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**Flannery O'Connor: Revelations of the Displaced Soul**

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Flannery O'Connor: Revelations of the Displaced Soul**

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Flannery O'Connor's thematic paradigm incorporates spiritual overtones, irony and black comedy into her works. The characters appear to possess displaced souls that require some type of spiritual and moral awareness through a shocking intervention. This paper provides an analysis of the introspective development that occurs within the characters; and I will examine the process in which the characters seem to come to shocking revelations about their flawed view of life. Furthermore, an investigation of the protagonist's journey from selfishness to self-awareness will demonstrate the human flaws and weakness in their lives. The circumstances surrounding these outcomes is tragic, yet they are somehow ironic and comic when main characters seem to get what they deserve. Therefore, an interpretation of the turning point and conclusion, which teaches the protagonist a lesson, will be explored. O'Connor's characters may undergo a moral revelation, but the reader also contemplates the anagogical implications presented. The characters in Flannery O'Connor's short stories, "Good Country People," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Displaced Person," and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" undergo possible spiritual and moral revelations of their displaced souls through the narrative form of black comedy.

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## Introduction

How should we decide what is right or wrong? Does our upbringing help define our intentions, motivations and actions? It is not surprising that with Flannery O'Connor's southern roots and religious upbringing, she is able to convey short stories in which the characters come to learn a moral lesson. O'Connor's writing talent is exceptional because she masters the integration of various themes. In a dark comedic manner, she questions a person's ability to live a proper Christian existence without bigotry and hatred. The character's code of ethics, morality and spiritual awareness are all questioned. O'Connor depicts the sinful duplicitous lives in which we live, whose displaced souls are in need of redemption because no one appears to live a devout Christian life worthy of God's grace and salvation. O'Connor infers that people are unclear of the ramifications of their ungodly actions, and her parables become shocking and violent examples that force her readers to consider the consequences of their unchristian-like behavior. O'Connor accentuates her character's flawed human nature, and transforms their transgressions through what appears to be a moral revelation.

In an allegorical framework, O'Connor wrote "brilliant stories that brought the issue of religious faith into clear dramatic focus. She was a devout Roman Catholic living in predominantly Protestant rural Georgia. Her stories are usually shocking and often bizarre. Yet the religious issues they raise are central to her work" (May 382). She writes in an "effort to hand others along spiritually, to give us readers a lot to hold in mind as we go about our lives, tempted so often to fall by the way in thought or deed" (Coles 390). O'Connor's characters often display literal and figurative deformities and are offered an opportunity to redeem their displaced souls and achieve Grace. The anagogical message relayed in O'Connor's works stimulates the audience's conscience to contemplate the ramifications of allowing misguided actions into our

lives. The short stories have grotesque elements, and her narrative technique is used “to indicate the moral and spiritual conditions of deformed characters [that] reflect spiritual incompleteness or lameness...[because] people are for the most part [are] representatives of fallen mankind, never worthy but always subject to grace and eligible for redemption” (Martin 71). Although many of the characters demonstrate spiritual incompleteness, the option of godly restoration is available to those who seek to transform themselves spiritually.

In addition to the religious and grotesque aspects of O’Connor’s writings, she also implements the thematic form of black comedy and dramatic conclusions, which take place by her stories’ endings. She writes in the form of black comedy, a “writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Throughout O’Connor’s short stories, irony and dark humor is clearly evident as her readers surmise how her characters will utilize the opportunity they have been offered. As a narrative form, “O’Connor uses classic comedic elements, and she customizes them for her anagogical purposes by truncating the conventional comic plot resolution, and shifting modes at the ends of her works” (Askin 47). O’Connor employs a thematic juxtaposition of comedy and anagogical perspective to justify the turning point of the characters. At times the endings are ambiguous, but the audience nevertheless realizes that the main character will never be the same. Arthur Kinney explicates that O’Connor’s main characters “often do not appear to deserve His blessing; almost as often they appear to learn nothing from it (or, if they do, we are not told about it). Nor is grace dramatized as a dazzling joy, a sweep of awareness. Rather, it can come in an act of random violence, a forceful accident, a blinding pain. It can be unexpected, intrusive, unwanted, ignored, baffling, misidentified, and forgotten. It can bring suffering, wretchedness even annihilation” (71). O’Connor explains “that her characters were consistently grotesque ‘because it is the



nature of my talent to make them so” (Walters 146). She has a talent for blending her southern roots, religious upbringing, love for the gothic and grotesque in the form of dark comedy to her audience.

Consequently, these grotesque elements add to the drama and suspense of her works. O’Connor’s short stories climax when the characters appear to come to shocking realizations about their flawed outlook of life. The audience then has to interrupt the implication of the conclusion, and decide if the turning point teaches the protagonist a lesson. In an article entitled “Everything That Rises Must Converge: O’Connor’s Seven-Story Cycle” Harbour Winn posits that O’Connor highlights “the disease of spiritual emptiness. Ironically, however, the potential moment of epiphany does not usually trigger self-awareness, for the narrow-minded, self-righteous protagonists...but the final story collide[s] rather than converge[s] with the possibility of growth” (207). Thematically, O’Connor suggests that spiritual enlightenment is theoretically available to all those who seek God’s grace. Therefore, she presents her characters with an opportunity to receive spiritual growth; and when they discard the opportunity, the comedic ending appears plausibly justified. Even though the circumstances surrounding the climax is tragic, it is somehow ironic and comic when main characters seem to get what they deserve. In a strange subconscious method, the audience becomes drawn to the characters’ misfortunes and their ultimate tragic endings. Black comedy is used to engage the audience into the characters’ lives, and O’Connor’s humor seems to mock the shortcomings of her protagonists. McEntyre postulates that “perhaps one of the truest observations about O’Connor’s characters is that none of them is likeable. Though some of them evoke laughter, there are none with whom any respectable reader would readily and wholeheartedly identify” with (42). Yet the audience is

somehow drawn to these characters, and at times is sympathetic to the protagonist, but at other times, dislikes the protagonist.

