FLANNERY O'CONNOR:
A STUDY OF THE CHILDREN IN THREE SHORT STORIES

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

The child is a long-standing image in literature, which dates as far back as the Old Testament of the Bible. Children are most often represented in one of three manners in literature: purely good or evil, a combination of both good and evil tendencies, or as ambiguous, or difficult to classify as either good or evil. In her book, Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture, Sociologist Ellen Pifer notes that even in contemporary culture children are presented as either evil or innocent, and are rarely presented as anything in between. Pifer maintains:

[...] widespread polarization of the child's image into a demonic or angelic figure may help to prove the point concerning adults' deep-seated ambivalence. What makes the child so powerful an image of human creativity and potential--the sacred soul or self worshiped by the Romantics and still evoked in various guises today--is exactly what makes our darker visions of the child's mysterious nature and origins so terrifying. In both cases the
child represents the other side—original or shameful, beautiful or monstrous, forgotten or repressed—of the adult self. The child's image is always bound up in Otherness. (15-16)

For Pifer, the dualism in the portrayal of the nature of children in literature is the result of adults' inability to realistically comprehend childhood or themselves, for that matter. Adults cannot paint an accurate portrait of children when they cannot understand that state of being themselves. Pifer argues that adults tend to view children in an idealistic manner, and adults, in turn, represent children idealistically rather than realistically. Pifer cites Stephen Spielberg's film, "E.T," as one such projection of loveable, but unrealistic children in twentieth-century American culture. In this film virtuous young boy encounters an alien from outer space and he and his lovable brother and sister help return the alien to its native people. Pifer argues that the children in this film are portrayed as exaggeratedly pure. Pifer does not, however, pinpoint twentieth century American literature in her argument. Nonetheless, this embellished image of the fictional child leads to the sharp dichotomy between evil and innocent children in literature, according to Pifer.
In his book, *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art*, Eric Ziolkowski argues that authors tend to portray children as evil. He writes, "My purpose is to reveal a motif about children that, stemming from a terse tale in the Hebrew Bible, presents them as a sacrilegious type [...] the motif to which I refer has thrived over the centuries in literature and art, both sacred and secular, and tends to associate boys with evil and sacrilege" (6). The tale in the Hebrew Bible to which Ziolkowski refers occurs in 2 Kings 2.23-24, wherein a group of boys mock the prophet Elisha on his way to Bethel. Elisha curses the boys and afterwards many of them are mauled by a bear. Ziolkowski explains that this story is significant in that it dismisses the notion of children as perpetually innocent, especially in literature (8). Ziolkowski further contends:

[...] that the perennially perpetuated image of boys abusing a holy man stemmed largely, at least in Western Christendom, from an irrepressible Augustinian perception of troublesome male children as living, walking, taunting reminders of inherited Adamic sin. Although in the Gospels Jesus ascribes a heavenly nature to children, the frequency with which Christians have ignored, rejected, or defied that

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1 Ziolkowski also notes that although the word "boys" is used in the Bible and "boys" and/or "girls" is used elsewhere in literature, those gender-specific terms are often meant to encompass all children regardless of gender (9).
view is reflected in a long tradition of literature and art that shows boys abusing holy men, including Jesus himself [...] What never subsides, nor seems ever likely to subside, is the cultural disposition to portray boys as disrespectful and misbehaving. (11)

Especially when seen in conjunction with a particularly holy adult, children tend to be depicted as mischievous, disrespectful and altogether sinful. This portrayal of evil children has only been perpetuated in literature over the years due to the religious origin of the evil child image, argues Ziolkowski. In his book Ziolkowski traces the image of the evil child in literature from its biblical origin to the work of Christian theologian Tertullian (c. 160-220), who refers to the tale of Elisha in his Against Marcion (Adversus Marcionem, written in 207-8). Within this tale God commands bears to attack some boys for their disrespect of a prophet. The significance of this reference, argues Ziolkowski, is that Tertullian makes the conscious decision that the boys in the story are punished for their evil acts of disrespect, much as in 2 Kings 2.23-24 (37-8). This biblical tale states:

And [Elisha] went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out
of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.

And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them. (2 Kings 2.23-24)

Ziolkowski notes that the legacy of 2 Kings 2.23.-24 is still prominent in twentieth century literature. Traces of this timeless biblical story are to be found in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, argues Ziolkowski, as the young Stephen Dedalus openly defies authority in the chapter of the book commonly dubbed "Wandering Rocks." It is in this chapter of the epic novel that Dedalus spurns Leopold Bloom, an older man who seeks to take the place of Dedalus's father as the young man's guide and role model. Ziolkowski cites another twentieth century piece of fiction, William Golding's 1911 novel, *Lord of the Flies*, as representative of this biblical tale and the evil child in literature. In this tale a group of boys are stranded on a desert island. The boys quickly form a self-government, but a few of the boys are dissatisfied with this government and rebel, which causes chaos amongst the boys as they eventually become savage and fierce and fight one another. The difference between this story and its
biblical counterpart, however, is its lack of adult interference with the boy, Simon, as a replacement of Elisha (147). Simon is the established wise man of the group. Ziolkowski’s closing statement in his book is:

If literature, film, and art are at all mimetic in relation to reality, the obstinacy with which the Bethel boys motif has recurred in different times and places could lead to several suppositions. Perhaps [...] the nature of children may never change over time. Perhaps [...] children are everywhere the same, being always subject to the same natural instincts. Perhaps [...] it is a timeless, universal truth that boys will be boys, in the worst sense of the phrase. (188)

In the end, Ziolkowski upholds the belief that the image of children is commonly negative in religion, art and literature and that this negative image stems from the story of Elisha and his encounter with the evil Bethel boys.

Perhaps the tendency to portray children as possessing evil tendencies lies in the difficulty of an accurate portrayal of children as innocent. According to Reinhard Kuhn, author of Corruption in Paradise: The Child in Western Literature, “Bliss is harder to communicate than suffering, and the many attempts to recreate a childhood paradise all too
often result in uncomfortably sentimental effusions that are made even more intolerable by an equally mawkish enthusiasm for nature” (106). In a chapter of his book entitled “The Heaven and Hell of Childhood,” Kuhn maintains that attempts to portray child innocence often result in images of children frolicking in nature and are wholly unbelievable to the reader. To better illustrate this argument Kuhn cites George Sand’s *Histiore du Veritable Gribouille* (*The Story of the Real Gribouille*, 1850) wherein a boy escapes his sufferings at the hands of his guardians to a utopian fairyland. Kuhn explains:

> [...] few writers or artists have both the requisite genius and the humility to portray a state that is the essence of simplicity and that is, at the same time, extraordinarily complex, a state that is always the same and yet of an infinite variety ... it is a condition that by definition must be monotonous but that cannot provoke boredom. [...] For many writers the only gateway to the childhood paradise is through death, and the child must pass through hell on earth in order to gain admittance to heaven. (107)

So, once the innocence of a child has been successfully established by an author the innocent child must die in the state of childhood in order to
remain eternally innocent. In another chapter of the book entitled "The Revenge of the Well-Treated Child" Kuhn further claims that, "[…] the child for whom adults attempt to create a paradise occasionally takes his revenge on his well-meaning elders" (121). Kuhn calls on the adolescent girl in Proust's "Confession of a Girl" (1896) as an example of this idea. Kuhn relates that this girl, among other literary children in this situation, turns upon her adoring mother as a kind of perverse revenge even though the girl has always been treated well by her mother.

