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# The Tender Reader**, or, Trivializing Flannery O'Connor

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**Abstract:** In this study, I interpret five short stories from Flannery O'Connor's first published collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955): "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," and "Good Country People." Each of the stories contains elements of the macabre, biting humor, or physical and psychological violence, so characteristic for the writer. Yet, less characteristically, each of them ends somewhat positively, sparing the reader the feeling of discomfort, which O'Connor usually serves. Thus encouraged, in search of apparently insignificant readerly comforts, I analyze the stories through the perspective of emotions, arguing that her repulsive, grotesque characters take on human qualities when viewed with compassion. O'Connor's texts contain considerable evidence that allows for the above reading. In this interpretation, the horror and disgust traditionally associated with the author's characters are replaced by tenderness, and the audience feels joy in discovering that the characters manage to defend themselves from dehumanization.

**Key words:** Flannery O'Connor, stories, characters, emotions

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** Choosing the approach for this study, I was inspired by Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Lecture, "The Tender Narrator." *The Nobel Prize*, 2019, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/ [10.08.2024].



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# Czuły czytelnik, albo, trywializując Flannery O'Connor

**Streszczenie:** Tematem artykułu jest pięć opowiadań Flannery O'Connor, wybranych z jej pierwszego zbioru, *Trudno o dobrego człowieka* (1955): „Ocalisz życie, może nawet własne", „Uśmiech szczęścia", Przybytek Ducha Świętego", „Ostatnia potyczka z nieprzyjacielem" oraz „Poczciwi wiejscy ludzie". Każde z opowiadań zawiera charakterystyczne dla pisarki elementy makabry, kąśliwego humoru albo przemocy fizycznej czy psychicznej. Jednak, co mniej charakterystyczne, każde z nich kończy się raczej pozytywnie, oszczędzając czytelnikowi uczucia dyskomfortu, które O'Connor zazwyczaj serwuje. W poszukiwaniu podobnych, na pozór błahych czytelniczych przyjemności, opowiadania te interpretuję przez pryzmat emocji. Argumentuję, że odpychające, groteskowe postacie O'Connor nabierają ludzkich cech, gdy patrzy się na nie ze współczuciem. Teksty O'Connor zawierają mnogość dowodów, które pozwolą na powyższe odczytanie. W tej interpretacji, grozę i obrzydzenie, tradycyjnie powiązane z postaciami autorki, zastępuje czułość, a odbiorca odczuwa radość odkrywając, że bohaterowie sami bronią się przed odczłowieczeniem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Flannery O'Connor, opowiadania, postacie, emocje

O'Connor's works are fun to teach because in most of my students[1] she evokes strong emotions of dislike. At the same time, her style presents no trouble; sure of understanding her, at least at the sentence level, the class responds willingly and freely: she likes neither her characters nor her readers, students announce,[2] adding knowledgeably – she is a racist, she is anti-women. I expect such responses in today's classroom. Few students grasp or comprehend O'Connor's religious message, but they are quick to learn about it. *SparkNotes* and the like come helpful. "Say what you wish, no matter how trivial it sounds" is usually how we start a discussion. Sometimes, trivializing O'Connor is all we do, though I dutifully direct my young people to critical sources on Southern gothic, O'Connor's attitude to race, and her Catholicism. But the pleasure of individual reaction comes first.

Emotional distance is "masculine" – nowadays a sexist remark, for modernists an attribute of good literature. Flannery O'Connor "writes like a man," a high compliment according to literary standards of her times (Chmiołek 2016: 126). In her own critical essays, O'Connor addresses emotions and speaks of "compassion" repeatedly, as if obliged to – that it is "[today's] reader's favorite word" or that "it's considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion." She continues, "the kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything" (O'Connor 2012). "Hazy compassion" is the conservative O'Connor's epithet directed against liberals of her times, showing simultaneously her conservatism and her "masculine,"

[1] I refer to Polish students who have near-native English-language skills and who are majoring in American studies.