Frequently, “O'Connor makes us laugh at a character's stubborn and foolish pride... [and] our laughter is turned inward, so that we are not merely deriding that pride, alienating it as something outside and away from ourselves; rather, we are shifting in our seats, making internal adjustments that, in effect, are assimilating. ...It is satirical – because satire has as its essential quality the provocation of uneasiness in the reader, urging some sort of reform” (Steed 299). O'Connor's satirical delivery permits her audience to laugh at the dramatic conclusions of her stories, not because they are technically funny, but because the protagonists seem to deserve their misfortune. O'Connor's obscure and dramatic endings leave the audience to ponder her stories long after their conclusion. The tragic endings may promote a spiritual catharsis not only within the characters, but the reader as well.

Since O'Connor is considered one of the finest southern writers of the twentieth century, and her talent is so great, her life seems tragically short. Born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, O'Connor died when she was just thirty-nine on August 3, 1964, in Milledgeville, Georgia when she succumbed to lupus, which first struck her in December 1950 (May 382). Writing letters to her friends was extremely important to O'Connor. Sally Fitzgerald states that after reading through her letters, “I felt her living presence in them. Their tone, their content, and even the number and range of those she corresponded with, revealed the vivid life in her, and much of the quality of a personality often badly guessed at” (xi). O'Connor's letters had a “manner of intimacy that letters do seem to offer. If our lives are generally conducted with other individuals or with small groups, the letter collection provides us with a manner of interaction that is familiar and accessible. And to read a letter written by O'Connor is in some sense to enter

into a relationship with her” (McGill 46). In addition to her letters, O’Connor’s artistic legacy lives on in her short stories. The characters in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories, “Good Country People,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “The Displaced Person,” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” undergo possible moral revelations through the narrative form of black comedy.

## Chapter 1

In 1955 O'Connor wrote "Good Country People." In her biographical book of letters compiled by Fitzgerald, O'Connor feels that "Good Country People pleases me no end;" and she comically adds, "you will observe that I admire my own work as much if not more than anybody else does" (78). Indeed, it is apparent that O'Connor was proud of the short story she wrote in only four days (Fitzgerald 78). Mark Bosco speculates that "parallels abound between O'Connor's history and Hulga's: O'Connor was incapacitated by lupus, which forced her to leave the intellectual and cultural reaches of New York City and return to the South; there she was cared for by her mother on their family farm" (293). As ambiguous as O'Connor's endings, it is speculative whether the parallels of O'Connor's and Hulga's life are true.

In "Good Country People," Hulga (a.k.a. Joy Hopewell) experiences an apparent moral revelation about her seemingly isolated life. O'Connor employs comedic interactions within mother-daughter relationships that have opposing views of the world. "Good Country People" has a familiar type of O'Connor character, the thirtyish adolescents [who] do battle with their old mothers [and] each is a grown single child who lives with his or her parent" (Garson ¶6). Joy's mother is aptly named Mrs. Hopewell. Her character's name demonstrates her belief in the ideal of "good country people." Mrs. Hopewell believes that "good country people are the salt of the earth" and that "there aren't enough good country people in the world" (O'Connor 433). Her belief system enables the teenage Bible salesman to infiltrate and manipulate his way into Mrs. Hopewell's family. Hulga is thirty-two years of age, and is Mrs. Hopewell's daughter. A tragic childhood accident blasted off Hulga's leg, resulting in her bitter and ugly outlook of her life. Mrs. Hopewell's farm tenant, Mrs. Freeman, is also significant because she is a character who continually banters with Mrs. Hopewell and establishes the relationship

between Hulga and her mother. The Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, becomes the “man” who “points” Hulga in a direction to recognize her shortcomings. Pointer tempts Hulga into violating boundaries set up by “good country people.” The underlying question is whether there are any good country people.

Since her tragic accident, Joy sees herself as being completely ugly; and now, as an adult, she has had her name legally changed to Hulga because it sounds ugly too. Because of her deformity, “Joy tries to change her identity by changing her name to Hulga, a name whose sound and connotation suggest the heavy physical ugliness which she emphasizes as well as the heaviness of spirit which is hers. Joy/Hulga sees the change of name as a major triumph in her lifelong battle with her mother” (Garson ¶6). Mrs. Hopewell detests the name Hulga, and she associates the name with “the broad hull of a battleship” (O’Connor 274). She refuses to use it, and continues to “call her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way” (O’Connor 274). Mrs. Hopewell is overprotective of her daughter, and “treats her as if she were a child. And while the daughter resents the mother’s overprotection, she continues to play the role of the child” (Garson ¶6). Hulga regards herself as ugly and her life reflects no “joy.” In an attempt to remain ugly, she wears hideous clothes, makes obnoxious faces, and delivers rude remarks. In an annoying mode, she drags her wooden leg loudly around the house.

Although one of the greatest achievements in Hulga’s life has been the acquisition of a Ph.D. in philosophy, she now “wishes to know nothing of nothing” (O’Connor 432). Hulga’s nihilistic beliefs and physical deformity is metaphorically used to demonstrate her flawed belief system, and her figurative cross to bear. It may appear that O’Connor wants to “create characters who have destroyed their own integrity to pursue a false good. Characters who re-create

themselves according to a chosen image...” (Feeley 23). Due to her deformity, Hulga recreates herself as someone who is externally and internally ugly.

Hulga’s experiences a moral revelation about her nihilistic existence when she realizes she has invested blind faith in Manley Pointer, an immoral person. Consequently, she is manipulated by a deceptive person who makes her recognize that she has a negative view of life. When she encounters the burden of a physical deformity, her outlook on life also became deformed. When Hulga loses the physical connection with her leg, she loses the emotional connection to her “self” and to God. Hulga’s wooden leg is the creation of a false self (Feeley 23). She believes she does not need a connection with anyone to be a complete person. Another of Hulga’s major faults is that she “despises or denies everything her mother values; yet for the mother the daughter becomes a symbol of everything Mrs. Hopewell wants to deny. . . . [Mrs. Hopewell’s] perceptions are so limited she cannot understand human suffering [and] certainly not her daughter's” (Garson ¶7). Hulga’s human suffering makes her incapable of finding contentment in life because she no longer finds “joy” in life, and appears to have lost a spiritual connection with God.