In the conclusion of the book Kuhn maintains that the "heaven" and "hell" of a literary childhood is totally dependent on the influence(s) of the adult(s) in that child's life. Further, adult writers cannot produce accurate portrayals of "the time-bound state of childhood" because adults cannot reach that realm (126). This portion of his argument is reminiscent of Ellen Pifer's in Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture. Kuhn states:

The childhood world is a separate and yet dependent reality; therefore, contact, even though usually intermittent, is maintained with the adult world. Although such communication is by its very nature imperfect and determined more by necessity than by sympathy, it can
assume the most intense forms. This forced interrelationship is most often expressed through hostility. [...] the child seems resentful of the very effort by adults to shape his world and thus attempts, often successfully, to take revenge on the presumptuous architects of his universe. (125-6)

Kuhn primarily uses nineteenth century writers to illustrate her arguments and few American writers at that. Nonetheless, these ideas contribute to the idea of literary children as ambiguous in their nature. That is, it is often difficult to discern whether a literary child is either good or evil.

Sabine Bussing, author of Aliens in the Home: the Child in Horror Fiction, outlines a thorough examination of the child in horror fiction and asserts that some images of children in horror fiction are exaggerated, while others are more realistic. While I am not interested in her focus on genre for this study, her ideas about the literary child are quite relevant. Bussing traces the child in both literature and film in her book and discovers several commonalities among children in horror fiction. For instance, she maintains that children in this literary genre are more often than not radiantly beautiful, as are Miles and Flora in Henry James's Turn of the Screw. Bussing holds that readers equate beauty with goodness,
and thus beautiful children cannot be viewed as evil by readers (1-4).

Bussing also ponders the child and its environment, and asserts that children of horror fiction are almost exclusively either solitary (Charlie in Stephen King’s *Firestarter*), part of a brother/sister duo (John and Pearl in Davis Grubbs’s *The Night of the Hunter*), or seen with peer groups, (H.L. Lawrence’s *Children of Light*). The positioning of the child is significant, maintains Bussing, to enforce the idea that children of horror fiction are completely separate from the adults in the stories. This separation appeals to the fears of the adult readers (5). Bussing also describes the child as a victim in horror fiction. The child tends to be either a victim of parents and/or tutors, (e.g., the children in V.C. Andrews’s *Flowers in the Attic*), or a victim of its environment, (e.g., the childhood episodes of Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*), (97-100). Bussing includes a chapter towards the conclusion of her book entitled “The ‘Evil Innocent,’” which is particularly relevant to this discussion. Bussing maintains that in order for a literary child to truly be evil, he/she must possess knowledge of evil. It is more likely, argues Bussing, that outside evil forces influence the child to commit evil acts, but the child himself remains essentially innocent:
Authors have taken it for granted that the choice between good and evil requires knowledge of both. Though the figure of the “evil innocent” has grown [...] more and more popular, in this particular respect it hardly provides an equivalent of the doppelganger. Unlike that classical type, the child is never fully conscious of the harmful things that happen through it—sometimes to it—and notably has no awareness of any metamorphoses in its own soul. (101)

Bussing reinforces the idea presented earlier by Ziolkowski that in order for a child to be evil, he must be conscious of evil. Further, Bussing maintains that children begin as innocents and only transform to evil once evil has been introduced to them. Children who are never introduced to evil cannot become evil. Evil is not innate like innocence. Thus, Bussing adopts the term “evil innocent” to describe those children whom evil moves through, but that are still not evil themselves. Bussing explains:

The term “evil” is problematic in any case: its most widespread popular meaning ("morally depraved, bad, wicked, vicious") can in its strict sense not be applied to the child, although the mere monstrosity of its “crimes” may easily lead an indiscriminate observer to do so. [...]
“Innocence,” on the other hand, can be an equally deceptive term in this context ... The implications “freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong,” “freedom from specific guilt,” or “freedom from cunning or artifice” are accepted without hesitation and even appear somewhat trivial. The initial and [...] principal sense, harmlessness and innocuousness, complicates matters considerably. (101)

Though the term “evil innocence” is itself flawed in the ambiguity of the meaning of the words “evil” and “innocent,” the “evil innocent,” as Bussing calls it, is a much more likely representation of the child in literature than the purely evil child. Literary children that embody Bussing’s description of the “evil innocent” are neither wholly innocent nor wholly evil, rather they possess a combination of the two qualities.

Children hold significant roles in most of Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, yet critics rarely address her works in comparative discussions of child images in literature. Pifer, Ziolkowski, Kuhn and Bussing do not address the works of Flannery O’Connor in their examinations of the child in literature, but a look at O’Connor’s fiction is especially fitting in light of these critics’ ideas.
Pifer neglects to examine the works of Flannery O'Connor in her study of the child in fiction in Demon or Doll. Pifer might see that unlike the fictional children she mentions in her study, both O'Connor’s innocent and evil children are easily believable, and not at all exaggerated. O’Connor, though, supports Pifer’s idea of the dichotomy of good and evil in fictional children in the story “The Lame Shall Enter First,” which possesses one good and one evil child character.

Though Ziolkowski does not mention the works of Flannery O’Connor in Evil Children, his idea of the literary child as perpetually evil is supported in O’Connor’s fiction. Certainly one of the boys in O’Connor’s “The Lame Shall Enter First” is evil. Ziolkowski’s notions do not, however, manifest in the other child character in that story, nor do his notions manifest in “The River” or “A View of the Woods.”

Bussing’s idea of the “evil innocent,” that is a literary child whom evil moves through, but is still innocent himself, is particularly interesting in connection to O’Connor. Each of the innocent child characters in “The River,” “The Lame Shall Enter First” and “A View of the Woods” might be viewed as an “evil innocent” since each of these characters is introduced to evil in some form or other and even experiences the workings of evil, yet each of these three children remains innocent.
The innocent children in Flannery O'Connor's "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "A View of the Woods" are all prime examples of Kuhn's idea of childhood death in literature. The innocent children in these stories remain in states of innocence even in death, and it is these deaths that bring redemptive grace for these characters.

Flannery O'Connor explains her views on death/violent acts and the acceptance of grace in literature in an essay entitled "On Her Own Work," which is included in a collection of her essays, Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners. She writes:

We hear many complaints about the prevalence of violence in modern fiction, and it is always assumed that this violence is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. (113)
O'Connor recognizes that violence in literature is often viewed negatively. She claims, though, that literary violence is often depicted by some writers, herself included, to reveal the essential state of being. We see the truth of this idea in the three stories to be discussed herein. In each of these stories a child commits a violent act that does, in effect, reveal the true nature of the child. Whether the outcomes of these violent acts are either good or bad is not O'Connor's goal. She is more concerned with portraying the fundamentals of the characters. O'Connor continues:

[...] it is the free act, the acceptance of grace particularly, that I always have my eye on as the thing which will make the story work ... in "The River" it is the child's peculiar desire to find the kingdom of Christ ... None of these [acceptances of grace] can be predicted. They represent the workings of grace for the characters. (115-6)

So, it is the acceptance of grace that O'Connor seeks for her characters. She specifically names Harry Ashfield of "The River" as one of these characters, but we can see how her ideas are applied to other child characters in her stories as well. For some of those characters--Harry Ashfield in "The River," Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and Mary Fortune in "A View of the Woods"-- grace is only achieved in death. But,
again, that is not to say that grace is realized by other characters in the stories. The reprehensible adult characters, namely Mr. Paradise, Sheppard and Mark Fortune, each experience a revelation at the death of the innocent child, though these revelations are not necessarily redemptive in nature.

Certainly, the redemption of these characters must be viewed in accordance with Flannery O'Connor’s beliefs about the significance of such redemption. In an essay entitled “The Fiction Writer & His Country,” which is included in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor addresses this very topic. The essay begins as a rebuttal to a question posed in “Life” magazine that asked “’Who speaks for America Today?’” (25). She explains that the writer of the article contends that American literature is dark and depressing and is not representative of what America really is. The article further maintains, claims O'Connor, that American novelists are devoid of “spiritual purpose,” as is evident in American fiction and that American writers do not accurately represent their country in their work. O'Connor first ponders the meaning of the word “country,” because for her country is more than the boundaries of America. O’Connor believes, “[...] when we talk about the writer’s country we are liable to forget that no matter what particular country it is, it is inside as
well as outside him” (34). So, every writer differs in his representation of his country because country is a different thing for every writer. For O'Connor her position as a Christian writer is something that sets her apart:

I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery. (31)

Her explanation of the significance of redemption follows:

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in its relation to that. I don’t think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent into fiction.

