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**REDEEMING FEMININITY: A STEINIAN CATHOLIC FEMINIST READING OF
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S SHORT FICTION**

By

Amanda Pugh

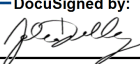
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ABSTRACT

By situating an analysis of Flannery O'Connor's short fiction in conversation with Edith Stein's theology of gender, this project contributes to the critical conversation that interprets O'Connor's fiction through various feminist frameworks. I respond by proposing an alternative feminist framework that centers O'Connor's sacramental or incarnational vision of the human body and her characters' movement from fallenness to redemption. Stein's theology posits that men and women live their fallenness and redemption in differentiated ways that correspond to their embodied masculinity and femininity, respectively. For men, participating in redemption involves imitating the sacrificial love of Christ's crucifixion. For women, participating in redemption involves imitating Christ's mother by paradoxically living out both spiritual maternity and spiritual virginity, which is possible in various states of life and professions. I argue that O'Connor's short fiction dramatizes and embodies Stein's theology of gender posited in her *Essays on Woman*, which I refer to as "Catholic feminism." To illustrate my argument, I examine eight of O'Connor's short stories through the lens of Stein's Catholic feminism.

Chapter one argues that O'Connor's stories "A View of the Woods" (1957), "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953), and "Parker's Back" (1965) dramatize a movement from fallen masculinity to redeemed masculinity, culminating in the male character's identification with Christ. Chapter two argues that O'Connor's stories "Good Country People" (1955), "Greenleaf" (1956), and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953) dramatize a movement from fallen femininity to redeemed femininity, with a particular focus on the spiritual maternity of their characters. Chapter three argues that O'Connor's stories "The Crop" (1947), "Good Country People" (1955), and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1955) also dramatize a movement from fallen femininity to redeemed femininity, focusing more particularly on the spiritual virginity and individuality of their characters. I conclude that a Steinian reading of O'Connor's fiction invites new readings that harmonize her redemptive and incarnational vision with the critical concerns raised by other theoretical lenses.

Thesis Advisor **John Dudley**
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For my own grandmothers, who both showed this misfit world what it means to be “a good woman”—even without “somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

Requiescant in pace.

Redeeming Femininity: A Steinian Catholic Feminist Reading of Flannery O'Connor's Short
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Introduction

“In the view of most feminist critics, Flannery O’Connor cannot win,” claims Christina Bieber Lake (118). While much scholarship on O’Connor focuses on the ways O’Connor’s faith shaped her fiction, some scholars have chosen to focus instead on how her fiction engages with feminist theory. Although these feminist readings offer a refreshing change of pace from strictly theological approaches, they also, as Lake claims, inevitably encounter a problem. That problem is O’Connor herself. Not only does O’Connor’s devout Catholic faith raise difficulties for a feminist reading of her work, but so too do her own ambiguous or even dismissive comments about feminism. In a 1956 letter to Betty Hester, O’Connor contextualizes her remarks to be “[o]n the subject of the feminist business,” before claiming that she “never” thinks “of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine,” opting instead to classify people “into two classes: the Irksome and the Non-Irksome without regard to sex” (*HB* 176-77). This response, characterized by O’Connor’s playful but sharp certainty on the topic, could be read as a closed door to feminist scholars attempting to read O’Connor’s stories with gender in mind. Read in another light, however, this comment may be an invitation to examine how O’Connor’s stories transcend or even deconstruct mid-century gender roles. I, however, choose to read it a third way. I see O’Connor affirming her focus on the general mystery of human existence, which neither excludes nor totalizes the topic of gender. This moderate reading of O’Connor’s much-debated reaction to the feminism of her time invites a new examination of her work.

In this thesis, I respond to several feminist critics’ scholarship on O’Connor by proposing an alternative feminist framework that takes O’Connor’s Catholic faith as its foundation. I argue that acknowledging the theological dimension of O’Connor’s stories greatly enriches the historical, cultural, and ideological perspectives of feminist criticism, and that her Catholic faith

need not be treated as an obstacle for a feminist reading of her fiction. More precisely, an openness to the theological work accomplished in O'Connor's stories allows a greater faithfulness to both text and author, while simultaneously inviting a more generous reading of O'Connor's approach to gender, especially in readings of her female characters. These female characters, even when victimized by corruptions of masculine power or constrained by unjust cultural expectations, are powerful agents able to either reject grace and cling to fallen humanity, or to accept grace for themselves and simultaneously bring about the redemption of themselves and other characters. Further, I argue that O'Connor's fiction embodies Edith Stein's incarnational and sacramental understanding of gender that sees in the complementarity of embodied masculinity and femininity a revelation of God's loving union with humanity.

A Review of the Scholarship

O'Connor's remarks aside, scholars have been reading her works through a feminist lens since around the 1980s. Although the body of feminist O'Connor scholarship includes a variety of critical opinions, a few key topics ground the conversation. These topics include embodiment (especially female embodiment), O'Connor's religious belief, Southern cultural expectations for women, and violence in O'Connor's fiction. The earliest of these feminist readings are Louise Westling's article "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters" (1978) and her book *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (1985). In her book, Westling explores the ways in which the "distinctively feminine literary tradition" of these Southern writers reflects their regional culture (3). She notices that their "preoccupations with feminine identity" are necessarily "shaped by the traditional Southern veneration of the lady" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 5). Westling argues that O'Connor, who

herself “refused to play the part of the Southern lady,” writes fiction that “struggle[s] against” this artificial feminine ideal by depicting young daughters who resist both their own femininity and their mothers’ capitulation to male authority (135, 5). Nevertheless, Westling contends that while these writers may have “manipulated, adapted, [and] challenged” the “traditional expectations for the lady,” they also “all too often finally capitulated” to them (37). In the case of O’Connor’s fiction, female characters’ resistance and eventual capitulation to male power and stereotypical expectations for their feminine behavior is ultimately veiled in violent, sexual, and religious imagery. Westling’s study thus begins the recurring focus on the combination of several topics in O’Connor scholarship as it relates to gender. These topics include O’Connor’s relationship with and reaction to her Southern culture’s expectations for femininity, her violent treatment of female characters, her relationship with female embodiment, and her religion. As feminist O’Connor scholarship developed in response to this Westling’s foundational work, differing perspectives developed, as well. My Steinian Catholic feminist reading, even as it variously incorporates or questions elements of the critical conversation, nevertheless centers on these same issues.

A decade later, more scholars further explored the interaction of these issues in O’Connor’s fiction from new angles. Sura P. Rath and Mary Neff Shaw’s collection titled *Flannery O’Connor: New Perspectives* (1996) include several readings that focus on gender.¹ In this collection, Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s chapter “Women, Language, and the Grotesque in Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty” explores the way female embodiment functions in O’Connor’s fiction to break her characters out of confining social roles and offer them a more

¹ According to Robert C. Evans’s survey of O’Connor’s critical reception, the publication of this collection “marks a major turning point in discussions of O’Connor and gender. Never before had this topic been so explicitly or consistently emphasized in a gathering of essays about O’Connor” (Evans 220).

expansive vision of their female identity. According to Reesman's Bakhtinian reading, O'Connor's "feminine grotesques . . . simultaneously address the personal, spiritual, and social realms of existence, joining them dialogically through their multiple referential capacities" (42). Through mundane events that are "at once everyday and cataclysmic: sexuality, birth, deformity, abuse, death," O'Connor's female characters "have their eyes opened to some truth about themselves" (40). Thus, for Reesman, it is through bodily functions, including sexuality and birth, that O'Connor brings her characters to higher modes of being that are "the only way they are able to address their tenuous social status" (Reesman 44). For Reesman, then, the body, and especially the female body, in O'Connor's work serves to as a gateway to epiphanies about characters' identity.

Reesman's method of reading O'Connor's fiction centers material reality and bodily functions as the pathway to spiritual revelation. Her focus on the body aligns well with O'Connor's evaluation of her own work as incarnational or sacramental. O'Connor continually stresses the "concrete," "human," and sensory elements of her fiction, arguing that "you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions" (*MM* 67). O'Connor believes that she as a fiction writer is an incarnational artist. She claims that "the concrete is [her] medium" and "that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them" (*MM* 146). Edith Stein argues something similar regarding her theological approach to gender. "Transcendence over natural limitations is the highest effect of grace," writes Stein; "however, this can never be attained by an arbitrary battle against nature and by denial of natural limitations but only through humble submission to the God-given order" (85). For both Stein and O'Connor, the body does not weigh down the soul's journey to God or to the fullest realization of its identity. The vision of reality that both women share thus involves a radical affirmation of material reality as the *sine qua non* of

spirituality. Various scholars have referred to this vision of reality as anagogical, sacramental, or incarnational.² Just as Stein grounds her theology of gender in the sacramental meaning of the human body, so does O'Connor. Her approach to human sexuality in general is to "identify it plainly with the sacred" (HB 117). I argue that reading in light of O'Connor's identification of the body and of sexuality "with the sacred," along with its connection to Stein's theology of gender, opens a new approach to O'Connor's fiction that maintains a healthy tension between faithfulness to the author's vision and fresh perspectives on her art.

In the same collection edited by Rath and Shaw, Marshall Bruce Gentry takes a different approach to gender that elevates characters' "androgynous" behavior, rather than their embodied sexual differences, as the gateway to redemption in O'Connor's fiction. In "Gender Dialogue in O'Connor," Gentry claims that "O'Connor characters frequently find redemption as they move toward androgyny" (57). These characters, all of whom "have internalized the voice of patriarchal authority," must unconsciously battle a patriarchal narrator (61). In doing so, Gentry argues, they develop characteristics of the other sex—"a female character discovers strengths that are masculine (especially by patriarchal standards), or a male character discovers his female side and the advantages of the feminine" (Gentry, "Dialogue" 57). Gentry's approach indeed "helps preserve our sense of the characters' wonderful individuality" that need not conform to superficial gendered stereotypes to receive redemption (70). Gentry's vision, however, seems to reduce all sexual difference to gendered stereotypes. Rather than finding meaning in the (male or

² This sacramental, incarnational, or anagogical worldview is affirmed numerous times throughout O'Connor's letters, essays, and fiction itself. For a straightforward explanation of this vision and its operation in O'Connor's work, see Peter M. Candler's 2010 article "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor." The term "anagogical" refers originally to a method of reading biblical texts that finds eschatological meaning in the literal images and events of the text. Candler extends the meaning of this exegetical term to apply it to reading fiction and to interpreting all of reality. He defines O'Connor's anagogical vision as a "vision that sees all things as instances of participation in God which, read properly, are fragmentary disclosures of the divine glory" (Candler 12). See also Susan Srigley's book *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art* (2004) and Helen R. Andretta's book chapter "The Hylomorphic Sacramentalism of 'Parker's Back'" (2007).

female) body, as O'Connor, Stein, and Reesman do, he argues that their redemption happens when they act against the culture's expectations for their sex. Thus, Gentry's vision seems disconnected from O'Connor's own incarnational vision. Further, he also risks reducing a character's redemption to merely the successful outcome of a power struggle against patriarchal norms, thereby erasing the need for divine action.

Building on Gentry's reading, Richard Giannone's essay in the same collection emphasizes androgyny rather than embodied sexual difference in O'Connor's vision of gender. However, Giannone also attempts to integrate O'Connor's faith and feminism to a degree most other scholars have not. In "Displacing Gender: Flannery O'Connor's View from the Woods," he argues that O'Connor's fiction exhibits "the mystical feminism of a spiritual woman" (93), and that her mystical feminism freely subverts gender stereotypes in a "gender free-for-all" that anticipates a genderless afterlife of transcendent unity in divine love (75). This articulation of O'Connor's mystical feminism, while impressive in its attempt to articulate a theology of gender in her work and to ground it in the author's professed faith, unfortunately subtly misunderstands at least one crucial element of this faith. Catholic belief includes a belief in the resurrection not just of the soul, but also of the body, which would imply the existence of distinctly male and female human persons even after death.³ Although Giannone's work appears to successfully integrate feminist criticism and O'Connor's Catholic faith, this crucial misunderstanding further highlights the gap between them. It also furthers the critical conversation on O'Connor, gender, and the body by claiming that she "displaces gender by subsuming the issue into theological

³ This Catholic belief is clearly stated in the confession of faith known as the Apostle's Creed. O'Connor affirms that she holds this belief in a letter where she states, "For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified" (*HB* 100).

finality” rather than grounding gender differences in embodiment (80). By creating this opposition between embodied gender and Christian spirituality, Giannone asserts a sort of Gnostic approach for O’Connor’s fiction that decouples the sexed body from the spiritual reality of the person. This dualistic approach to the body is contrary to O’Connor’s incarnational aesthetic vision, a vision that unites matter and spirit in a sacramental participation in divine life that can only be accessed through contact with the material world.

Recognizing the significance of O’Connor’s incarnational vision is a vital prerequisite for understanding the spiritual depth of her fiction. Further, understanding her incarnational vision clarifies why I am proposing a theological feminism counter to feminist readings that deny or overlook it. Christina Bieber Lake’s *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor* (2005) explores the importance of reading with O’Connor’s incarnational vision in mind. Lake sees crucial inconsistencies between O’Connor’s incarnational world view and the world view underlying much of the scholarship on her work. Lake notes that “we operate with strong cultural assumptions that O’Connor did not share,” namely the assumption that “growth comes by way of transcendence of the autonomous individual” (121). This idealization of autonomy, what Lake refers to as “the American religion” or “the religion of the self,” is a set of Gnostic beliefs that O’Connor rejects (8).⁴ Through her fiction, argues Lake, O’Connor attempts to refute this dualism by emphasizing the “inescapable reality of human embodiment” and its many limitations (9). Lake puts it this way: “We tend to think O’Connor’s stories shout out her beliefs; what they actually shout out is the body” (Lake 91). The reason for this emphasis on the body is, in the end, spiritual. According to Lake, O’Connor’s emphasis on the body is to reveal that “[o]ur bodies’

⁴ Lake describes “two essentially Gnostic ideas Americans have made their own: (1) that the imagination can be made pure and free, unfettered by the body and (2) that the self can birth itself in complete freedom and independence from the authority and determination of others... they vanquish God by asserting the human self” (Lake 16).

limitations prove that we need a redeemer” and that “Christ’s agreement to become flesh proves that the body is redeemable” (Lake 9). Rather than rejecting the body in favor of transcendent spirituality, as Giannone might, and rather than reducing redemption to a character’s gendered (or gender-nonconforming) behavior, as Gentry might, Lake’s reading synthesizes the body—including the female body—with the spiritual work of redemption. This vision of the body and its limitations as a gateway to redemption is precisely the vision that Stein contributes, as well.

Related closely to the topic of the body in O’Connor’s fiction is the topic of her Catholic faith and to what extent it ought to shape our reading of her work. Sarah Gordon’s *Flannery O’Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (2000), the first book-length study focusing exclusively on O’Connor and gender, addresses this topic. Gordon’s criticism aims at reading O’Connor’s works in light of developing theoretical approaches while simultaneously acknowledging O’Connor’s devout Catholicism and her technical skill (xviii). Like other scholars, Gordon labors to keep the tension between O’Connor’s Catholicism and her supposedly subversive literary voice without sacrificing one to the other. Gordon thus defines what she terms O’Connor’s “obedient imagination” as “the paradox by which the devout Catholic writer creates and explores fictive worlds and yet works within the limits of faithful obedience to the hierarchical Church” (Gordon 245). In keeping with her faith, O’Connor “creates fiction that, regardless of its ‘accidents,’ is in essence or substance Christian, specifically Catholic” (Gordon 44). Yet, Gordon contends, O’Connor’s Catholic fiction simultaneously challenges the institution it supports. O’Connor’s fiction, according to Gordon, contains “a subterranean current of rebellion that appears to be finally checked by or channeled into a dogmatically acceptable position” (Gordon 164). Throughout the book, Gordon periodically flirts with this claim that O’Connor’s work stealthily subverts cultural expectations. However, she ultimately commits to

evaluating O'Connor's work as perpetuating "a curious blend of the tenets of the New Criticism and those of Catholic Christianity," which she defines as a "masculinist" tradition (Gordon 89, 164).

Gordon's study thus highlights a tension that persists throughout feminist criticism of O'Connor: namely, a perceived tension between O'Connor's religious belief and a feminist reading of her work. Indeed, O'Connor makes strong claims about the nature of her orthodoxy. O'Connor's personal letters include claims such as, "What the Church has decided definitely on matters of faith and morals, all Catholics must accept" (*HB* 365), or "If you're a Catholic you believe what the Church teaches and climate makes no difference" (*HB* 103). Gordon affirms these kinds of absolute claims as O'Connor's real position. However, she also refers to O'Connor's faith tradition as the "strongly misogynistic tradition of the Roman Catholic Church," thus problematizing O'Connor's orthodoxy within her feminist reading (Gordon 30). But Gordon does not merely imply this tension. She describes the precise nature of it: "the intensity of O'Connor's vision and its great success are the result of the sometimes torturous, always difficult struggle of her own words to embrace the flesh, to affirm the very physicality that her background, her education, and her church often asked her to deny" (Gordon 130). In light of O'Connor's incarnational vision and its connection to Stein's theology, this is a strange claim, as it seems to imply that O'Connor's incarnational vision was actually in opposition to her Catholic faith. Elsewhere in her book, Gordon doubles down on this characterization of O'Connor's faith. She argues that "the patriarchal Church imposes its own set of constraints, many of which have to do with the subordination and denial of the flesh" (Gordon 16). Again, this is a puzzling claim, especially in light of Stein's theology of gender that reaches spiritual transcendence through embodiment. It appears that Gordon may be creating an opposition that

was not necessarily present for O'Connor. Like Giannone, Gordon pits incarnate reality against a disembodied spiritual reality, when in fact, O'Connor's incarnational vision unites them.

Other scholars also allege the existence of a tension between O'Connor's focus on the body and the spirituality of her Catholic faith. Shortly after Gordon's book was published, Katherine Hemple Prown's *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship* (2001) describes a similar conflict. Prown describes O'Connor's aesthetic as rooted in the New Criticism's "masculinist" rhetoric, which views the female intellect as "inferior" (6) and therefore "unfit" (3) to create art with universal appeal because of the feminine association with "the mundane, and the trivial" (7). Prown then argues that O'Connor's fiction reveals her "strong desire to transcend the constraints of female embodiment" (50). This claim is also puzzling in light of O'Connor's emphasis on the body and its crucial role in her sacramental vision of reality. Like Gordon, Prown finds unnecessary conflict between O'Connor's approach to embodiment or material reality and her adherence to Catholicism. But Prown, however, seems to take the inverse position to Gordon's. Rather than affirming the sincerity of O'Connor's faith, Prown questions it. She argues that gender is the "key influence around which all others revolve" in O'Connor's work (2), and that Catholicism served merely as the "chief means" to "veil the subversive threats posed by her literary voice" (20-21). According to Prown, O'Connor did not practice her faith as an end in itself. Instead, Prown alleges, she only adopted it as a persona, exploited its superficial trappings to mask her true self, and thus gain a socially acceptable platform to question gender norms and escape her female body.

A few years after Gordon and Prown's studies, Teresa Caruso edited a collection of O'Connor scholarship that continues to explore tensions between her faith and feminist readings of her work. "'On the Subject of the Feminist Business': Re-reading Flannery O'Connor"

(2004) brings to light the relative absence of mainstream feminist criticism on O'Connor (4), which the editor partly attributes to the way O'Connor's religious beliefs have contributed to primarily theological approaches to her work (1). Caruso concludes her introduction by reiterating her view that "the increasing secularity" of culture requires new scholarly approaches and that O'Connor's life reveals "a whole personality" that goes "beyond her Catholicism" (6).⁵ In the conclusion of the collection, J. June Schade claims what she sees as the "indisputable feminism" of O'Connor's work (Schade 155). Schade argues that the "analysis of Flannery O'Connor's fiction from a feminist standpoint has been severely limited due, in part, to the restricted scope within which most of her work was critiqued, but also because of scholarly research done from an undeniably masculine, more specifically, Catholic viewpoint" (Schade 156). Yet again, this is another puzzling claim in light of the two Catholic women whose scholarly and artistic work this thesis studies. Caruso, Schade, and many of the scholars in this collection have noted here the same problem as Gordon and Prown: O'Connor's Catholicism, or at least a critical reading that centers her Catholicism, just does not seem to fit into a feminist hermeneutic.

If O'Connor's Catholicism is problematized by so many feminist readings, then it may be fair to ask: do Gordon, Prown, Caruso, Schade, and others get O'Connor's Catholicism right? Is

⁵ Included in Caruso's collection, Natalie Wilson's "Misfit Bodies and Errant Gender: The Corporeal Feminism of Flannery O'Connor" once again highlights the importance of the body in O'Connor's fiction, especially for a feminist reading. Wilson explores how O'Connor's female characters, by the social meaning of their grotesque female bodies, attempt to flout patriarchal power. She argues that O'Connor critiques the norms of constructed Southern femininity and the inevitable patriarchal assertion of power over the female body. Like Gordon and Prown, Wilson must labor to keep O'Connor's clearly Catholic approach in the proper tension with a feminist reading. While most critics, and even O'Connor herself, focus only on religious themes, Wilson argues that O'Connor's "fiction also consistently focuses on the body as a radically material entity that is profoundly shaped (and constricted) by social forces" (94). And, like Gordon, Wilson assumes that this focus on the body "seems to contradict a key tenet of her religion—that the flesh should be subordinated and denied" (Wilson 94). Unlike Giannone, Prown, and others who suggest that O'Connor's fiction attempts to transcend embodiment, Wilson instead posits that "her fiction pervasively topples the disembodied, transcendent, materially perfect or immune body" (Wilson 101).

there really a discrepancy between O'Connor's embrace of the body and her Church's alleged denial of the flesh? Does O'Connor's orthodoxy prevent her from questioning Southern American cultural gender norms? Robert Donahoo asks similar questions in his 2007 article "Beholding the Handmaids: Catholic Womanhood and 'Comforts of Home.'" In doing so, he presents a much more expansive picture of both O'Connor's work and American Catholic culture than the above-mentioned scholars may expect. Donahoo engages specifically with the work of Gordon and Prown to question their tendency to connect O'Connor's portrayal of women "to her Catholicism" (82). These critics who "so clearly desire to present a complex, multidimensional image of O'Connor" end up instead presenting "a largely one-dimensional image of Roman Catholicism as O'Connor would have known it" (84). Donahoo would thus answer an emphatic "no" to the above questions.

Donahoo examines a wide range of popular Catholic publications to understand the American Catholic perspective during O'Connor's lifetime. He concludes that various writers held a wide range of perspectives on issues involving gender, all possible within the category of Catholic orthodoxy. Whereas some more heavily theological publications simply focus on Mary as the ideal of femininity, other more conservative publications rail against the feminist movement and working mothers, while still other more progressive publications advocate for women's greater participation in national political life.⁶ With many diverse voices coexisting within the milieu of O'Connor's mid-century American Catholicism, Donahoo suggests that if O'Connor is critiquing some kind of rigid understanding of femininity, it is, for the most part,

⁶ Donahoo's evaluation of the variety of political positions possible within the bounds of orthodox Catholicism is consistent with O'Connor's personal advice in a letter to Cecil Dawkins dated 23 December, 1959. She writes, "What the Church has decided definitely on matters of faith and morals, all Catholics must accept. On what has not been decided definitely, you may follow what theologian seems most reasonable to you. On matters of policy you may disagree, or on matters of opinion" (*HB* 365).

one based more on the wider American culture than one officially prescribed by her Church. Thus, “what initially looks like merely Catholic conservatism is, at least potentially, American sectarian conservatism,” and the “ideological genesis” of this vision of femininity is “to some extent in the American culture of *Leave It To Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*, not religious doctrine only” (88). Donahoo makes an important contribution to my argument by providing some critical clout to my claim that Gordon, Prown, and others may misrepresent the relationship between O’Connor’s approaches to gender, embodiment, and her faith.

Like Donahoo, Lake also calls attention to the unnecessarily complicated positions that pit O’Connor’s faith against her approach to gender in her fiction and her personal life. Indeed, for O’Connor to fit the descriptions Gordon, Prown, and others have for her, counters Lake, she would have to be “deeply conflicted, her strong vocational sense of herself as a woman writer warring at all times against her support of a patriarchy” (Lake 119). Lake engages specifically with Westling, Gordon, and Prown to question their assumption that “to be a Catholic woman in the 1940s and ‘50s meant having only two choices: either acquiesce to or struggle subversively against a hierarchy that denigrates women and denies them any real agency” (119). In Lake’s portrait of the artist, O’Connor is a “radically countercultural” woman who “managed to fashion herself a life that enabled her both to be in full communion with the Catholic church and to be the furthest thing from the 1950s-woman Betty Friedan was soon to identify” (Lake 119-120). Lake clearly has little patience for feminist criticism that caricatures O’Connor as a conflicted patriarchal woman writer who unhappily struggled to balance the burdensome demands of a rigidly traditional Church with her private subversive tendencies.⁷ Instead, Lake paints

⁷ Lake’s argument here is that O’Connor’s true subversive act is to live as a faithful Catholic in the predominantly Protestant (and increasingly secular) American South. By rooting (rather than opposing) her identity as a woman writer in her faithfulness to Catholic teaching, O’Connor subverts the fundamentalist vision of femininity as a restrictive one-size-fits-all role, while simultaneously pushing against some depictions of religion as a tyrannical and

O'Connor as a confident, if idiosyncratic, intentionally Catholic woman who lived out her artistic vocation as a freely chosen path to her redemption. This depiction of O'Connor's personal life is much more in line with O'Connor's representation of herself in her letters, as well as Donahoo's depiction of the historical reality of American Catholic culture in the 1950s. Further, Lake's willingness to harmonize O'Connor's Catholic faith and incarnational vision with her approach to gender welcomes a Steinian Catholic feminist reading.