Hulga entrusts herself to Pointer, the Bible salesman, who is welcomed into her home by her trusting mother. In a defiant act, and an attempt to take control of her life, Hulga’s vulnerability is exploited by someone who is considered “good country people.” Pointer becomes the catalyst for Hulga realizing she needs more from life than her isolation and meaningless existence. O’Connor introduces Pointer as the devilish trickster in the plot who leads Hulga to examine her life. Hulga plans on luring the Bible salesman to the loft in order to seduce him, but in a comic twist, she is the one who is tricked. Hulga condescendingly “looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity” (O’Connor 276). Although Hulga

considers herself as an intellectual, Pointer ironically exploits her stupidity. In a “reverse seduction and trickery...[Pointer] lures her by way of her own vanity into crossing boundaries from the world she thinks she knows and claims to be a master of, to one both unpredictable and revelatory” (Schaum7). When Pointer entices Hulga to the barn, he first takes her glasses, and then convinces her to give him her wooden leg. The removal of her glasses demonstrates the “inversions and blindness she has willed upon herself by way of her nihilistic philosophy and pride. Hulga – as is the case for all those caught in the falsity of intellectual hubris – has long been duping herself” (Schaum 7). In a moment when Hulga finally becomes vulnerable and lets down her guard, she ultimately recognizes she needs “someone” when she is deceived and abandoned alone without her leg in the loft.

In a humorous manner, Pointer finally reveals his true intentions. He opens up his Bible suitcase to pull out whiskey, condoms, and obscene playing cards. Hulga is shocked to learn that Pointer is not “good country people” when he announces, “. . . you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay no where long. And I'll tell you one thing Hulga you ain't so smart” (O'Connor 441). Hulga obviously is not so clever, and “Mainly Pointer's interaction with the purportedly brilliant doctor of philosophy, Hulga, becomes a way to subvert and reveal the foolishness of intellectual pride. With meretricious suspensefulness, the trickster sets up his verbal con” (Schaum 10). Not only does Hulga come to realize she is not as smart as she thinks she is, but she comes to the realization that she has been tricked by someone who has been considered “good country people.” In an attempt to disassociate herself from her mother's influence, Hulga now must consider that she may have trusted Pointer because of her mother's belief system. Garson posits that “Mrs. Hopewell, certain that she knows what a lady is, wants her daughter to fit that

description. Equally convinced that she knows what good country people are, Mrs. Hopewell identifies the Bible salesman as one of that breed, thus indirectly and unwittingly encouraging her daughter to take up with the man. Hulga, thinking to deceive him, is left deceived and helpless at the end, a victim not only of her own making and his, but also of her own childlike, though hidden, acceptance of her mother's views" (119). O'Connor challenges the southern viewpoint that there are not many good country people. What she may be inferring is that no one is truly good and that all people are sinners and in need of God's grace.

Hulga thinks that Pointer is a good country person, and sets out to take advantage of him; but, ironically, Pointer is the one to take advantage of Hulga. Hulga does not implement her tryst with Pointer in the barn because she wants to fall in love. All she desires is to be kissed. Hulga's plan is a manipulative ploy to get what she wants and control—what she conceives to be—a naïve Bible salesman. Although "it is not love than she has experienced with Manley," it has to be considered that "it is certainly more than the Nothing she has worshiped before" (Baumgaertner 39). O'Connor's comedic narrative form teaches Hulga a lesson, and it is easily assumed that Pointer leaves a different Hulga in the barn. Hulga begins to contemplate the turn of events when Pointer "serves to teach a lesson in self-knowledge to Hulga [in] his betrayal of her, revealing the futility of her own belief in nothingness by cruelly objectifying its destructive effect upon human needs for love" (Martin 76). In addition, O'Connor ". . . seeks to disrupt sterile orders in order to make room for revelation, . . . [and] the outcome of disruption can be redemption; the shattering of old orders can incarnate new ways of thought, new affirmations" (Schaum 23). In her style of unexpected, ambiguous, and comical endings, O'Connor's readers are left to contemplate how and whether Hulga's displaced soul will change after her altercation



with Pointer in the barn. Will she emerge with God's grace, wisdom, and maturity? Will her life mean "something" instead of "nothing?"

## Chapter 2

O'Connor continues her exploration of moral revelations in the form of black comedy in other works. Similar to "Good Country People," O'Connor resumes the thematic paradigm to question the existence of an honorable and good person. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor recommences this theme in one of her most powerful and violent stories. Stephen C. Bandy states, "None of O'Connor's stories has been more energetically theologized than her most popular 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.' O'Connor flatly declared the story to be a parable of grace and redemption" (123). Her Catholic principles are personified in this story, and "one cannot deny that the concerns of this story are the basic concerns of the Christian belief [of] faith, death, salvation, [and it] cannot be saved from itself. It has a will of its own and a moral of its own (Bandy 123-4). Grace is also a central theme when the grandmother has to evaluate God's grace and mercy when she encounters The Misfit.

In a biographical letter, O'Connor writes about southern grandmothers and states, "these old ladies exactly reflect the banalities of the society and the effect is of the comical rather than the seriously evil. . . . Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical" (Fitzgerald 289). The grandmother's character in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" epitomizes O'Connor's perception of an elderly southern lady, whose imperfect and hypocritical personality is exaggerated to create a comical effect. The grandmother will eventually realize that, even though we are all God's children, some people cannot be saved by His Grace.

The characters in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" reflect a comedic family unit that is classic in O'Connor's stories. As is evident in many of her other works, O'Connor centers on dysfunctional family relationships. The grandmother is the protagonist who appears to be a good

spiritual person with old-fashioned ideas, but she is humorously manipulative in her dealings with her son, Bailey, his wife and two children. The other characters have less important roles, and are only participants in the grandmother's antics. In a manipulative manner, the grandmother tries to persuade her family to go to Tennessee for a family vacation instead of Florida. She warns them of the possibility of meeting The Misfit who is an escaped convict, and who is suspected to be in the Florida area. She tries to convince her son and his family that "this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to those people. . . . I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it" (O'Connor 117). The grandmother's prophesy is dismissed in a condescending way, and her disrespectful grandchildren tell their grandmother, "if you don't want to go to Florida, why don'tcha stay at home?" (O'Connor 117).