[...]

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest
eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. [...] Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live. (32-3)

For O'Connor, all of her stories are representative of spiritual purpose, but this spiritual purpose is often found in "grotesque," "perverse" and "unacceptable" images. But, the redemption and spiritual purpose is there.

Upon a brief review of the prose fiction of Flannery O'Connor we see that children play significant roles in almost all of her works and few critics have explored the importance of these characters. A comparative examination of three of Flannery O'Connor's short stories reveals a grim function of the children in these stories. Stephen Sparrow maintains that both Harry Ashfield of "The River" and Norton of "The Lame Shall Enter First" are innocent, or free of evil intent. Sparrow explains that in these stories, among others, the innocent children serve as catalysts for action in the stories (Sparrow 1). I further maintain that Mary Fortune of "A View of the Woods" is also an innocent child character and she, too, can be viewed as a catalyst for action in that story.

Though very different from one another, I have not chosen these three stories for this examination at random. While each story supports
one or more prominent child characters, the roles of these characters are quite diverse, as are the stories themselves. First published in O'Connor’s 1953 collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, “The River” presents a young male protagonist who participates in a journey of spiritual enlightenment. In O'Connor’s 1957 collection of stories, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, “A View of the Woods” introduces an elderly male protagonist who is keenly concerned with preserving his self in his child granddaughter who happens to be the old man’s doppelganger. Finally, in 1963, O’Connor’s “The Lame Shall Enter First” supports two significant child characters and their struggles to comprehend spirituality and death under the rule of their atheist father figure and the protagonist of the story. So, not only are the plots of the stories different, but the child characters themselves differ from one another. In accordance with the ideas presented by critics Pifer, Ziolkowski, Kuhn and Bussing the stories and these child characters in O’Connor are presented as simultaneously good and evil as in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” as purely innocent in “The River” or as difficult to discern as either good or evil in “A View of the Woods.” Further, these stories span almost the entirety of O’Connor’s career and thus do not focus on only one period of her writing, which
suggests these ideas are a mainstay of her career rather than a passing interest.

Although these stories differ in some ways, they are also linked by several common strands. It is these similarities between "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "A View of the Woods" that reveal the importance of O'Connor's child characters to her stories. A child dies in each of these stories and this child, as Sparrow notes, is free of evil intent. Each child dies as a direct result of his or her inability to comprehend or compound the vague instructions he or she receives in life. Further, these children each have a parent or guardian figure void of religion or spirituality. Harry Ashfield's parents and Mr. Paradise of "The River" mock faith, Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First" is a self-proclaimed atheist and Mark Fortune of "A View of the Woods" places all value of life in material possessions. Further, in each of the stories an adult close to the child who dies is guilty of one of the seven deadly sins outlined in the Bible. Harry Ashfield's parents are guilty of sloth, Sheppard is guilty of pride, and Mark Fortune is guilty of greed. Lastly, in each of the stories a child is sacrificed for the revelation of an adult, usually the adult who is in some way a sinner.
Chapter 2: "The River"

Harry Ashfield, a young boy, is the child protagonist in "The River." The story is told primarily from his point of view and thus we receive a purely innocent view. Harry lives in a dingy city apartment with his parents, an apartment which is literally a dirty "ash field," hence the significance of the family name (May 65). The family name also foreshadows the parents' indolence or sloth that will become even clearer as the story goes on. The apartment is dismal and dark, "The sun came in palely, stained gray by the glass" (O'Connor 171). And the neighborhood surroundings are just as gloomy, "Outside the gray morning was blocked off on either side by the unlit empty buildings" (158). Harry's parents are obvious alcoholics who entertain in the home frequently. The morning after a party Harry reinforces the idea of their apartment as an ash field as he empties several ashtrays of cigarette butts onto the carpet and grinds the ashes into the carpet with his feet. The image is reminiscent of a line in Ecclesiastes, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Harry returns ashes to the ground in his apartment just as he will soon return to the earth.
Harry is introduced to color, literally and figuratively, by Mrs. Conin. Mrs. Conin is the sitter that the Ashfields hire to take care of Harry at the introduction of the story as his parents are too hung-over to do so themselves. We get our first glimpse of Harry’s parents and a reinforcement of their deadly sin of sloth. Mrs. Conin picks Harry up at his apartment in the morning to take him to her house in the country for the day. As the two wait for the trolley to the country, Harry needs to wipe his nose but has no handkerchief. Mrs. Conin produces “a red and blue flowered handkerchief” for Harry and tells him he can borrow it (158). Harry puts the handkerchief into his pocket and saves it as later in the story it is a reminder of the color Mrs. Conin provides him. Harry receives another glimpse of color while he and Mrs. Conin wait for the trolley, “The trolley appeared as a yellow spot at the end of the deserted street” (159). This glimpse of color in Harry’s deserted neighborhood foreshadows the burst of color Harry receives into his dark and deserted life on this day in the country with Mrs. Conin. John R. May, author of The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor, further explains the significance of light and dark to the story:

The total contrast that names country over city as the place where Harry “counts” is drawn principally in terms of color.
and related contrasts. The difference is by no means a facile distinction between good and evil; rather, in the country there is the clarity of recognizable contrast. In the apartment everything is dark and gray, even the sun appears pale, "stained gray by the glass." The apartment is dark during the day because its adult inhabitants are night people; the family name indicates its characteristic desolation. (65-66)

Harry notices color again upon his arrival at Mrs. Conin's country home. He sees a picture hanging on Mrs. Conin's wall, "[...] a colored picture over the bed of a man wearing a white sheet. He had long hair and a gold circle around his head and he was sawing on a board while some children stood watching him" (161). The color in the picture fascinates Harry and he learns that the man in the picture is Jesus. Mrs. Conin is shocked at Harry's lack of religious instruction and the fact that he does not recognize Jesus Christ. Mrs. Conin believes it is a fault of Harry's inert parents that Harry is ignorant of spirituality. Here begins Harry's introduction to religion at the hands of Mrs. Conin. She tells him wonderful stories of the Bible and Jesus and Harry soon realizes that this man and his colorful world is what he (Harry) wants to be.
Four other children appear in the story, but they are not innocent and are, in fact, paralleled with the unclean man, Legion, in the Bible in Mark, Chapter Five. In contrast to Harry, Legion proclaims himself unclean. Harry cannot be unclean as he has not been instructed to know what is considered virtuous or vile. These four children are Mrs. Conin's children who Harry meets upon his arrival to her house. Three of the children, the boys, serve as tempters to Harry. They lead Harry to a pig pen in the yard of the house and all the while Harry is aware that the boys are likely up to no good. The incident reminds Harry of something that occurred previously:

He was coming very slowly, deliberately bumping his feet together as if he had trouble walking. Once he had been beaten up in the park by some strange boys when his sitter forgot him, but he hadn't known anything was going to happen that time until it was over. (161)

Harry's curiosity compels him to go on. The boys tell Harry to lift on a rotten board of the pen. Harry does so, and releases a squealing hog that has one of its ears missing. The hog frightens Harry and sends him running back into the house. “The three Conins watched from where they were [...] their stern faces didn’t brighten any but they seemed to become
less taut, as if some great need had partly been satisfied" (162). The boys' encouragement of the release of the pig is symbolic of Jesus Christ's cleansing of Legion, the man with the unclean spirit in Mark, Chapter Five. Herein Legion begs Jesus to cleanse him of the evil within himself. Jesus does so, and the spirits take the form of pigs that run into the sea and drown. The connection between Legion and the Conin boys lies in their need to be spiritually cleansed. Like Legion, the boys are aware of their spiritual unseemliness, which means they are aware of evil and, therefore, not innocent. The pig serves to emphasize this connection. Harry, on the other hand, does not comprehend the significance of freeing the pig, and Mrs. Conin must explain the story of Legion to Harry.