O'Connor's incarnational approach to the body and its connection to her Catholic faith have sparked much debate in feminist scholarship on her work. Both of these topics are also inextricably connected to O'Connor's critique of cultural expectations for women in the South. In the 2004 collection edited by Caruso, Donahoo contributes an essay exploring this topic titled "O'Connor and *The Feminine Mystique*: 'The Limitations that Reality Imposed.'" Donahoo addresses O'Connor's female characters that, while "multi-dimensional, vital, and complexly meaningful," have nevertheless "tended to draw the ire of feminist critics, largely for their perceived failure to champion female empowerment and equality" (9). He claims that O'Connor's fiction "mirrors" Betty Friedan's critique of social expectations for women by exposing their "confinement within cultural definitions of 'woman'" (13, 27). Robert Rea's article "Flannery O'Connor's Murderous Imagination: Southern Ladyhood in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'" (2017) explores a similar topic. He argues that the violence toward the grandmother in O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" has "more to do with hostility toward clichés than cruelty to women" (168). Like Donahoo, Rea sees O'Connor's fiction "[bidding] good riddance to a worn-out type for fictional heroines" like the Southern belle or the

patriarchal authority that overpowers femininity, and especially feminine creative expression. Michael Mears Bruner makes a similar argument about O'Connor's theological aesthetic vision, with less emphasis on gender, in his book *A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (2017).

1950s-woman (169). Gentry also notices O'Connor's rejection of superficial constructions of femininity, and he similarly locates this vision of femininity in Southern culture rather than O'Connor's religion vision. Gentry argues that O'Connor wrote characters that refused to conform to idealized femininity "because of her deep disgust for the prescribed repression and bland perfection of the southern belle," which Gentry calls a "corruption of and substitution for the Virgin Mary" ("Dialogue" 64). Indeed, Stein would likely support O'Connor's critique of arbitrary, superficial cultural expectations for feminine appearance and behavior. Such a critique leaves room for Stein's sacramental theology of gender that grounds the meaning of sexual difference in the body (and the soul that it reveals) rather than cultural norms.

Within the conversation about O'Connor's approach to cultural expectations for femininity, several feminist readings focus on the interaction of mothers and their children. Several of these readings argue that the unrealistic cultural and familial expectations for female characters lead to cycles of abusive relationships. One of the first of these explorations, Louise Westling's "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters" (1978) traces the "repeated mother-daughter pattern" in O'Connor's fiction (510). Other scholars, like Lisa S. Babinec (1990), build on Westling's foundation by testing the possibility of reading O'Connor's stories with a contemporary feminist lens. Babinec concludes that mothers in O'Connor's fiction struggle to simultaneously fill the roles of nurturing mother and of protector and provider. Such a strain results in a futile grasping for control over their daughters that manifests in a cycle of domination, manipulation, and mental abuse, which daughters respond to with rebellion (27). In his article "Flannery O'Connor's Empowered Women" (1994), Peter Smith also evaluates the abuse wrought by O'Connor's female characters, particularly the female characters he considers "empowered women." He ultimately classifies many female characters in O'Connor's work as

“failures” because, in their attempts to exploit the “power which comes as a result of land ownership and the ability to employ workers,” their power eventually causes them to abuse their employees and family (45). Smith calls these stories “commentaries upon the impossibility of a woman of this society successfully negotiating her way through a patriarchal power structure” (46). Because they try to fill “both gender roles, these women fail to completely fill the requirements of either” (47). His reading implies at least two points: first, that O’Connor’s empowered women often end up living a perverse version of their humanity by mistreating their employees, and that society imposes burdensome expectations on women, particularly single working mothers or widows. But he also implies something more: that the cause of these characters’ suffering is their attempt to transcend the limitations of their gender.

Carla L. Verderame’s article “A Retreat Home: Flannery O’Connor’s Disempowered Daughters” (2000) further develops the scholarship on O’Connor’s mother-daughter relationships, similarly concluding that O’Connor’s women struggle because they cannot transcend their embodied and cultural limitations. She observes these daughters’ “function as grotesques whose awkward, defective bodies...prohibit them from experiencing the world and threaten any possibility of social connection” (149). Although these women exceed gendered and classed categories like the “southern belle,” they ultimately “fail to overcome their socially imposed gender boundaries or to depart from the southern, patriarchal scripts assigned to them because they are immobilized by external social forces that deny their movement” (143). I argue that, in light of Stein’s Catholic feminism, O’Connor’s female characters are indeed constrained, as Verderame and others argue. However, I contend that though they may at times be constrained by “external social forces” and their own bodies, they are just as often constrained by their own fallen human nature, just as O’Connor’s male characters are constrained by their fallen human

nature. Further, I argue that the “constraints” of their female embodiment eventually become the very source of connection and transcendence for them.

Of the many forces that constrain women in O’Connor’s fiction, the violence that faces many of her characters is an important topic in the conversation. In “How Sacred is the Violence in ‘A View of the Woods?’” (2004), Gentry wants readers to avoid overlooking the literal horror of violence, particularly of child abuse, by romanticizing the events of the story. His reading thus questions the “common reading” of many of O’Connor’s stories, namely, “that the story’s violence is linked to the sacred” (64). Several other scholars of note examine this violence that pervades most of O’Connor’s fiction. For example, Prown juxtaposes O’Connor’s unpublished early manuscripts with her published work to reveal that “an earlier, female-sexed voice that governed her fictional landscape” eventually gives way to stories that “endorse a misogynist politics wherein women are figured as victims” (6-7). Other scholars critique the sometimes sexual nature of the violent incursions into female spaces and bodies. In “The Saving Rape: Flannery O’Connor and Patriarchal Religion” (1994), David Havird takes this stance. He unpacks his reading of the erotic in O’Connor’s fiction as “forcing upon [female characters], in a sexually humiliating and often violent way, the humbling knowledge that they are after all women. It is not simply that they are merely human while God is divine; it is rather that they are female while God is male” (17). These violent situations are indeed troubling, and O’Connor most likely did not mean for her readers to overlook the violence in an attempt to force a theological meaning out of it. But at the same time, it is also unlikely that her violence was meant to “endorse a misogynist politics,” as Prown argues, or to somehow assert the male dominance of a divine spiritual being, as Havird argues.

The incarnational world view of both Stein and O'Connor helps give some context for the complexity of this issue. To this end, Lake offers some insight by pointing out an inconsistency between O'Connor's incarnational world view and criticism of her work. Lake argues that critics often look for a modernist version of God, characterized as "distant," "paternal," and "authoritarian" (34). This seems to be the God that Havird sees, the kind who regularly commits violence against innocent women in a fashion similar to a Steinian description of fallen masculinity. But, Lake asserts, "modernism's God is not O'Connor's God. In her stories, God is not a distant authoritarian figure who passes judgment on sinners, but a being whose primary aim is revelation" (Lake 34). And similarly, for O'Connor Christ is not a harsh tyrannical ruler who assumes superiority through a male body, but instead is "an engaged physical presence, living in the bodies of believers here" (Lake 35).⁸ Lake's reminder does not do away with the problematic nature of O'Connor's violence so much as simply reveal what is perhaps a misunderstanding between two very different world views that clash in O'Connor criticism.

It seems that O'Connor herself was quite aware of these clashing world views, and she reveals that she has a purpose for her violent plots that relates directly to them. O'Connor often wrote and spoke about the rapidly increasing trend toward secularization taking place in American culture. For her, violence and the grotesque were last-ditch efforts to remind

⁸ Several other scholars also emphasize divine love rather than power as the appropriate hermeneutic to clarify O'Connor's violent plots. Giannone, in *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (1999), argues that reading O'Connor's violence more charitably allows us to see that her "quiet, patient smile of controlled abandonment to love shines forth through all her fictional violence" (3). This new perspective offers deep theological insight for Giannone: "Read by the light of salvific possibilities, O'Connor's fiction can be seen as not only clarifying the idea of God for the unbelieving modern mind, but also as modifying our idea of the human person" (3). More recently, Ralph C. Wood reads O'Connor's fiction through another hermeneutic of love, specifically in light of Pope Benedict XVI's theology of "divine eros." In "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and Divine Eros" (2010), Wood sees O'Connor's fiction as a revelation of the theological truth that grace perfects, rather than destroys, nature. He writes, "In both Benedict and O'Connor, the realms of nature and grace do indeed penetrate and interlock so as to form a perfected whole, but they do so in a radically surprising way. Both the pope and the writer retain the real *offense* of the Gospel by envisioning the love of God as *eros* no less than *agape*. The divine love not only gives itself in oblation for the world's sin, it also burns and pierces the myriad hosts of its beloved, erupting into their lives so as to prevent, if possible, their being lost to false lovers and false loves" (36).

Americans of their sacramental nature. She writes about these clashing world views and how they influence her work: “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (*MM* 34). The violence in O’Connor’s fiction is thus not a “misogynist politics” that she endorses, but rather a warning signal. In a culture that was rapidly forgetting that human beings are spiritual beings, the most efficient remedy would force readers to remember the reality of their own body. For, in an incarnational world, it is only the material reality of the body that can reveal the spiritual reality of the soul. And in a culture that was rapidly forgetting that it needed to be redeemed, the most efficient reminder would shock readers into recognizing the truly fallen nature of the world and of themselves, for it is only a fallen world that needs redemption. Thus, O’Connor’s violence, while it cannot be explained away by O’Connor’s theology, does itself point to her theology.

Up to this point, the critical conversation has revolved around topics like O’Connor’s approach to the body, her Catholic faith, her engagement with cultural representations of femininity in the 1950s American South, and the violence that pervades her work. More recent feminist readings of O’Connor’s fiction, however, tend toward intersectional approaches that often avoid engaging with the topic of O’Connor’s faith. The range of these approaches is broad, including ecofeminist readings, queer theory and disability studies readings, and readings that pair gender and race.⁹ Some take historical approaches that note O’Connor’s engagement with

⁹ For an ecofeminist reading, see the work of Catherine Bowlin, such as her 2022 article “‘Marching Across the Water’: A Material Ecofeminist Reading of ‘A View of the Woods’” (2022). For a reading that focuses on the intersection between queer theory and disability studies, see “‘God Made Me Thisaway’: Crip-queer Perspectives on Flannery O’Connor” (2020). For approaches that focus on the intersection between gender and race, see works like Katie Frye’s “‘A ‘Silver Bullet Ready to Drop into Her Brain’: The Crisis of White Motherhood in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf,’ ‘The Enduring Chill,’ and ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’” (2018). See also Christine Grogan’s “‘Parker’s Black? A Rereading of Race in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Parker’s Back’” (2020).

gender stereotypes in the American South, while others draw connections they see between O'Connor's stories and various feminist theorists.¹⁰ For example, in Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick's "Feminism and Identity Politics in a Critical Close Reading of 'Good Country People'" (2019), Goodspeed-Chadwick reads O'Connor's story with a "women's studies" lens by drawing connections to Judith Butler's performativity theory, Audre Lorde's description of Western binaries, and Helene Cixous's *écriture féminine*. This move further develops earlier readings that link O'Connor with feminist theorists, including Natalie Wilson's work linking O'Connor with Judith Butler and Donahoo's work linking O'Connor and Betty Friedan. This thesis further develops this trend by reading O'Connor's work through the lens of a near-contemporary feminist who not only shares O'Connor's Catholic faith and incarnational world view, but also one whom O'Connor read and positively engaged with.

Much of the above scholarship demonstrates that for some feminist readings, O'Connor's faith presents an obstacle. Either O'Connor must be painted as a patriarchal woman for endorsing her religion; or, if we wish to claim her completely for the feminist side, we must say that she is not *really* Catholic in sincerity, only strategically pretending to get ahead in her Catholic circles. For other scholars, her faith and feminism can be harmonized, but only when they consider an incomplete representation of this faith. Still other feminist scholars might get around the issue by focusing exclusively on gender politics without mention of her faith or her sacramental aesthetic vision. However, as I argue, the method of separating O'Connor's fiction from her faith in order to read with a feminist lens jeopardizes the overall project of O'Connor's

¹⁰ In a recent historical reading titled "Country People: Depictions of Farm Women in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction," Monica Carol Miller's contribution to the 2020 collection *Reconsidering Flannery O'Connor* examines O'Connor's female characters against social expectations for women in the South. Miller argues that "O'Connor's farm stories represent an important turn away from nostalgic visions of a pastoral South" and instead provide a "counternarrative to the prevailing . . . depictions of southern agrarian life" (122, 113). Like other feminist readings before it, Miller's presents O'Connor's female characters as resisting (or at least trying to resist) the confinement of cultural representations of femininity.

entire *oeuvre*. To avoid these dilemmas, critics need to diversify their framework. They need a framework that synthesizes O'Connor's Catholic faith and incarnational worldview with feminism. Using the work of Edith Stein, I will propose an alternative feminist framework for reading O'Connor's fiction that harmonizes the tension between the author's faith and feminist theory. By reading through this Steinian lens, I will explore how a sacramental vision of gender enriches both feminist readings of and theological approaches to O'Connor's fiction.

O'Connor's Steinian Catholic Feminism

I argue that O'Connor's faith can indeed be harmonized with a feminist reading of O'Connor's fiction by looking no further than the author's own extensive private studies.¹¹ Stein, a key figure in articulating a uniquely Catholic feminism, features in O'Connor's personal library, book reviews, and correspondence. O'Connor's comments on Stein reveal an admiration both personal and intellectual for the feminist saint's life and thought. In an August 1955 letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor calls Stein one of "the two 20th-century women who interest me most" (*HB* 91-93).¹² In a September 1956 letter to the same woman, O'Connor writes approvingly of

¹¹ See Arthur F. Kinney, *Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being* (University of Georgia Press, 1985) for a full catalog of O'Connor's private library collection, which is also housed in a special collection at the Ina Dillard Russell library at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, GA. These records indicate that O'Connor owned two books by Stein, including *Writings of Edith Stein* published by Newman Press in 1956 and translated by Hilda Graef, and *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross* published by Henry Regnery in 1960 and translated by Hilda Graef, Dr. L. Gelber, and Fr. Romaeus Leuven. O'Connor's reviews of both books are included in *The Presence of Grace: And Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*.

¹² The other woman O'Connor refers to in this statement is Simone Weil. Sarah Gordon calls attention to O'Connor's affinity for both Stein and Weil in her 1987 article "Flannery O'Connor, the Left-Wing Mystic, and the German Jew," and in a revised version of the same work published as a book chapter in the 2017 *A Political Companion to Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Henry T. Edmondson. In this chapter, Gordon finds detailed parallels between O'Connor's work and Weil's thought, but much of the chapter's section on Stein focuses on controversies between Jewish and Catholic leaders regarding Stein's religious identity and the construction of memorials at Auschwitz. The connection between O'Connor and Weil's thought is further explored by E. Jane Doering and Ruthann Knechel Johansen in the 2019 book *When Fiction and Philosophy Meet: A Conversation with Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil*. To my knowledge, a similar exploration of the connections between Stein's thought and O'Connor's work has yet to be produced.

Stein: “If she is ever canonized, she will be one saint that I don’t think they can sweeten up on holy cards and write a lot of ‘pious pap’ about” (*HB* 172-74). Yet, O’Connor was not ignorant of Stein’s feminist vision, as she writes later in a 1957 review of a collection of Stein’s work that Stein is “a thorough-going feminist, willing when the occasion demanded to wrestle with the apostle Paul” (*Presence of Grace* 34). O’Connor’s classification here of Stein as a “thorough-going feminist” warrants various feminist readings of O’Connor’s fiction, but in a particular way, I argue, it warrants a Steinian Catholic feminist reading.

Stein herself acknowledges the particularly Catholic nature of her feminism in “Problems of Women’s Education” (1932), where she differentiates between the Women’s Movement in general and the Catholic Women’s Movement. She argues that the “Catholic Women’s Movement must rest on its own foundation, the foundation of faith and a Catholic world view which is well thought out in all its consequences” (171). O’Connor’s letters also reveal a particularly Catholic approach to her concern with feminism and gender. In one letter she writes, “Of course I do not connect the Church exclusively with the Patriarchal Ideal. The death of such would not be the death of the Church, which is only now a seed and a Divine one . . . In the end we visualize the same thing but I see it as happening through Christ and His Church” (*HB* 99). It is unclear exactly what “same thing” O’Connor and her interlocutor are visualizing, but O’Connor’s statement applies to our discussion here. As for Stein, it is clearly a Catholic world view that modifies her feminist framework, and not vice versa, in O’Connor’s vision of gender. In a later letter, O’Connor adds that “[t]he Church would as soon canonize a woman as a man and I suppose has done more than any other force in history to free women” (168). This last comment is indeed a bold claim, but it offers an important grounding principle for reading gender in O’Connor’s work, and one that may remind us of Stein’s Catholic feminism. For both

Stein and O'Connor, the sacramentality and redemptive nature of their Catholic world view ground their feminism.

Several of Stein's works contribute to the theoretical framework for my analysis of O'Connor's stories. These works include "The Ethos of Women's Professions" (1930), "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace" (1932), and "Problems of Women's Education" (1932). I have chosen these works because they were included in *Writings of Edith Stein* (1956), the selected translations of Stein's writings that O'Connor owned and reviewed and thus would have been familiar with. I also include concepts from Stein's "Spirituality of the Christian Woman" (1932). A key move in Stein's works is promoting the dignity of woman's embodied natural vocation as wife and mother, which she sees as a revelation of woman's unique spiritual faculties that can also serve other professions and vocations. This essentialist philosophy has been described as a "dynamic" essentialism or as "personalism" because it centers the agency and development of the individual human person (male or female) over static, prescribed gender roles (Allen 69). Stein's essentialist philosophy of gender is the fruit of a much larger system in Catholic thought, namely a sacramental world view that draws from an Aristotelian model ofhylomorphism. Such a vision of reality sees the material world as distinct from, but always participating in, the spiritual realm. Stein references this hylomorphism when she reminds her readers of the principle of "*anima forma corporis*," that is, the soul is the form of the body, and when she posits that "man is not only an organism but rather an organism with a soul who, in the sensitive manner peculiar to him, is open to himself and his environment" (Stein, 182-183). Thus, in addition to being an embodied organism, a human being is also "a spiritual being who is consciously cognizant of himself and others and can act freely to develop himself and others" (Stein 183). This focus on the body as

both material reality and the revelation of spiritual reality is consistent with O'Connor's incarnational, sacramental vision of the world.

This bringing together of the spiritual and material into one sacramental reality is a distinguishing factor of both O'Connor's fictional vision and Stein's Catholic feminism. However, a more complete definition of a Steinian Catholic feminist framework would be useful here. Some scholars have offered a broad definition of feminist criticism in relation to O'Connor studies. For example, Katherine Hemple Prown defines a feminist analysis as "any analysis that takes gender into consideration" (163). Stein's thought indeed fits this definition, as the works in *Essays on Woman* focus on the nature of gender, especially femininity, and how it operates in human experience. Stein terms the focus of her work as the "inquiry into the essence of woman," which for her "has its logical place in a philosophical anthropology" that is consistent with Scripture and Catholic theology (Stein 174). Thus, Stein's Catholic feminism offers a feminist framework that is consistent with O'Connor's Catholic faith, and more specifically, with her sacramental world view.

In addition to a focus on gender, other definitions of feminism can further clarify Stein's Catholic feminism. In a 2022 interview with a popular online Catholic publication, Abigail Favale provided such a definition. This definition has "two parts: first is a belief in the equal dignity of men and women; second is a belief that there are significant social forces undermining that dignity" (Favale, qtd. In Ureneck). For Stein's Catholic feminism, these undermining forces take a very particular form. Stein locates the source of disordered relations between man and woman in evil and sin. She explains, "Everywhere about us, we see in the interaction of the sexes the direct fruits of original sin in most terrifying forms: an unleashed sexual life in which every trace of their high calling seems to be lost; a struggle between the sexes, one pitted against the

other, as they fight for their rights and, in doing so, no longer appear to hear the voices of nature and of God (Stein 76). This explanation leads us to another distinguishing factor of Stein's Catholic feminism. Stein places hope for restored harmony between men and women in redemption received through God's grace. According to Stein, "The redemptive order restores the original relationship; the more redemption is personally adopted, the more it makes possible a harmonious collaboration and an agreement concerning the allotment of vocational roles." (80-81). These concerns parallel O'Connor's concern with the distortions of fallen human nature and the (often violent) action of grace in characters' lives, which they choose either to accept or reject.¹³ Thus, both women are concerned with the movement from the fallen to the redeemed state of humanity.

These two focuses—on embodied gender differences and on the movement from sin to redemption—converge in Stein's Catholic feminism. Stein studies the way man and woman's fallenness and redemption are characterized by their embodied masculinity or femininity. Much more will be written in the subsequent chapters regarding the specifics of Stein's thought. However, a general outline of the trajectory is as follows. For Stein, all human experience in some way manifests either fallen human nature, redeemed human nature, or the tension between them. She writes, "the great events of the cosmic drama of the fall of man and redemption are renewed again and again in the life of the Church and in each human soul" (125-126). Stein offers key figures to illustrate this pattern as it relates to man and woman. Fallen man, represented by the first man Adam, is redeemed through his association with Christ. By imitating

¹³ In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor writes, "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (*MM* 32). Further, O'Connor describes the importance of Redemption for writers: "There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored" (*MM* 48).

Christ and participating in His redemptive sacrifice, man can receive his redemption. Thus, according to Stein, “the distinction of the male sex is that redemption came through the Son of Man, the new Adam” (65). Woman follows a similar trajectory from imitating the first fallen woman, Eve, toward imitating the pattern of redeemed femininity, which is Mary, the Mother of God. In Stein’s Catholic feminism, Mary is the model of redeemed femininity because through her, “a woman was the gateway through which God found entrance to humankind” (70). Stein explains that “every other woman has something in herself inherited from Eve, and she must search for the way from Eve to Mary” (119). This is the Steinian Catholic feminist framework in a nutshell. In a Steinian Catholic feminist reading, one might look for the way this pattern from fallen to redeemed masculinity or from fallen to redeemed femininity plays out in an author’s characters and plots.

In applying Stein’s Catholic feminism to O’Connor’s fiction, I focus on a number of O’Connor’s stories, each of which includes male and female characters who live their uniquely masculine and feminine vocations in varying states of grace or fallenness and who either accept or reject the dynamic of divine life offered to them. In keeping with both Stein’s and O’Connor’s sacramental worldview, most also depict embodied, complementary gender differences and relationships that become a meaningful conduit for this divine life. Each chapter of this thesis follows the action of grace as characters move from the fallen order to the redeemed order, with a particular focus on the way each character’s gender characterizes his or her individualized rejection or reception of redemption.

In chapter one, I examine O’Connor’s theological vision of masculinity. I begin by exploring those characters in O’Connor’s stories that represent a fallen, unredeemed masculinity, such as Mr. Fortune and Mr. Pitts in “A View of the Woods” (1957) and Tom T. Shiftlet in “The

Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953). O’Connor, however, also sees in masculinity the possibility of restoring order through the action of grace. Using “Parker’s Back” (1965), I explore how Parker’s actions embody true masculinity within the sacramental vision of gender, a vision that sees sexual difference and complementarity as a revelation of both human and divine love and that provides the foundation for Stein’s Catholic feminism. Because it reveals, through Parker’s redeemed masculinity, the sacramental image of Christ’s love for his Church, O’Connor’s fiction can also reveal, through the redeemed femininity of its female characters, the mystery of the Church and its feminine capacity to actively receive divine love.

In chapter two, I examine O’Connor’s theological vision of femininity lived out in the vocation of marriage and motherhood. Several of O’Connor’s stories include overbearing mothers desperately striving to conform themselves and their daughters to the stereotypes of Southern “ladyhood.” One such character is Mrs. Hopewell in “Good Country People.” Several other stories include crafty wives and mothers successfully running businesses but giving little to no attention to God’s existence or to their duties toward the persons in their care—women like Mrs. May in “Greenleaf” (1956). In this chapter, I juxtapose those “fallen” wives and mothers who seek control and superficial status symbols of Southern gentility with those wives and mothers who arrive at a redeemed state through active receptivity to the action of grace mediated through their own feminine humanity. The most notable of these is the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953). This unlikely hero is forced into a painful recognition of her fallen humanity, which leads her to receive a revelation of grace that in turn bears redemptive fruit in the lives of those in her care, a pattern that resembles a spiritual “maternity” of grace.