Since she is unable to change their minds, the grandmother prepares for her trip to Florida. As most southern elderly ladies, she dresses elegantly for the trip in a "baby blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print" (O'Connor 118). The story sets a foreshadowing scene when the grandmother arrogantly states that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady" (O'Connor 118). In addition, she also sneaks her cat, Pitty Sing, into her valise so it would not be left alone in the house. It is obvious that "the grandmother is sneaky (she is deliberately deceiving Bailey about the cat, which will cause the accident that brings about the deaths of all the family) and she is proud (everything she does is centered about her own satisfaction – such as protecting the cat that loves her – or her future pleasures – taking mileage so as to center later conversation on herself and on her special knowledge). Both her deceit and pride continue unabated" (Kinney 96). Through the grandmother's antics and

manipulating cunning manner, she is able to convince her son to visit a plantation she had once visited, and persuades the family to go down an old dirt road to visit the plantation. The grandmother's cat springs onto Bailey's shoulder, and causes the car to turn over once, and the mother is thrown out of the car and breaks her shoulder. With no other alternative but to wait for someone to come along the road, the family waits. Even though the turn of events is not technically funny, the audience seems to laugh at the irony. If the grandmother had not convinced her son to turn down the road to find a plantation that really is located in Tennessee, and if she had not brought her cat on the trip when she was told to leave it at home, the family would not be stranded on a dirt road.

In a twist of fate, The Misfit comes along and begins to terrorize the family. Along with his accomplices, The Misfit takes the family into the woods and brutally kills them. The culmination of ironic events results in the final exchange between the grandmother and The Misfit. She fervently believes that there is good in every man because we are all God's children. O'Connor attempts to "startle her secular readers into spiritual awareness... [and] is determined to take us by force, to bear us away so that we may be open to the possibility of grace" (Bloom 3). In an attempt to save herself, "the Grandmother lurches desperately from one strategy to another, not quite admitting to herself that The Misfit will kill her as casually as he has killed the rest of her family. All her ruses so dependable in the past, have failed" (Bandy 128). She desperately attempts to pacify The Misfit and tells him "I just know you're a good man" (O'Connor 128). When the grandmother grasps that her strategy is not working because he lets her know that "Nome, I ain't a good man," she implores him to pray (O'Connor 128). Carter W. Martin explains that the The Misfit and the Grandmother are

unpleasant destructive characters, sharing in the responsibility for the multiple killing, the positive Christian theme is expressed through them: the grandmother

becomes worthy by recognizing her participation in evil as The Misfit's symbolic mother, and The Misfit is revealed as an outrageous, shocking representative of mankind suffering and protesting against a world of injustice. The Misfit's suffering is intense because he fails to understand the context of Christianity; his highly charged colloquial dialogue with the grandmother demonstrates that he is engaged with moral questions, and his answers, even though wrong, evoke sympathy. (229)

The Misfit's displaced soul feels that "Jesus [has] thrown everything off balance," and he is called "The Misfit because [he] can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment" (O'Connor 131). In a final futile attempt to spiritually enlighten The Misfit, the grandmother uses her maternal instincts, and tells him "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children" (O'Connor 132.). The grandmother comes to a likely moral revelation when she comprehends that God's grace cannot be used to save her from death. She fails to convince the Misfit to accept God's grace, and he "shot[s] her three times through the chest" (O'Connor 132). Unfortunately, she learns that not every soul can be saved. O'Connor presents a dilemma when the grandmother's devout faith is also questioned, when she is unable to save herself from death or spiritually enlighten The Misfit. Stanley Renner explicates that

it is virtually impossible to say anything unquestionably good about [the Grandmother]. One cannot even fall back on the excuse that she means well, since most of what she means is to please herself by devious means. To be sure, she is created in the vein of comedy; her sins of self-serving seem ingratiatingly human and harmless enough. But, as O'Connor pointed out, the comedic method is this story's way of being serious. In bringing the grandmother and her world into collision with the Misfit, O'Connor seems to be implying some sinister connection between them. (127)

Renner's assertion that the grandmother has a sinister connection to the Misfit is questionable. Although both characters are obviously flawed, the evil nature of the Misfit is apparent. The grandmother, though annoying and foolish, has virtuous intentions in believing there is good in everyone. O'Connor depicts a paradoxical scene by alluding that not all of God's children can be saved spiritually or literally. It can be argued that the spiritually devout grandmother and the

spiritually misguided Misfit are both flawed human beings, which can be representative of the Catholicism viewpoint that we are all sinful people who need to be saved by God's grace. Can it be that the "the grandmother is granted a moment of illumination during which she realizes the emptiness of her faith and extends to the man who is about to kill her, the true love of Jesus?" (Renner 125). Once again, the ending is abstruse, since we have to consider if the grandmother dies realizing that a good man is undeniably hard to find. Did she die knowing that all God's children cannot be saved through His Grace? The grandmother's antics and manipulation are ultimately unsuccessful, and the reader is to consider if the grandmother "gets what she deserves" and quietly chuckles at her fate, or feels sadness for her tragic demise.

The Misfit theoretically comes to terms with his own redemption when he states "she would have been a good woman if it had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor 133). At this moment "The Misfit in juxtaposition to a similarly destructive figure who has recognized the reality of grace at the last minute, is a tragic figure who struggles vainly against his own convictions" (Martin 230). O'Connor depicts two characters that are faced with "harrowing moments that are finally reserved for those characters who must struggle with the devil and persevere in their quest for some terrible revelation. Seemingly haunted by God or selected by Grace, these characters refuse the easy answers proved by modern religion and embark upon a nightmare journey of the soul" (Thomson 317). In the end, The Misfit confesses that murder brings "no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor 133). The Misfit's final admission allows the reader to have some faith that even the most evil and sinful person can be redeemed. Similarly, to the character of Manly Pointer who may have "pointed" Hulga in the direction to contemplate salvation, the grandmother may have pointed The Misfit to think about redemption.