It is in the country setting of Mrs. Conin's home that Harry's religious instruction continues:

It occurred to him that he was lucky this time that they had found Mrs. Conin who would take you away for the day instead of an ordinary sitter who only sat where you lived or went to the park. You found out more when you left where you lived. He had found out already this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he had thought it had been a doctor named
Sladewall, a fat man with a yellow moustache who gave him shots and thought that his name was Herbert, but this must have been a joke [...] If he had thought about it before, he would have thought that Jesus Christ was a word like "oh" or "damn" or "God," or maybe someone who had cheated them out of something sometime. (163)

This passage provides ample evidence of Harry's spiritual and religious ignorance up to this point. But, this lack of spiritual or religious guidance serves to reinforce Harry's innocence. The passage positions Harry as a virtual clean slate in terms of spirituality. He clearly awaits a religious path to follow as he is completely fascinated with everything Mrs. Conin has to say about Jesus Christ. Harry is excited to gain the religious knowledge that he has lacked throughout his life. Mrs. Conin is shocked at Harry's lack of spiritual instruction and finds it all the more important to take Harry to a Baptism at the river conducted by the Reverend Bevel Summers. It is clear from early in the story that the boy is ignorant in a spiritual sense, argues Dorothy Walters in her book, Flannery O'Connor. She writes, "The parents' neglect of the physical well-being of their child is paralleled by their unconcern for his spiritual welfare [...] Ignorant of
the basic principles of religious instruction, he does not even know the meaning of the act of Baptism” (75).

Mrs. Conin, her children and Harry begin their trek to the river for the Baptism. Color is again vibrant at the river, “Across the river there was a low red and gold grove of sassafras with hills of dark blue trees behind it and an occasional pine jutting over the skyline” (165). Just as with Mrs. Conin’s country home, the river entices Harry with the many colors that contrast his dingy gray apartment. In addition to others gathered at the river is a man named Mr. Paradise, whom Mrs. Conin tells Harry is a non-believer since he has cancer of the ear and has not been healed by faith. Harry expresses discomfort at the thought of Mr. Paradise. Harry is in awe of the Reverend Bevel Summers and of the river Baptism. But, as no one has explained otherwise, Harry does not fully comprehend the meaning of the Reverend’s words. So, when the Reverend proclaims, “[...] if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that’s the River that was meant to carry sin. It’s a river full of pain itself, moving toward the Kingdom of Christ,” the Reverend is emphatic about the spiritual benefits of Baptism and Harry, in his spiritual ignorance, believes one should physically feel healed after Baptism (165). Harry is eager to be Baptized at the river under Mrs. Conin’s suggestion,
especially after he hears the reverend proclaim, "'If I Baptize you ... you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ [...] You won't be the same again ... You'll count" (168). But, once Harry is himself Baptized in the river he does not feel different and is wholly dissatisfied with the experience. Even after the Baptism he does not comprehend the metaphoric meaning of "healing," as is exemplified when Mrs. Conin asks the Reverend to heal Harry's mother from her "sickness." The Reverend asks Harry what his mother suffers from and he replies, "'She hasn't got up yet [...] She has a hangover'" (168). Harry is unaware that physical illness is not equivalent with spiritual illness. The reverend, though, realizes that Harry is a product of sinful parents in their sloth. Walters further maintains, "For the preacher, life has a purposeful relation to a divine principle which resides outside the human sphere: but the child responds only to the literal level of the preacher's assertions" (76). Even after this failed Baptism, Harry is determined to find the Kingdom of Christ which, as he now has been thus instructed, lies somewhere in the river.

With the vibrant color and light of the country and the river Baptism still fresh in his mind Harry is delivered home to his dingy gray apartment. His parents are once again entertaining friends and are shocked to learn that Mrs. Conin has taken Harry to a river Baptism.
Harry's mother is especially dismayed at her son's religious experience and to learn that she was mentioned at the Baptism. Harry smells her "bitter breath" when she puts him to bed, which again signifies her alcoholism and sloth (171). Harry wakes up the next morning and scavenges for food in the apartment as his parents are not yet awake. After eating remnants of food left out from the party the night before he looks in the refrigerator and finds, "[...] some shriveled vegetables that she had forgot were there and a lot of brown oranges that she bought and didn't squeeze; there were three or four kinds of cheese and something fishy in a paper bag; the rest was a pork bone" (171). The rotten food in the refrigerator further reveals the indolence of Harry's parents. The pork bone is also reminiscent of Harry's incident with the hog at Mrs. Conin's house and of the biblical story of Legion. Nonetheless, Harry eats what he can and sets out on his mission.

Under the belief that this first Baptism was unsuccessful, Harry returns to the river. "He intended not to fool with preachers anymore but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river" (173). While looking for the Kingdom of Christ in the river Harry drowns himself and dies. Though suicide is undoubtedly a sin, Harry's accidental demise is brought about by his
ignorance. Carter W. Martin maintains in his book that Harry Ashfield arrives at his spiritual epiphany, "[...] from a condition of relative innocence or ignorance, without being guilty of active evil or long-standing spiritual pride" (105). Harry remains innocent despite his final act because he is free of evil intent. Walters further asserts, "Since he dies in a state of grace (no conscious act of suicide is committed), he is eligible for direct admission to that kingdom which he seeks" (76).

But, in what way does Harry's death bring a revelation for the sinister adult character in the story? There are a number of adult characters in "The River," but only one we see react to Harry's death--Mr. Paradise. From the first appearance of Mr. Paradise we are presented with his heathenish nature. He has a purple-colored bulge on the left side of his face, which holds significance later in the story. Though Mr. Paradise is present at the river Baptism he openly mocks the Reverend Bevel Summers and cries out to the crowd, "Pass the hat and give the kid his money. That's what he's here for" (166). Mr. Paradise is in no way interested in the spiritual healing of Baptism; rather he is at the river to watch the Reverend perform his song and dance, so to speak. Mr. Paradise witnesses Harry's Baptism and forms a keen interest in the boy. When Harry goes to the river the second time for his self-Baptism Mr. Paradise
follows. Mr. Paradise buys a peppermint stick for Harry, presumably to entice the boy (for what we can only guess). However, Mr. Paradise’s last glimpse of Harry is at the boy’s moment of death, wherein Harry does not see a friendly man with candy, but rather, “[...] something like a giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting” (174). Harry is reminded of the evil heathen shouting at the Reverend and the pig of the day before and does not see a helping hand in Mr. Paradise, but a beast wielding a club. Walters asserts:

The most sinister of the child’s attackers is, of course, Mr. Paradise, the unbeliever. A conspicuous scoffer at the claims of the country preacher, Mr. Paradise pursues the child with a depraved intention. Paradise bounds into the water after the boy “like a giant pig.” For, as we have already observed, man, by rejecting the divine principle, reduces himself to the level of the beast. The Reverend Bevel Summers warned that man must choose either Jesus or the devil [...] and Mr. Paradise, who has renounced the former, clearly is committed to the latter. (75)

In the end, Mr. Paradise is left standing of the river’s edge watching Harry’s body float away. John R. May explains:
Harry knows enough about hogs from his frightening experience at Mrs. Conin’s to appreciate Jesus’ having to drive the “crowd of pigs out of a man,” and Mr. Paradise, with the “purple bulge on his left temple” favors the shoat with an ear bitten off that has already scared Harry half to death. It is thus his fear of the evil Mr. Paradise, “like a giant pig bounding after him,” and his effort to escape him that lead ironically to a happy death. Complete acceptance by the river is of course Harry’s ultimate concern. (67)