In chapter three, I examine O’Connor’s theological vision of femininity lived out in an unmarried state. In “The Crop” (1947), Miss Willerton offers a satirical example for how a

female artist should *not* conduct herself—that is, with no regard for either the objective quality of the work or the totality of the person she encounters in reality. In this way, she rejects her individual vocation, her femininity, and her humanity, thus rejecting the action of grace mediated through her ordinary life. Among the rebellious daughters in O’Connor’s stories, two stand out as offering hope for redeemed femininity: Joy/Hulga in “Good Country People” (1955) and the unnamed protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1955). Both, through a jarring encounter with their own embodied femaleness, are purified and supernaturally empowered to freely give their lives to the Truth that, in the mind of the author, is the divine person of Jesus Christ.

This thesis offers a new reading of O’Connor’s work that harmonizes her faith with a feminist reading. It also engages with the work of a contemporary Catholic feminist theologian whom O’Connor studied. Since at least the 1980s, many scholars have labored over the difficult task of holding two seemingly contradictory systems in a healthy tension. As Louise Westling writes, “Whatever side we take in this controversy, we must eventually explain our admiration for the fiction in terms that reconcile religious and secular responses and also grant its obvious literary merit” (Westling 136). It is my hope that this thesis furthers Westling’s goal. By taking a theological approach that O’Connor herself would recognize, the readings provided in the following chapters will hopefully, in some small way, enrich both the feminist and theological schools of O’Connor criticism by synthesizing their primary concerns. Indeed, for many feminist critics, this approach may mean recognizing a different world view—an incarnational world view, to be precise—as a valid premises for a feminist framework. And, for theologians and Catholic critics, focusing on the theological meaning of gender instead of O’Connor’s moral theology may mean a similar recognition of new concerns and ways of thinking. Ultimately, I hope that the following chapters will work towards gaining new and deeper insights into the

work and thought of Flannery O'Connor while remaining faithful to the Catholic literary woman behind it.

Chapter 1: “I’m a Man, Even if I Ain’t a Whole One”: The Foundation of Redeemed Masculinity

O’Connor’s stories tend to reveal a less-than-flattering image of masculinity and male characters. Common throughout O’Connor’s fiction are self-absorbed and tyrannical father figures, morally impotent husbands, and disobedient sons. Given these less-than-ideal models of masculinity, one might not be surprised to notice the tendency of some O’Connor scholarship to fixate on the dynamic of fallen masculinity without having recourse to the dynamic of redeemed masculinity also working in her fiction. Marshall Bruce Gentry articulates this tendency by playing on the title of O’Connor’s most famous story. Gentry observes that in O’Connor’s fiction “[a] good man is hard to find because being masculine gets in the way of being good” (“Gender Dialogue” 68). By fixating on misogyny or by characterizing masculinity as an obstacle to redemption, this mindset makes it difficult to see any hope for the redemption of truly “masculine” characters, much less for redemption effected through masculinity.

In this chapter, I argue that O’Connor presents fully-realized and redeemed masculinity in her stories through both counterexamples and positive examples of male characters. Edith Stein’s theological grounding of embodied and sacramental gender differences allows us to see the ways in which O’Connor’s vision of masculinity depends on the action of grace in the life of each individual character. In Stein’s thought, men and women tend to live out their fallen state and participate in their redemption in particularly gendered ways. Reading in light of Stein’s gendered understanding of fallen and redeemed masculinity thus provides the key to understanding O’Connor’s male characters and their particular function in her fiction’s sacramental order of sexual differentiation. Such a lens will acknowledge O’Connor’s reliance on violent or tyrannical male characters while simultaneously revealing her hope for a radically transfigured vision of masculinity that is only possible through the action of grace.

This chapter will focus on three stories that illustrate O'Connor's Steinian vision of masculinity. In "A View of the Woods" (1957), O'Connor presents two fairly clear versions of fallen masculine humanity in its characters Mr. Fortune and Mr. Pitts. Both men fail in the particularly masculine tasks of responsibly cultivating the land and sacrificing their selfish desires to care for their family. These characters' idolization of abstraction, fragmentation, material wealth, and domination echo Stein's description of fallen masculine humanity. O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953) builds on this representation of fallen masculinity, with the protagonist positing his own Gnostic vision of masculinity. This character's vision of masculinity as a mode of being that tends toward abstraction and autonomy, even at the expense of his wife's wellbeing, further reveals how O'Connor's vision of fallen masculinity parallels Stein's vision.

By painting fallen masculinity as artificially fragmented and self-seeking, however, O'Connor also paves the way for her depiction of redeemed masculinity as restorative and self-giving. Against her vision of fallen masculinity stands the protagonist of O'Connor's final story, "Parker's Back" (1965). In this story, the development of Parker's character points to his sacramental task of restoring creation's wholeness by imitating Christ's sacrificial love for His bride. It is only through an emphasis on the Incarnation—of both Parker's body and Christ's body—that Parker's masculinity finds its highest realization in sacrifice of self. What looks to the world like Parker's defeat is, like Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the true expression of strength and masculinity. It is to this ideal that O'Connor's many fallen male characters point by negation, and it is only next to this revelation of divine love that O'Connor's vision of redeemed femininity will be credible. By representing masculinity as a sacramental revelation of God's

self-giving love, Stein also elevates femininity to the position of privileged sacramental recipient of this divine love that is mediated through masculine humanity.

Stein on Masculinity and Gender Complementarity

Stein takes up this topic throughout the works included in *Essays on Woman*. Her theological approach to gender is grounded in her exegesis of the two creation accounts in the book of Genesis. In the first creation account, God creates out of nothing the earth and all its inhabitants. Over a figurative seven “days,” God’s creation becomes increasingly glorious and complex, culminating in the creation of human persons, both male and female.¹⁴ After each of five “days,” God proclaims his creation to be good. But on the sixth day, God makes “man in our image, after our likeness,” and then gives them “dominion . . . over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1:26 RSV). The next verses clarify to whom exactly God is speaking. It is not a singular male person, but rather man as humanity, as both male and female: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27 RSV). To both man and woman God then gives blessings and commandments. He “blessed them” and “said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:28, 31 RSV). What is notable in this account is that God does not grant his likeness and authority to man as male only, but to man as male and

¹⁴ It is widely accepted by most mainstream Catholic theologians that the creation narratives contained in the book of Genesis are not to be read in a strictly literal sense but instead as poetic “myths” that illustrate certain theological truths about the origin, nature, and final end of created being and especially of human being. In this way, the Judeo-Christian creation “myth” can be compared with the contemporary creation myths of other Semitic peoples. Abigail Favale’s *The Genesis of Gender* (2022) engages these comparisons, particularly with the *Enuma Elish*, to highlight the distinctiveness of the Christian vision of gender and sexuality as sacramental iconography of divine love (33-44).

female—what Stein calls the “double species man and woman” (Stein 187). Thus, a radical equality and harmony between the sexes existed in the original order of creation, just as a radical intimacy between God and his creatures existed in this original order. The harmony of the original order of creation is for Stein the most authentic manner of relations between man and woman.

By focusing more clearly on the topics of sexual differentiation and the Fall of humanity, the second creation narrative complicates the theological dynamic of human sexuality. Adam, the first man, is specifically tasked with “tilling” and “keeping” the garden, but he is also warned against eating from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17 RSV). After God makes man (male) and places him in the garden, he declares, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (2:18).¹⁵ Out of Adam’s own rib, God forms a woman, Eve, whom the man recognizes as both the equal and perfection of his solitary being, as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). Man and woman are thus united by their shared human nature and dignity, in a union made possible only by their differentiation.

The union of the man and the woman is so close as to be described as “one flesh.” (2:24). Moreover, “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:25). Stein is careful to remind us that in this original order, man and woman were not classes in a perpetual power struggle against the other, but equal partners who freely gave of themselves for the other’s benefit:

¹⁵ Note here the important declaration of man without woman as “not good.” Recall that in the first creation story, each successive day of creation is declared “good” until the sixth day when humanity as both male and female, together with all of creation, are declared by God as “very good.” Thus, solitary man is the only creature declared by God to be “not good.” In communion with woman, however, the two are not merely “good,” but “very good.” Thus, the complementarity of humanity as male and female is affirmed in the beginning by God’s word and action.

It is not a question here of a *sovereignty* of man over woman. She is named as *companion* and *helpmate*, and it is said of man that he will cling to her and that both are to become *one* flesh. This signifies that we are here to consider the life of the initial human pair as the most intimate community of love, that their faculties were in perfect harmony as within one single being; likewise, before the Fall, all faculties in each individual were in perfect harmony, senses and spirit in relation with no possibility of conflict. For this reason, they were also incapable of inordinate desire for one another. This is revealed in the words “They were naked and were not ashamed.” (Stein 62)

The radical unity and harmony between God, man, and woman in the original order parallels the radical unity of the human self before the entrance of sin. The integrity of the self and of interpersonal relationships in this state render unnecessary the kinds of domination, manipulation, and resistance that become standard once man and woman allow evil into creation. The radical union between man, woman, and God in Stein’s original order should not be misconstrued as a lack of distinction between them. Rather, the clear distinctions between man and woman and between God and creature are the *sine qua non* that makes these unities possible. This unity in differentiation is a foundational concept in Stein’s theology, often referred to as “complementarity.”¹⁶ Stein’s complementarity keeps in tension the equal dignity of man and woman while also acknowledging important differences between the sexes in both biology and spirituality. Furthermore, the concept of unity through distinction also makes possible an even greater diversity between individual men and individual women.

¹⁶ See Prudence Allen’s distinction between theories of gender that embrace unisex, polarity, reverse polarity, and complementarity models of difference, as well as her further distinction between fractional complementarity and integral complementarity, found in *The Concept of Woman, vols. 1, 2, and 3*. Allen tends to classify Stein’s thought as fractional complementarity.

According to Stein, the complementarity of the sexes can be inferred directly from the biblical creation narratives. Man and woman's equal dignity flows directly from their shared vocation to become God's image and have dominion over the earth. However, the same creation narratives also reveal differentiated tasks within this shared calling. Man in particular was tasked in the second creation narrative with cultivating the garden—thus, man's particular vocation within humanity's shared task relates to authority over creation, and in a particular way over the earth. In the original prelapsarian harmony, this authority was ordered toward providing for, protecting, and otherwise serving woman and her offspring. Stein writes that “[l]ordship over the earth is the primary occupation of man,” and that to support this duty, God has given him “gifts for struggle, conquest, and dominion,” including “bodily force for taking possession of that exterior to him, intellect for a cognitive type of penetration of the world, the powers of will and action for works of creative nature. (100).¹⁷ By themselves, these particularly masculine gifts are neither good nor evil. In Stein's thought, these traits were used for good in the original order, but they would eventually become perverted after the Fall once sin and evil entered the world.

For Stein's Catholic feminism, the forces that work against the equality of man and woman are not institutions or systems, but evil and sin. Stein explains that after man and woman both sin, they both experience a deterioration in the original state of harmony. The Fall thus marks a significant “change in the relationship of human beings to the earth, to their descendants and to one another. But all this is the result of a changed relation to God” (Stein 63). From their disordered relationship to the Source of Being flows a disorder in the whole order of being, manifest in the consequences that God names for Adam and Eve. As a result of their actions, God tells the woman, “in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your

¹⁷ Stein has much more to say here and elsewhere about the particular vocation and gifts of woman within humanity's shared task, which will be referenced in chapters two and three.

husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16 RSV). Then God tells the man, “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (3:17). Just as man and woman had both equal and shared but differentiated vocational tasks in the original, unfallen order, so too do they receive equal and shared but differentiated consequences for their participation in the Fall (Stein 74). These curses that result from man and woman’s sin are not a prescription for how the creator intended the world to look. Instead, they are a description of what sin does to human relationships.

After the fall, the relationship between man and woman begins to look much more like the dynamic of power, struggle, and oppression familiar to many theorists today. In Stein’s words, “After their Fall, the relationship between them is transformed from a pure partnership of love to a relationship of sovereignty and subordination and is distorted by concupiscence” (70). Thus, the repeated action of men taking inordinate sovereignty over women to exploit them for their own benefit is, in Stein’s thought, a direct consequence of the Fall. Cruel domination of women and children is not the hallmark of masculinity as the creator intended it. Fallen masculinity is for Stein a perversion of original masculinity. It is a manifestation of concupiscence that takes a uniquely masculine form.¹⁸ Stein describes this “specific degeneracy of man” as the tendency to use one’s strength for cruelty, which “is seen in his brutal despotism over creatures—especially over woman” (Stein 190). Stein also adds that the specific degeneracy of man includes “his enslavement to his work up to the point of the atrophy of his humanity” (Stein 190).¹⁹ These two tendencies—namely, toward the cruel domination of woman and

¹⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines “concupiscence” as “the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of human reason. The apostle Saint Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the ‘flesh’ against the ‘spirit.’ Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins” (par. 2515).

¹⁹ Once again, Stein has much more to say about the “specific degeneracy” of woman, which will be addressed in the following chapters.

toward the fragmentation of his unified human self—comprise two key aspects of masculinity in the fallen order that are also embodied in O'Connor's fiction. The following section will examine O'Connor's "A View of the Woods" (1957) in light of its male characters' tendency toward domination and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953) in light of its male character's tendency toward fragmentation and abstraction of the self.

Neither Stein's exegesis nor O'Connor's fiction, however, ends in despair of humanity's fallen status. As both man and woman freely chose to disrupt their relationship with each other and with God, so they can freely choose to be restored to their original state through participation in the redemptive order. And for Stein, this participation in redemption takes uniquely masculine or feminine forms. For man, redemption is more closely linked with imitating Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Stein notes that "the male sex is to be exalted by the coming of the Son of God," and that "every man in the kingdom of God should imitate Christ, and in the marital partnership, he is to imitate the loving care of Christ for his Church" (70). On the other hand, woman is "charged with the battle against evil" through her capacity for maternity. "The feminine sex," writes Stein, "is ennobled by virtue of the Savior's being born of a human mother; a woman was the gateway through which God found entrance to humankind" (70). Thus for Stein, each woman is to image Christ by "[being] the image of God's mother" (70). Just as man and woman had different but equally important tasks in caring for the garden before the Fall, and just as they had different but equally important consequences for the Fall, they also have different but equally important gifts and callings in their participation with God's work of redemption.

At the heart of Stein's vision of gender relations in the redeemed order is the analogy found throughout Scripture of God's love for his people to the love between a bridegroom and a bride. Not only is God's love for his people illustrated in nuptial terms, so also the love between

a man and a woman becomes a physical sign that both calls to mind and mysteriously participates in God's love for his people. The most notable passage in the New Testament that clarifies this connection is chapter five of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The passage in question exhorts husbands to "love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor . . . This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-26, 32 NAB). Paul instructs men to subordinate themselves to their wives in a radical way—by imitating Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the good of his Bride, the Church. Every man's mission is likewise to give his life for his bride out of love, to "sanctify," "cleanse," "nourish," and "cherish" her, and thus to elevate her to "splendor," as Christ did for all of humanity. This vision of gender relations is far from the kind of cruel domination and forced submission that is found in the fallen order's perversion of masculinity and femininity. This chapter will explore how O'Connor's male characters fail at, strive for, or successfully attain this Steinian vision of redeemed masculinity.

Fallen Masculine Humanity as Domination in "A View of the Woods"

In O'Connor's stories, depictions of family dynamics often involve either an absent father or one who, by his tendency to misuse his masculinity for cruel, selfish domination, brings about the destruction of his children. Case in point is "A View of the Woods" (1957), in which two father figures physically abuse a girl, their daughter and granddaughter respectively, to the point of murder. In this story, Mr. Fortune and his son-in-law Mr. Pitts play out a tragic intra-family feud, heightened by Mr. Fortune's sale of land, that culminates in the violent death of Mary Fortune Pitts. In so doing, I argue, both these characters act out their fallen humanity in a

particularly masculine way.²⁰ They intentionally fail at their divinely ordained duties by abusing their relationship with the land and by misusing their physical strength to dominate and destroy the very people they are tasked with protecting and providing for. Failing to see the totality of creation and of their role as father, both Mr. Fortune and Mr. Pitts embody the fallen masculine dynamic that Stein describes.

The primary conflict driving “A View of the Woods” (1957) is essentially a masculine power struggle between Mark Fortune and his son-in-law Mr. Pitts.²¹ Fortune, a stubborn and power-hungry patriarch, provides the land on which his daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren live. Though he has a low view of the rest of his family, Fortune nevertheless dotes on his youngest granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. He takes on Mary as his sole heir and apprentice, earning her a privileged position in his business decisions. Her grandfather’s preferential treatment, however, only earns her disdain (and even physical abuse) from her family.

An overemphasis on material wealth is the origin of Fortune’s utilitarian vision and despotic behavior. Fortune, true to his name, is a shrewd businessman who prizes “progress” over “a cow pasture” (O’Connor 336).²² He views people not in terms of their personal dignity but instead for their utilitarian value. Fortune reads every move his daughter and her family make as a secret betrayal, treating them with cold, distrustful authority: “The daughter had been born

²⁰ Other feminist scholars also read this story as a commentary on gender. Avis Hewitt draws particular attention to its commentary on both masculinity and femininity in the American South (130). According to Hewitt, “what mainly constructs femaleness in American literature is embodiment, the metaphorical embodiment of the female as ‘virgin land’” (Hewitt 130). She argues that, following the usual pattern, Mary Fortune symbolizes the “land” that her male relatives “conquer.”

²¹ Many other scholars who read the issue of gender in this story see through the lens of gender conflict and male power. Giannone says that the story “dramatizes the destructive hatred born of gender warfare” (“Displacing” 81). Prown notes that “Mary Fortune is forced to submit to her father’s aggression, and the narrator characterizes her acceptance of it as natural,” and that the “injustices that Mary Fortune suffers result specifically from gender-based inequities Mary Fortune becomes the victim of male treachery and of a drive for power and domination that is characterized as part of a masculinist value system” (Prown 155).

²² Roos refers to Fortune as “an apostle of progress” (Roos 166).

and raised on [the land] but the old man considered that when she married Pitts she showed that she preferred Pitts to home: and when she came back, she came back like any other tenant, though he would not allow them to pay rent” (337). By treating them as mere tenants but not charging rent, Fortune relinquishes his familial bonds with his daughter and her family only to the extent that it gains him power over them. Clearly, Fortune’s prime motivation is propping up his own self-image and power rather than providing for his family’s well-being.²³ Such a dysfunctional dynamic, finding its origin in the father, is reminiscent of Stein’s exegesis. In O’Connor’s story, as in Stein’s vision of masculinity in the fallen order, the “deterioration of kingship to brutal authority” transforms the original order of man and woman as equal helpmates into “a brutal relationship of master and slave” (Stein 72). In this fallen order, “women’s natural gifts and their best possible developments are no longer considered; rather, man uses her as a means to achieve his own ends in the exercise of his work or in the pacifying of his own lust” (Stein 72). In the way that Fortune sees his relationships as opportunities to increase his power and further his business ventures, he embodies this brutal master-slave relationship. His lust for power ultimately objectifies his granddaughter into a pawn to be used against her father, who has become Fortune’s enemy.

Fortune, however, is not the only cruel patriarch in the story. For all of Fortune’s cruel power games, Mr. Pitts has his own serious flaws as a father, and Mr. Fortune’s distrust of his son-in-law is not entirely unfounded. The Pitts name itself, according to Henry T. Edmondson, “evokes the lower, darker side of human nature” (Edmondson 201). Mr. Pitts is a “thin, long-

²³ John Roos reads this story through competing Lockean and Thomistic philosophies, with Fortune representing “in concrete form what it is like to live as a Lockean individual,” whereas Mary represents someone at least open to a Thomistic sacramental vision of reality (165). Fortune’s worship of the abstract idea of “progress” and his attempts to dominate the land, forming it according to his own vision, are ultimately defeated by Mary Fortune’s vision—a sacramental vision in which the natural world holds intrinsic meaning through its connection with the supernatural world.

jawed, irascible, sullen, sulking individual” and “a man of nasty temper and of ugly unreasonable resentments” (O’Connor 337, 340). His strong temper manifests in his family relationships, especially in the fact that he beats his daughter Mary regularly. If that act alone were not a sufficient condemnation of his character, he appears to do so with no real motivation other than to take revenge on his father-in-law. When Fortune confronts his son-in-law about the abuse, Pitts offers the justification: “She’s mine to whip and I’ll whip her every day of the year if it suits me” (341). Apparent in Pitts’s attitude is the same kind of dehumanizing and possessive attitude his father-in-law takes toward his family and land. Rather than taking his duty as father seriously, he uses his authority to harm his youngest daughter and manipulate his father-in-law. Thus, Mary becomes doubly a pawn: both for her grandfather’s petty self-aggrandizement and her father’s retaliation.²⁴

Pitts’s strategy is effective. Despite Fortune’s preferential treatment of his granddaughter, he cannot bring himself to intervene in her abuse, and the abuse in turn causes Fortune to suffer. In one instance observed by Mr. Fortune, Pitts takes Mary from their dining room table to a remote place. Mr. Fortune, “from behind a boulder about a hundred feet away while the child clung to a pine tree,” watches as “Pitts, as methodically as if he were whacking a bush with a swing blade, beat her around the ankles with his belt” (340). After Pitts leaves his daughter alone to recover from the abuse, Fortune approaches. Rather than expressing sympathy, he directs his anger at his granddaughter: “He sprang on her and sputtered, ‘Why didn’t you hit him back? Where’s your spirit? Do you think I’d a let him beat me?’” (340). The problematic element in

²⁴ According to Richard Giannone, Mary Fortune “lives under two oppressive male regimes—a grim patriarchy superimposed on a feeble gerontocracy . . . Whether Mary Fortune is the prime target of the patriarch’s free-floating rage or a prize for the older man’s manipulative affection, the girl’s life as a child and a female is degrading. Her value depends on the inhuman use of her humanity by others, and her femaleness lowers the worth of her service and as she grows up increases the poignancy of her exploitation” (Giannone “Displacing Gender” 84).

this interaction is not Fortune's anger, but that his anger is directed primarily at his innocent granddaughter rather than his son-in-law. When he does finally turn his anger on Pitts, it is primarily to indulge in self-pity rather than for Mary's protection. He decides that "[t]his was Pitts's revenge on him. It was as if it were *he* that Pitts was driving down the road to beat and it was as if *he* were the one submitting to it" (341). In this case, Fortune is unable or unwilling to use his masculine strength for the good of others.²⁵ Instead, he falls to the level of Pitts's symbolically fallen humanity, becoming as much an abuser as his son-in-law.

The moral connection between Pitts and Fortune invites closer scrutiny. Fortune favors Mary because he sees in Mary an extension of himself within the Pitts family. However, he also sees her Pitts heritage as a flaw and something to be at least ignored, "as if it were an affliction the child was not responsible for. He liked thinking of her as being thoroughly of his clay" (338). Fortune describes the Pitts family connection as "an affliction the child [is] not responsible for," but nevertheless bears the effects of, in language that echoes the Catholic doctrine of original sin.²⁶ Mr. Fortune sees his own hereditary image in his offspring, but he also sees a flaw or

²⁵ Hewitt offers a gender-based reading of this scene as Fortune's particularly masculine failure at his expected role: "First, he has been emasculated in that his graceless lack of willingness to yield the farm to the next generation betrays an unmanly lack of courage. His cowardice takes the form of hiding behind Mary's 'apron strings,' letting her face beatings that should have been his" (Hewitt 147). Giannone offers a similar reading: "Pitts gets at the old man indirectly by beating his daughter Mary. His intention is to make the old man feel the emotional and physical impotence that lies beneath Mr. Fortune's legal power . . . Mr. Fortune observes the punishment from behind a boulder a hundred feet away, and there the titular patriarch manifests concealed submission and terror before the actual brute male power" (Giannone 82-83). Giannone also calls this interplay between the two men's fallen masculinity a "a self-sustaining process of abusive power" in which eventually "Pitts's impotence speaks to Mr. Fortune's impotence; then spite begets spite, and wrath speeds the male conflict to an unspeakable and mortal confrontation between old man and young girl" (Giannone 88).