The Misfit's final statement alludes to his mixed emotions, and suggests that he may contemplate salvation for his displaced soul.

### Chapter 3

In a different arrangement from “Good Country People” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O’Connor imparts a short story that explores the introspection of a character’s life where the protagonist has to investigate his or her displaced soul. In “The Displaced Person,” O’Connor introduces us to the mindset of country people in the aftermath of World War II. A “displaced person” is viewed as a European who is displaced from the effects of the war and comes to find a home and employment in America. O’Connor cleverly incorporates the theme of the “displaced person” within all the characters. She presents characters who are struggling to find where they belong. Once more, O’Connor continues to discuss the ideas and thoughts of “good country people.” O’Connor’s seems to thematically search for the elusive good qualities of country people.

In a complex and long short story, O’Connor discusses “the values surrounding good country people and southern womanhood troublingly entangled with hierarchies of class and race” (Gleeson-White 53). Mr. Guizac and his family are displaced from Poland, and come to Ms. McIntyre’s farm to live and work. Albeit Mr. Guizac is displaced because of the war, O’Connor explores all the character’s displacement within his or her own lives. Mrs. McIntyre is the protagonist who has to reflect on her prejudice and moral behavior when the Guizacs come to live on her farm. Mrs. McIntyre is presented with an opportunity to extend genuine Christian charity, but instead her myopic nature expunges her ability to extend grace to others. Comedic dialog is used to symbolize the other character’s prejudicial views, especially when the housekeeper, Mrs. Shortley, explains the arrival of the Guizacs to the Negroes who work on Mrs. McIntyre’s farm. Ignorantly, Mrs. Shortley states, “they belong back over yonder where everything is still like they been used to. Over here it’s more advanced than where they come



from. But yawl better look out now, there's about ten million billion more just like them' (O'Connor 199). Each character's hierarchy is threatened by the arrival of the Guizacs. The lady of the farm, Mrs. McIntyre, continues in her grand manner of maintaining her family farm. The hired farm family, the Shortley's, become threatened by the arrival of the Guizacs. They are worried about their future employment on the farm. The Negroes also worried that they will not be needed.

O'Connor continues her theme of "dramatizing the predicament of the willfully blind who see the whole truth only in judgment. Vision, it should be noted, is a recurring motif in her work, with physical sight often used symbolically to suggest inner, spiritual knowledge" (Drake 187). It would be difficult to explore how Mrs. McIntyre comes to gain divine inspiration in "The Displaced Person" without explaining the complex role of each character. Betsy Bolton explains in her article entitled "Placing Violence, Embodying Grace: Flannery O'Connor's 'Displaced Person'" that "Mrs. Shortley characterizes the foreigners as people who were all eyes and no understanding. But the real problem is that the Guizacs do not understand the manners of the region; they do not know what to understand and what to close their eyes to. The incomprehension of the blacks is, by contrast, a gesture of courtesy, [which is] a demonstration of their fine grasp of country etiquette" (94). O'Connor accentuates the characters clash of common civility when they conflict on proper country protocol. Unfortunately, this drastically culminates into anger and eventually violence.

When Mrs. McIntyre learns that Mr. Guizac is trying to pay one of the black workers to marry his cousin so she is able to come to America, Mrs. McIntyre confronts him by calling him a monster. "She no care black," he said. "She in camp three year" (O'Connor 223). Mrs. McIntyre struggles with her moral obligations, but lacks compassion for Mr. Guizac's cousin,

and states, "I am not responsible for the world's misery" (O'Connor 223). She arrogantly tells Mr. Guizac, "you have a good job. You should be grateful to be here, but I'm not sure you are" (O'Connor 223). Even though Mrs. McIntyre seems conflicted with her moral obligations to her hired help, her feeling of prejudice and arrogance are evident. She judges that "they're all the same, whether they come from Poland or Tennessee. I've handled the Herrins and Ringfields and Shortleys and I can handle a Guizac" (O'Connor 24). She further reflects that "all her life she had been fighting the world's overflow and now she had it in the form of a Pole" (O'Connor 224). Mrs. McIntyre's tainted attitude of the world is arrogantly stated in a defiant manner through her association with people who are beneath her in class. In an attempt to keep her farm after her husband's death, she has an overflow of hired help who do not measure up to her societal standards. Mrs. McIntyre believes the various workers on her farm are an inconvenient necessity. Consequently, she presents a paradoxical view of their worthiness because the farm cannot continue without their assistance, and their presence irritates her southern sensibilities.

Bolton further states that

Mrs. McIntyre, in keeping with her refusal to allow black and white to intermarry, compares the Pole not to the Negroes but to white-trash. Her ability to handle a Guizac is here linked to her capacity for violence . . . in metaphysical terms, the story challenges anyone's right to claim, 'this is my place'; while on a more concrete level, what Mrs. McIntyre most resents about Guizac by the end of the story is his refusal to concede her place, his failure to leave of his own accord. As a result of this unexpected identification, Mrs. McIntyre becomes the recipient as well as the purveyor of violence. (95)

Mrs. McIntyre's sinful temperament climaxes when Mr. Guizac refuses to heed to her wishes. Mr. Guizac can be regarded as a Christ-figure who is sacrificed for the sins of others. "The Displaced Person" characters portray displaced souls through a plethora of sinful traits such as bigotry, hatred and lack of acceptance. In an ironic twist, Mr. Guizac, who survives war, is killed by the people who are supposedly helping him get back on his feet. After Mrs. Shortly

and Mrs. McIntyre negligently watch Mr. Guizac get run over by the tractor, they are never the same, and they succumb to evil instead of goodness.

