to see the holes in these people's souls grow as their own self-interests are served over the needs of a poor helpless mentally retarded, deaf-mute. "A central principal of O'Connor's Catholic theology, expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians, is that evil has no being, and that evil always appears as good to the one who commits it, i.e., as something good for him" (Desmond 129).

It is not hard to see at this point, O'Connor is using this new symbol of the country, a car, to show that it is becoming a status symbol and material possession that is becoming excessively important in the American mainstream. O'Connor sees that materialism is the new evil in the country, and this is her warning that materialism is becoming the new religion of the United States.

The story consists of two parts. The first part is the trade, in which we see this need for material possessions. The second part enforces how these possessions continue to bring those who desire material possessions over morality to failure based on O'Connor's religious convictions. What appears as a dark comedy worthy of a Coen Brother's script, is actually a Sunday school lesson in the most nontraditional sense, which is interesting, based on O'Connor's traditional Southern upbringing.

Lucynell is a symbol of salvation, but not in the traditional form that Christians celebrate. She is symbolic of how we are given chances by God to live life in the way that O'Connor was brought up believing. This is the most important point in understanding O'Connor's story. She creates Shiftlet as the anti-Christ, who is really a soul in need of help. Lucynell becomes a representation of Christ; a choice that saves. Shiftlet must choose between keeping her in his life or driving off. She becomes a metaphor of making the decision to accept Christ in his life. She is a turning point for Shiftlet to start doing something right in his life. The boy in the diner enforces O'Connor's statement before Shiftlet drives off leaving Lucynell as a faceless hitchhiker as the boy touches her *golden* hair. Golden is a reference to heaven, the streets paved in gold, and the promise of salvation.

After Shiftlet leaves Lucynell behind, O'Connor's symbolism becomes dark. We see the light of Christ turn into shadowy figures as the war between good and evil begins to show its outcome. As Shiftlet drives down the road, we see his new love, the Ford, only provides temporary happiness. O'Connor is reminding us that material items produce little happiness compared to the happiness of accepting Christ and eternal salvation. "He was more depressed than ever as he drove on by himself" (O'Connor 60). The word himself not only refers to him being without Lucynell, but it is also religiously symbolic that he turned away from salvation; a

theme seen on a popular Christian bumper sticker: *God is my copilot*. As he drives on, we see more signs of O'Connor's salvation message as Shiftlet sees signs that remind him to "Drive Carefully: The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (O'Connor 60).

The imagery continues to get darker as she describes the scenery as Shiftlet drives down the road. "The road drops off on either side into dry fields" (O'Connor 61). Dry fields are similar to Shiftlet's life at this point. His life is dry without anything to offer, and the one chance he had to offer something, he disgraces himself. The sun also gives us some insight into Shiftlet's life. "It was a reddening ball that through his windshield was slightly flat on the bottom and top" (O'Connor 61). Red is a symbolic for the anger and guilt deep inside that Shiftlet is obviously ignoring as he continues depressed driving down the road. The sun is setting is a symbol the end is near. The sun being flat is obviously a metaphor to how meaningless Shiftlet's life is now that he has placed value in a car over a person. It provides another warning about materialism. It is also a symbol to how meaningless life is without salvation.

We see O'Connor's message of salvation enforced as Shiftlet picks up a hitchhiker along the road to deal with his depression and loneliness. Shiftlet begins talking about his dear old mother and what a gift she is. The boy he picks up doesn't have the same loving feelings for his mother as Shiftlet, and he angrily yells at Shiftlet, "You go to the devil!" (O'Connor 62). This is where O'Connor's Sunday school message becomes most obvious. She delivers the Christian story of heaven and hell. She makes it evident of where Shiftlet is headed now that he turned down his chance for salvation. By this point it is too late for Mr. Shiftlet. "Whether we gain admittance depends on how we've met the challenge: a perspective backed by Flannery

O'Connor, who bluntly stated that, "redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live"" (Sparrow, "Evolution").

While the distorted characters keep O'Connor's stories amusing, her descriptions of natural things are funny, almost too lightly described for the violence that is about to be carried out from the storm in "The Life You Save." Although, Mr. Shiftlet gets what was coming to him, her descriptions of how it came about are comical. She describes the tornado as clouds that come to look like turnips. She describes the severe raindrops that Shiftlet is trying to beat as tin can tops. "Nature shrinks to laughable proportions" (Bleikasten 140). O'Connor describes how nature is a form of divine justice. Even though O'Connor must realize how scary the power of an angry God is, she keeps the violence light and uses sarcasm to describe the justice served to Shiftlet.

"The Life You Save" is a social statement about materialism since the invention of the car. It is the shift, that event the Vatican has warned about, of material possessions taking the place of God in modern society; something that most of us are probably guilty of.

The real brilliance of O'Connor is she is capable of teaching the morality of the *Bible* on the level of a dark comedy. It's an interesting dichotomy between the formalness of the Catholic Church and the informal nature that O'Connor parallels the teachings of the *Bible* in her stories. The reader isn't preached to in her stories, but rather they are shown that a character must choose between good and evil, lifesaving salvation or the denial of it. Most readers probably don't realize they just entered Ms. O'Connor's Sunday school class as they read her works.

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