The sin of Harry’s caregivers is sloth, which leads to the death of the innocent child. His inability to integrate the lack of instruction from his parents with the surge of religious instruction from Mrs. Conin and the Reverend Bevel Summers eventually leads to Harry’s death. But, Harry’s parents do not experience a revelation that we know of. The only sinister adult we see react to Harry’s death is Mr. Paradise, who actually experiences a kind of Baptism himself in the river, much like the biblical Legion. He, too, bounds into the river much like Harry does. Mr. Paradise, though, cannot save Harry. Mr. Paradise’s revelation is that for him, there is no saving grace.
Chapter 3: “The Lame Shall Enter First”

In “The Lame Shall Enter First” the adult protagonist, Sheppard, is the widower father of the mentally challenged ten-year-old, Norton. Like the name “Ashfield” in “The River,” Sheppard’s name holds significance to the story. As we come to learn, Sheppard is a “self-proclaimed secular messiah,” as he wishes to guide the children towards the path he sees fit (Getz 121). But, Sheppard’s position as a leader of the two “sons” in the story is an ultimate failure in the cases of both Norton and Rufus Johnson. Sheppard’s pride drives him to take an orphan juvenile delinquent he has counseled, Rufus Johnson, under his care and try to reform the boy. Rufus has a club foot, which Sheppard believes to be the root of Rufus’ problem. Part of Sheppard’s plan to help Rufus is to improve the condition of the foot. In Sheppard’s mind, the improvement of the foot will improve the condition of the boy. To Sheppard’s dismay, Rufus rejects Sheppard’s guidance, which eventually causes Sheppard to despise Rufus. Just as Sheppard decides to give up on Rufus and send him away, Sheppard realizes that Rufus has had an amazingly startling effect on Norton, whom Sheppard continuously neglects throughout the story.
We are enlightened of Norton’s innocence early in the story. In the first scene of the story, for example, Sheppard and Norton breakfast together. Sheppard watches in disgust as Norton chooses to eat chocolate cake topped with peanut butter and ketchup for breakfast. With the knowledge that this meal is over-indulgent and will make his son sick, Sheppard warns Norton not to eat it. Norton’s reply to the comment is, “‘It’s stale ... That’s why I have to put stuff on it’” (446). Norton does not comprehend the meaning of his father’s warning. Sheppard and Norton’s relationship is, indeed, strained, which is evidenced by the lack of communication between the two. Sheppard’s wife, Norton’s mother, has passed away prior to the story and Sheppard has not explained to Norton anything about death. As a result, Norton has not stopped grieving for his mother simply because he does not understand death. So, when Sheppard accidentally mentions the boy’s mother, Norton begins to cry. Sheppard is dismayed by this display of grief, “This was not normal grief. It was all part of his selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child’s grief should not last so long” (447). Sheppard does not understand his son’s emotions and does not attempt to understand them. It is evident early on that Sheppard feels animosity towards Norton. Sheppard is particularly disgusted with Norton’s selfishness. The narrator states of
Sheppard’s feelings, “All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely” (445). Later Sheppard ponders Norton’s faults again and claims, “Almost any fault would have been preferable to selfishness—a violent temper, even a tendency to lie” (446). Sheppard actually wishes that Norton’s faults are other than his ignorance and innocence, which are what he dislikes in the boy’s selfishness. Sheppard mistakes his son’s simple innocence for selfishness.

With his dislike for his own son established, Sheppard decides to take another boy, the orphaned fourteen-year-old Rufus Johnson, under his wing. Sheppard’s volunteer job as a counselor introduced him to many orphaned and poor children. Sheppard’s job is here described, “On Saturdays he worked at the reformatory as a counselor, receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about. Johnson was the most intelligent boy he worked with and the most deprived” (447). Though Sheppard does not receive monetary compensation for the counseling job, he receives something more valuable to himself—a sense of pride in helping others. This pride will prove ultimately disastrous in the end. His desire to “save” Rufus is misplaced because Rufus is unwilling or unable to be saved. As we will see, Sheppard’s efforts would be much more fruitful if he put them toward his
son. Sheppard decides that since his own son is unappreciative of his advantaged life, Sheppard will give those advantages to a more deserving child. Of course, Rufus is dead-set against any such thing. Rufus is a juvenile delinquent and knows he cannot be reformed. Mischief and evil intent are in his nature, as he explains to Sheppard during one of their counseling sessions:

"I already know why I do what I do."

"Well good!" Sheppard said. "Suppose you tell me what's made you do the things you've done?"

A black sheen appeared in the boy's eyes. "Satan," he said. "He has me in his power."

Sheppard looked at him steadily. There was no indication on the boy's face that he had said this to be funny.

Even though Rufus claims to be a pawn of Satan, Sheppard's pride leads him to believe he can make Rufus good. Sheppard believes in his power to redeem. Sheppard thinks, "What was wasted on Norton would cause Johnson to flourish" (452). Of course, Sheppard's intentions with Rufus are to boost his own ego rather than to actually help Rufus, which is evident of Sheppard's own selfishness. Rufus does eventually come to live
Crucial to the story is the spirituality of the characters. It is notable that Sheppard is an atheist and to this point he has raised Norton to be one as well. The theme of characters' atheism is similar to Harry Ashfield and the other characters in "The River." Like Sheppard, Harry's parents and Mr. Paradise mock religion and those that believe in it. And, like Sheppard, Harry's parents raised their child void of any religious or spiritual instruction. Rufus Johnson, on the other hand, is a devout Christian, much like Mrs. Conin. Norton's religious instruction begins at the hand of Rufus Johnson just as Harry Ashfield's religious instruction begins at the hand of Mrs. Conin. We learn that Rufus dislikes Sheppard largely for religious reasons. He says to Sheppard:

"When I die I'm going to hell."

[...] "Nobody has given any reliable evidence there's a hell."

"The Bible has given the evidence," Johnson said darkly, "and if you die and go there you burn forever."

[...]
“Whoever says it ain’t a hell,” Johnson said, “is contradicting Jesus.” (461)

Norton, who is listening to this argument then, asks Sheppard if his mother is in hell burning up. Sheppard replies that she is not. He says, “’Your mother isn’t anywhere.’” The narrator reflects, “His lot would have been easier if when his wife dies he had told Norton she had gone to heaven and that some day he would see her again, but he could not allow himself to bring him up on a lie” (461).

Rufus accepts that he is evil and will go to hell. But, he feels it is totally unacceptable to be in Sheppard’s situation. That is, condemned to go to hell, but in denial of it. In the battle of wills, Rufus is the victor and, unfortunately for Sheppard, Norton witnesses the whole argument. It is here that Norton accepts Rufus as a spiritual guide, for at least Rufus has an explanation for death, whereas Sheppard admittedly does not. This knowledge of the existence of evil means that Rufus is not innocent. Norton remains the innocent child in the story.

Though one evil and one innocent, the two boys bond with one another more and more as they pull away from Sheppard. Rufus sees a blank slate in Norton, one that is open and starving for spiritual guidance. Norton is especially willing to accept this guidance from Rufus where the
boy's mother is concerned. Rufus asks Norton if his mother believed in Jesus:

"She did all the time," Norton said. "I heard her say she did all the time."

"She's saved," Johnson said.

The child still looked puzzled. "Where?" he said.

"Where is she at?"

[...] "It's in the sky somewhere," Johnson said, "but you got to be dead to get there." [...] 

"When I'm dead will I go to hell or where she is?"

Norton asked.

"Right now you'd go where she is," Johnson said, "but if you live long enough you'll go to hell." (462)

Because of his innocence, Norton believes that his mother is in heaven, a physical location, and that he might someday join her. This is a pivotal point for Norton. He first realizes under Rufus' instruction that he must die in order to be with his mother again. He is also aware that he must die "now" or else he will be corrupted and go to hell. He then recalls that his father, Sheppard, will also go to hell and Norton, who favors his mother
over his father, would rather be with her than with him. It is here that
Norton’s increasing interest in outer space arises.