Situational irony manifests by the story's conclusion. The characters that were critical of displaced persons are now themselves displaced. Combining irony with black comedic justice, O'Connor illustrates that the judgmental characters now realize that they do not know where "they" belong. When Mr. Guizac is literally killed by their negligence, Mrs. McIntyre is figuratively killed emotionally and morally. Although the question of morality remains mysterious, the reader speculates if Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley feel any remorse at not intervening in Mr. Guizac's death. In an attempt to hold onto their "place" in society, a moral dilemma tests the humanity of each character. Irving Malin states, "if the story were to end here, we would have faith in humanity, [but] O'Connor refuses to give us this happy ending. She makes us realize that Mrs. McIntyre, left alone without Mrs. Shortley, is unable to love others. She retreats inward, loving herself so much that she turns upon the Displaced Person, and she is an accomplice to murder" (117). Mrs. McIntyre begins and ends as a wretched and despondent character with a displaced soul, and may represent those in society who demonstrate superiority to others. Mrs. McIntyre has many opportunities to embrace God's grace and accept others in a Christian tradition, but she chooses to reject His Grace and condemn those she encounters. Grace and salvation are continually available to Mrs. McIntyre when she is routinely visited on her farm by her priest, and it is not surprising that he is the only person who remains by her side when he "continues his regular visits with her, visits which may reflect the ever-present, waiting grace of God" (Shaw 476). In the end, the reader considers if Mrs. McIntyre "understands her complicity ... and recognizes the enormity of her responsibility for other human beings. The impact of this new awareness debilitates her; she loses her health, her

farm, even her ability to speak. The moment of revelation, when the individual comes face to face with her own limitations and comprehends the true frontiers of her own inner country, is classic O'Connor, and always arrives in times of extreme crisis and loss" (Walker 57).

O'Connor's ending emphasizes how Mrs. McIntyre and remains in a state of internal and external isolation and despondency, and the reader is uncertain if she seeks redemption.

## Chapter 4

O'Connor resumes her exploration of the mother-child relationship in her posthumously printed short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," with the portrayal of a dysfunctional mother-son relationship. O'Connor found the inspiration for the unusual title when she read Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1961 (Maida 549). Harbour Winn explains, "in his evolutionary system Teilhard sees the continuing movement of diverse species into higher and higher forms of consciousness until, ultimately, they combine or converge upon one another at what he calls the Omega Point, the stage at which spirit and matter exist in equal proportion and blend together as one. According to Teilhard, the individual must grow from egoism to self-awareness and love for human history... [and] evolve toward Omega" (195). Though she admired Teilhard, "O'Connor's fiction gives dramatic, concrete form to the humble and often banal insight that enables the individual man to move toward grace by rising only slightly. Recognition of this very real phenomenon of rising and converging is at the heart of her own sacramental view" (Martin 17). O'Connor explores the protagonist's journey from selfishness to self-awareness, and demonstrates the human weakness in their lives.

Similarly, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is set in the South in the early 1960s when the public bus system has been recently integrated. The story explores the immoral behavior of Julian as he travels on a bus with his narrow-minded and bigoted mother. From the onset tensions are high between mother and son as they travel downtown. Julian is irritated that he must accompany his mother to her weekly weight-loss meeting because "she must lose twenty pounds on account of her high blood pressure" (O'Connor 405). Reminiscent of the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Julian's mother worries about her outward

appearance and is “one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves” (O’Connor 406). O’Connor alludes that southern older women present an external elegant style of dress to the outside world. Unfortunately, their internal reflections do not necessarily correspond to their proper appearance.

The dialogue between mother and son demonstrates their tension through black comedy. Although their interaction is not actually comical, the remarks exchanged by the characters are humorous. Julian and his mother exchange biting sarcasm to exemplify their ignorance. When Julian's mother is indecisive about whether to wear a garish new hat, they begin to argue. Julian regards his mother as a “dumpy figure, surmounted by [an] atrocious hat” (O’Connor 406). His mother is conflicted whether to wear the hat or return it to the store. She eventually decides to wear it, commenting that the hat was worth the extra money because others will not have the same one. Even though Julian’s mother may “not express [herself] directly concerning God or religion, [she] clearly considers [herself] to be a right-thinking Christian” (Martin 38). Julian’s mother is described as a “struggling widow, who has sacrificed her own wellbeing for her son’s education” (Denham 42). At times it is difficult to have empathy for this struggling widow. It can be argued the mother did struggle to sacrifice for her son’s future, but this should not condone her outspoken and prejudicial views.

As they walk to the bus stop, Julian's mother reminisces about her family legacy, which has given her a strong self-identity. She implies that it does not matter that she is poor because she comes from a well-known and once prosperous family. Julian's mother reminds him that they come from a "good" family that was once respected for its wealth and social standing. She reminds Julian that “your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state. Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh” (O’Connor 407).

However, Julian and his mother now live in a rundown neighborhood, and she has sacrificed everything for her son and continues to support him even though he has graduated from college. Julian is described as “a disheartened, cynical, confused, misanthropic young man” who epitomizes a “moral superiority to elevate himself and thereby judge the inadequacies of others,” and whose character depicts “a self-pitying malcontent who enjoys the role of martyr and who treats his mother with an unrelenting contempt, offering her no love or sympathy and delighting in her discomfort” (Denham 42). It is difficult not to have disdain for O’Connor’s faulty characters. Julian wants to “distinguish himself from everything in the South that he finds morally, intellectually, and aesthetically repugnant: its racism, its nostalgia for the glorious past, it’s to him petty concern with manners, its barren intellectual life, its insufferably banal social intercourse” (Browning 103). In an effort to “be different, [from] everything about the South . . . [and] is symbolized by his mother. Julian wants especially to be different from his mother. His hatred for all that his mother epitomizes is so venomous that he must constantly insult it” (Browning 103). Even if the mother is obviously irritating, Julian’s condescending behavior and blatant disdain for his mother are unequivocally objectionable.