[2] This circulating opinion about the writer, expressed in many ways, is also easy to find on *Goodreads* and similar sites.

cool detachment. A verbal connotation comes to mind: a century before her, Nathaniel Hawthorne referred to abolitionism as "the mistiness of a philanthropic theory" (31). "Misty" and "hazy" serve these two tough ironists to distance themselves from matters that seem too soft to be respectful. In later context, O'Connor's words predate reaction against "political correctness" disputes of the last few decades or rage against DEI as part of today's political campaigns. In all of these examples, the rights of the dispossessed matter, but to O'Connor, concern with the weak is cheap sentimentality. "I think what is meant by [compassion] is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human," she explains ironically (O'Connor 2012)[3]. Coolly unemotional, O'Connor does not excuse human weakness. Her third-person, seemingly objective narrator underlines the author's distance; this "relentlessly perceptive narrator never merges with her tragicomically blinded characters" (Weinstein 2009: 9). Both the abusers and the abused receive ironic treatment. Disregarding a so-called error of intent, some even claim that O'Connor "clearly derives authorial pleasure from the suffering of her fictional characters" (Dunne 2009: 122). I admit I am tempted by the idea.

*PMLA*'s 2015 special issue on "emotions" dissects the era when recognized literature was "masculine" – that is, devoid of soft, "feminine" sentimentality. "At least as early as the seventeenth century in Western cultures," reads the volume's introduction, "the power that emotion exerted over body and mind troubled thinkers who wanted to see the mind as superior to both body and emotion." Sentiment belonged to inferior beings, to "others" – such as women, homosexuals, or slaves. The mind was an attribute of those who wield control – of white, heteronormative men, guided by reason (Jensen et al. 2015: 1255). Emotionalism became "an insult to exclude voices from the public sphere. When women, queers, and racialized or culturally othered peoples have been called emotional, this has always meant too emotional, [ … ] unbecoming of the well-adjusted citizen" (Pahl 2015: 1457). Now, compassion even toward animals – just recently equated with tacky sentimentalism – has acquired a scholarly gravity. Elizabeth Arnold-Bloomfield cites a "new wave of theorists" – such as Josephine Donovan, Jacques Derrida, Ralph Acampora, and Donna Haraway – who have "granted compassion theoretical pride of place" (2015: 1467)[4].

Compassionate consideration of characters' behavior and fate allows me today to re-read O'Connor's without a sense of moral revulsion – in other words, it allows me to take pleasure in their rebarbative fictive lives. This reading pleasure is given to me by yet another critical approach of recent decades: surface reading, or "unsuspicious immersion" in the text (Halpern 2018: 635), as Joanne Dobson did by "trusting" her emotions when she interpreted the quintessentially sentimental piece of American literature, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Famously, Rita Felski identified "the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed [interpretive] moves" (2008: 1) – as passé. Hence, following Dobson's take on Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and Felski's doubts over "poses of analytical

[3] Characteristically, O'Connor dismisses *human* kindness: "In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber" (O'Connor 2012). The slippery-slope argument is one bad thing here. The other, offensive and brazen, is her appropriation of WW2 horrors.

[4] Well, white men – at least in 2015 – still ruled in *any* theoretical studies: "It is […] difficult […] to explain why, for example, feminist sympathy theory has remained in the margin while much attention has been given to the handful of texts that Derrida and his readers have dedicated to compassion" (Bloomfield 2015: 1467).