Sheppard buys a telescope and places it in an attic window of his
house so that Rufus can be exposed to the entire universe. Rufus,
however, is wholly uninterested in the telescope, much to Sheppard’s
dismay. Norton is greatly interested in looking through the telescope and
he spends many hours peering through it throughout the story. Sheppard
does not pay Norton any attention in this regard, even when Norton
declares he wants to be a spaceman when he grows up. Sheppard also
disregards Norton when the boy waves into space while looking through
the telescope, which is a mistake Sheppard will soon regret.

Significant to this story is the fact that Rufus is handicapped with a
club foot. In Nature and Grace in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction, Lorine M.
Getz explains that the difference in Rufus’s feet is symbolic of the dualism
of his personality. She writes:

A central set of symbols in the story are Rufus
Johnson’s feet: one “lame” (physically deformed and unable
to function normally) and the other well-formed and
“normal.” Rufus’ two dissimilar feet symbolize the dual
composition of existence. His “normal” foot symbolizes
natural, physical or material reality. The "lame" foot, though
grotesque and abnormal on the natural level, symbolizes
supernatural or spiritual reality. (115)
The foot is a source of fascination for Sheppard, as he believes the foot is
the root of Rufus's problems:

The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four
or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place
and the end of an empty sock protruded like a gray tongue
from a severed head. The case was clear to Sheppard
instantly. His mischief was compensation for the foot. (450)
The shoe that holds Rufus's club foot is battered and worn out. Sheppard
believes that if he improves the condition of the boy's foot he will improve
the boy himself. In fact, "Nothing excited him so much as thinking what
he could do for such a boy. First he would have him fitted for a new
orthopedic shoe" (452). But, the new shoe is not enough for Rufus. Shortly
after Sheppard takes Rufus to be fitted for the shoe, Rufus is caught in an
act of vandalism and is brought home to Sheppard by the police. It is at
this point that Sheppard realizes the root of Rufus's evil lies deeper than
the club foot, "The boy had failed him even before he had had a chance to
give him the shoe. They were to have got it tomorrow. All his regret
turned suddenly on the shoe; his irritation at the sight of Johnson doubled" (465). Sheppard is dumbfounded that the enticement of a new shoe for the club foot is not an incentive for Rufus to stay out of trouble. Sheppard now has no explanation for Rufus's self-admitted evil nature and Sheppard's pride is damaged because of it.

As Norton and Rufus spend more time together, Sheppard realizes his plan to reform Rufus is a failure and he begins to resent the boy. One of Sheppard's first realizations of his resentment towards Rufus occurs as the three are at the ballpark:

Johnson's hand was on Norton's shoulder, his head bent toward the younger boy's ear, and on the child's face there was a look of complete confidence, of dawning light. Sheppard's grimace hardened. This would be Johnson's way of trying to annoy him. But he would not be annoyed. Norton was not bright enough to be damaged much. He gazed at the child's dull absorbed little face. Why try to make him superior? Heaven and hell were for the mediocre, and he was that if he was anything. (463)

Sheppard realizes he has truly failed to reform the juvenile delinquent when Rufus is arrested once again. The police bring Rufus back home and
Sheppard pleads with Rufus, "you ain't going to save me [...] save yourself ... Nobody can save me but Jesus" (474). Rufus refuses Sheppard because he knows that Sheppard cannot change his nature, which is evil. The relationship between Sheppard and Rufus becomes one of mutual hatred. Sheppard soon longs for his life to return to its state before Rufus came to live with him:

His feelings about Johnson now were involuntary. He would like to feel compassion for him. He would like to be able to help him. He longed for the time when there would be no one but himself and Norton in the house, when the child's simple selfishness would be all he had to contend with, and his own loneliness. (475)

Sheppard realizes that he has wasted his energy on Rufus. He feels nothing but contempt for the boy and regrets bringing him into the home. Rufus has damaged Sheppard's pride. Rufus is arrested yet again and is taken away by the police. This time Sheppard will not "rescue" him. Sheppard sees that rather than try to reform a child who refuses to or cannot change, he should put his efforts into Norton, who is essentially a blank slate. But, Sheppard reaches this realization too late:
He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself.

He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. [...]  

He saw Norton at the telescope, all back and ears, saw his arm shoot up and wave frantically. A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy’s face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light. [...]  

The light was on in Norton’s room but the bed was empty. He turned and dashed up the attic stairs and at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space. (481-82)  

Just as Sheppard becomes determined to be a better father to Norton, in a bitter display of irony the boy kills himself. Norton believes he can see heaven through the telescope and heaven is where his mother is waiting for him. He has already been informed by Rufus that he must die young
and innocent in order to be reunited with her in heaven. So, Norton makes up his mind to make the fatal leap to heaven.

Stephen Sparrow explains:

The rationalism of Sheppard was a sterile creed, which destroyed Norton. At his tender age he needed a simple faith. He missed his mother and her love had not been replaced. The nearest thing to it was his relationship with Rufus Johnson whose motives for taking Norton "under his wing" were aimed more at annoying Sheppard than supplying any sort of emotional help. Johnson offered more acceptable explanations than Norton's father had. The idea that his mother was in heaven, among the stars had definite appeal... It was the simple childlike faith of Norton, which enabled him to believe that he was seeing his mother in the stars when Sheppard discovered him looking through the telescope and waving. Norton wanted to believe because he needed to. (3)

Norton's innocence eventually leads to his death. His death then leads to a revelation for the heathen Sheppard. Though Sheppard does not outwardly commit sinful acts, he possesses one greatly sinful
characteristic—pride. Sparrow contends, "Sheppard's great sin was Adam's failing; pride. Sheppard refused to believe in the Doctrine of the Fall of Man. By default he had adopted the opposite Doctrine 'Progress,' which holds that Man is born capable of protecting himself unaided" (4). Sheppard's pride lies in his desire to reform Rufus Johnson for selfish reasons. Sheppard wishes to boost his own ego and take pride in a job well done with Rufus rather than to help the child and not gain a thing out of the act. The suicide of his son causes Sheppard to take another look at himself. "Sheppard has belatedly discovered that everything he cherished has fallen apart. He's failed on a massive scale. Johnson is back behind bars and Norton is dead," declares Sparrow (5).

Upon close analysis we find that the nature of Sheppard's revelation is quite discernable. Getz explains, "There is a recognition on the part of the protagonist [...] But the recognition is that within this life, there is no grace. Matter and spirit are and remain irrevocably opposed to one another" (112). While this statement is true from Sheppard's perspective, it does not hold for Norton. The innocent child characters do experience the workings of grace. So, when Getz goes on to state, "[...] there is no action of grace in this story. There is only the revelation that nature and supernature are diametrically opposed to one another in a
dualistic understanding of reality,” she perhaps does not take into view Norton’s account (112). Norton believes he experiences an action of grace, which Getz argues does not occur. Norton, though he does not fully understand the complexity of death, believes suicide will be the act of grace he needs to reunite with his mother. Neither Getz nor anyone else for that matter possesses the knowledge to assume that Norton is not, indeed, reunited with his mother in heaven. Getz further claims:

Norton seems to be displaced, drawn gradually by the power of grace into a state discontinuous with his former self [...] Norton is not displaced to be replaced by grace. He does not become a sign of divine power in the world, a sign of God’s presence, because there is no presence of God in the world. God’s power is elsewhere, completely separate from and alien to everything created. Norton is thus drawn out of the world of matter into the world of spirit. He is “displaced,” [...] He is not replaced by grace, but removed altogether. In his place there is only darkness and emptiness. (113)

Norton is not replaced by grace in the story. However, that does not mean that grace is nonexistent in the story. Perhaps Norton’s death is not an
example of grace for anyone but himself. Getz more completely captures the nature of Sheppard’s revelation as she writes, “At the close of the story, Sheppard is forced to acknowledge the existence of evil [...] However, [Norton] has already moved beyond the physical realm, leaving Sheppard alone in the overwhelming darkness” (124).