It is interesting to note that O’Connor wrote about race related issues in her biographical letters. In April of 1960 she “writes an anecdotal letter to Maryat Lee that is clearly the origin of her story” (Johnson ¶24). In her letter to Maryat she wrote: “That certainly was a shame that a colored woman on the bus had to get you. I sat down next to a colored woman in the waiting room at Dearborn Street station in Chicago once. She was eating grapes and asked me to have some but I declined. She was very talkative and kept talking and eating grapes. Finally, she asked me where I was from and I said, ‘Georgia,’ and she spit a mouthful of grape seeds out on the floor and said, ‘My God’ and got up and left” (*Habit of Being* 392-3). It can be surmised that

“O'Connor recognizes the irony of the black woman who presumably insulted or attacked Lee, not knowing Lee was actually a civil rights proponent. Something of this irony must have worked its way into the character of Julian in this story” (Johnson ¶24). Whatever motivated O'Connor to write about race relations, her story's theme returns to a turning point in which the protagonist learns a moral lesson. As they travel downtown on the bus, Julian is “contemptuous of his mother, from whose values and prejudices he thinks he has freed himself” (Browning 102). Furthermore, Julian instigates his mother on the bus ride by befriending a “Negro man and indulges in malicious glee when a large Negro woman boards the bus wearing a hat identical to the one his mother has on” (Browning 102). Julian's malevolent elation at his mother's discomfort is disturbing.

The turning point culminates when “they leave the bus, and [his mother] offers a penny to the Negro woman's small son and is knocked to the sidewalk by the infuriated Negress” (Browning 102). Julian believes his mother has been “taught a proper lesson,” and feels she has been put in her place for her condescending approach of the woman (Browning 102). Indeed, there is no argument that Julian's mother tends to demonstrate poor behavior, and has an exasperating personality; however, “she is one of those legendary Southern matrons of aristocratic birth who, though forced to live in relative poverty, continues upon a distinction which she believes birth has conferred upon her” (Browning 103). Whatever motivated Julian's mother to approach the woman's son when leaving the bus, she certainly did not deserve to be hit by the other women and rebuked by her son.

After his mother is punched, she falls to the pavement, and Julian realizes something is wrong, and “a tide of darkness seemed be sweeping over him” (O'Connor 420). When he reaches her “her face was fiercely distorted” (O'Connor 420). Julian senses that she is dying and



runs for help in a last unsuccessful attempt to save her life. Unlike O'Connor's other protagonists, it can be assumed that Julian begins to form an intrinsic remorse when his mother dies, because "a sudden darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (O'Connor 420). At this point, it is apparent that Julian, "who has knowingly done evil and yet who is unaware of the pretension in his moral posturing, encounters a shocking event that changes his moral nature: it alters the attitude toward the evil he has done wittingly and deflates his unconscious moral egoism," and a once "unsympathetic character, one whose actions and thoughts have aroused our moral indignation, has changed in such a way that our reaction of vexed displeasure toward him has become understanding; our disapprobation, [and] sympathy" (Denham 42). Denham's claim that we must somehow change our opinion of Julian is disputable. Some readers may not be able to shift their opinion of Julian after his mother dies. His arrogant, intolerant nature does not warrant our understanding and forgiveness, and the audience may not feel compelled to offer him any compassion. After his mother's death our desire is the "belief that poetic justice will be served if Julian is somehow punished" (Denham 42).

Although the ending to "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is not as ambiguous as many of O'Connor's other short stories, the reader must decide if Julian truly experiences sorrow for his mother's death, or if he was properly punished. The conclusion of this story, which in its "compactly interwoven, parable-like form makes one realize that nearly every incident is symbolic in action, and that there is in fact a chain reaction...where one sees one action precipitates another, in an unremittingly lethal fashion, for the unfortunate characters who are involved in its enactment" (McDermott 171). It certainly is not humorous that Julian's mother has died, but one has to contemplate that Julian got what he deserved in his ill treatment of his

mother. Whether Julian's displaced soul receives a moral revelation or he got what he deserved remains ambiguous, but we know that he is left to live in a "world of sorrow and guilt" (O'Connor 420).

## Conclusion

Although we may realize that “O'Connor cannot give us her faith, her stories can expose our need for it and create in us a longing that may lead us to accept the grace of faith that believers hold to be offered without restriction or reservation to each individual” (Raab 449). O'Connor's literary mastery allows the reader to explore their quest for faith and grace, and challenge's the reader to see beyond the story. The ironic twists at the stories endings leave her audience in a quandary. Even though the endings are not humorous, the amusement of each of their predicaments allows the audience to chuckle over their moral dilemma, and then seriously consider our own conscience. Her audience is left in a paradox, and it could be that “the nature of her vision and the shape it takes are not now regarded as they were once by some critics as mutually contradictory” (Byars 34). In a disturbing way, O'Connor draws us into her dark, comedic plots. Our sense of logic should force us to dislike the familial dysfunction, reject the prejudice and detest the grotesque; but instead, O'Connor ingeniously interweaves all of these narrative techniques into her writings to induce us into the character's lives. O'Connor gives us the “possibility of recognizing evil, our involvement in it, and our need for redemption” (McEntyre 42). In these characters we may see ourselves; and we speculate on what is right or wrong, if the characters deserve their fate, and to reflect on the dramatic circumstances surrounding their downfalls. The reader mulls the narratives continuously in his or her mind. Can it be that Flannery O'Connor's intention is to make us see our own displaced souls within her characters so we are able to accept God's grace and salvation? Only we can decide.

Although “O'Connor's fiction is witty, grotesque, and entertaining, and, at the same time, complex, ambiguous, and indefinable” (Babinec 9), some critics argue that “O'Connor intended for her outrageous art to shock, perhaps even to scandalize her readers, but she repeatedly

defended the comic mode as a fitting vehicle for prophetic vision. She went so far as to claim that she looked for the ‘will of God through the laws and limitations’ of her own art. What God seems to have willed for O'Connor was an acid-tongued species of comic-prophetic writing that operates by unveiling human malice in unlikely characters” (Askin 556). O'Connor could have easily ended each story with a conclusive ending that leaves each character easily receiving God's grace and salvation. Instead, she allows the reader to become part of the story, determine her nebulous endings, and ponder their spiritual and moral revelations. In a juxtaposition of thoughts and feelings, the audience is left to surmise how the displaced souls of her characters will utilize the revelations they have been offered.