detachment, critical vigilance, guarded suspicion" (Felski 2008: 2), I will not refer to "the hidden depths" of O'Connor's stories; instead, I will describe the "sympathetic, emotional reaction" (Halpern 2018: 635) that her characters evoke in me, even though the stories in the volume *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* seem devoid of sentiment. O'Connor's people are usually comical, grotesquely shallow, sometimes repulsive. They do not evoke sympathy, although their fate is often tragic. Selfish, cruel and contemptible, they live among similar others. "What sustains our interest in such antipathetic figures in so grossly unsympathetic a world?" asks Harold Bloom in the preface to an anthology of critical articles, promptly answering that a religious interpretation of the stories – the meaning their author insisted on – is beyond his reading capacity (Bloom 2009: 6). He adds, however, that O'Connor is "more equivocal than she evidently intended" (Bloom 2009: 7). In looking for these "unintentionalities," then, I will invoke the principle of freedom, the right of the readers to interpret a work as they see fit – insofar as its words allow it, insofar as the words offer evidence. A sympathetic approach to the characters is the core of the following study. Sympathy is an emotion through which we understand others. In the grotesque characters of O'Connor's stories, I recognize human beings. I feel sorry for their fate, and I feel joy when I manage to "save" them, that is, perceive their humanity beneath their awfulness, even when that awfulness seems an inherent, essential part of their makeup. Often, I need to clear my mind from what I have learned about interpreting O'Connor's literary figures. In short, I look for the ways in which her characters resist their creator's cruel depiction of them.

The article takes on five out of ten stories from O'Connor's first collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. I selected the pieces which I consider hopeful, sometimes despite appearances. I insist on "happy endings"; I want to examine the sympathetic features of O'Connor's flawed, freakish human beings. I see these features in virtually all of her characters, but four of the collection's stories end in such utter horror that they form a counterpoint to the ones I focus on. Hence I won't discuss in detail the titular "Good Man," "The River," "A Circle in the Fire," and "The Displaced Person." In truth, I don't dare "trivialize" them. I also avoid discussing "The Artificial Nigger," commonly classified as a happy-ending tale: in Joyce Carol Oates's words, the story "is virtually unique in Flannery O'Connor's oeuvre, ending not in violent death, nor even in devastating irony, but with tenderness" (2009: 43). Thus, the heroes of "Artificial" need no "saving" – O'Connor herself spared them. The discussion that follows concerns the five remaining texts, which may easily evoke gloom, repulsion, or just a feeling of sorrow in the reader. But they have not evoked harsh feelings in the writer of this article.

Having served horrific endings of the two stories with which the collection begins, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The River," in the third, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the author saves the mortal lives of all the characters. Intellectually disabled Lucynell lives with her mother in a somewhat neglected farmhouse. A vagrant Mr. Shiftlet joins them. Mr. Shiftlet would like to have a car, and Mrs. Crater would like to marry off her daughter. Each achieves their goal. After proving his usefulness on the farm and repairing Mrs. Crater's old Ford, Mr. Shiftlet marries Lucynell. The groom insists on a honeymoon trip, for which his mother-in-law gives him a few dollars. At a restaurant, Lucynell falls asleep, and her husband drives away. He later picks up a hitchhiker. But the boy jumps out of the car when Shiftlet starts telling moralizing stories.

The vagrant Shiftlet and the widow Crater are O'Connor's characteristic types. They parrot noble ideas, but their interests are mundane. It is not clear whether the old woman wants to get rid of her daughter and expects the girl not to return from the honeymoon. Undoubtedly, the widow wants the man to help on the farm and lures him with the girl for this purpose: "A woman who does not speak [...] will not be able to quarrel with her husband or insult him," she says, trying to tempt him (O'Connor 1976: 176). For a moment, the story promises an idyll; indeed, the reader muses, these three people could live happily together. Mr. Shiftlet has fixed the farm equipment and taught the mute girl to pronounce the word "bird." However, he abandons the newlywed wife and steals the car. Only the hitchhiker realizes the man's evil nature – it's the only lesson Shiftlet will receive.