²⁶ In Catholic theology, original sin was the sin committed by the human race's first parents, Adam and Eve, and subsequently inherited by every human by their nature. George Kilcourse (*Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*, 2001) reads much of O'Connor's work with an eye toward original sin. This sort of reading would be fitting here given the subtle references to Genesis. Fortune's connection to Mary leads to a kind of fatherly protectiveness: "He was always very careful to see that she avoided dangers. He would not allow her to sit in snakey places or put her hands on bushes that might hide hornets" (339). These lines subtly parallel Genesis's creation and fall story, with references to "clay," as God formed Adam out of the clay, and the mention of "snakey" places, as the serpent tempted Eve in the garden.

affliction in her, which is her connection to the Pitts family.²⁷ Seeing a “flaw” in his granddaughter and choosing to ignore it at first seems like a charitable act, until one sees that Fortune’s apprehension of the Pitts flaw is merely his own perceived superiority over the rest of his family. Further, his willingness to overlook a perceived “flaw” in Mary, who so closely images himself, points to an interior reality of Fortune’s disposition. If he is so willing to overlook Mary’s hereditary “affliction,” which is of a physical rather than moral nature, how much more is he willing to overlook his own hereditary affliction, which is of a spiritual nature? Fortune tends to ignore his own fallen nature, which simultaneously leads to a hyper-focus on, and a distortion of, his family’s faults.

Fortune’s personal faults, and his refusal to recognize them, bring the familial conflict to a head. His decision to sell land adjacent to the Pitts’s home sets off a chain of events and a further deterioration in his relationships that culminates in Mary’s violent death. The lot in question, referred to as “the lawn,” holds value both utilitarian and sentimental to Mary and her siblings. It is where they play, where their father’s calves graze, and, most importantly, what gives them a “view” of the “woods from the porch” (342). Mary, who often sides with her grandfather in family matters, unexpectedly expresses her dissatisfaction at his decision to sell the lawn (342). In retaliation against Fortune’s decision, Mr. Pitts decides to once again physically abuse his daughter. Fortune responds in anger to his son-in-law’s abuse but once again takes no real action to protect Mary.

However, even in his inaction, Fortune cannot escape his body’s physical reaction to the abuse. Whenever he knows Mary is being abused by her father, “[h]is heart . . . felt as if it were slightly too large for the space that was supposed to hold it in” (344). Read through a

²⁷ Hewitt also notes this connection between the name and heritage of Pitts with fallen nature, saying that Mary carries the Pitts name “as if it were a manifestation of original sin” (Hewitt 142).

sacramental lens, Fortune's heart problem points to a possibility of redemption. It is as if Fortune's physical heart is reminding him of his soul's defect—of his fallen masculine nature—which needs to be acknowledged in order to be healed. Edmondson also notes the symbolic meaning of Fortune's heart problem: "O'Connor offers another clue to the problem of human nature in this story by assigning the old man a 'heart condition.' His physical ailment is symbolic of the sickness with which humanity is afflicted" (201). Rather than prompting him to embrace the limitations and dependence of his embodied self, to Mr. Fortune the affliction becomes an unwelcome reminder of his vulnerability. In retaliation against reality, he strengthens his resolve to assert dominance over his family, concluding that "it would be well to take [them] down a little. All men were created free and equal. When this phrase sounded in his head, his patriotic sense triumphed and he realized that it was his duty to sell the lot, that he must insure the future" (348-49). His decision, clearly motivated by a desire for power rather than for his family's well-being, illustrates Stein's notion of fallen masculinity. He chooses to assert dominance over his family rather than to sacrifice his selfish desires to serve their well-being. He disregards both the emotional value of the land and the personal nature of his relationship with his family, seeing instead only the abstractions of progress and power.

Fortune's disordered relation to his family and with the land precipitates the final conflict. When Mary throws a tantrum over the sale of the lawn, Fortune decides that to force her into submission to his will, he will take her to the exact place where her father beats her to punish her in this exact way. Mary, however, retaliates violently as soon as she realizes her grandfather's plan. She soon has the upper hand of the battle, and the narrator observes that it "was as if [Fortune] were being attacked not by one child but by a pack of small demons all with stout brown school shoes and small rocklike fists" (354). The brawl between old man and child

dramatizes Fortune's conflicted response to his granddaughter's family connections. Fortune "looked up into his own image. It was triumphant and hostile. 'You been whipped,' it said, 'by me...and I'm PURE Pitts'" (355). By identifying herself firmly with her father, Mary has rejected her grandfather and degraded his heritage. Fortune reacts to this betrayal even more violently: "looking down into the face that was his own but had dared to call itself Pitts...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" (355). Fortune's evaluation of the scene is not one of remorse, but of vindication. He "continued to stare at his conquered image" and proclaims, "There's not an ounce of Pitts in me" (355). Fortune, seeing what is unbearable to him reflected in his own image, destroys what he sees. On a symbolic level, by declaring that "there's not an ounce of Pitts in me," he has denied both the reality of his own fallen humanity and any familial connection with his "PURE Pitts" granddaughter.

In addition to denying his own fallen state and using his masculine strength for cruel domination, Fortune's flaw also involves his overall lack of sacramental "vision," a lack that prompted him to sell the land. With the title "A View of the Woods," the focus on Fortune's vision is not surprising. Mary and her family protest the sale of the "lawn" because they are able to truly see the land. Fortune, on the other hand, is blind to its meaning. After Fortune decides to sell the lot, he experiences a graced vision that he ultimately rejects. He is offered the possibility of seeing the woods as his family does. After Mr. Pitts beats his daughter in retaliation against Fortune's plan to sell the land, Fortune looks out his window "[s]everal times" to see if he could understand what his family sees. When he looks out at the woods, he sees the "sunlight . . . woven through them at that particular time of the afternoon so that every thin pine trunk stood out in all its nakedness" (348). Rather than seeing anything of mystery in this view, Fortune

decides that “[a] pine trunk is a pine trunk...and anybody that wants to see one don’t have far to go in this neighborhood” (348). Although Fortune is given the chance to see the reality of the situation, its “nakedness” enlightened by the sun, he only sees the material reality, and thus diminishes it. He is further convinced of his own good judgment and is “reconvinced of his wisdom in selling the lot” (348).

However, the vision of the woods, or whatever agent is behind it, does not give up so easily. The third and final look catches a bit more of Fortune’s attention:

The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o’clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. After a few minutes this unpleasant vision was broken by the presence of Pitts’s pick up truck grinding to a halt below the window. He returned to his bed and shut his eyes and against the closed lids hellish red trunks rose up in a black wood. (348)

This time, O’Connor is a bit more explicit with her Christological imagery. The trees, previously bathed in the afternoon sun, are now also colored red as the sun sets, and the narrator compares the vision to the blood of someone’s wounds. Through our Steinian lens, this is a mystical vision in which Fortune is given the opportunity to truly see the meaning of the land and of his family, and in so doing, to see the meaning of his call to care for them. He is given a brief glimpse of the “uncomfortable mystery” of his masculine identity and his vocation to restore order to the fallen world. Mr. Fortune is further invited to see the connection between his masculine vocation and

Christ's sacrifice, as the whole landscape is "bathed" in a bloody red light that "gushed" from the setting sun. It is as if the bloody death of God's Son on the wood of the cross is happening now in the setting sun seen through the woods on Mr. Fortune's land. In the very next line, however, the narrator makes it clear that Fortune rejects this vision. Clearly, the rejection is on more than a literal level, as it results in a vision of "hellish red trunks" (348). By dismissing the vision, Fortune rejects the mystery of Christ's redemption sacramentally revealed in the woods, and thus rejects the redemption of his masculine humanity.²⁸

It is no coincidence that Fortune's attempt to "force 'progress' without regard for the mystery of human nature" is simultaneous with both the murder of his own grandchild and the securing of his damnation (Edmondson 200). By destroying the Pitts flaw in his opponent, Fortune has also let his fallen nature destroy himself. Fortune, whose weak heart could have prompted his conversion, has now precipitated his own downfall. Staggering away from the corpse of his murdered granddaughter, "he fell on his back and looked helplessly along the bare trunks into the tops of the pines and his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion...He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay" (356). Because of Fortune's weak heart, his choice to murder his granddaughter has resulted in his own physical death. On a spiritual level, this chain of events parallels the physical events. His choice to deny his own fallenness and need for redemption has resulted in his own spiritual death, as well as the literal death of his granddaughter. Stein helps us see, too, that

²⁸ Many critics draw attention to the sacramental meaning of the woods and the significance of Fortune's refusal to acknowledge it. Recognizing this meaning, argues Henry T. Edmondson, "might help the reader understand why O'Connor's judgment on the grandfather is so harsh: by destroying the woods he is rejecting Christ's redemption" (Edmondson 202). John Roos similarly argues that Fortune's decision to sell the land is a rejection of his own redemption. Although Fortune has "exercised his right" to mastery of the land, "he has also penetrated to the very core of where a life spent solely in pursuing progress and those rights leads" (Roos 172).

Fortune has rejected his own masculine humanity. Adam's original task to "till" and "keep" the earth, giving it life and order, has instead become an inheritance of death for those who are made in the image and likeness of Mr. Fortune.

The ending of the story seems to indicate that Fortune's fatal flaw is his own world view. Taking his worship of progress to its logical conclusion results in a rejection of reality and the destruction of himself, his family members, and his land. In Fortune's vision of reality, the family is "not an analogy to Divine love" but is "no more and no less than a collection of individuals" (Roos 172). According to Roos, Fortune's story becomes the "story of the consequences of choosing the way of isolated individuals with no natural basis in morality, and no sacramental sense of nature" (Roos 172). Thus, the violence perpetrated by the two male characters in the story is not separate from their redemptive status.²⁹ In fact, it is both symptom and cause of their choice to reject their own redemption, and a revelation of their fallen masculine tendency to grasp for power.

While Mary's father Mr. Pitts offers a fairly straightforward example of an abusive father, Mr. Fortune's character is a bit more complex. At the beginning, Fortune does not physically abuse his granddaughter, though he also does not stop the abuse. His fatal flaw, so to speak, is his tendency to place his ego over his family's best interest and to see abstractions like "progress" where he should see persons. Eventually, Fortune abuses Mary in a far worse way than Pitts does, violently smashing her head into a rock. Both characters offer their own individualized manifestations of a perverted masculinity. But both, ultimately, fail at their role as

²⁹ Avis Hewitt evaluates the ending of this story in a way that combines a focus on the violence and on redemption. Fortune, now a corpse like his granddaughter, has proven his "values and choices have been dead wrong, while . . . Mary Fortune Pitts [is only] dead, but not wrong" (Hewitt 152). She also notes that Mary even in death is clearly much closer to redemption than either Fortune or Pitts because "[s]he clings to the pine, the designated Christ figure, but neither man clings to the pine. Instead, an instinctual grasping after power drives each of them" (Hewitt 145).

father and protector to Mary, just as Adam failed in his role of keeping the garden. As Stein said, “the great of events of the cosmic drama concerning the fall of man and redemption” are repeated both individually and collectively over time (125). In this case, it seems that both Fortune and Pitts almost exclusively live the drama of the Fall.

Fallen Masculine Humanity as Fragmentation in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”

O’Connor’s drama of fallen masculinity extends also to married male characters. For example, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953) follows Mrs. Crater and her daughter Lucynell as Lucynell is pawned off as a bride to Tom T. Shiftlet in return for a car. Lucynell, who lives in a perpetual state of mental and developmental childhood, thus becomes a pawn between the two, in a similar manner that Mary Fortune serves as a pawn between her father and grandfather. Throughout the course of the story, O’Connor directly addresses questions about the meaning of gender, especially masculinity, through the voice of Shiftlet. Shiftlet asks questions regarding the nature of masculinity and then offers a quasi-sermon that asserts a sort of Gnostic separation between matter and spirit. This theology, emphasizing abstraction over embodiment, grounds Shiftlet’s subsequent act of deserting his new wife at a roadside diner. As with the double figures of father and grandfather mentioned previously, one of the primary forces of evil in the story is the perversion of Shiftlet’s masculine vocation. By separating spirit and matter in his quest for the full realization of his masculine self, Shiftlet embodies the kind of atrophied humanity that Stein attributes to fallen masculinity. His choice to desert his wife reveals this fallen masculinity, as it constitutes an attempt to reach a selfish and disembodied transcendence by rejecting the limitations and duties of his marriage. Rather than using his masculine strength in the service of his bride, he uses it at her expense. Finally, by negatively addressing the topic of

masculinity through the danger of Shiftlet's dualism, O'Connor sets the stage for her positive vision of redeemed masculinity that embraces incarnate reality in the service of others, ultimately imitating Christ's sacrificial love for humanity.

Even the initial physical description of Tom T. Shiftlet, when read through a sacramental lens, reveals the unfortunate state of his interior life. The reader first glimpses the man through the eyes of Mrs. Crater, sitting on the porch with her daughter. Mrs. Crater sees Shiftlet approaching "from a distance" and can see "[h]is left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him . . . his face turned toward the sun" (145). In O'Connor's fiction, the sun often symbolizes Christ. Thus, depicting Shiftlet as oriented toward the sun seems to imply at least an initial mystical orientation for the character. Complicating this characterization, however, is the rest of Shiftlet's appearance. Missing part of a limb and too weak to stand against the wind, Shiftlet's physical weakness and disability reveal an interior spiritual weakness. Despite his orientation toward Christ, there is something stunted about Shiftlet's spirituality, which is revealed as the story unfolds. This characterization is further deepened when Mrs. Crater observes that the man "swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross" (146). Through its cruciform imagery, this passage draws a clear comparison between Shiftlet and Jesus. But, the crooked incompleteness of Shiftlet's cruciform figure also implies something sinister about the man. Just as his body lacks half an arm and stands crookedly against the wind, so too is the man's soul lacking some crucial element that makes it too weak to withstand resistance. This description is even more significant when read through a specifically Steinian lens. If Stein links redeemed masculinity to Christ, then this man's crooked Christological appearance also says something

about his masculinity. It appears that Shiftlet's character approaches but just misses the fullness of redeemed masculinity.

Once Shiftlet begins speaking, our suspicions about his character are confirmed. To use Christina Bieber Lake's terms, Shiftlet reveals that he is a follower of the "American religion," or the "religion of the self" (8). In other words, he sees his own humanity, especially his masculinity, as an autonomous transcendence over limitations. Beginning his conversation with Mrs. Crater, he ponders both general human existence and his masculine identity. He says to Mrs. Crater, "'Maybe the best I can tell you is, I'm a man; but listen lady,' he said and paused and made his tone more ominous still, 'what is a man?'" (O'Connor 148). He continues by claiming that "'[t]here ain't a broken thing on this plantation that I couldn't fix for you, one-arm jackleg or not. I'm a man,' he said with a sullen dignity, 'even if I ain't a whole one. I got . . . a moral intelligence' (149). Once again, Shiftlet approaches but just misses the full sacramental meaning of his masculine humanity. He sees in himself the capacity to restore things to their original wholeness, to "fix" broken things, as well as to use his reason for moral ends. These are the masculine gifts Stein recognizes from the original order. Throughout the exchange, however, both Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater tend to reduce the full sacramental meaning of Shiftlet's masculine humanity to menial tasks, thus overlooking the way in which his embodied masculinity reveals his vocation to sacrifice and serve others in imitation of Christ.

As Shiftlet continues his reflections, he reveals that his incomplete vision of masculinity reflects a dualist bent to his thinking. In a strange anecdote, he describes "'one of these doctors in Atlanta that's taken a knife and cut the human heart . . . out of a man's chest and held it in his hand . . . and studied it like it was a day-old chicken, and lady,' he said . . . 'he don't know no more about it than you or me'" (147). Shiftlet here seems to cast doubt on the ability of modern

science to plumb the depths of the mystery of human existence. At first glance, it seems like Shiftlet's anecdote supports O'Connor's sacramental vision of reality, with the physical heart becoming a symbolic representation of the spiritual "heart" or soul of humanity. However, Shiftlet's later comments reveal that this is not the case: 'Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit,' he says, and he continues by comparing the body to a house that "don't go anywhere" and the spirit to an "automobile, always on the move" (152). Thus, for Shiftlet, the spirit is higher than the body because of its freedom from physical limitations. As a man, he is tempted to ground his identity in the spiritual at the expense of the sacramental body, prizing his independence over the limitations of embodiment and service of others. Shiftlet's anecdote about cutting the human heart critiques the materialist tendencies of modernity, but this analogy takes his critique to the extreme. Rather than simply warning against materialism, Shiftlet shuns the body totally. By totally rejecting the materialism of modernity, he instead embraces a spiritualism that is just as reductive a vision of humanity. Shiftlet's dualistic vision in effect separates matter from spirit, resulting in a tendency to overemphasize abstraction and fragmentation at the expense of the limits of incarnate reality—the exact qualities that Stein attributes to a fallen version masculinity.

The end of the story further illustrates the perversion of Shiftlet's masculine humanity. After agreeing to marry Lucynell in return for a car and seventeen and a half dollars from Mrs. Crater, Shiftlet takes his new wife to a roadside diner. Shiftlet, always on the move like the automobile in his Gnostic sayings, uses his automobile and the new freedom it offers to abandon his sleeping wife. Leaving the diner, Shiftlet "felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. 'Oh Lord!' he prayed. 'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!'" (156). Shiftlet here, like Fortune and Pitts, embodies

a perversion of masculinity. But unlike Fortune and Pitts, Shiftlet comes closer to recognizing this flaw in himself. With the penitential action of beating his breast coupled with his request that God “wash the slime from this earth,” he at least hints at a recognition of his faults. But, as the rain falls on Shiftlet in answer to his prayer, literally washing the earth, he continues driving away from the diner and his abandoned wife. Although Shiftlet’s reflections invite readers to ponder O’Connor’s vision of masculinity, his actions reveal that for O’Connor, his theological vision of masculinity is incomplete. In O’Connor’s radically incarnational landscape, Shiftlet rejects the incarnation of his own embodied self, symbolically rejecting the Incarnation of Christ, a reality that for Stein and O’Connor reveals both true humanity and true masculinity. In O’Connor’s world, this theological error results in a perversion of his masculinity, as it causes him to abandon the woman he has just vowed to take care of. Readers are left wondering what a more positive vision of masculinity might look like for O’Connor.

Redeemed Masculinity as Christ’s Sacrifice in “Parker’s Back”

Whereas “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953) represents a fallen male character often resistant to grace, “Parker’s Back” (1965) provides a foil, with a male character, imperfect as he is, open to the action of grace that works to redeem him. The story offers a theologically and artistically rich depiction of a man who, by getting a Byzantine icon of Christ tattooed on his back, seeks to both honor his wife’s fundamentalist Christian religious inclinations and to obey the promptings of his own religious experiences. The plan backfires, and upon his return Parker’s wife, who condemns his tattoos as “a heap of vanity,” beats him with a broom (515). Parker, however, now finds in the icon tattooed on his back a new meaning for his previously disordered tattooed body. Drawing a connection between Parker’s marriage and

Christ's redemptive suffering, O'Connor's story embodies Stein's connection between redeemed masculinity and Christ's masculinity.

O.E. Parker and his wife Sarah Ruth are an unlikely combination, to say the least. Parker, whose full name is Obadiah Elihue Parker, is a tattooed former sailor fond of swearing like one, a rough character whose "mother wept over what was to become of him" (513). Sarah Ruth, on the other hand, is a strict fundamentalist Christian who "thought churches were idolatrous" and refuses to look at Parker's tattooed body in the light (518). In short, Sarah Ruth is an iconoclast. Her personality and appearance, too, are as harsh and restrictive as her religious and aesthetic vision. Her appearance is "plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks" (510). Parker, understandably, "couldn't understand why he stayed with her now" (510). However, his confusion is less about Sarah Ruth and more about himself and his own identity: "Her being against color, it was the more remarkable she had married him. Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn't. He could account for her one way or another; *it was himself he could not understand*" (510, emphasis mine). Just as Tom T. Shiftlet pondered his masculine identity, eventually living out his Gnostic theology in his marriage to Lucynell, so too will Parker live out a (very different) theology in his marriage to Sarah Ruth.

Parker's eventual conversion is effected in many ways by an unusual medium: tattoos. Parker's fascination with tattoos begins at a young age, and his devotion to them takes on an almost religious quality. When Parker was fourteen, "he saw a man in a fair, tattooed from head to foot . . . patterned in what seemed from Parker's distance . . . a single, intricate design of brilliant color" (512). This spectacle has a profound impact on Parker. He is "filled with emotion,

lifted up as some people are when the flag passes . . . When the show was over, he had remained standing on the bench, staring where the tattooed man had been, until the tent was almost empty.” (512-13). Parker’s experience in the tent, with his emotional response, verges on the religious. Indeed, at the very least, it is an unexpected encounter with beauty that lifts Parker’s mind to the contemplation of existence: “Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed” (513). At the young age of fourteen and prompted by a carnival show, Parker begins reflecting on the meaning of his own existence, an existence that sparks wonder. It also sparks the beginning of Parker’s conversion, a journey that will not be complete until the end of the story.

As a result of the encounter with the tattooed man, Parker begins accumulating tattoos on the front of his body. His hobby becomes almost an addiction, as he must get increasingly larger and more complex tattoos to satisfy his growing desire for wonder. He, Lake argues, “falls prey to the modern world’s notion that we generate meaning in our lives by constructing them as we choose without needing anyone else” (226). Parker, however, eventually approaches a serious limitation to his notion of self-made identity. His body has only so much flesh. With nowhere left on his body for a tattoo that he can see, Parker must reconsider the purpose of his tattoos and the meaning of his body. Parker knows that in order to satiate his desire for a tattooed body, he must get a tattoo that he cannot see, one that seems unable to fulfill his desire. He devises what he thinks is a fool-proof plan: He will get a tattoo on his back “that Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist—a religious subject” (519). This way, he can kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. He will at least nominally fulfill his desire for a tattoo, while simultaneously winning his wife’s favor by adding a religious subject to the “heap of vanities” on his body. This act, at least in a

small way, reveals a bit of selflessness in Parker. Although he is still attempting to satiate his own desire for yet another tattoo, he does so in a way that, in his mind, will benefit Sarah Ruth. By relying on tattoos, and thus on his own body, for fulfillment, Parker begins to learn that “our bodies serve as a constant reminder that we are no better positioned to make sense of our lives as a whole than we are to see our own backs” (Lake 225). His almost-religious fascination with tattoos, by grounding meaning in the body, may be what prepares Parker for a fuller understanding of the sacramental meaning of his male body.

Once Parker decides to get a religious tattoo, he soon finds himself in the city with an artist asking for a tattoo of God. Choosing his tattoo marks yet another religious experience for Parker. Parker flips past the saccharine, kitschy “up-to-date” pictures like “The Good Shepherd, Forbid them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician’s Friend” (522).³⁰ He also flips past the “less and less reassuring” images of Christ with “a gaunt green dead face streaked with blood” and “sagging purple eyes” (522). He keeps flipping until one picture literally speaks to him: “Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, *Go Back*” (522). Parker settles on “the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes,” and he feels his heart “being brought to life by a subtle power” (522). He chooses an unsettling image, an icon, most likely Christ Pantocrator, or the “All-Ruler” (Zubeck 95).³¹ As Jacqueline Zubeck explains, versions of

³⁰ Cameron Lee Winter (2018) uses this passage to examine O’Connor’s engagement with the distinction between high art, such as iconography, and low art, such as the kitschy and sentimental Christian images in the tattoo artist’s book, as well as tattooing as an art form.

³¹ Jacqueline A. Zubeck explores the significance of this particular image for the story, the general theological meaning of iconography as participation in the Incarnation, and O’Connor’s interest in the Byzantine Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. She sees the icon in “Parker’s Back,” which is O’Connor’s final story, as a “consummating image, which connotes both an ending and a beginning, the sum of her labors and a hermeneutic through which we might contemplate all her fiction.” (92). George Kilcourse uses the centrality of this icon to explore O’Connor’s kenotic and Eucharistic “ascending Christology” that culminates in this story. See also Dennis Patrick Slattery’s “Faith in Search of an Image: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Parker’s Back’” (1981) and his “Evil and the Negation of the Body: Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Parker’s Back’” (1988).

this particular icon have appeared continuously in Byzantine churches since the fourth century, all with slight variations but an overall uniformity in basic appearance. While the nature of iconography in general emphasizes sacramentality, as it draws together both the material and spiritual elements of religious figures, the Pantocrator image is particularly significant. Tradition in Orthodox Christianity holds that the original image was painted by Saint Luke and accurately portrays the bodily and spiritual realities of Christ's nature, united sacramentally in one image (95). By choosing to be marked with this particular icon, Parker is assenting to the sacramental nature of reality, to its connection with ancient Christian tradition, and to his personal identification with the totality of Christ's identity.