“The Lame Shall Enter First” contains one innocent and one evil child, but the story is told primarily from Sheppard’s point of view, which supports the combination of good and evil literary children. This image differs from the point of view in “The River,” which is mostly told from Harry’s point of view and thus is a purely innocent view. Like Harry Ashfield in “The River,” Norton is sacrificed as a direct result of the sin of his caregiver. But, where the sin of Harry’s parents is sloth, the sin of Norton’s father is pride. And, while Harry’s escape of the sin is Baptism, Norton’s escape is flight, although both escapes are also the sacrifices of the children. Further, Both Harry’s parents and Sheppard are atheists, which also leads to the deaths of Harry and Norton. Both boys lacked spiritual guidance from their parents so they misinterpret what little religious instruction they do receive and die as a result. Though Sheppard might not experience the workings of grace, he definitely experiences a revelation which is caused by the death of the innocent child.
Chapter 4: “A View of the Woods”

“A View of the Woods” reveals the relationship between nine-year-old Mary Fortune and her grandfather, Mark Fortune. Mary Fortune’s father, who is only referred to as Pitts, is involved in a constant power struggle with Mark Fortune. The entire family resides in a house that provides a lovely view of the woods from the front—a view that all family members enjoy. But Mark Fortune, the property owner, is aware that the land and the view are practically the only cards he has to play against his son-in-law, Pitts. Just as with the adults in “The River and “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Fortune’s name holds significance to his characterization within the story and to his sin.

Mark Fortune is an embodiment of his name. He covets his material fortune. It is Mark Fortune’s deadly sin of greed that eventually leads to the sacrifice of the innocent child in the story. But, nearly as important as the land to Mark Fortune is his granddaughter, Mary. Mary Fortune is used by both her father and grandfather in the story as a piece of property vital to the power struggle between the two men. The girl’s father claims a right to her as she is his child, but Mark Fortune claims a right to her as she is a miniature version of himself. Part of Mary’s significance is her “in
between" role in the story. She is constantly between Mark Fortune and Pitts. Both men lay claim to her, but she does not fully belong to either one. Mary Fortune serves as her grandfather's double. She is like him both physically and mentally. "Her face [is] a small replica of the old man's," notes the narrator (336). Their likeness is further described:

No one was particularly glad that Mary Fortune looked like her grandfather except the old man himself. He thought it added greatly to her attractiveness. He thought she was the smartest and the prettiest child he had ever seen [...] but she was like him on the inside too. She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive. Though there was seventy years' difference in their ages, the spiritual distance between them was slight. She was the only member of the family he had any respect for. (336)

Mark Fortune also claims a right to Mary because she was essentially given to him at birth by her parents. He even had the opportunity to choose her name, so he chose to name the girl after his own mother. The narrator explains, "When the baby came, a girl, and he had seen that even at the age of one day she bore his unmistakable likeness, he had relented
and suggested himself that they name her Mary Fortune, after his beloved mother, who had dies seventy years ago, bringing him into the world” (337). But, Mary Fortune number two is given the surname Pitts, which is always a source of anger for Mark Fortune. And, as we come to see, just as Mary Fortune dies bringing Mark Fortune into the world, Mary Fortune Pitts dies bringing Mark Fortune out of the world.

Mark Fortune knows that his son-in-law is eager to get a hold of the Fortune land upon his death. Pitts, too, is guilty of greed. Just to spite Pitts, Mark sells off the land bit by bit and refuses to sell any of it to Pitts. And, to ensure that Pitts does not inherit any land Mark Fortune has taken the necessary precautions:

He knew they were waiting impatiently for the day when they could put him in a hole eight feet deep and cover him up with dirt. Then, even if he did not leave the place to them, they figured they would be able to buy it. Secretly he had made his will and left everything in trust to Mary Fortune, naming his lawyer and not Pitts as executor. When he died Mary Fortune could make the rest of them jump; and he didn’t doubt for a minute she would be able to do it. (337)
Mark Fortune uses Mary to ensure that Pitts never gets what he is after. Mark trusts that he will be able to raise the girl to spite her father and continue the Fortune tradition, since he and she are already so alike and inseparable in every way. He uses Mary to perpetuate his greed. Pitts, though, also uses Mary Fortune against Mark. Pitts knows that Mark and Mary share a special bond. Mary is in every sense a part of her grandfather. While Pitts is aware he cannot cause Mark physical harm, he is also aware that Mary is his "property," and he can essentially do with her as he pleases. Seemingly unprovoked, Pitts regularly beats Mary:

Time and again, Mr. Fortune's heart had pounded to see [Pitts] rise slowly from the table ... and abruptly, for no reason, with no explanation, jerk his head at Mary Fortune and say, 'Come with me,' and leave the room, unfastening his belt as he went. A look that was completely foreign to the child's face would appear on it. The man could not define the look but it infuriated him. [...] This look would appear on her face and she would get up and follow Pitts out. They would get in his truck and drive down the road out of earshot, where he would beat her. (340)
Pitts knows that his abuse of Mark Fortune's beloved miniature is the only thing that pains the old man. Not only is Mark Fortune upset with Pitts for administering these beatings, but he is also upset by Mary's submissive allowance of these occurrences. He asks his granddaughter after one of these beatings, "'Why didn't you hit him back? Where's your spirit?'" To which Mary replies, "'Nobody's ever beat me in my life and if anybody did, I'd kill him'" (340). Mark is appalled at the fact that Mary does not stand up for herself against her father. Mark likens Pitts's beating on Mary to Pitts beating on him, "This was Pitts's revenge on him. It was as if he were the one submitting to it" (341). In his essay, "Displacing Gender: Flannery O'Connor's View From the Woods," Richard Giannone claims that the majority of the two men's dominance over Mary lies in her sex: "Pitts's domination of Mary Fortune is based on the rule of father that keeps the daughter isolated and therefore despairing of aid to control her behavior" (89). Certainly, there lies significance in the sex of the child in this story. John R. May, author of The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor, maintains that Mark Fortune and his granddaughter are representative of O'Connor's take on Adam and Eve, "The latter-day Adam and Eve are the improbable seventy-nine year old Mark Fortune and his nine year old granddaughter Mary Fortune Pitts. It is undoubtedly
O'Connor's deliberate variation on Genesis ..." (102). For May, O'Connor's Genesis variation lies in the position of the Adam and Eve figures as grandfather and granddaughter rather than as husband and wife. May also claims that Mary Fortune feels a deeper connection to nature than her biblical counterpart, which is one of the reasons she opposes her grandfather's eventual business deal with Mr. Tilman. May explains:

O'Connor's farcical variation on the story of the fall absolves woman from the complete spiritual blindness that mistakes stewardship for absolute dominion, while acknowledging sufficient temperamental likeness between old man and child to sustain the myth's tragic conclusion—expulsion from the garden is indeed a kind of death. (103)

This suggestion that Mary represents Eve counters the idea that Mary represents the mother figure in her likeness of Mark Fortune's mother. Either way, there is a great deal of significance to the story in both Mary's name and her gender. I maintain that Mary's significance to both Mark Fortune and Pitts lies in her position as Mark's double or in her position as "in between" the two men.
Nonetheless, conflict arises when Mark Fortune decides to sell a piece of land in front of the house so that a filling station can be built there. None of the family members are happy with this business deal, least of all Mary, because the erection of the filling station will block their view of the woods. This comfort and joy in nature is one that the entire Pitts family enjoys. When Mark Fortune announces this latest business venture, Mary Fortune is so upset with her grandfather that she announces she will side with her “daddy” in this struggle rather than with her grandfather, whom she had always sided with previously in arguments between the men. Mark Fortune is enraged that his own double agrees with his enemy and storms off to close the business deal with Mr. Tilman, who is to buy the land. Interestingly, O'Connor describes Mr. Tilman as very reptilian:

Tilman was a man of quick action and few words. He sat habitually with his arms folded on the counter and his insignificant head waving snake-like above them. He had a triangular-shaped face with the point at the bottom and the top of his skull was covered with a cap of freckles. His eyes were green and very narrow and his tongue was always exposed in his partially opened mouth. (352)
The equation of Tilman and snake is very telling. Tilman’s goal is to devour the earth in the name of material progress, which is an act devoid of intelligent purpose (Browning, 115). The name Tilman suggests he is a tiller of the soil. With this character trait we are of course reminded of the first literary tiller of soil—Cain, the first-born son of Adam and Eve. Cain is one of the first biblical characters to commit an evil act out of greed and selfishness and he is eventually punished by God for his evildoings. No doubt we are intended to make the connection between O’Connor’s Tilman and the first literary tiller of soil. Tilman’s physical description paired with his disregard of good create a very devil-like character. Thus, Mark Fortune essentially makes a deal with the devil. This act, along with the spitefulness and greediness of Mark Fortune, paint the portrait of an evil character that will, for O’Connor, experience a revelation at the death of the innocent child.