Yet Lucynell Crater, the apparent victim of manipulation, is a character worthy of closer scrutiny; she is the one who challenges the story's pessimistic overtone. Presented as mentally retarded, compared to an angel, she is still not defenseless. In fact, O'Connor does not sentimentalize disability: Lucynell "whimpers," "stamps her feet," and "makes speechless sounds"; she has "long pink-gold hair and eyes as blue as a peacock's neck" (O'Connor 1976: 56, 59, 52). "Pink-gold" disturbs – juxtaposed, the golden splendor of wealth and the pinkish innocence of the girl clash; additionally, the colors suggest an albino, a creature alien and bizarre. Among birds, the peacock is also alien and bizarre – repulsively beautiful. And even if the sapphire of its feathers captivates, who would want eyes the color of a bird's neck? However, the reader should not fear for the girl's fate – the author armed her sufficiently. I will venture to say that Lucynell's character evokes peace and contentment: when we met her, she calmly "[plays] with her fingers"; she plays with wooden cherries of her hat at the story's end (O'Connor 1976: 51, 64). Although she understands the concept of danger – when Shiftlet shows off with a lit match, the girl "[begins] to make loud noises [shaking] her fingers at him" (O'Connor 1976: 54) – she is not timid. Leaving with Shiftlett, she pays no attention to her mother – no bad premonitions worry her. And rightly so – because, ultimately, Lucynell will not suffer harm. When she wakes up in the restaurant and her disability becomes clear, someone will call the police, and the girl will return to her mother. Her appearance moves strangers: "she looks like an angel of Gawd" (O'Connor 1976: 64), says the awed waiter. This angel gets what she wants: attention, language lessons, a car trip, even her straw hat's wooden cherries that she can pick and throw out of the window. There is also the word "sly," which I consider crucial for understanding Lucynell's survival skills. O'Connor uses it three times in the story – once for Shiftlet and twice for Lucynell – and it suggests the retarded girl's hidden powers. At the beginning, she gives a "sly look" to the newcomer (O'Connor 1976: 53). The same "sly look" appears on Shiftlet's face (O'Connor 1976: 54) as he tries to worm his way into the old woman's good graces. Significantly, O'Connor employs the word "sly" only three times in her other works, each time in relation to a person who is strong and capable of manipulation.[5] The sentence that reassures me of Lucynell's optimistic fate contains the word "sly." The marriage has been sanctioned, the couple is about to embark on their honeymoon, the young woman sits comfortably in the car. "Every now and then her placid expression was changed by a sly isolated little thought like a shoot of green in the desert," writes O'Connor (1976: 63). Considering the hopeful "shoot of green" as a gift from the usually stingy creator – Lucynell will be just fine.

[5] Once in the story "Greenleaf" and twice in the story "The Lame Shall Enter First."

The interpretation of "A Stroke of Good Fortune" may be simple. Ruby Hill, a thirty-four-year-old married woman worries about an unspecified progressive disease, possibly cancer. The illness turns out to be an unwanted pregnancy. Readers of either feminist or Catholic beliefs will understand this text according to their respective principles. The obviousness of these interpretations makes one all the more inclined to carefully examine the main character, especially since O'Connor does not bestow on Mrs. Hill much sympathy, not unlike on the rest of her characters. This is evident in the first paragraph, when the woman's head is compared to a "big, florid vegetable" with "mulberry-colored hair stacked in sausage rolls" (O'Connor 1976: 67). Arguably, the hair is beautiful, an inseparable attribute of the temptress, but its food connotations diminish Ruby's attractiveness. (Additionally, the reader appreciates an opportunity to laugh.) Ruby is a snob and despises the province she comes from. Although elements of Southern culture are not central to the story, the "informed" reader will smile at Ruby's dislike of collard greens, a traditional part of the Southern diet. Ruby's brother, who has "just come back from the European Theater" and is visiting his sister, yearns for the dish; she views this as a symptom of provinciality, wishing he would choose something more "civilized" to eat (O'Connor 1976: 68). Ruby comes from a family of eight, her sisters bore "four children apiece," but to her it is "Pure ignorance. The purest of downright ignorance!" (O'Connor 1976: 70). To children, Ruby will certainly not devote herself.