Parker's experience with the tattoo is a sacramental one, beginning with physical appearances and moving toward interior spiritual realities, with a particular emphasis on his masculine identity. After getting his tattoo, "Parker sat for a long time on the ground in the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed" (527). Parker begins to see some kind of cosmic reason behind the events of his life, which until now have puzzled him, especially his marriage to Sarah Ruth. Parker returns to his home and his wife, expecting that she will bring further meaning to his experience (527).³² Standing on his own front porch and asking his wife to let him into the house, Parker does something he has avoided until this moment. He identifies himself by his full name: Obadiah Elihue Parker. And as he speaks his name, "he felt the light pouring through him turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of

³² "Although he consciously resists Sarah Ruth because he does not want to be enframed into fatherhood, he instinctively returns to her. He needs her to give his life meaning, to be the 'other' to complete the arabesque of colors" (Lake 228).

trees and birds and beasts” (528). The tattoo of Christ begins to make sense of Parker’s body, which until now had appeared to him as “something haphazard and botched” (514). So it is with his soul. Just as Parker’s tattooed body has a new wholeness, so too has Parker’s soul been restored to wholeness. The bodily mark of a suffering yet powerful Christ brings order and meaning to Parker’s previously disordered self. By submitting himself to Christ’s “all-demanding eyes,” Parker has finally found the meaning he has been looking for, and this meaning is now found in both Christ’s body and Parker’s body. Christ and Parker are now united, and Christ reveals Parker to himself in a way Parker has not yet encountered. Parker’s masculine identity *is* Christ, at least in a sense. Parker now both reveals and participates in Christ’s love for humanity by sacrificing his own body for Sarah Ruth.

However, Parker’s recognition of the incarnational and Christological meaning of his body is not shared by his wife. Sarah Ruth rejects the tattoo of God because, according to her belief, God is purely spiritual and therefore invisible (529). Parker has failed to take into account the nature of his wife’s religious convictions. Her vision of salvation and embodiment is too restrictive for Parker’s sacramentalism, and she will not receive his shocking religious gesture.³³ Sarah Ruth, in rejection of what she sees as an idolatrous attempt to depict God, begins beating

³³ Elaine Whitaker (2015) argues that Sarah Ruth’s character can be read more sympathetically. She cites Prown, who argues that Sarah Ruth has used her feminine power to “symbolically [castrate] her husband” and to “thwart Parker’s attempts at achieving salvation” (105). Katherine Hemple Prown asserts that “Sarah Ruth prevails over both her husband and God, thereby pronouncing judgment on Parker, enacting punishment on him and thereby negating the power of a religious epiphany she understands as misdirected” (Prown 105). On the other hand, Sarah Gordon offers a more moderate reading of Sarah Ruth: “Sarah Ruth’s disapproval of the tattoos suggest her disapproval of the world and the flesh—a disapproval that, of course, reflects the Manichaean heresy. O’Connor, however, rather obviously expresses her own disapproval of Sarah Ruth and her form of spirituality. In perhaps the clearest repudiation of Manichaenism in all of her works, O’Connor presents Sarah Ruth’s foolishness in rejecting creation, denying joy” (Gordon 250). Lake affirms Gordon’s reading of the character: “O’Connor links Sarah Ruth’s failure to understand art with her failure to see Parker’s human potential, to see his body as good, as validated by the Incarnation. Her kind of Gnosticism . . . is the worst threat to both a sacramental theology and a sacramental aesthetic. Since Sarah Ruth closes her eyes to the physical world, she also closes them to the only way of salvation. She refuses to see what this living art can uniquely illustrate—that Parker, ‘as ordinary as a loaf of bread,’ is, like the Eucharist, the actual body and blood of Christ. He is the church, a temple of the Holy Ghost, not to be worshiped himself, but by his redeemed existence to lead others to God” (232).

Parker with a broom. Parker, without protest, “sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ” (529). The story ends with a shocking and somewhat pathetic image: “There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby” (530). Obadiah Elihue’s search for identity, for a while transcendent and epiphanic, ends instead with the appearance of defeat and victimization. But the transformation is not entirely unexpected, as Parker’s capacity for personal sacrifice has certainly grown throughout the story. Further, when one reads with a sacramental lens, one sees that the final image is quite fitting.

In fact, Parker’s transformation from an a-spiritual tattooed tough guy to a suffering Christ figure makes sense in light of a sacramental understanding of gender. Read in this light, Parker’s seeming defeat at the hands of his wife is the embodiment of redeemed masculinity. Because it draws a connection between Parker, his marriage, and Christ, Parker’s story parallels Ephesians 5 and Stein’s call for men to imitate Christ.³⁴ Parker’s self is restored to order and wholeness, and he participates in the redemption of his masculinity via his association with Christ’s suffering. Parker’s humanity, and specifically his masculine humanity, is restored to wholeness through his tattoo because it is a tattoo of Christ.³⁵ Through the permanent mark on his body, Parker has himself become an icon of Christ, both revealing and participating in Christ’s act of redemption. Further, this permanent mark causes him to suffer at the hands of his wife, and like Christ, he willingly accepts this suffering for her sake. Parker is now only capable

³⁴ Few, if any, scholars read this story in light of this passage. Many scholars read in light of the Book of Jonah and other Old Testament figures, mostly due to the scripturally allusive names of the protagonist and his wife. Jordan Cofer (2008) evaluates these readings and adds his own interpretation in light of the New Testament accounts of Saul’s conversion. Elaine Whitaker, however, arguing for a more sympathetic reading of Sarah Ruth, does cite a passage from 1 Corinthians regarding duties and responsibilities of both husband and wife to support her reading.

³⁵ Reading the ending of this story as a full realization of Parker’s masculinity counters Marshall Bruce Gentry’s argument: “If one decides that O’Connor associates childhood with androgyny, one can also develop a reading of the late story ‘Parker’s Back’ in which O.E. Parker is feminized as he is redeemed, for when Sarah Ruth Cates beats him with a broom at the end of the story, he cries ‘like a baby’” (Gentry 69).

of understanding his masculine identity and his marriage “in reference to Christ and his Church” (Ephesians 5:32). His body has been marked permanently with the image of a suffering God while he, like Christ, also suffers for his fallen bride and for her redemption. It is as if Parker, with his whole life, now repeats with Christ in the upper room and on the cross, “this is my body, given for you” (Luke 22:19) The great mysteries of both Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5, the “cosmic drama concerning the fall of man and redemption,” is indeed being lived over and over in Parker’s life and in his own body (Stein 125).³⁶ Obadiah Elihue’s conversion began in part because of his wife’s religious convictions. Ironically, his newfound faith may in turn help save his wife by revealing to her, through his incarnate, tattooed person, the redeeming love of the incarnate Christ.

³⁶ “Parker sees that his own body animates the body of Christ. Parker’s body is now a grotesque participant in the Incarnation, and Parker’s understanding is sacramental, not verbal” (Lake 230)

Chapter 2: “A Good [Wo]Man Is Hard to Find”: O’Connor’s Vision of Redeemed Femininity as
Spiritual Maternity

The most significant evidence of the eternal meaning and value to be found in sexual differentiation lies in the fact that the new Eve stands beside the new Adam on the threshold between the Old and New Covenants. God chose as the instrument for His Incarnation a human mother, and in her He presented the perfect image of a mother.

—Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 198

A Steinian Catholic vision of gender, as explored in the previous chapter, understands masculinity as sacrificial self-gift ordered toward woman in imitation of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice on the cross. This vision of masculinity provides the backdrop for Stein’s vision of femininity. Recognizing embodied sexual differentiation in light of the iconography of redemption—a sacramental revelation of the “mystery” of the “marriage” between Christ and his Church—offers an understanding of femininity that allows for difference without ascribing inferiority. Instead, Stein’s Catholic feminism highlights the particular ways in which women both collectively and individually participate in the divine work of redemption, at least in part by imaging in their bodies and souls the active receptivity and fruitful union of the whole Church with Christ.

In this chapter, I examine O’Connor’s theological vision of femininity lived out in the vocation of marriage and motherhood.³⁷ When her fiction is read through the lens of Stein’s theological vision of femininity, O’Connor’s stories present fully-realized and redeemed femininity through both counter-examples and positive examples of female characters. Several of

³⁷ This statement is not meant to imply that femininity may be reduced to only its physical expression as biological maternity. The subsequent chapter will focus on unmarried women’s vocations in secular professions or in the consecrated life.

O'Connor's stories include overbearing mothers desperately striving to conform themselves and their children to the stereotypes of Southern femininity. One such character is Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People." Several other stories include crafty wives and mothers successfully running home businesses, but with little regard for God's existence or for their duties toward the persons in their care—women like Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" (1956). In this chapter I juxtapose those "fallen" wives and mothers who seek control and superficial status symbols with one female character who eventually arrives at a redeemed state through active receptivity to the action of grace mediated through her feminine humanity. This character, the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953), is forced into a painful recognition of her fallen humanity, which leads her to receive a revelation of grace that in turn bears redemptive fruit in the lives of those in her care, a pattern that resembles a spiritual "maternity" of grace. I argue that O'Connor's fiction reveals through literary means the dynamic of redemption working in feminine humanity, as posited by Stein in *Essays on Woman*. This dynamic involves female characters moving from a rejection of the Other (both divine and human), and a rejection of their feminine humanity, to an active personal receptivity that is both spiritual and embodied. Most importantly, it also involves a female character embracing her capacity for maternity—spiritually, physically, or both.

Edith Stein and Femininity as Spiritual Maternity

The relationship between the female body and woman's spirituality is at the heart of Stein's exploration of what she calls "the question about essential feminine nature (153). She writes in "The Ethos of Women's Professions" that "[o]nly the person blinded by the passion of controversy could deny that woman in soul and body is formed for a particular purpose. The

clear and irrevocable word of Scripture declares what daily experience teaches from the beginning of the world: woman is destined to be wife and mother” (45). Stein’s claim here does not, however, reduce women to *merely* wives and mothers. For Stein, as for O’Connor, a Catholic worldview is a sacramental worldview, one in which a physical reality reveals and participates in a spiritual reality without either collapsing one into the other or strictly separating them. Thus, Stein’s observation that the female body points to woman’s natural calling to marriage and motherhood does not limit every woman to the same predetermined pattern of life. In fact, just as strongly as Stein asserts the clarity of woman’s natural vocation, so too does she vigorously deny such a reductive vision of femininity: “Only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practicing vocations other than that of spouse and mother” (49). For Stein, woman’s unique potential to actively receive life and to nurture a human being into its full potential is a bodily reality, wondrous enough in itself, that simultaneously reveals the spiritual potential of the soul to do the same.

The logic behind Stein’s assertion flows directly from the Thomistic appropriation of Aristotelianhylomorphism that grounds much of the Catholic intellectual tradition. If one accepts that the male body is biologically different from the female body, and if the body reveals the interior reality of the soul, then it simply follows that there is indeed something different between a man’s soul and a woman’s soul, which cannot be separated from the differences between the male and female body. Indeed, as the female body is capable of actively receiving, nurturing, and bringing forth physical human life, so too is the woman’s soul capable of actively receiving, nurturing, and bringing forth spiritual divine life. Stein articulates this principle: “Both physically and spiritually [woman] is endowed for [motherhood], as is seen clearly from practical experience. However, it follows also from the Thomistic principle of *anima forma*

corporis that such a spiritual characteristic does exist. Of course, woman shares a basic human nature, but basically her faculties are different from men; therefore, a differing type of soul must exist as well” (45). This assertion, that woman possesses a differing type of soul, raises many questions about what different faculties this feminine soul would have.

Stein describes the uniquely feminine faculty in a way that pays homage, once again, to woman’s maternal nature. She writes, “Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning” (45). In short, the unique faculties of woman, according to Stein, relate to her orientation toward the individual human person as a totality, an orientation reflected bodily in her potential for pregnancy. This faculty is contrasted with man’s original orientation toward working the land and toward “his enterprise,” an orientation that tends more toward fragmentation and abstraction than woman’s personalistic orientation. Stein characterizes the feminine faculty to receive and nurture the individual, whole person as an “endowment” that is “bound closely to her maternal gift. An active sympathy for those who fall into her ken awakens their powers and heightens their achievements” (46). Through her “gift of adapting herself to the inner life of others,” she “brings humanity in its specific and individual character in herself and in others to the most perfect development possible” (188). Thus, it is woman’s acceptance of the gift of her capacity for maternity, both physically and spiritually, that Stein sees as the key to redeeming every woman’s feminine humanity.

The concept here of “spiritual maternity” is also key to understanding Stein’s thought correctly. Claiming that only women who physically conceive and birth children are capable of redemption would certainly be problematic and a definite misunderstanding of Stein’s work. Stein herself would undoubtedly disagree with such a claim—she herself never married or gave

birth, yet she is venerated as a canonized saint in the Catholic Church. The focus on the body in both Stein's and O'Connor's thought, while striving to ground spiritual realities in concrete reality as sacramental revelation, should also not be misconstrued as a materialistic rejection of supernatural reality. Instead, the human body and the entire material world reveals the supernatural world. Thus, woman's capacity for maternity is an external sign of an interior reality that all women participate in by virtue of their own feminine humanity, regardless of their marital or maternal status. All women in every state of life, according to Stein, "must practice spiritual maternity, begetting and drawing sons and daughters nearer to the kingdom of God" (126). In other words, woman must live from a place of active receptivity to the divine life working in her life and must subsequently allow that divine life to bear fruit in her and through her. She must allow the divine life in her to overflow into others through her attention to the personal and concrete. This dynamic union with divine life is the very heart of feminine humanity in the redemptive order.

By receiving her spiritual maternity, in Stein's thinking, each woman also participates in the redeemed and glorified maternity of the Mother of God. Stein writes that, "[a]s Mother of God and mother of all God's children, [Mary] is exalted above all creatures on the throne of glory; maternity itself is glorified through her . . . Every woman who wants to fulfill her destiny must look to Mary as ideal" (119). Further, Stein calls Mary the "pure image of feminine nature," "the perfect temple, in which the Holy Spirit took up his dwelling," and "the gate through which He would make His entry into humanity" (119). Stein's exaltation of Mary highlights the way in which femininity and maternity are inextricably linked in her thought. Even further, it highlights the way in which the Incarnation of Christ uplifts maternity and femininity as an instrument of grace through which all of humanity is redeemed. Although it is Christ who

redeems, he redeems through his Incarnation, which relied on the maternity of his mother. Through Christ's Incarnation made possible by Mary's surrender to God's action, God unites himself to humanity. In this prototype of spiritual maternity, Mary models and embodies—indeed makes possible—the spiritual maternity of all women and the redemption of all humanity.

This feminine receptivity to divine action and to spiritual maternity, as embodied in Mary the Mother of God, is for Stein the calling of all women as well as all of humanity. In union with a longstanding tradition in Catholic exegesis, Mary is, for Stein, the New Eve. As Eve was the archetypal woman through whom sin entered the world, Mary is the archetypal woman through whom redemption enters. It could be said that in this, Mary is the icon of femininity, of the whole Church, and more broadly, of all of humanity in its relation to God. Note, strikingly, that this means the entire church, including the male-only hierarchy, finds its self-identity in a characteristically feminine reality and in a specific woman. Stein argues to this point: "I believe that bridal love in man or in woman is the foundation of surrender to the Lord wherever it is purely and freely observed" (123). This concept of the feminine iconography of the Church speaks several truths. In addition to the truth that the Church and all of humanity is, in a sense, "feminine" in relation to God, it also speaks a truth about woman as a collective, and about each individual woman. If the Church finds its physical manifestation in a human woman, then indeed each individual woman is herself an icon of the Church and of humanity. Written into her very body (and soul) is the receptivity and fruitfulness to which God invites every human. And, if each and every individual woman reveals God's invitation to union with humanity in the collective sense, then she herself is also called to a special individual and personal union with the divine, possibly in a way that man does not have access to.

Woman's privileged position in Catholic theology and ecclesiology, however, does not exempt her from the fallen nature she shares with man. Just as the previous chapter explores man's "specific degeneracy" as "his brutal despotism" and his "enslavement to his work up to the point of the atrophy of his humanity," Stein locates also the "specific degeneracy of woman" (190). This perversion of the feminine nature is found in "her servile dependence on man and in the decline of her spiritual life into a predominantly sensual one" (190). If woman in the original order was ordered more particularly than man toward active receptivity to the whole person and to divine action, the perversion of her particularly feminine faculties relates specifically to her relationship with the human person and with God. For the woman who lives from her fallen feminine humanity, her "personal outlook appears to be exaggerated unwholesomely. . . it is manifested in her complete absorption with them beyond the measure required by maternal functions . . . she does not foster development but rather hinders and paralyzes it" (Stein 47). Just as a man living from his fallen masculine humanity tends to "shirk his paternal duties," a woman living from her fallen feminine humanity will either "attempt to shirk her maternal duties" or instead she will "[hover] anxiously over children as if they were her own possessions" and "try to bind them to her in every way . . . She will try to curtail their freedom of development; she will check their development and destroy their happiness" (74-75). In sum, the fallenness of woman involves either a lack or an excess of her maternal orientation toward the whole person.

But, there is indeed redemption for both Stein and O'Connor, who highlight this dynamic. Stein makes use of the two archetypal women in biblical theology for one of her descriptions of this dynamic. "Every other woman has something in herself inherited from Eve," writes Stein, "and she must search for the way from Eve to Mary. There is a bit of defiance in each woman that does not want to humble itself under any sovereignty. In each, there is

something of that desire which reaches for forbidden fruit” (119). The tension between fallen and redeemed feminine humanity—the search for the way from Eve to Mary—is the dynamic driving many of O’Connor’s stories and her female characters. This feminine type of redemption is characterized by the movement away from possessive grasping for control toward active receptivity of one’s identity and circumstances. It is also a movement away from stifling the personality of another toward nurturing life through fruitful self-gift. Further, it is a movement away from rejecting one’s feminine humanity and capacity for maternity—both biologically and spiritually—and towards active receptivity of one’s divinely given identity.

Fallen Feminine Humanity as a Rejection of the Person in “Good Country People”

O’Connor, not one to shy away from the darkness of fallen humanity, provides numerous examples of mothers and married women in need of redemption. Some accept; others resist, but the action of grace is always present. Two female characters who exemplify this resistance are Mrs. May in “Greenleaf” (1956) and Mrs. Hopewell in “Good Country People” (1955). “Good Country People” is arguably representative of much of O’Connor’s fiction because, as Louise Westling notes, “[i]n at least six of O’Connor’s thirty-one published stories, the plot centers on a mother resembling Mrs. Hopewell and a daughter like Joy” (144). Mrs. Hopewell, although not the protagonist of “Good Country People” (1955), nevertheless demands our attention because of the way her perspective dominates much of the story. Mrs. Hopewell, a divorced woman who owns and manages a farm (with the help of the hired Freeman family), lives with her “thirty-two years old and highly educated” daughter (271). Joy Hopewell, a woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy, lives with her mother only because of her health conditions, which include both an artificial leg (the result of a hunting accident) and a life-threatening heart condition. The mother-

daughter relationship between Mrs. Hopewell and Joy, with its many dysfunctions, sheds light on both characters.

Even in the face of her daughter's conditions, Mrs. Hopewell, as the name suggests, applies an overly optimistic disposition to every interaction. Such positivity manifests itself in Mrs. Hopewell's characteristic clichés, among which are "Nothing is perfect," "that is life," and "well, other people have their opinions too" (272-3). Mrs. Hopewell's optimism is not always benign or well-meaning, and it reveals an inflated sense of superiority over her employees. According to her estimation, at least, she is capable of using her exaggerated positivity to manage or even manipulate others: "Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack" (272). Clearly Mrs. Hopewell's character reveals an orientation toward the person as totality that Stein understands as a uniquely feminine faculty. However, she uses this faculty not to bring herself and others to their full flourishing but to control, dominate, or manipulate, as she does with the "bad qualities" of the Freeman family, as well as her with her daughter.

Mrs. Hopewell's unrealistic optimism reveals a perversion of her feminine and maternal orientation toward the person. Instead of "adapting herself to the inner life of others" (Stein 188), she imposes her optimism on her daughter and ultimately rejects the reality of her daughter's personality. Peter Smith calls Mrs. Hopewell's "persistent belief in her own superiority that entitles [her] to denigrate [her] fellow human beings" a "spiritual defect" (42), and Lisa S. Babinec names this rejection of the daughter a form of domination. She writes, "Mrs. Hopewell tries to dominate Joy-Hulga so that she behaves in so-called 'normal' ways, which include having male companions and being a 'social butterfly'; Mrs. Hopewell wants to transform the daughter into a mirror image of the mother" (Babinec 14). Rather than producing the desired

effect of constructive interactions, Mrs. Hopewell's forced positivity becomes an obstacle in her relationship with Joy. Instead of acknowledging Joy's personality and life choices, Mrs. Hopewell disapproves of her daughter's tendency to choose what she sees as less pleasant or lady-like. In one interaction, Mrs. Hopewell's rejection of her daughter's personality clearly becomes an obstacle: "Mrs. Hopewell would say, 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all,' to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM'" (274). Mrs. Hopewell's rejects her daughter's entire personality, in both the strict and broad sense of the term. She rejects Joy's disagreeable temperament and manners. But her rejection of Joy's manners also reveals her rejection of Joy as a person—of her very being.

Much of Mrs. Hopewell's rejection of her daughter's personality centers on Joy's academic career, which does not conform with Mrs. Hopewell's rigidly stereotypical vision of a woman's role. To her mother, Joy appears to be "still a child" (274), and "[w]henver she looked at Joy this way, she could not help but feel that it would have been better if the child had not taken the Ph.D . . . It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like other people and more like herself—bloating, rude, and squint-eyed" (276). Note again that Mrs. Hopewell's disapproval of her daughter hinges on a rejection of her entire personality. She disapproves of her daughter's character because she "grew less like other people" and "more like herself." Mrs. Hopewell elaborates on her disapproval of her daughter's choices:

The girl had taken the Ph.D in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a schoolteacher,' or even, 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that ended with the Greeks and Romans. All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep

chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but she didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men. She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity. (276)

Mrs. Hopewell's definition of femininity has nothing to do with embodiment or spirituality, as Stein's does. Instead, she evaluates her daughter's standing as a woman in terms of her narrow vision of appropriate occupations and romantic desire. As Christina Bieber Lake argues, Mrs. Hopewell "defines femininity by that which is attractive to men" and thus sees Joy as not beautiful or truly feminine (Lake 125). Although Mrs. Hopewell does not restrict women's role to the domestic, she still has the notion that some occupations are more suited for women than others. Further, Mrs. Hopewell's judgment also centers on Joy's lack of romantic interest. Unlike "normal" young women, she spends her time reading philosophy when she could be dating, marrying, and procreating. Her current path of life is unacceptable to Mrs. Hopewell.

Clearly, Mrs. Hopewell's interactions with people are colored by her desire for control. She uses her feminine orientation toward the person to manage her farm and her employees. However, she also uses it to impose her vision of femininity on her daughter, and thus reject her daughter's individual personality. Edith Stein, herself an unmarried woman with a Ph.D., and Flannery O'Connor, an unmarried woman writer with an M.F.A., would likely both disagree with Mrs. Hopewell's vision of femininity. Stein addresses this point, writing, "Every profession in which woman's soul comes into its own and which can be formed by woman's soul is an authentic woman's profession. The innermost formative principle of the woman's soul is the love which flows from the divine heart," which Stein says is gained "through the most intimate union

with the divine heart in a Eucharistic and liturgical life” (57).³⁸ Stein’s focus here is on the full development of the person and her union with God, a union which restores and redeems their fallen humanity. Mrs. Hopewell’s focus is on forcing her daughter into a mold according to her image of femininity. Mrs. Hopewell, then, not only rejects her daughter’s personhood, but also her daughter’s feminine humanity. By rejecting her daughter’s humanity, she herself rejects her own feminine vocation to motherhood, both physical and spiritual. She shirks her maternal duty to nurture her daughter’s individuality, and thus lives from her fallen humanity.

“Greenleaf” and the Rejection of One’s Own Feminine Humanity

The controlling mother figure, as embodied by Mrs. Hopewell, is a common trope in O’Connor’s short fiction. Additionally, many of O’Connor’s female characters tend to view reality, persons, and their own femininity through reductively rigid categories of class and sexual desire. The protagonist of “Greenleaf” (1956), Mrs. May, is one of these characters and thus offers an even deeper revelation of O’Connor’s vision of fallen feminine humanity and the action of grace. Mrs. May, a widow, owns and runs a farm with the help of the hired Greenleaf family. She lives on her farm with her two adult sons, Wesley and Scofield, neither of whom live up to Mrs. May’s expectations for Southern gentlemen. Mrs. May, like Mrs. Hopewell, strives for a high level of control over her business and her children that she is ultimately unable to achieve. Also like Mrs. Hopewell, she sees reality through the lens of rigid roles: both her role as a female in the South and her vision of the role that religion plays in everyday life. These prejudices, along with her rigid view of class distinctions, give her an inflated sense of self-importance over

³⁸ Lest I stray too far from the main focus of this chapter, which is the way in which women live their fallen and redeemed femininity within their natural vocations of marriage and motherhood, this idea will be explored further in the next chapter.

the hired Greenleaf family. But, as with many other men and women in O'Connor's stories, Mrs. May's unrealistic worldview eventually meets violent resistance, and this violence is the action of redemption. But Mrs. May, unfortunately, seems to resist her redemption. Reading this story in light of Stein's sacramental vision of gender, I argue that, through the events of the story, O'Connor condemns Mrs. May's resistance as a rejection of both divine erotic love and the sacramental reality of her feminine humanity.