Mary Fortune’s death occurs at the end of the story and is the result of a final argument she has with her grandfather over the loss of the view of the woods. Mark Fortune, in a last attempt to beat some sense into Mary, drives her to the same spot where her father beats her and instructs her to get ready for her beating. The child repeats what she has already told Mark Fortune, “‘Nobody has ever beat me,’ she said, ‘and if anybody
tries it, I’ll kill him” (354). Mary means what she says. She fights back against her grandfather and declares, “I’m PURE Pitts,” which is the last straw for Mark Fortune (355). He is outraged that Mary denies the name he gave her, the name of his mother, in favor of Pitts. Then:

In the pause she loosened her grip and he got hold of her throat. With a sudden surge of strength he managed to roll over and reverse their positions so that he was looking down into the face that was his own but that had dared to call itself Pitts. With his hands still tight around her neck, he lifted her head and brought it down once hard against the rock that happened to be under it. Then he brought it down twice more. Then looking into the face in which the eyes, slowly rolling back, appeared to pay him not the slightest attention, he said, “There’s not an ounce of Pitts in me.” (355)

Mark Fortune kills his granddaughter because she opposes him and sides with her father. Mark Fortune cannot stand to be contradicted by Mary—his double. Mark Fortune dies presumably of a heart attack shortly after he kills his granddaughter when he realizes that in killing the child he has
essentially killed himself. This revelation does not bring salvation for Mark Fortune; rather this revelation causes his death.

Preston M. Browning Jr. explains:

The child stands for a quality of imagination and sensibility [...] That quality, atrophied and nearly extinct in [Mark Fortune], still lives feebly on in the deepest recesses of his unconscious mind, and when it threatens to interfere with his conscious purposes, he acts (as if by compulsion) to destroy it. Hence, his killing of Mary Fortune, though not a consciously willed act, corresponds to a conflict within his unconscious. Her death symbolizes a violent extirpation of a part of himself and it is indeed his own "conquered image" which he beholds as he stares at his lifeless granddaughter.

(114)

Mark Fortune's attempt to kill his granddaughter is actually his attempt to suppress the good within himself that would prevent his deal with Mr. Tilman. Carter W. Martin also maintains that Mary Fortune's death is for her a redemptive grace. Her death, and in turn her grandfather's, brings about her family's wealth with the inheritance of Mark Fortune's land.
Further, Mary's death saves her from becoming a spiteful greedy person as her fate as Mark Fortune's double has slated her (135).

Like Harry Ashfield in "The River and Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Mary is sacrificed as a direct result of the sins of her caregivers. But, where the sin of Harry's parents is sloth and the sin of Norton's father is pride, Mary Fortune's grandfather and father are guilty of the sin of greed. And, while Harry's escape of the sin is a Baptism and Norton's escape of the sin is flight, Mary's escape is a literal sacrifice in the form of a bludgeoning. Further, unlike the purely innocent view of Harry Ashfield or the view of Sheppard that combines both good and evil, "A View of the Woods" is told from an ambiguous viewpoint as Mary has no evil intent, but takes after the evil Mark Fortune. She eventually thwarts Mark Fortune's greed-filled guidance to let good intentions prevail.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Unlike the notions presented in Pifer's Demon or Doll, O'Connor's child characters are easily believable, and not at all exaggerated. O'Connor, though, supports Pifer's idea of the dichotomy of good and evil in fictional children in the story "The Lame Shall Enter First," which possesses one good and one evil child character. The story is given mostly from Sheppard's point of view and is, therefore, an example of the dichotomy--both sides of good and evil in images of literary children. Norton is representative of the good child. Norton remains ignorant and innocent throughout the story. His violent death is caused by his simple and child-like misconceptions about heaven and his desire to reunite with his deceased mother. On the other hand, Rufus Johnson represents the perpetually evil child. Whether the root of Rufus' evil lies in his club foot, as Sheppard believes, or in his obedience to "Satan's power," as Rufus declares, the boy is no good. Ziolkowski's idea of the literary child as perpetually evil is personified in Rufus Johnson. Throughout the story Rufus antagonizes Sheppard and feeds Norton with ideas of suicide. In the end Rufus' prediction for himself comes true—he cannot be saved. Sheppard is the character who unites the good and evil child to create the
dichotomy. Sheppard invites the evil to unite with the good in the beginning. The story is presented from his point of view so we see the intermixing of the good and evil literary child.

Bussing’s idea of the “evil innocent,” that is a literary child whom evil moves through, but is still innocent himself is particularly relevant to O’Connor. Harry Ashfield, Norton and Mary Fortune Pitts might be viewed as “evil innocents” since each of these characters is introduced to evil in some form or other and even experiences the workings of evil, yet each of these three children remains innocent. The sloth of Harry Ashfield’s parents definitely influences the boy’s religious enthusiasm as does the heathenish attitude of the pig-like Mr. Paradise. But, Harry does not become evil himself. Norton is similarly influenced by his pride-filled father and the evil Rufus Johnson, yet Norton, too, remains innocent. And, Mary Fortune Pitts also allows evil to move through her in the form of her father’s violence and her grandfather’s greed, but also remains an innocent literary child.

Lastly, the innocent children in Flannery O’Connor’s “The River,” “The Lame Shall Enter First” and “A View of the Woods” are all prime examples of Kuhn’s idea of childhood death in literature. The innocent
children in these stories remain in states of innocence even in death, and it is these deaths that bring redemptive grace for these characters.

Flannery O'Connor's "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "A View of the Woods," though completely different stories in terms of plot, are actually quite similar. Each story features an adult (or two) guilty of one of the seven deadly sins. In "The River" Harry Ashfield's parents are guilty of sloth, in "The Lame Shall Enter First" Sheppard is guilty of pride and in "A View of the Woods" both Mark Fortune and Pitts are guilty of greed. The innocent child in each of the stories struggles to merge the evil influence(s) of the adult(s) with the good or spiritual influence of his or her life. For Harry it is the compound of the dark ash field of his parents and the bright colorful country Mrs. Conin. For Norton it is the unification of the pride of his father and the Christian faith of Rufus Johnson. For Mary Fortune it is the combination of the material greed of her father and grandfather and her own desire to preserve the aesthetic beauty of nature. In the end the child is sacrificed as a direct result of his or her inability to blend these two influences. Harry's sacrifice is in the form of Baptism, Norton's sacrifice is in the form of flight and Mary's is a literal sacrifice in the form of bludgeoning. The adults cannot save these children, especially because in each of the stories the death of
the innocent child serves as a revelation for the reprehensible adult character. Coincidentally, in each of the stories this character that experiences a revelation is the only character we see react to the child's death. In "The River" it is Mr. Paradise, in "The Lame Shall Enter First" it is Sheppard and in "A View of the Woods" it is Mark Fortune. But, this revelation does not necessarily bring salvation for the adult.
Works Cited