Ruby Hill has two authority figures whom she trusts: they are Madam Zoleeda, "the palmist on Highway 87," and Bill Hill, Ruby's husband. The fortune-teller implies to Ruby that her condition is not caused by cancer. Madam Zoleeda is often mentioned in the story, each time to bring Ruby solace – the attentive reader will like the clairvoyant and perhaps long for one who is genuine. The woman assures Ruby that change is coming, but that "a long illness" will end with "a stroke of good fortune" (O'Connor 1976: 69). Ruby recalls Zoleeda's words as she herself is gripped by fear: "Madam Zoleeda said it would end in no drying up. Madam Zoleeda said oh but it will end in a stroke of good fortune! [...] Madam Zoleeda hadn't been wrong about anything yet" (O'Connor 1976: 83). The main character's trust in the Madam gives hope that Ruby will nevertheless consider the birth of her child "a stroke of good fortune." And, given Ruby's obsession with "drying up" (i.e., growing old and unattractive), here, too, "a stroke of good fortune" may await her – her body, grateful to nature and fulfilled, will bloom after the baby's birth. Madam Zoleeda might suspect as much.

Ruby's husband, Bill Hill performs his husband's duties at least as well as the fortune teller does hers. Ruby trusts Bill and relies on him: "Bill Hill takes care of that. Bill Hill takes care of that! Bill Hill's been taking care of that for five years!" she assures a friend. In addition to being "careful" in certain situations, Bill also watches over his wife's needs—he earns money, and thanks to him they will move to a better neighborhood, which Ruby dreams of. It is also significant that the woman leaves heavy shopping bags along with a note for her husband at the bottom of the stairs of the apartment building; Bill will carry them up. However, along with the friend who suggested it, the reader fears that Bill has let Ruby down in terms of "taking care of that" or worse, has deliberately "slipped up" (O'Connor 1976: 80). And although she has "gained some weight," Bill hasn't "noticed except that he was maybe more happy lately and didn't know why," thinks the wife (O'Connor 1976: 73). Near the end of the story, there appears an almost identical statement: "Bill Hill didn't mind

her being fat, he was just more happy and didn't know why" (O'Connor 1976: 81). But it is Ruby who doesn't know why – Bill is apparently well aware of the reasons for his wife's plumpness. There are more elements in the story that point to an optimistic interpretation, but I will stay with the most important one – the joy of a good husband: "She saw Bill Hill's long happy face, grinning at her from the eyes downward in a way he had as if his look got happier as it neared his teeth" (O'Connor 1976: 81–82). Indeed, for Mr. and Mrs. Hill, the future does not have to appear bleak.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost," uniquely in O'Connor's oeuvre, might not unsettle its readers at all, despite being centered around religion, a topic traditionally associated in the writer's work with violence. Yet here, no one dies, is deeply humiliated, or learns a painful lesson. Pain is mentioned, however – the protagonist dreams of becoming a martyr, but only "if they killed her quick" (O'Connor 1976: 95). A twelve-year-old girl, "the child" as O'Connor calls her, observes two teenage cousins, students at a convent school, during a holiday visit. The fourteen-year-olds think of boys and are not interested in "the child." The piece abounds with gender issues – there are the giggles of excited adolescents, the unattractiveness of a sweaty overweight boy, suggestive jokes, and finally the depiction of a hermaphrodite at a country fair – all giving the story a slightly off-color overtone. The Catholic writer won't spare her own religion its comically ambiguous aspects: the titular "Temple of the Holy Ghost" is the main joke, to which I will return. Indeed, merriment rules the story. When two pious country boys, equipped with harmonica and guitar, sing – as part of their summer courtship – to the young visitors about Jesus and the cross, the schoolgirls, ungodly yet educated, respond with "their convent-trained voices, *Tantum ergo Sacramentum*," a Catholic liturgical hymn. Bewildered and scandalized by the foreign-sounding text, the young Protestants comment: "That must be Jew singing" (O'Connor 1976: 92–93). When "the child" dreams of a martyr's fate, it's the image of lions in the arena (which "liked her" instead of devouring her) that tempts her more than "the entrance of Paradise" (O'Connor 1976: 95–96). Irony and the narrator's objective distance reign supreme. Yet it is a truly heartening text, both in religious and secular interpretation. O'Connor allows the girl's childish antics, but in the end bestows the promise of grace. The optimistic Christian conclusion of the story is obvious. A certain nun, recognizing the girl's transformation, "almost smothered her in the folds of her black habit, pressing a crucifix into her cheek" (O'Connor 2019: 279) – in this somewhat aggressive manner the nun rejoices as well.