Although Mrs. May ultimately rejects the redemption offered to her, the divine action nevertheless drives the story's plot, pursuing Mrs. May to the end. In true O'Connor fashion, redemption is mediated through an unlikely instrument: this time an escaped scrub-bull wandering Mrs. May's property. The bull, and Mrs. May's reaction to it, draw attention to the narrow-mindedness of her interactions, especially the way in which she lives without the awareness of her need for redemption and its link to the mystical reality of her feminine humanity in relation to God. As the harbinger of Mrs. May's redemption, the bull is compared to both a divine being and a romantic partner. When Mrs. May first observes the bull, she sees him through her bedroom window, which "was low and faced on the east and the bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room" (311). O'Connor here draws parallels between the bull and "some patient god," as well as between the bull and a suitor awaiting entrance into Mrs. May's bedchambers. This is a strange combination indeed. However, in a Christian context the convergence of deity and lover as a literary trope has precedents, and for an author as steeped in Catholic theology as O'Connor, this parallel would likely not be coincidental. The marriage metaphor in Ephesians 5, in which Christ is compared to a bridegroom in relation to the Church, helps ground a Catholic feminist reading of this story. We might even read this story as a

mythologized dramatization of this metaphor. In this reading, the bull becomes a sacramental revelation of Christ, a divine suitor pursuing his beloved humanity, represented by the figure of Mrs. May. Sarah Gordon also recognizes this motif of the divine suitor in “Greenleaf” and explores the ways it clarifies O’Connor’s sacramental vision of femininity. Gordon argues that female characters like Mrs. May simultaneously reveal “the Church’s teaching about the sacredness of the human body . . . and the Church’s recurrent metaphoric use of the soul as female pursued by the divine Lover” (Gordon 198). We might, then, see in Mrs. May an incarnation of the bride in Ephesians 5, called to union with the divine Bridegroom by receiving his redemptive and sacrificial love mediated through her feminine humanity.

In this light, Mrs. May’s attitude toward the bull takes on a new significance. Her rejection of the bull’s presence becomes a rejection of a relationship with Christ and thus a rejection her redemption. She constantly frets about the bull’s presence on her property, nags the hired Greenleaf family to get rid of it, and even plots its death. Mrs. May’s intense hatred for the beast reveals a pharisaical obsession with maintaining the pristine superficial appearances of her class status, an obsession that ultimately hinders both her spiritual life and her relationships with other people. Mrs. May’s worst fear becomes “that bull ruining my herd” (326). This obsession over the purity of her herd parallels her obsession over the purity of her family, as she also fears that her sons will “marry trash and ruin everything I’ve done” (315). The bull quite inconveniently threatens Mrs. May’s neat and tidy way of life. His presence invites her to consider the possibility of a new vision of reality that, if received, would lead to her redemption. By accepting the inconvenient presence of the bull, perhaps she would be that much closer to accepting the presence of the Greenleaf family. Even further, perhaps she would be that much closer to accepting the reality of her imperfect and fallen nature. By accepting the divine pursuit

of the bull, Mrs. May could receive a more expansive vision of reality that prepares her to receive her redemption and to live a fully-realized version of her femininity. This vision is never fully realized in the story, however. Mrs. May's rejection of the bull's presence instead becomes the outward manifestation of her inward rejection of Christ's pursuit of her soul. In a Steinian reading, Mrs. May's rejection of union with the divine through "bridal" surrender to God's will, becomes a rejection of her feminine humanity (Stein 123).

If Mrs. May's rejection of divine action in the story represents one extreme of fallen feminine humanity, another female character represents the opposite extreme. Mrs. May's rejection of the spiritual dimension of her humanity and femininity serves as a foil to Mrs. Greenleaf's overly spiritualized approach. Mrs. Greenleaf, married to Mrs. May's hired help, lives out her religious devotion in very visible, even grotesque, ways. Almost the antithesis of Mrs. May's carefully constructed self-image, "Mrs. Greenleaf was large and loose. The yard around her house looked like a dump and her five girls were always filthy; even the youngest one dipped snuff. Instead of making a garden or washing their clothes, her preoccupation was what she called 'prayer healing'" (315). By occupying herself with "prayer healing" rather than stereotypical "women's work" like laundry, Mrs. Greenleaf earns Mrs. May's scorn. By focusing so intensely on her own private spirituality, Mrs. Greenleaf appears to fall short of Mrs. May's social expectations for femininity. She also appears to neglect her feminine maternal duties.

The two women's manner of living their feminine humanity most clearly conflicts in one interaction that Mrs. May recalls:

Every day [Mrs. Greenleaf] cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper—the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars. She took

these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them and then she fell on the ground over them and mumbled and groaned for an hour or so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt.

...

Mrs. Greenleaf raised her head. Her face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as composed as a bull-dog's. She swayed back and forth on her hands and knees and groaned, 'Jesus, Jesus.' (316)

In this scene, Mrs. May is shocked to find Mrs. Greenleaf in such an unkempt and frantic state. Moreover, she is shocked that Mrs. Greenleaf would express her spirituality so brazenly. Rather than Mrs. May's respectful but reserved attitude toward religion, Mrs. Greenleaf throws around the name "Jesus" with abandon in a public display of dramatic emotion. When Mrs. May observes this, she "winced. She thought the word, *Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom*. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (316 emphasis mine). Mrs. May here reveals her concern for outward propriety and social convention, and this superficial concern becomes almost religious for her. Mrs. May's comparison between a reserved reverence regarding religious matters and the personal nature of one's sexuality further reveals her attitude toward both religion and sexuality. By restricting God to the church building, she attempts to re-make God in her image, according to her restricted vision, placing Him under her control. She thus has a similar approach to both religion and her sexuality. Mrs. May would

rather be in control over her own feminine identity than receive it, acknowledge her need for redemption, and be mystically united to Christ.

Mrs. Greenleaf has a much different relationship with both religion and sexuality. Although still living out a fallen version of femininity, her approach is much closer to O'Connor and Stein's vision, as the story's ending will reveal. Herein lies a key difference between Mrs. May and Mrs. Greenleaf. Mrs. Greenleaf's entire life revolves around her personal ritual of intercessory prayer, one in which she continually receives the suffering of others as her own and surrenders her life to God. Mrs. May's entire life, on the other hand, revolves around managing her property, employees, and family. Not bad in itself, Mrs. May's attempts to control her life and those around her come at the cost of her spirituality. They also come at the cost of her feminine humanity. Sarah Gordon sees the religious fanaticism of the one and the unbelief of the other as a "comic foil" that reveals "Mrs. May's association of religious excess, sexuality, and childbearing" with "a vulnerability she considers female and weak" (197). Thus, according to a Steinian reading, Mrs. May's rejection of Mrs. Greenleaf's religious devotion and sexuality are not only a manifestation of her fallen feminine humanity, but also a rejection of femininity itself.

Mrs. May's reaction to Mrs. Greenleaf's religious fanaticism prompts differing reactions from scholars. Some scholars, like Marshall Bruce Gentry, read Mrs. May's ultimate rejection of religious practice as "overcoming patriarchal authority through private strategies," making her the creator of "alternate, unorthodox, personal religious systems that give [her] as much control over [her life] as men have over theirs" (Gentry, "Dialogue" 64). Other scholars, however, read Mrs. May's religious views more negatively. Gordon calls Mrs. May "another pursued (female) sinner" who, "like other O'Connor women . . . is obsessed with power and control" (Gordon 195). Mrs. May's obsession with control, and her attempt to assert her control over God in some

measure echoes Adam and Eve's attempt to assert control over God. Kilcourse reads in light of this parallel, calling Mrs. May "a self-made woman" whose "contempt for Mrs. Greenleaf's emotional, pentecostal religious displays and 'prayer healing' in the woods exposes her cold, methodic self-righteousness" (Kilcourse 254). Indeed, the story's ending lends credence to Kilcourse's moral reading. However, much more insight can be gleaned from the juxtaposition of Mrs. May's self-righteousness and Mrs. Greenleaf's religious fanaticism.

The "prayer healing" ritual continues with Mrs. Greenleaf's increasingly frantic pleading, bizarrely bordering on sexual:

'Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!' Mrs. Greenleaf shrieked. 'Jesus, stab me in the heart!' and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth...Mrs. May felt as furious and helpless as if she had been insulted by a child. 'Jesus,' she said, drawing herself back, 'would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!' and she had turned and walked off as fast as she could. (317)

Once again, Mrs. Greenleaf's ritual, and Mrs. May's reaction, reveals the differences between the two women. Mrs. Greenleaf puts up no appearances of genteel perfection, but perhaps goes to extremes in her practice of the religious ritual. Mrs. May, on the other hand, frets about the purity of her reputation while neglecting her spiritual life. This neglect amounts to a spiritual barrenness, according to Westling. Whereas the Greenleaf family's Christian faith and "harmony with natural forces" embody a "genuine fertility," Mrs. May's attempts at self-creation and control over others results in the opposite (Westling 162). Mrs. Greenleaf seems to be living a version of the "spiritual maternity" that Stein references. She attempts to become, through mystical union with suffering souls, the mother of the whole world. She even attempts to make

her spiritual maternity physical, attempting “a sprawling embrace with the potent earth” (Westling 164). Mrs. Greenleaf’s spiritual maternity, though, is indeed a twisted version of Stein’s vision. Whatever grace she opens herself to in her invitation to Jesus to “stab me in the heart,” may be eclipsed by her reduction of spirituality to a superstitious ritual, as well as her general neglect for the duties of her physical maternity.

Notice the parallel in these two women’s different manners with Stein’s description of typical feminine perversions. For the woman living from her fallen nature, “her reverent joy in the things of this world may degenerate into greed, leading her, on the one hand, to the anxious, avaricious scraping together and hoarding of things for which she has no use; and on the other hand, a lapse into a mindless, idle life of sensuality” (Stein 74). Both women, it seems, have a degenerate relation to the things of this world. Mrs. May lives a mostly material existence, obsessed with controlling her outward purity and appearance. Mrs. Greenleaf lets her spirituality, in a misguided attempt at sacramentality, become both an “anxious, avaricious scraping together” of artifacts and a “mindless, idle life of sensuality.” She has allowed her spiritual life to “decline... into a predominantly sensual one” (190). But, if Mrs. Greenleaf’s spiritual life is twisted by superstition and sensuality, Mrs. May does not even have a spiritual life to speak of. In this way, both women embody Stein’s descriptions of fallen feminine humanity.

Mrs. May’s arrogance and condescension meet a violent end, however. In a final attempt to assert her control, she escorts Mr. Greenleaf to find the bull, forcing him to shoot it against his will. As Mrs. May waits in the car for Mr. Greenleaf to carry out the mission, the bull arrives clearly on a search of his own for Mrs. May:

In a few minutes something emerged from the tree line . . . He was crossing the pasture toward her at a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her

again . . . She looked back and saw that the bull, his head lowered, was racing toward her. She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but *in a freezing unbelief*. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and *the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover*, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but *the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable*. (333 emphasis mine)

Mrs. May, pursued from the very beginning of the story by the bull, in the end cannot fend off his pursuit. The divine suitor who awaited entrance into Mrs. May's room finally gains it in the end. By returning to the story's convergence of divine presence and erotic desire onto the bull, the language of the above passage takes on a deeper significance. Mrs. May's perception of the approaching bull is again described in religious terms, as "unbelief." Further, the comparison between the bull and a romantic partner develops in this violent climax. The bull's act of goring is described not in graphic, violent terms but as the erotic gesture of a "a wild tormented lover." As the bull's act is complete, the language turns again toward the religious. Not only has the bull gored Mrs. May, but the penetration extends to the whole earth, as well. Mrs. May now sees "a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky." Heaven has now united itself to earth, as the divine bull has united himself to Mrs. May. Mrs. May, however, "finds the light unbearable." Like Mr. Fortune in the previous chapter, who closes his eyes against the vision, Mrs. May sees the possibility of her redemption but ultimately is unable or unwilling to receive it.

A few moments later, Mr. Greenleaf returns and finally follows his orders to shoot the bull that is currently impaling Mrs. May. She “did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (334). Paralleling the Ephesians 5 metaphor, the bull as Divine Lover has finally united himself to his bride, Mrs. May, to save her. Mrs. May, however, seems to persist in her rejection of him. She remains in “freezing unbelief” and appears, despite her changed vision, to find “the light unbearable.” By reading in light of Stein’s sacramental understanding of gender, further clarified by the Ephesians 5 metaphor, Mrs. May’s choice to kill her suitor, the divine bull, is symbolic of her interior rejection of God’s redemptive love. Just as she believes herself superior to the Greenleaf family, she also sees herself above the need to receive her identity or her redemption from anyone outside herself. Her rejection of her feminine humanity in relation to her children and employees has culminated in a rejection of her humanity before God, resulting in both physical and spiritual death.

The Dynamic of Redeemed Femininity in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

The grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953) undergoes a similar journey from a restrictive vision of femininity that centers on superficial appearance and control toward a recognition of her spiritual maternity. The dynamic of redeemed femininity at work in the story also comes through a measure of violence. By her eventual acceptance of spiritual maternity, the grandmother could perhaps be compared to a redeemed Mrs. Hopewell, who similarly let her striving for the appearance of Southern ladyhood interfere with her motherhood. The grandmother’s development offers a literary representation of Stein’s vision of femininity as

spiritual maternity. Stein writes that “[i]n order to develop to the highest level the humanity specific to husband and children, woman requires the attitude of selfless service. She cannot consider others as her property nor as means for her own purposes; on the contrary, she must consider others as gifts entrusted to her” (Stein 110). Woman’s ability to consider other persons as gifts entrusted to her is only possible “when she also sees them as God’s creatures towards whom she has a holy duty to fulfill” (110). Recognition of and receptivity toward the gift of the other, the gift of oneself, and with the duties attached to those gifts constitute the climactic event in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953). By eventually recognizing her connection to The Misfit as a maternal duty toward a person instead of an artificial superiority over a criminal, the grandmother receives her redeemed feminine humanity.

At the beginning of the story, the grandmother does not yet have this expansive vision of femininity. The story begins with Bailey, his wife, their children, and Bailey’s mother preparing for a road trip to Florida. Bailey’s mother, referred to as “the grandmother” throughout the story, is not looking forward to the trip. She attempts to convince her son to change plans, in part because of the news she reads about an escaped convict known as “The Misfit” who is currently roaming the countryside (117). The road trip begins in comic fashion, with the two children fighting in the back seat across the grandmother, inevitably nagging their parents about their boredom. In a more serious register, however, the beginning of the road trip also reveals the grandmother’s narrow vision of femininity that is centered on the coded manners and superficial status symbols of a genteel southern lady. In clear contrast to her daughter-in-law, a “young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage” (117), the grandmother has carefully conformed her appearance to what she sees as the appropriate representation of a lady:

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white dots in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (118)

The grandmother's concern here is to maintain her reputation as "a lady." Her method of maintaining her reputation remains on the superficial level, with a detailed description of the articles of clothing that prop up her status. Robert Rea calls the grandmother's characterization "a highly stylized performance of gender" and "a canned imitation of Scarlet O'Hara and Melanie Wilkes" (175). Even in this initial description, the grandmother reveals that her concept of proper femininity is merely superficial, as well as a source of false superiority over those who do not conform to her stereotypes, including her daughter-in-law.

The grandmother's carefully manicured appearance and her sense of dignity are not necessarily something to be condemned. However, she later reveals that her self-assurance masks an inflated sense of superiority. The family eventually stops for lunch at a barbecue joint owned by a man named Red Sammy Butts (120). Sammy and the grandmother converse about the state of the world, including the way that "[p]eople are certainly not nice like they used to be" (122). The grandmother concludes that "It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust," she said. 'And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody,' she repeated, looking at Red Sammy" (122). Red Sammy similarly concludes that "A good man is hard to find," and that "Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door

unlatched. Not no more” (122). They also agree that “Europe is entirely to blame” for the state of things (122). These characters here recognize the presence of evil in their fallen world. But, like many O’Connor characters, the grandmother’s fatal flaw is to fail to recognize the evil in her fallen nature and her need for redemption. Instead, the grandmother props up her self-image with a false sense of superiority and a readiness to assign blame to others for the world’s fallenness.

As they continue the drive and the kids continue to get restless, the grandmother entertains them with stories, convincing them that she knows of a plantation house nearby that contains secret panels. John Wesley and June Star proceed to beg their father to stop and visit. Bailey resists his children’s request, but he eventually caves to their begging, and the grandmother encourages the stop by claiming, “It would be very educational for them” (123). When Bailey agrees to take the detour, an unfortunate string of events precipitates the tragic outcome of the story. With Bailey driving down the remote unpaved road, “a horrible thought came to [the grandmother]. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner, causing her basket to rise with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey’s shoulder (124). The upset causes Bailey to swerve off the road in a rollover accident.

Fortunately, the family is alive but a bit injured and shaken. The grandmother decides not to share “the horrible thought she had had before the accident,” namely, “that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee” (125). Ironically, the cause of their accident is the grandmother’s recognition of her mistake. Previously, the grandmother could only place blame on others for the evil in the world. This event, however, forces her to recognize that perhaps it is not “Europe” that is “entirely to blame” for the state of things. In this case, she must reckon with the fact that the blame lies entirely with her. This may be true both literally and

spiritually. The car accident is an unforgettable, jarring event, and it requires that the grandmother acknowledge her mistake, at least interiorly. There is no escaping the fact of a rollover car accident. Given the grandmother's previous conversation about assigning blame for the world's evil, this event might also help reveal to the grandmother her fallen nature and her need for redemption. As she begins to acknowledge, to herself at least, that she made a small mistake in remembering directions, perhaps she will begin to also acknowledge the fallen state of her soul.

As they recover themselves on the side of the road, the family sees a "big black battered hearse-like automobile" approach along with the "three men in it" (126). The grandmother recognizes the leader of the three men "as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was" (126). She eventually identifies him as The Misfit, the escaped convict she had read about in the newspaper that morning. As his accomplices systematically separate and murder her family members in the woods, the grandmother attempts to negotiate with The Misfit. What results, though, is a theological debate about the implications of the Christian belief in Christ's resurrection. In this debate, the grandmother gradually relinquishes the narrow view of her feminine humanity, so carefully constructed at the beginning of the story, and comes eventually to a more complete acceptance of her femininity as spiritual maternity. The grandmother at first attempts to exploit her genteel status for protection. She pleads with The Misfit: "'You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?'" (127). The Misfit replies sardonically that he would hate to have to. As this interaction unfolds, the grandmother quite literally lets go of her attachment to superficial markers of genteel ladyhood: "The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim...but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground" (128). With the prior connection between the grandmother's clothing and her

status as a “lady” in mind, this action seems to represent her release of a superficial marker of her constructed genteel femininity, making way for a more expansive vision of femininity that encompasses her spirituality and her embodied capacity for maternity.

The conversation continues with the grandmother encouraging The Misfit to pray so that Jesus would help him. He responds by asserting, “I don’t want no hep...I’m doing all right by myself” (130). The grandmother, who “found that she had lost her voice,” again attempts to urge The Misfit to pray: “She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, ‘Jesus, Jesus,’ meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing (131). The Misfit responds to the mention of Jesus that “‘Jesus thown [sic] everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime . . . I call myself The Misfit,’ he said, ‘because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment’” (131). He continues with an assessment of Christianity:

‘Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,’ The Misfit continued, ‘and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow Him, and if He didn’t then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.’ (132)

The Misfit’s monologue about Jesus raises the stakes of the story. No longer is it merely about the grandmother’s superficial construction of genteel Southern femininity, nor is the story merely a backwoods murder mystery. There is no mistaking it now: this story is clearly also about sin and redemption. The Misfit offers a relatively clear argument: if Jesus really rose from the dead,

then such an event would be so significant that one ought to live as if it were true by wholeheartedly following Him. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the only logical way to live is hedonistically, “enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can” (132). It appears that at least up until now, The Misfit has chosen the latter.

The Misfit, who is now wearing Bailey’s shirt, sparks a recognition in the frantic grandmother’s mind. She no longer reacts to The Misfit’s immoral moralizing with an instinct of self-preservation, but instead with a recognition of her responsibility toward him. She begins to see herself as his mother and attempts to reach out to him:

His voice seemed about to crack and *the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant*. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘*Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!*’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.” (132 emphasis mine).

In an epiphanic moment, the grandmother makes a sudden connection. This man, despite being a complete stranger and a criminal, belongs to her as “one of my [her] children,” and thus a person with dignity whom she is called to serve. She is connected to him in some irrevocable way. On a literal level, the grandmother subconsciously recognizes that The Misfit is wearing her son’s shirt, and thus makes a connection between The Misfit and her son. On another level, I argue, something much deeper is happening simultaneously. In recognizing her son’s shirt on The Misfit, she recognizes her son in the Misfit. She chooses to treat The Misfit as her own child and to view herself as his mother. In short, she recognizes her spiritual maternity. In her conversation with The Misfit, she has gradually let go of her earlier pretentious approach to femininity in favor of a more concrete yet expansive one. For the grandmother, it is no longer about

maintaining the superficial trappings that come with her status as a “lady,” complete with genteel manners and frilly hats. Apart from these superficial status symbols, the grandmother can now embrace her full identity as a woman and a mother, radically receptive to grace and uniquely capable of authentic connection with other people. At the beginning of the car ride, the grandmother revealed her desire for “anyone seeing her dead on the highway” to “know at once that she was a lady” (118). It appears that she may no longer be concerned with such a narrow vision of femininity.

The text itself, and even *The Misfit*, recognize this transformation. After her death, “the grandmother . . . half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (132). O’Connor’s narrator here reinforces the grandmother’s redemptive status, describing her posture in a way that implies her return to a childlike state of innocence. Yet, this is no innocent, unfallen earth that the grandmother lies upon, murdered and in a puddle of her own blood. She lies in the mess of the violence, caused in part by her fallenness, yet she gazes heavenward, smiling. This is clearly, at least in O’Connor’s world, the face of a redeemed woman. Upon seeing the grandmother this way, *The Misfit* says, ““She would have been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life”” (133). At first glance, this appears to be a macabre comment from a serial murderer who takes pleasure in destroying human life. However, O’Connor’s stories often invite a sacramental reading, looking at and then through the obvious material realities into the spiritual ones they reveal. Read in this light, *The Misfit*’s statement pronounces something deeper about the state of the grandmother’s soul. His statement implies that becoming a murder victim is what brought about the grandmother’s redemption. In a sense, this is true. On the literal level, it is only through her death that the grandmother can attain heaven. But the statement is true on the

spiritual level, as well. It was The Misfit and his violence that made the grandmother consider her faults, reflect seriously on her Christian faith, recognize her maternal connection and duty toward others, and choose to courageously act on her recognition. Paradoxically, through accepting the reality of her fallenness and its consequences, she has transcended it and gained redemption.

Reading The Misfit's statement closely reveals something more, especially in light of Stein's thought. The first part about being "a good woman" is telling in this context. Not only does The Misfit's statement imply a connection between violence and redemption, but it also implies a connection between the grandmother's redemption and her fully-realized femininity. Jeanne Campbell Reesman also notes the connection between femininity and redemption, arguing that "the story is about how her redemptive power arises from the grandmother's femininity" (49). When she receives her epiphany that The Misfit belongs to her as her child and then responds by physically reaching out to him, the grandmother claims her role as spiritual mother. In so doing, argues George Kilcourse, her "own transformation is evident. She is no longer the controlling and manipulative woman whose religion has evaporated into social prestige and self-righteous judgment of others. The alienation of original sin in her life is ultimately overcome" (134). Kilcourse associates the grandmother's "open gesture of inclusive love" toward The Misfit with the "maternal gesture" of "Mary the mother of Jesus, whose heel crushes the serpent" (134). Whereas "Catholic tradition points to Mary's being free from original sin...The grandmother's reaching out to touch The Misfit symbolizes that she has found the goodness God gave her, goodness that original sin had eclipsed" (Kilcourse 134). This connection that both Reesman and Kilcourse draw between the grandmother's redemption and

her femininity, specifically her maternity, is precisely the connection Stein makes in her *Essays on Woman*.