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor comments, "the novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking; where there is a general mystery of incompleteness" (167). O'Connor creates characters whose poor behavior, bad judgments, and arrogant natures, leave them in moral dilemmas. The protagonists in her stories demonstrate that their lives are lacking fulfillment. Her literary works “are sober reminders of the long demonic shadow cast over our fractured culture. O'Connor searches survive the era's evil without being corrupted by it. O'Connor's stories tell of characters who fight their attachment to their own will and rise to the occasion of the ordeal. Her stories demonstrate how deeply she plumbs the modern condition and how greatly she cares about our fate” (Giannone 66). O'Connor instills in each story a mystery of her character's fate. Joyce Carol Oates reflects that “O'Connor's short stories are a collection of revelations. They point to a dimension of experiential truth that lies outside the sphere of the questing, speculative mind. Despite her rituals of baptism-by-violence, and her merciless subjecting of ordinary good people to extraordinary fates, O'Connor sees the world as an incarnation of spirit” (150-151).

Even though O'Connor's characters may undergo a possible moral revelation, it can also be argued that her readers displaced souls leave somehow spiritually enlightened.

Each protagonist in the short stories, "Good Country People," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Displaced Person," and "Everything that Rises Must Converge," must question their morals and bad behavior. Her literary work demonstrates that "there is no doubt that O'Connor was particularly well suited by talent and temperament for the job of exposing human folly and wickedness" (Oliver 13). She exploits her character's faults, questions their views of the world, and leaves each one of them with the possibility of receiving God's grace and spiritual enlightenment. In each of these stories, O'Connor challenges us to question whether the protagonist's situation is humorous or morally justified. It would appear that in the form of black comedy, O'Connor presents the lacking qualities of her characters. O'Connor presents to the faults of her characters, and in turn challenges us to question our own faults. It seems that "the laughter she invites us to in these darkly comic tales is a laughter that mocks the devil, affirms the burning mercy of God, and perhaps also reminds us . . . that the end of all things is delight" (McEntyre 50). O'Connor's audience is uncertain whether to laugh at her protagonist's situation, or to question its dismal humor.

In "Good Country People," we contemplate Hulga's life when she emerges from the barn. Has her displaced soul experienced moral enlightenment based on her cocky and arrogant behavior? O'Connor requires her audience to reflect on their "nothingness." In addition, the reader experiences conflicting emotions within O'Connor's black comedy. We try not to laugh at the circumstances that left Hulga without her leg in the barn, but we are drawn to the ironic twist of her situation, and find it humorous. In one of her most violent short stories, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor uses irony and wit to question if the grandmother deserved to

be shot by The Misfit. At times we can feel empathy for the grandmother because she truly believes there is good in everyone, but it is difficult to sustain compassion for her character after witnessing the antics that brought her to her fate. O'Connor cleverly places the audience in an impasse. Should we, in an odd way, laugh at the circumstances that brought the grandmother to the deserted road, and to her death? The moral banter between the grandmother and The Misfit is comical in a dark sense because she undoubtedly believes she can save The Misfit, and the audience knows it is hopeless. Maybe O'Connor is implying that we are all misfits who are in need of forgiveness. Again, O'Connor's ending leaves the reader to ponder if The Misfit's soul will experience redemption after his encounter with the grandmother. In the same way, Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person," is left in a quandary. Throughout the story, she was critical of the displaced person, but now finds herself displaced. O'Connor's allegory may require us to consider if we are displaced persons in search of God's grace.

By intertwining irony with black comedic justice, O'Connor illustrates that the judgmental and displaced souls of each character are placed in situations in which they do not know where they belong. Irving Howe states that "in shaping her materials Miss O'Connor clearly intends us to savor a cluster of ironies; her sensibility as a writer of fiction was formed in a milieu where irony took on an almost totemic value. . . . Mustered with the regularity of battalions on parade, complex ironies have a way of crystallizing into simple and even smug conclusions" (¶9). O'Connor leaves the reader to wonder if the lonely and isolated life that Mrs. McIntyre is left to lead is justified. Will she change? Did she get what she deserves?

In contrast to "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Displaced Person," and "Good Country People," "Everything that Rises Must Converge" has a different theme. O'Connor's comedy is evident throughout the story in her physical and philosophical description of Julian's

mother. Julian's mother is comical. Her interaction with her son, views of society and poor behavior present a protagonist who is truly flawed. At times, the reader empathizes with her character, and at other times is angered by her outspoken remarks and behavior. Although Julian's mother is imperfect, she obviously loves her son. O'Connor draws the reader's attention to Julian's poor opinion of his mother, and she presents an ending that illustrates that Julian got what he deserved. O'Connor shocks us into reality with the untimely death of Julian's mother, and illustrates that life is too short, and we should not take those we love for granted or we may experience regret. Again, we question how his mother's dramatic and untimely death will affect him. Will he emerge a better person, or be left in a world of sorrow and guilt?

Flannery O'Connor's mortal life may have been too short, and her life may have tragically ended too soon when she succumbed to Lupus, but her legacy lives on in her writings. Her gift for incorporating her religious beliefs, southern roots, and dark comedy into her writing has marked her place in literary history. O'Connor places moral dilemmas in the lives of all her characters in these short stories, and their redemption remains unclear. What remains clear is that "many of O'Connor's stories end in death: in some, a survivor remains to endure the pain of loss and begin a movement toward an enlarged consciousness; in others, the reader is left to carry on the evolution in his own mind" (Kessler 123). O'Connor's readers become engrossed in her character's lives, and she leaves us to question if their situation is amusing or tragic. Her talent for delivering literature in the form of black comedy, religious overtones, a southern flair, and moral quandaries is truly a gift. She intertwines all these elements into magnificent fiction, which engages her readers to revisit her fiction's meaning and intention. Without even realizing it, her audience becomes a participant in her story. The reader hopes that Hulga, The Misfit, Mrs. McIntyre and Julian all receive God's grace and find redemption for their aberrant

imperfections. The displaced souls of the characters become an allegorical representation of all of our flaws and sins. O'Connor challenges her audience to contemplate redemption and salvation. We are left to evaluate the ambiguous endings, and struggle with what is right or wrong.



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