The story has none of O'Connor's typical bitterness. The adults are caring and responsible and the teenagers playfully obnoxious; even the hermaphrodite, a freak who earns money at the fair (before "some of the preachers [...] got the police to shut it all down" [O'Connor 1976: 102]) is content: "God made me thisaway. [...] I am making the best of it. I don't dispute hit" (O'Connor 1976: 98). And it is this sentence, with its positive meaning for a religious person (submission to God's will) as much as for a practical one (difference as a source of survival), that leads to the protagonist's transformation, to the happy ending: during Mass, when "her mind began to get quiet" and "the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining [ … ] she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, 'I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be'" (O'Connor 2019: 279). Thus, everyone is God's creature. However, a narrower interpretation, no less positive, also comes to mind. As Philip M. Weinstein (2009: 13) notes, "The truth is simply the

absurdity of taking human procreative power as the natural model for human well-being." A hermaphrodite will not prolong the species. Their happiness comes from elsewhere.

There still remains the titular joke. The convent-school girls call each other "Temple One" and "Temple Two." Giggling, they explain the meaning:

> Sister Perpetua [ … ] had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should [...] "behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile." Sister Perpetua said they were to say, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" and that would put an end to it. (O'Connor 1976: 88)

One might be unsure about the result of the sister's recommended procedure, remembering that "the back of an automobile" was the proverbial site of corruption for American teenagers of the time.[6] A gentle reader might raise their eyebrows over the joke's indecency. An irreverent reader might smirk and comment on the current American obsession with gender and sexuality. But O'Connor is confident; she won't bat her narratorial eye. She distances herself from the "temple," allowing teenagers to joke about it; she appears to say, real belief defends itself from ridicule. Neither the lions nor lewd connotations will unsettle a true Christian.

The protagonist of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," the Civil War participant called General, dies, yet apparently while sleeping and at the age of one hundred and four. Hence his demise should not depress the audience. The other important characters are his granddaughter, a teacher aged sixty-two, and a scout, John Wesley, aged ten. The attentive reader will remember that an eight-year-old John Wesley was shot in the volume's first story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and might optimistically ponder on that John Wesley's possible survival. Miss Sally Poker Sash desires strongly that the venerable fighter adorns with his presence the ceremony of awarding her a teacher's diploma, earned with considerable effort in summer courses. Her desire comes true. But during the ceremony, unnoticed by anyone, the veteran dies.

"A Late Encounter with the Enemy" is a critical commentary on the South's past, as Kathryne Bevilacqua writes in an article about "history lessons." General Sash does not remember what battle he took part in or whether he fought in any battles at all. He is not even a general, because the rank was assigned to him by mistake. The past doesn't matter to him; what's important is the uniform and the fact that because of the past, the "general" is in the spotlight today. "Historical facts," writes Bevilacqua, "are condemned to cheery oblivion" (2014: 123). Yet in the last moments of his life, history catches up with him, refusing to be forgotten. Suddenly the names of battles resurface in the old man's memory, "the words [ … ] coming towards him like musket fire" (O'Connor 1976: 174). The past attacks, fights for the right to exist, and the general dies under its onslaught.

Knowledge of the historical and cultural context – the Civil War and the American South – will undoubtedly help in appreciating the story, and even deepen its humorous overtones. However, the reader need not be aware of this context. The characters of the general, the teacher, and the scout are recognizable outside America, and the story can evoke positive emotions. Not that O'Connor has any sympathy for these three: they are

[6] See Bruce Davidson's 1959 photograph, "Couple Necking in the Backseat."