What makes the grandmother's redemption truly a spiritual maternity, and therefore a redemption characterized by her femininity, is the fruitfulness of it. The grandmother's active receptivity to the action of grace bears redemptive fruit in both her life *and* other people's lives—in particular, the Misfit's. Kilcourse writes, "O'Connor thus opens the door for The Misfit's pilgrimage to a fuller appreciation of the grace that has been extended to him. He may have recoiled from the grandmother's touch but O'Connor subtly suggests he has already been changed" (Kilcourse 134). Immediately after The Misfit shoots the grandmother, he "put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them" (O'Connor 132). With O'Connor's recurring motif of vision, and her sacramental worldview in which physical realities participate in and point to spiritual realities, the reference to glasses likely points to a reality not merely physical. Indeed, based on the literal context of the story, The Misfit is probably wiping blood spatter from his glasses in order to see through them. Perhaps, though, what he sees now is not only the physical world around him, but through it, a spiritual truth. Just as Christians are redeemed by being "washed in the blood" of Christ, perhaps The Misfit begins the process of redemption by having both his physical and spiritual vision "washed in the blood" of the grandmother, who shed her blood for his sins. The text supports this possibility with the last few lines of the story. The Misfit's accomplice Bobby Lee evaluates the afternoon of murders as "Some fun!" (133). The Misfit does not respond affirmatively, but instead with the admonition, "'Shut up, Bobby Lee,' The Misfit said. 'It's no real pleasure in life'" (133). Compared to his comments previously, these comments imply that he has made a decision. Rather than finding "no pleasure but meanness," The Misfit has realized that in these acts of meanness, there is "no

real pleasure in life,” at least not this life. Only in the life the grandmother has entered through her death, the life of redemption, will he find “real” pleasure. Thus, like Christ’s Mother, the grandmother also becomes a mother in the order of grace. By living her spiritual maternity, even for a brief instant, she has received her redemption.

Chapter 3: “God Made Me Thisaway”: O’Connor’s Vision of Redeemed Femininity as Spiritual
Virginity

Transcendence over natural limitations is the highest effect of grace; however, this can never be attained by an arbitrary battle against nature and by denial of natural limitations but only through humble submission to the God-given order.

—Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 85

As the previous chapter began to outline, the concepts of spiritual maternity and the total “bridal” surrender of self to God’s action are the essence of Stein’s answer to her own question about the nature of woman as both spiritual and corporeal being. For Stein, these mystical modes of being in the world are the common form of every woman’s vocation. Every woman, whether she is married, a consecrated religious sister, or working in the professional world, can participate in the supernatural mission to actively receive the divine action and allow it to bear fruit in and through her. This dynamic of grace constitutes a driving force in O’Connor’s plots, and the participation or rejection of this grace by her characters serves as their primary motivation. I argue that O’Connor’s female characters embody this dynamic of redemption in a particularly feminine way by living out their embodied and spiritual identity in various spheres: the domestic settings of marriage, motherhood, and childhood, or as working professionals. Each of the unmarried protagonists of each of the stories examined in this chapter must choose to accept or reject the gift of their embodied femininity. Their unmarried state further serves to highlight the unique ways in which they live out (or refuse to live out) their individual feminine humanity in these particular circumstances.

In this chapter, I examine O’Connor’s theological vision of femininity lived out in an unmarried state. The female characters included in this chapter embody the dynamic of fallen

humanity and redemptive action but do so in a way that further highlights both their femininity and individuality. In “The Crop” (1947), Miss Willerton appears to be O’Connor’s satirical examination of a single female artist, and thus offers an example for how a female artist should not conduct herself—that is, with no regard for either the objective quality of her work or the totality of the persons she encounters in reality. She consistently lives from her fallen humanity by refusing to strive for true excellence as an artist, refusing to see the value of human persons over abstract social issues, and refusing to consciously acknowledge the gift of her embodied feminine humanity. Among the many rebellious daughters in O’Connor’s stories, two stand out as offering hope for redeemed femininity: Joy/Hulga in “Good Country People” (1955) and the unnamed protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1955). Both, through a jarring encounter with their own embodied femaleness, are purified and supernaturally empowered to freely give their lives to Christ. And in so doing, both are also empowered to receive the gift of their embodied feminine humanity and individual identity.

Stein’s “Three-Fold Analysis” and Spiritual Virginity

In describing Stein’s thought on embodied feminine humanity and its relation to spirituality, it is important to avoid misreading her “dynamic essentialism” or “personalism” as a narrow prescription of stereotypical gender roles. Stein’s own work refutes this kind of narrow thinking by recognizing the complex ways human beings share both universal similarities and individual differences. Her theological anthropology thus offers a “three-fold analysis” of the human person that theorizes on the level of human nature, gender (male and female), and individuality (178). It is Stein’s emphasis on man and woman’s shared human nature combined

with her emphasis on the individuality of each human person that preserves her theological vision of femininity from merely prescribing reductive stereotypes of so-called gender “roles.”

After reading Stein’s assertion that woman’s natural vocation is to be wife and mother, some readers may not expect this emphasis on individuality. These readers may see Stein’s grounding of feminine identity in the body as a reduction of a woman’s femininity to her relationships with men and possibly children, thus erasing woman’s agency. Stein, however, resists this oversimplification of “the meaning of the specifically feminine being” as merely “her relation to man” (197). Instead, she points to humanity’s shared calling to “reflect the divine” (197). She also points to the individuality of each woman. “Each human soul,” writes Stein, “is created by God; each one receives from Him a character which distinguishes it from every other soul, and this individuality is to be developed within the broader context of humanity in general and womanhood in particular” (201). Indeed, it is woman’s natural vocation to be wife and mother, and this embodied vocation points to the spiritual reality of the person. But just as important as it is to notice the way gender characterizes a person’s actions, one must also note the way one’s individual character forms his or her actions. Stein’s view is that man and woman are united in their common human nature and dignity but are differentiated by their maleness and femaleness, and that each woman is further differentiated by her individuality. This individual differentiation is a further revelation of the divine because it reveals the various ways God personally calls each to human to receive his grace.

Thus each woman is free to live her individuality in various vocations and professions according to her desires, talents, and discernment. Stein stresses that women’s individual gifts make them capable of full participation in even the traditionally masculine world of public life. She argues that “no woman is only *woman*; like man, each has her individual specialty and

talent, and this talent gives her the capability of doing professional work, be it artistic, scientific, technical, etc” (49). Stein recognizes that this openness to women serving in positions formerly only open to men is a historical development. Changing technologies, cultural values, and economic situations in early twentieth-century Germany move her to assert that “we must consider as closed the historical epoch which made an absolute differentiation between the duties of the sexes, i.e., that woman should assume the domestic duties and man the struggle for a livelihood” (79).

Stein argues that greater inclusion of women in secular professions can help individual women and women collectively become more fully their individual selves. Further, though, Stein makes the case that greater inclusion of women in the world also benefits the whole of society. In increasingly industrialized work environments dominated by men “where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanized and losing his humanity,” “the development of the feminine nature can become a blessed counterbalance” (50). Stein continues, “the participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved” (50-51). Later Stein argues that “Every profession in which woman’s soul comes into its own and which can be formed by woman’s soul is an authentic woman’s profession” (57). For Stein, it is always the person who characterizes the action, not the action that characterizes the person. Thus, any profession carried out by a woman is indeed a woman’s profession because a woman is the one carrying it out. Stein clarifies, though, that the process of forming and being formed by a woman’s soul cannot be fully realized without the action of divine grace. She continues, “the innermost formative principle of the woman’s soul is the love which flows from the divine heart. Woman’s soul wins this formative principle through the most intimate union with the divine heart in a Eucharistic

and liturgical life” (57). This principle, namely, the reliance on and receptivity to divine action as the source of feminine flourishing, is the distinguishing mark of Stein and O’Connor’s Catholic feminism.

Another distinguishing mark of Stein’s Catholic approach to women’s issues is her focus on virginity as a legitimate, and perhaps even ideal, way of living out a Christian life. For Stein, the Christian ideal of virginity is grounded in her biblical interpretation. She also connects the ideal of virginity to woman’s inclusion in secular professions. Stein notices that after the fall of man and woman, the Old Testament of the Bible outlines one way for women to gain salvation: motherhood. In the New Testament and in the early Christian Church, a new path is opened for women’s salvation: virginity. Writes Stein, “The redemptive order...caused a further basic change in the status of woman by asserting the ideal of virginity. This broke through the Old Testament norm which stipulates that woman effects her salvation only by bearing children” (80-81). Through Christ himself, through the Virgin Mary, and through countless early saints, Christian women find a “new way” beyond marriage that “reveals women can consecrate themselves exclusively to the service of God” (81). Once again, the emphasis on the exclusive service of God is the most distinctive element of Stein’s feminism, and it serves as the glue that holds together her vision of both marriage and virginity as the seemingly contradictory paths all women must take as they advance toward their redemption.

Just as all women, whether married or unmarried, mothers or not, are called to live their spiritual maternity, so too all women are called to live what Stein calls a “virginity of soul.” On first glance, it may seem that a spiritual virginity would be at odds with the spiritual maternity and “bridal” surrender mentioned in the previous chapter. Paradoxically, in Stein’s thought, a bridal surrender of one’s life to Christ and the subsequent spiritual maternity is not incompatible

with this “virginity of soul.” In fact, spiritual virginity and spiritual maternity are inseparable from one another:

To be the bride of Christ means to belong to the Lord: it means to put the love of Christ before all things, not merely by theoretical conviction but in the tug of the heart and in practical life. To become so one must be detached from all creatures, free of a fixation on oneself and on others; and that is the deepest, most spiritual meaning of purity. The wife and mother must also have this virginity of soul: indeed, only from this does she get the power to fulfill her vocation; from this source alone flows the ministering love which is neither servile subjugation nor imperious self-assertion and imposed self-will. This ministering love is not only the essence of maternity; in the love of Christ it needs to devote itself to all creatures coming into its ken. It is for this reason that the woman who is not wife and mother must also be true in thought and deed to this spiritual maternity.

(203)

For Stein, “virginity of soul” is tantamount to a form of purity, perhaps best described as a detachment from the created world. The detachment from created things and from the self frees one for greater attachment to God and to one’s vocation. Indeed, it is precisely this detachment, or virginity of soul, that Stein says is the “essence of maternity.” Just as every woman, even an unmarried woman, lives out her spiritual maternity in an individualized way, so too does every woman, even a married woman, live out her spiritual virginity in an individualized way.

That being said, neither the natural vocation of woman as wife and mother, nor the ideal of virginity, posit a rigidly defined course of female life in the Church or the world. In Stein’s words, “there is not one fully undifferentiated goal for all women,” as the great variety of vocations and professions lived out by the female saints attest (201). There is not one cookie-

cutter way to live one's femininity, but there is, however, one objective that every woman is invited to strive for. For Stein, the ideals of spiritual virginity and spiritual maternity unite in every woman, just as literal virginity and literal motherhood unite in Mary, the Mother of God. Mary, who proclaims herself "handmaid of the Lord" before surrendering her total self with her *fiat*, "let it be done unto me according to your word," is the prototype of every feminine vocation. Every woman, then, "[w]hether she is a mother in the home, or occupies a place in the limelight of public life, or lives behind quiet cloister walls, she must be a *handmaid of the Lord* everywhere" (53-54). Thus, the objective that every woman, in all their glorious individuality, must strive for is none other than total surrender to God.

For Stein, a woman's total surrender to God is deeply united to her receptivity to her embodied femininity. Stein thus rejects any philosophy that excludes the spiritual, and she likewise rejects any philosophy that denies sexual difference. She writes that the

eternal order likewise demands a categorical rejection...of a social order and of education which deny completely woman's unique nature...but seek rather to consider all individuals as similar atoms in a mechanistically ordered structure. Such a society and educational system consider humanity and the relationship of the sexes merely on biological basis, fail to realize the special significance and the higher level of the spiritual as compared to the physical and, above all, are lacking completely in any supernatural orientation. (206)

This connection between sexual difference and the action of grace underlies Stein's entire thought in *Essays on Woman*. It is only in receiving her identity as woman, with all that entails, that woman can receive the action of divine grace, and it is only through receiving the action of grace that woman will receive the fullness of her identity as a woman. As Stein phrases it,

“woman can achieve perfect development of her personality only by activating her spiritual powers” (94). Elsewhere she writes, “only by drawing from the eternal source of power can woman perform the functions to which she is called by nature and destiny” (128). For Stein, “each woman who lives in the light of eternity” can fully live her vocation as a woman and an individual (128). A woman who receives her embodied feminine identity as virgin, bride, and mother also receives God’s grace, for this embodied feminine identity is a divine gift. Likewise, a woman who fully lives this divinely ordained feminine identity will fully realize her divinely ordained individual identity. This is the sacramental meaning of the female body—that in whatever a woman does, her very existence reveals the union of God and humanity in Christ through Mary.

Rejection of Feminine Humanity in “The Crop”

One of O’Connor’s early stories included in her master’s thesis, “The Crop” (1947) follows Miss Willerton, or “Willie,” a single female author as she navigates her relationships with roommates while writing a story about “social problems.” As Miss Willerton writes her story, she begins to insert herself into it. After a vivid fantasy in which she enters the story to fictionally murder a sharecropper’s wife, take her husband, and then give birth to a daughter, she is drawn out of her fantasy by her roommate’s request to run an errand. On Miss Willerton’s trip to the grocery store, she observes a couple much like the one she imagined in her story, but immediately perceives them as inferior. Despite her deep subconscious desire for relationship, made manifest in her story, she scorns those living the very life she cannot admit to desperately wanting. By ignoring her feminine orientation toward the person and by consciously rejecting her capacity for spiritual maternity, Miss Willerton attempts to reject her embodied feminine

identity. However, she is unable to truly do so, as her artistic self-insertion unconsciously reveals. As a result, she is unable to recognize the action of grace in her life or to live fully her individual vocation as a woman and literary artist. I argue that Miss Willerton's choice to reject reality—by repressing her desire for marriage and maternity and by neglecting to represent reality in her art—constitutes a choice to live from her fallen feminine humanity, according to Stein's vision. This is most certainly not to say that Miss Willerton fails to live her feminine vocation because she is not married. Instead, the issue is that Miss Willerton fails to allow her feminine identity to permeate her vocation as an artist. She fails to open herself to the fullness of reality and instead restricts her artistic vision to abstractions, which lead her to an incomplete view of human existence.

This story, which has not received much attention from scholars, “may well be the most important story in the thesis collection” (Gordon 3). Sarah Gordon sees the story as a “revelation of O'Connor's acknowledgement of the forces over which the female artist must have control” (Gordon 3). O'Connor thus simultaneously explores the challenges faced by women writers and satirizes her contemporary authors' hyper-emphasis on social realism. This is not to say that O'Connor rejected literary realism, but that she desired a more down-to-earth kind of literary realism that paradoxically makes possible a more expansive vision of reality. Gordon argues this point, saying that “O'Connor is defining for herself what a woman writer is by delineating what she is not or cannot be. This effete, finicky woman, who cannot face reality—warts and all—is no artist” (Gordon 21). Other scholars like Katherine Hemple Prown notice in this story a similar commentary on female artists. For Prown, Miss Willerton is a “blueprint” and “cliché of the lonely, unmarried penwoman” who concerns herself with trivial matters (42-43). Prown argues

that O'Connor attempts to "disparage" Miss Willerton's trivial approach to literature, and thus to separate herself as a woman writer from this narrow vision of art.

The story begins with a domestic scene that reveals the characters' personalities, and ultimately, begin to reveal the protagonist's rejection of both her feminine humanity and her vocation. Miss Willerton lives with Lucia and Lucia's husband Garner. Lucia seems to control the other characters as a nagging wife or mother would as she prepares their breakfast. Miss Willerton, too, has her own domestic duties, including "[crumbing] the table. It was her particular household accomplishment and she did it with great thoroughness...It was a relief to crumb the table. Crumbing the table gave one time to think, and if Willie were going to write a story, she had to think about it first" (33). After breakfast, Miss Willerton turns toward writing her story. Or, for now, she turns toward simply *thinking* about her story. Miss Willerton "spent more time thinking of something to write about than she did writing. Sometimes she discarded subject after subject and it usually took her a week or two to decide finally on something" (34). O'Connor's narrator gives us this insight into Miss Willerton's thought process that reveals a focus on abstract social issues rather than the particular and personal details of a character's human existence. In this particular session of artistic brainstorming, Miss Willerton first considers writing about bakers but decides that bakers are not "colorful enough. No social tension connected with bakers" (34). She then considers writing about teachers but rejects this topic with even more vigor: "Heavens no. Teachers always made Miss Willerton feel peculiar. Her teachers at Willowpool Seminary had been all right but they were women. Willowpool Female Seminary, Miss Willerton remembered. She didn't like the phrase, Willowpool Female Seminary—it sounded biological" (34). In this rejection, Miss Willerton reveals her discomfort with femininity. It appears that even the word "female" is too "biological" for her artistic

sensibility. Miss Willerton's rejection of embodied feminine humanity continues to manifest itself as the story progresses.

In her brainstorming, Miss Willerton eventually arrives at a viable topic, but in doing so tends toward emphasizing the abstract and political over the concrete and mysterious:

"Sharecroppers! Miss Willerton had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers but, she reflected, they would make as arty a subject as any, and they would give her that air of social concern which was so valuable to have in the circles she was hoping to travel!" (34-35). She begins populating her story with characters that conform to her limited perception of sharecroppers as a class. As she writes the first few lines of the story, she considers whether or not "a sharecropper...might reasonably be expected to roll over in the mud" with his dog (36). Miss Willerton continues by including a woman: "There had to be a woman, of course. Perhaps Lot could kill her. That type of woman always started trouble. She might even goad him on to kill her because of her wantonness and then he would be pursued by his conscience maybe" (36).

Once she has chosen the social problem and characters, Miss Willerton's story, and her thoughts, then begin to turn dark. She thinks of the "quite violent, naturalistic scenes, the sadistic sort of thing one read of in connection with that class" (36). In Miss Willerton's story, the sharecropper Lot and his wife begin a heated dispute that only ends when Miss Willerton inserts herself into the story: "Miss Willerton could stand it no longer. She struck the woman a terrific blow on the head from behind. The knife dropped out of her hands and a mist swept her from the room. Miss Willerton turned to Lot. 'Let me get you some hot grits,' she said" (37). She and the imaginary Lot start a life together and they live in near-Edenic domestic harmony. Within a page, they get their own land, plant a crop, and debate getting a cow but ultimately decide to wait because of their expected child. Miss Willerton seems to have claimed this fantasy life as hers,

writing that “[e]ven with as little as they’d had, it had been a good year. Willie had cleaned the shack, and Lot had fixed the chimney. There was a profusion of petunias by the doorstep and a colony of snapdragons under the window” (38). But tragedy looms in Miss Willerton’s fantastical domestic bliss because “now they were becoming anxious over the crop. They must gather it before the rain” (38).

The looming threat of crop failure becomes even more pressing, as Miss Willerton and her imaginary husband are expecting a child. One night, in the midst of harvest season, Miss Willerton wakes up “conscious of a pain. It was a soft, green pain with purple lights running through it...Her head rolled from side to side and there were droning shapes grinding boulders in it . . . It came again and again” (39). In the chaos of the imagined labor, Miss Willerton’s sharecropper husband is not able to finish the harvest. Their crop, and their livelihood, is ruined. Miss Willerton, still recovering from the recent birth of her daughter, is devastated in the face of their financial loss, but her husband comforts her by insisting that “‘I got what I wanted—two Willies instead of one—that’s better than a cow, even,’ he grinned. ‘What can I do to deserve all I got, Willie?’ He bent over and kissed her forehead.” (39). Miss Willerton, wishing to reciprocate such love, responds similarly by asking “what can I do to help you more?” (39). Miss Willerton abruptly returns to reality when Lucia, unbeknownst to either Miss Willerton or the reader, approaches Miss Willerton to ask: “How about going to the grocery, Willie?” (39). Miss Willerton’s fantasy, though cut short by Lucia’s intrusion, reveals Miss Willerton’s desires. An unmarried woman in her forties, Miss Willerton clearly desires marriage and motherhood. She even murders a (hypothetical) woman to fulfill this desire. Further, she and her imagined husband place much greater value on their baby daughter than the crop they lost. In Miss Willerton’s fantasy, it is what Stein calls woman’s “natural vocation” to marriage and

motherhood that motivate her action. It is her (and her fictional husband's) orientation toward personal relationships, rather than work and financial security, that are prioritized. Clearly, the life that Miss Willerton desires for herself is much different than the one she currently lives. But recalling Stein's expansion of motherhood to encompass spiritual maternity, as well as the universal call for all women to both spiritual maternity and spiritual virginity, the story suggests that Miss Willerton could actualize her maternal potential in other ways, such as in her everyday relationships or her work as an artist.

The value that Miss Willerton's fantasy places on their child and in their simple life together ought to strike the reader once he or she reads a little further. In Miss Willerton's real life, she instead tends to devalue romantic relationships and children as obstacles to her creativity and art. Leaving her fantasy at Lucia's insistence and entering the grocery store, Miss Willerton observes that the "place depressed her somehow" (40). Miss Willerton's depression results from the "trifling domestic doings" that surround her: "women buying beans—riding children in the grocery go-carts—higgling about an eighth of a pound more of squash—what did they get out of it? Miss Willerton wondered. Where was there any chance for self-expression, for creation, for art?" (41). On the surface, these seem like valid concerns for a woman writer. However, in light of the fantasy Miss Willerton just left, it seems that O'Connor is privately asking the reader to question her attitude.

What is more striking than Miss Willerton's reaction to the domestic doings at the store is her reaction to the couple, who bear striking resemblance to the fictional couple Miss Willerton had herself created earlier that morning.³⁹ This woman, plump with yellow hair and fat ankles,

³⁹ The man Miss Willerton writes that morning is "tall, stooped, and shaggy but with sad eyes...straight teeth...red hair...His clothes would hang on him." The woman Miss Willerton writes "would be more or less pretty—yellow hair, fat ankles, muddy-colored eyes" (37).

and this man, tall and wasted with straight teeth, look unmistakably like the sharecropper and his first wife in Miss Willerton's story. Miss Willerton, who previously fantasized about taking the woman's place with the man now "shuddered" at the sight of them. In Gothic fashion, Miss Willerton sees the doubles of her secretly imagined characters incarnate in reality, and she is disgusted by them. She no longer desires to steal the woman's husband and start a life with him. She no longer desires even to finish writing her story about the couple. Instead, she leaves the depressing grocery store and returns home to think about a new topic, one that is "more colorful, more arty" (41).

I argue that Miss Willerton's disgust at seeing this couple and her reaction to the "depressing" grocery store full of mothers and children constitutes a rejection of the divine gift of her feminine humanity. Miss Willerton's story, and her violent self-insertion into the domestic bliss of the sharecroppers' lives, reveals the strength of her desire for this life. Indeed, Stein argues that this desire is written onto every woman's heart in some capacity, as it is her "natural" vocation to be wife and mother, and her supernatural vocation to be spiritual mother. In more general terms, Stein describes the "deepest longing of woman's heart," which "is to give herself lovingly, to belong to another, and to possess this other being completely" (Stein 53). This desire, which can be fulfilled in any vocation or profession, provided a woman surrender her life to God, is not being fulfilled for Miss Willerton. Rather than allowing herself to feel this desire and letting it motivate her to more authentic relationships or more excellent writing, she leaves the store frustrated and returns to her mediocre literature that gets lost in abstract social questions at the expense of reality, real people, and artistic excellence.

Other scholars add credence to my position on Miss Willerton's mediocre art and its relation to her denial of her desire for relationship. Marshall Bruce Gentry thinks Miss Willerton

is a “laughable” character because she “cannot maintain her commitment to this implausible wish fulfillment she creates” (“Dialogue” 59). He ties her self-insertion into her story to her potential to achieve artistic greatness. In fact, it is only during this “fantasy of entering her own story” that “Miss Willerton indeed seems a writer” (59). On the other hand, “when she goes to the grocery store...and once again considers herself superior to people like the characters she has created, Miss Willerton deserves ridicule once again” (Gentry, “Dialogue” 59). Gordon further links Miss Willerton’s repressed desire for relationship and her mediocre art with sexuality, and thus with Miss Willerton’s femininity. Writes Gordon, “Miss Willerton wants to write of a relationship between the sexes, certainly a great part of the essence of real life,” but she is unable to because “she fears actually writing about passion,” “she becomes so much a part of her own plot that it amounts to little more than wish-fulfillment of a very idealized sort,” and “when she encounters in the grocery store the very characters she has created, she is repelled by them” (Gordon 23). This is not the vision of art that O’Connor saw for herself or for other women. Thus, the story condemns “the woman writer who seems to trivialize her literary ambition because she is so repelled by reality that she can only seek escape in another fantasy” (Gordon 29). In this way, O’Connor’s story upholds her vision for art and her vision for femininity lived out in this vocation—her vocation. A vision of femininity that orients itself toward the reality of the person (both oneself and others), as well as one that seeks to preserve this feminine orientation toward the person regardless of whatever “masculinist” tendencies others in the field may encourage, is certainly a vision of femininity in line with Stein’s. It recognizes the ways embodied femaleness reveals the spiritual reality of a woman’s soul and the ways in which her female person can characterize her actions in a great variety of occupations. Further, it emphasizes the necessity for women to open themselves to mystery and to the spiritual to be able

to fully live their femininity in the redeemed order. Although Miss Willerton ultimately fails to live this way, other female characters in O'Connor's fiction approach this ideal to varying degrees. In noticing the differences between Miss Willerton and these characters, we can see the ways in which they all point to O'Connor's vision of redemption and femininity.