characterized with her standard unkindness. The old man is spiteful and complacent, the teacher despises other people, and the "crafty scout" is not only overweight, but smug and cheeky as well (identical to his namesake, already killed by the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"). However, they are funny, and their imperfections, at least, not utterly revolting. The general remembers the war not at all but does remember being "surrounded by beautiful guls" at celebrations of historical events – such as the premiere of the film (most likely *Gone with the Wind*), during which he himself, as a Civil War relic, was put "up onto the stage." The general's thoughts are preoccupied only with "beautiful guls," and it is mostly about them that he talks (O'Connor 1976: 164). There are more occasions for donning the uniform: "Every year on Confederate Memorial Day, he was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum," where the old man functioned as a living exhibit. The granddaughter-teacher dreams of a diploma, and so has spent her summers "in the state's teacher's college" for the last twenty years. She doesn't dream of improving her teaching methods; upon returning "in the fall, she always taught in the exact way she had been taught not to teach" (O'Connor 1976: 162). What we do know about the "crafty scout" is that he was up to the task: after the ceremony's end, he "rolled [the wheelchair] at high speed down a flagstone path and was waiting now, with a corpse, in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine" (O'Connor 1976: 175). It's a macabre image, but funny and cheerful at the same time. The centenarian dies, but although the past bites him in his final moments, he apparently lived his life – or the parts he remembers – enjoying its pleasures. The granddaughter receives her long-awaited diploma and is freed from the care of her unruly grandfather at the same time. And the scout will have a Coke.

It might be harder to find heartwarming elements in "Good Country People," one of O'Connor's most frequently anthologized texts. We will recognize in it an autobiographical theme (the heroine stuck in a country house due to a physical handicap) and a religious one (the confrontation of an atheist with the devil). The ending is the writer's masterpiece – at once gruesome, moralizing, and comic. A young woman named Hulga lost her leg as a child and wears a prosthesis. She has a doctorate in philosophy, lives in a small town with her mother, and despises everyone around her, especially because of their religious superstitions. One day a young Bible salesman shows up. Hulga decides that she will seduce the simpleton, "[take] his remorse in hand and [change] it into a deeper understanding of life" (O'Connor 1976: 196). They head to the barn, where the boy persuades Hulga to climb up into the loft and then unfasten the artificial leg. He opens one of the Bibles, which, it turns out, is a box containing a bottle of whiskey, a condom, and pornographic cards. Hulga realizes she is not dealing with "good country people," and after a brief argument the young man packs everything back into the suitcase, along with the would-be lover's artificial leg: "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way," he informs and announces: "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (O'Connor 2019: 325). And thus, the young atheist comes into contact with evil, at which she is powerless – physically and intellectually. The reader feels morally satisfied, as for her irritating arrogance, Hulga needs a solid lesson. Yet I see no reason to assign additional pessimism to her story. The heroine has been brought down a peg or two, but she is not "doomed to certain death" (Chmiolek 2016: 126; my trans.). She waits in the barn until someone helps her down. The peddler leaves with his new treasure, and the town gets a sensational topic for gossip. Things are all right.

The above approach to O'Connor's fiction in no way negates the writer's complex relationship with religion and faith, nor other in-depth analyses of her prose, related, for example, to gender or the American South, but shifts the focus to the reader's reaction, which I called "trivial" in jest, believing it is the reader's most basic right. Indeed, O'Connor's stories give the audience a possibility of multiple understandings (despite the author's claims to the contrary) and emotional reactions to the characters (despite the fact that they seem to be flat stereotypes). And it is the author herself who allows for this emotional interpretation – it is O'Connor's specific words that we rely on. A careful, attentive, *tender* reader will find a shadow of hope in the narrator's coldly objective words and resist the chill. This reader might even discover a happy ending obscured by the narrator's irony. This reader will smile at the good husband's joy over the longed-for offspring and ponder upon the return of the wife's longed-for good looks. Perhaps, the reader will find satisfaction that against all odds, the abandoned, mentally different Lucynell is enjoying life's pleasures. For confirmation of the above, I shall invoke Dobson again, this time in her own article: "We respond to literary texts [...] because we feel they have value and meaning for our lives" (1997: 279). Following the example of my famous predecessor, I look at Flannery O'Connor's writing through the perspective of compassion. Interpreting kindly and tenderly, we may find people in the stories and thus save them both, stories and their characters, for the joy of reading.

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