Hulga's Hope for Redemption in "Good Country People"

Mrs. Hopewell's daughter Joy, also known as Hulga, is the protagonist of "Good Country People" (1955). Mrs. Hopewell's tendency to constrict the development of her daughter's individuality is not the only dynamic of fallen feminine humanity in the story. As Babinec, Smith and other scholars point out, the mother-daughter relations in O'Connor's stories often involve a cycle of abuse that extends from mother to daughter and back again. Thus, "Good Country People" (1955) examines this fallen dynamic in both Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter. Lake calls this story a "double critique" in which O'Connor criticizes Mrs. Hopewell for "adopting and propagating the culture's destructive gender binaries" while simultaneously criticizing her daughter for "for pursuing a faulty path to intellectual growth" (Lake 125). Lake argues that Mrs. Hopewell "defines femininity by that which is attractive to men" and thus sees Hulga as not beautiful or truly feminine, and Hulga's character for most of the story is an attempt to define herself against her mother's definition of femininity via her academic interests (Lake 125). Joy/Hulga's drive to reach her full potential as a woman in academia, and her desire for her mother to accept her individuality, is consistent with Stein's Catholic feminism.

Joy/Hulga responds to her mother's infantilizing attitude by acting from her fallen feminine humanity. In response to Mrs. Hopewell's shallow optimism, Joy/Hulga adopts a cynical attitude, professes an atheistic nihilism, and acts disagreeably. For example, she would

“[stump] into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it—Mrs. Hopewell was certain—because it was ugly-sounding)” (275). This cynical attitude relates, at least in part, to her academic studies. She uses her philosophy as a weapon against her mother’s shallow clichés. In one instance she confronts her mother, “standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full—‘Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God! . . . Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!’” (276). Here Joy/Hulga points out a truth her mother would do well to reflect upon, but so should she. Gordon notes this irony, namely, that “the daughter accuses the mother of the very failure of perception or of seeing that she herself exhibits, and certainly, to follow through on O’Connor’s irony, neither woman is God” (Gordon 178). Joy/Hulga’s academic career, which for Stein should be a positive expression of feminine individuality, becomes an obstacle for Joy/Hulga’s spiritual life and familial relationships. She uses her sharp intellect and deep reading (combined with her temper) to accuse her mother of arrogance and draw attention to her faults while ignoring her own.

In other instances, Joy/Hulga uses her atheist and nihilist worldviews to claim an intellectual penetration and control of reality that is, in the end, highly unrealistic. Joy/Hulga’s cynicism manifests most concretely in her name. In retaliation for her mother’s ultra-positive choice for her identity—Joy—she chooses for herself a name with opposite connotations: Hulga.

Joy/Hulga

had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major

triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga. (275)

With this name, Hulga grasps at the ability to control her life and form her own identity. At first, this looks like a child retaliating against her mother's restrictions. However, Hulga's vision of Vulcan, and the fact that she views her self-naming as "her highest creative act," confirms something more about Hulga's character. She sees, or at least is tempted to see, herself as her own God, at once creating her identity by naming herself and controlling others for her own desires, as Vulcan controls the goddess. Lake reads this act as Joy/Hulga's choice to sever herself from her mother, and thus also to "sever all ties to the body and live in a world her genius constructs" (Lake 128). Joy/Hulga's education and intellectual abilities are not the problem. The problem is that "she has used her intellect to deny the physical reality of her body and to convince herself that nihilism is the world's whole truth" (Lake 128). This position, argues Lake, is tied up with her and her mother's differing visions of gender. Because Joy/Hulga lacks "an example of femininity that can accept the female body without accepting rigid gender roles—an example the church could provide—Joy...adopts the modern intellectual's approach to identity by insisting that the mind is all, and the body is nothing" (126). While neither O'Connor nor Stein would see a problem with Joy/Hulga's academic career or her attempt to define femininity apart from rigid gender roles, they also would not accept such a disembodied or dualistic vision of reality. She needs "an encounter that will prove she is not above her body and that will give her a picture of the real results of her philosophical convictions" (Lake 128).

Enter Manley Pointer, a backwoods Bible-salesman whose very name foreshadows the carnal encounter that he later tries to facilitate with Joy/Hulga. Mr. Pointer approaches Mrs. Hopewell's farm supposedly selling Bibles. He soon gains Mrs. Hopewell's trust by claiming

himself to be “good country people,” and earns an invitation to dinner with her and Joy/Hulga. Pointer plays the part well. He even quotes the Bible once during the course of the meal, “He who loseth his life shall find it” (O’Connor 280, Matthew 10:39). He also gains, to an extent, Joy/Hulga’s trust by claiming to have the same heart condition she suffers from. They make arrangements to meet the next day, and Joy/Hulga begins imagining herself seducing the young man. As the story progresses, though, the reader grows increasingly aware of Pointer’s own seduction tactics, and one wonders who is seducing whom. Joy/Hulga, who sees herself as an intellectual and therefore superior to her bodily nature, believes she will remain in control of herself and of the situation.

During the night she had imagined that she had seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful. (284)

Here again, Joy/Hulga makes herself into a god. Like Joy/Hulga’s image of Vulcan summoning the goddess who must come when called, Joy/Hulga envisions herself manipulating Pointer for her own designs. Further, Joy/Hulga claims power to remove another human’s shame and remorse and to “transform it into something useful.” She becomes for herself the arbiter of morality. Joy/Hulga’s and Manley’s encounter indeed illustrates Stein’s claim that “the great events of the cosmic drama concerning the fall of man and redemption are renewed again and again in the life of the Church and in each human soul” (125-126). Joy/Hulga becomes Eve,

grasping for control, tricked by the serpent into believing that rejecting union with her Creator would somehow make her His equal.

Recall that Stein's Catholic feminism holds two objective realities in communion: receptivity to both the action of grace and to the gift of one's embodied femaleness. Not surprisingly, then, Joy/Hulga's refusal to surrender to God existence also constitutes a denial of her embodied femaleness. When she meets up with Manley Pointer the next day, she tells him that she does not believe in God (285). As they make their way up to the barn's hay loft for the consummation of their mutual seduction plans, Joy/Hulga believes she is in control of both Manley and her own biology. Their first kiss, "which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain" (286). Her mind, which was "clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity" (286). Joy/Hulga, throughout most of the experience, believes herself to be in control of the situation on account of her superior mind: "She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control" (286). Even as Joy/Hulga and Manley become increasingly physical, she remains convinced of her mind's control over her body.

The girl at first did not return any of the kisses but presently she began to and after she had put several on his cheek, she reached his lips and remained there, kissing him again and again...Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings. (287)

As Manley proclaims his love for Joy/Hulga and attempts to coax a confession of her love in return, Joy/Hulga, true to her character, offers nihilistic philosophical theories about love. "In a

sense,' she began, 'if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing'" (287). She continues her patronizing philosophizing: "The girl looked at him almost tenderly. 'You poor baby,' she murmured. It's just as well you don't understand,' and she pulled him they the neck, face down, against her. 'We are all damned,' she said. 'But some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation'" (287-288). Manley, however, is not interested in philosophy, at least not Joy/Hulga's kind. He just wants to know, "do you love me or don'tcher?" (288). To which Joy/Hulga replies 'Yes...in a sense," and then simply, "Yes, yes" (288). When Manley then asks her to "Prove it," she rejoices at the ease with which she believes she has seduced the young Bible salesman. The irony of the situation, of course, is that as much as Joy/Hulga believes she is seducing Manley, he too has seduced her. By denying the reality of her sexuality, she is blind to the power he holds over her (Westling 151).

Joy/Hulga's seduction plan then takes an unexpected turn when Manley asks to remove Joy/Hulga's artificial leg. It is not the possibility of sexual intercourse that shocks Joy/Hulga, but this strange request to see where her "wooden leg joins on" (288). The intrusive suggestion inspires a sort of embarrassment in Joy/Hulga: "As a child she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer...She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with his own eyes turned away" (288). The artificial leg is a source of shame for Joy/Hulga because it makes her dependent on another person. Without it, she is vulnerable. It is in large part the reason she must remain at the farm in the care of her mother instead of lecturing at a university. Manley understands Joy/Hulga's vulnerability when he says, "it's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody else" (288). Joy/Hulga, judging Manley to possess "real innocence" and "an

instinct that came from beyond wisdom” that allowed him to “[touch] the truth about her,” agrees to show him the leg (289). The narrator observes that “it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his,” a sentiment that echoes the Bible verse Manley quoted earlier (289). Strangely, it is the removal of the leg, rather than any of the other physical contact, that causes Joy/Hulga to let her mind stop controlling her body: “Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at” (289). As much as she wants to believe that she has mental control over her body, it seems that the opposite is quickly becoming true. Until this point, Hulga has operated under the mistaken notion that her mind was always in control of her body. She believed that she could use her intellect to overpower her sexuality and seduce Manley to assert intellectual prowess over the naïve religious youth. The reality of the situation, however, turns out much different.

It is only after surrendering the most vulnerable part of herself, and depending entirely on another, that Joy/Hulga is able to see her soul and body as integrated. She can no longer be the creator of her own identity and the manipulator of others when she must resign herself to bodily desires. The embodied reality of total surrender in a sexual relationship, as Hulga is quickly learning, is for O’Connor a sacramental revelation of the spiritual reality of the soul’s surrender to Christ in mystical union. Thus, in bringing herself to the point of physical surrender, Joy/Hulga has at least opened the door to spiritual surrender. In this way, her newly discovered sexuality and desire becomes a sacramental reminder of her potential union with God. Joy/Hulga, who is just now learning that her “sexuality is essential to her identity,” must learn now to give up “her sour independence as a female who refuses to accept the submissive role her Southern world has dictated for her” (Westling 152). Westling’s reading of this passage draws

attention to the gendered power dynamics at play in O'Connor's Southern world while simultaneously drawing attention to the spiritual dynamic. She argues that "In trying to live an independent intellectual life, Joy-Hulga fails to realize the power of sexual differences and her needs as a woman" (152). The differences and desires between Manley and Hulga point ultimately, I argue, to O'Connor's spiritual vision of masculinity and femininity.

Manley Pointer, however, is not the man he claimed to be. He is certainly not the redeemed Parker of "Parker's Back" (1965), who embodies redeemed masculinity in imitation of Christ's total self-gift. Instead, he is a charlatan and a con-man who reveals that he habitually seduces women to collect their prosthetic body parts. Joy/Hulga is shocked when Manley opens his suitcase, supposedly holding his Bible merchandise, only to offer her alcohol and pornography. "Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading quality to it. 'Aren't you,' she murmured, 'aren't you just good country people?'" (290). Manley's response sheds light on both his and Joy/Hulga's character. "Yeah...but it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week" (290). Joy/Hulga has met her match in Manley—someone who rejects the workings of God's grace by claiming sovereignty of his own life. "'I hope you don't think,' he said in a lofty indignant tone, 'that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!'" (290). Joy/Hulga, once patronizing towards this man she thought so young and innocent, is now on the other side of things. He reminds her that "'you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!'" (291). And when he leaves, "the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" (291). Joy/Hulga is now stranded in the hayloft without her artificial leg, left to ponder her physical dependence, a physical reality that points to

a corresponding spiritual reality. The text is ambiguous as to whether or not Joy/Hulga receives this sacramental revelation of her identity, but the possibility is not closed. Indeed, her shocked disgust at the moral corruption of a person who mirrors her own philosophical worldview indicate her openness to such a conversion.

Scholars puzzle over what to make of this ending. Donahoo reads it as O'Connor's exploration of "the limitations imposed by the reality of the visible, historical universe" (15). The victimization of Joy/Hulga for Donahoo is not an "authorial anti-feminism," but a manifestation of "historical gender reality" that both O'Connor and her characters experienced in the 1950s American South (21). Others read Joy/Hulga's sexual victimization in light of O'Connor's faith, seeing in Manley Pointer's violent assault the inevitable violence of patriarchal religion. Christine Atkins makes this argument in "Educating Hulga: Re-Writing Seduction in 'Good Country People'" (2004), essentially claiming that O'Connor used Joy/Hulga to construct a "strong, highly educated woman with little need for patriarchal religion or traditional culture" for the sole purpose of knocking her down with a "psycho-sexual assault" (120).⁴⁰ Westling makes a similar claim, that Manley Pointer's assault against Joy/Hulga is yet another of O'Connor's "rituals intended to batter her characters into an awareness of their helplessness before God," and that this "Sexual symbolism has been a traditional Catholic vehicle for describing God's intervention in human affairs" (Westling 156, 158-59). These scholars, by noting the sexual violence involved in the stories and by noting O'Connor's engagement with both sexuality and religion, begin to uncover the depth of the story's action.

⁴⁰ In referring to the mutual seduction of Manley Pointer and Joy/Hulga as a "rape script," Atkins draws on the work of David Havird. Atkins draws an extremely close connection between Manley Pointer's figurative "rape" and O'Connor's Catholic faith. She goes so far as to imply that Catholicism justifies rape as a redemptive act that may even be necessary for a woman's sexual maturation. Although Atkins raises important questions about the prevalence of sexual assault in American culture and religious communities, it seems that her criticism of the sexual violence in O'Connor's story may make too broad of a claim about O'Connor's intentions or Catholicism in general, characterizing both as a grotesque system that perpetuates a cycle of sexual abuse disguised as salvation.

However, to fully grasp the depth of the puzzling ending, readers must come to a fuller understanding of O'Connor's sacramental worldview. By centering Joy/Hulga's embodied female sexuality, O'Connor has not simply reduced her vision of gender to the body and its vulnerability to violence, as some scholars argue. Instead, I argue, she has granted a richer vision of the potential spiritual union between God and Joy/Hulga that is possible by living in the redemptive order. She has simultaneously offered a hint toward the means by which Joy/Hulga will enter the redemptive order—that is, by embracing her embodied feminine humanity. As Wilson points out in her reading of “Good Country People” (1955), the ending of the story reveals that “Hulga is forced to confront her own corporeality. No longer the haughty genius spouting philosophy, Hulga is forced into a realization that the body does, in fact, *matter*” (Wilson 108). Although Hulga must learn this difficult lesson about the insufficiency of her intellect and the dependence of her body, Manley Pointer also stands to learn something about his “commodified view of corporeality” that is “symbolic of the wider thievery of female autonomy that patriarchy enacts” (108). Either way, the story offers a corrected view of the body for both characters.

This corrected vision of embodiment leads inevitably, in O'Connor's stories, to a sacramental world view. Sarah Gordon sheds further light on the ways that the story's corrective of embodiment helps readers see how the human body sacramentally reveals a spiritual reality. She draws attention to O'Connor's use of “one of the Church's most pervasive metaphors—the soul as female, pursued by Christ, the ‘gentleman caller’” (193). In light of the previous chapters' use of the Ephesians 5 analogy and Stein's sacramental theology, Gordon's choice of metaphor here should not be surprising. If O'Connor revealed the sacramental iconography of masculine humanity in “Parker's Back” (1965), here she is revealing the sacramental

iconography of feminine humanity. Of course this is not to say that femininity in the redeemed order involves sexual assault, but it does imply that “O’Connor...found the idea of woman’s dependent status a compelling metaphor for the soul’s necessary dependence on God, a yielding that is epitomized in Mary’s words at the Annunciation” (193). This metaphor, of the soul as female in relation to God, is precisely the sacramental reality that O’Connor and Stein are getting at. Lake calls the incident in the hayloft “a displacing encounter” that shatters Hulga’s dualistic system and “rejoins body and mind and resuscitates her soul as a soul...she drags Joy back through her own body” (Lake 129). Lake acknowledges that Hulga and Manley’s sexual encounter is “perverted and possibly burlesqued” but that through it, “O’Connor again insists that sexual intercourse has spiritual significance whether participants acknowledge it or not” (130). By revealing through Hulga the spiritual significance of sexuality, O’Connor has opened the door for a different definition of femininity beyond shallow constructions of Southern ladyhood, like Mrs. Hopewell’s. This vision takes the body as its starting point but transcends through the body to the soul, and from the soul to God. The vision of femininity to which Hulga’s encounter leads readers offers a glimpse of what other female protagonists in O’Connor experience even more clearly.

“A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and Receiving the Gift of Embodied Feminine Humanity

In “A Temple of the Ghost” (1955), an imaginative young girl learns through a progressive series of images that her feminine humanity is a gift, a dwelling place of the divine, and an eternal reality, but also one that is in need of a redemption she is not capable of herself. Of all O’Connor’s *oeuvre*, this story most clearly illustrates the sacramental revelation of redemption through a character’s embodied feminine humanity. The title points to Stein and

O'Connor's shared Catholic notion of the sacramentality of the body, which the reader can discover through understanding its scriptural allusiveness.⁴¹ These verses assert something quite similar to Stein's premise—that one's embodied humanity is linked directly with the divine. The context of the passages also imply that embodied humanity is linked directly with divine realities most especially in the area of sexuality and sexual morality; that the body and sexuality are sacred gifts and divine revelation not to be defiled with immoral sexual conduct. Further, like Ephesians 5 analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis, the surrounding context of the passage in First Corinthians draws a parallel between the union of man and woman in marriage and the union between God and his people: "For 'the two,' it says, 'will become one flesh.' But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:16-17). O'Connor's title already hints at these ideas that permeate Stein's thought. The events of the story, though, do much more in the way of embodying them.

Scriptural connotations aside, the meaning of the phrase in the story is a source of both humor and profound mystery. The unnamed protagonist, a twelve-year old girl who lives with her mother, is helping to host her two cousins, Joanne and Susan, for the weekend away from their convent boarding school. Throughout the story, the protagonist's pre-adolescent sarcasm meets her cousins' boy-crazy teenage antics. The child's assessment of the two girls is as

⁴¹ The phrase "temple of the holy ghost" echoes at least three Scripture passages. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to his body as the temple: "Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:19-21 NAB). Jesus' use of the word "temple" confuses his fellow Jews because they assume he means the temple building in Jerusalem, which was the center of worship for Jews in the ancient world. Instead, though, Jesus was using the word "temple" to refer to his body and his bodily resurrection, thus making His glorified body the new center of religious worship for Christians. Later in the New Testament, Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy" (1 Cor. 3:16-17 NAB). Later in the same epistle, Paul writes, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

follows: “They were fourteen—two years older than she was—but neither of them was bright, which was why they had been sent to the convent...Neither one of them could say an intelligent thing and all their sentences began, ‘You know this boy I know well one time he...’” (236). The child also notices that “[a]ll weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly” (236). The girls are eventually asked to give an explanation for their nicknames, and they can hardly express themselves through their uncontrollable laughter: “Sister Perpetua, the oldest nun at the Sisters of Mercy in Mayville, had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should...‘behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile.’ Sister Perpetua said they were to say, ‘Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!’ And that would put an end to it” (238).

The girls are met with various reactions to their recounting of Sister Perpetua’s advice, ones quite different from their own scorn. The child’s mother “didn’t laugh at what they had said. ‘I think you girls are pretty silly,’ she said. ‘After all, that’s what you are—Temples of the Holy Ghost’” (238). The child also does not accept her cousins’ scorn for Sister Perpetua’s advice. Instead, she reflects on it and decides she likes it: “The child sat up off the floor with a blank face. She didn’t see anything so funny in this...I am a temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present” (238). The child here begins to recognize that her body is a gift from the Creator to herself, precisely because it is a dwelling place of the divine. In her child’s mind, the protagonist begins to grasp a simplified version of the same truth that serves as the foundation of Stein’s Catholic feminism, namely, that the human body and God’s presence are distinct yet inseparable realities, and that both these things have something to do with sexuality.

The mother and the child attempt to keep the cousins busy by sending them to the carnival with two ‘Church of God’ suitors, Wendell and Cory. The boys arrive that evening to take the girls to the carnival in town. Before the carnival, though, the Church of God boys and the Catholic convent girls share their respective musical stylings. The boys, Wendell and Cory “sing...a hillbilly song that sounded half like a love song and half like a hymn” (240). The girls, then, use their “convent-trained voices” to sing the “*Tantum Ergo*,” a Latin hymn written by Thomas Aquinas and traditionally sung at Eucharistic adoration (241). The boys were “startled” by the strange Catholic hymn, and Wendell exclaims, “That must be Jew singing” (241). The Eucharistic hymn, sung before their trip to the carnival, seems foreign and out-of-place for the Church of God boys. Yet it seems also that O’Connor is setting up an important connection that she will build throughout the story. The events at the fair, as shocking as they are for the girls, become strangely more and more connected to the Catholic belief in the Eucharist.

After the boys and her cousins leave for the fair, the girl waits in her room in the gathering darkness. In what follows, O’Connor continues the strange connection between the fair and religious worship. The girl gazes out the window and sees the beacon light from the fair, “a long finger of light was revolving up and around and away, searching the air as if it were hunting for the lost sun” (242). O’Connor often uses the sun as a symbol for Christ, so it is striking that the light from the fair is described as if it were seeking the sun, as if the carnival itself is somehow pointing to Christ. The girl, recalling her experience at carnivals, lets her imagination run wild with the mysterious personages hidden in the tents, and she imagines them as “martyrs waiting to have their tongues cut out by the Roman soldier” (243). Considering the martyrs inspires the girl to consider her own future occupation. Although the girl has at various times dreamed of various professions, “she felt that she would have to be much more than just a doctor

or an engineer. She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything you could know” (243). To the girl, sainthood is more than a simple occupation. The category somehow transcends categories to encompass every occupation. As if echoing Stein’s dynamic essentialism and appreciation for the individual vocation of every woman, the girl believes that every person, especially through the reception of grace, can achieve sanctity in any profession. One is not absolutely required to fit into narrow gendered stereotypes, much less become a biological mother, to live one’s vocation and become a saint. And yet, the girl is aware of her fallenness and need for redemption: “she knew she would never be saint. She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one...She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick” (243). In this aspiration, though, the girl recognizes her unworthiness for this high calling. The girl’s thoughts display a surprising awareness of her fallen nature, including its specific and individual manifestation in her thoughts and actions. In this way, her character is already primed to receive the action of grace and undergo the dynamic movement from fallen humanity to redemption.

When Joanne and Susan return home, their account of their time at the fair puzzles the protagonist, but also becomes the first version of a “vision” that primes her for a religious encounter later. The girls describe the evening’s events:

The girls heard the freak say to the men, ‘I’m going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way.’ The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low, just flat. ‘God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and

gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute hit.' Then there was a long silence on the other side of the tent and finally the freak left the men and came over onto the women's side and said the same thing . . . Susan said, 'It was a man and a woman both. It pulled up its dress and showed us. (245)

As she ponders this confusing reality, in an intermediate state between wakefulness and sleep, the girl's imagination again runs wild and she sees a second "vision," so to speak. The protagonist, struggling to comprehend her cousins' experience, imagines the scene not as a carnival but as a tent revival that also incorporates Sister Perpetua's phrase from the beginning of the story. In her mind, the "freak" becomes a preacher leading a call-and-response with plenty of "Amen!" from the crowd punctuating her exclamations. The intersex person as preacher addresses the congregation, "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit," and the congregation then affirms this with hearty "Amen" (246). He or she goes on to say, "God done this to me and I praise Him...He could strike you thisaway...But he has not...Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know? (246). Then he or she ends the sermon by warning the congregation, "If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing" (246). Thus the intersex person proclaims the same message that both Sister Perpetua and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians proclaims. That is, they all proclaim that the body is good as it is, that it is a dwelling place for God, and that because it is sacred, one must not destroy it, even if it falls short of one's expectations.

The next day, this puzzling incident at the fair finds its full meaning. The girl and her mother escort Joanne and Susan back to the convent where they all participate in a benediction service with the nuns. This is where the girl receives her third “vision,” an encounter with Christ in the Eucharist that fulfills the other visions and interiorly changes her. At the convent, they enter a chapel that “smelled of incense,” with a “priest...kneeling in front of the monstrance, bowed low,” and

[a] small boy in a surplice...standing behind him, swinging the censer. The child knelt down between her mother and the nun and they were well into the “*Tantum Ergo*” before her ugly thoughts stopped and she began to realize she was in the presence of God. Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do. Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, ‘I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be’ (247-48).

In this moment, the events of the story find their meaning and unite to become one revelation for the girl. The connection between the fair and religious practice is clarified. The congregation kneels and chants the “*Tantum Ergo*” before the monstrance, just as the cousins chanted the same hymn before leaving for the fair, as if in preparation for the shocking revelation they received. Echoing the girl’s prayer the night before, the rote recitation of the hymn’s verses lead her to a recognition of God’s presence. And in the presence of God, she recognizes and then surrenders her sins and her faults—in short, her fallen feminine humanity. The story does not end there. Once the girl has surrendered, God acts. The priest raises the monstrance that contains God’s presence and blesses the congregation with it, and this benediction makes her think about

the “freak” in the tent. Likewise, the protagonist draws this same connection when the host in the monstrance makes her think about the “freak” in the tent. Specifically, she recalls the way that the intersex person received his or her identity as willed from God without disputing it.

In light of the Eucharist, which Catholics believe is the real body of Christ, the protagonist now sees that the tent her cousins saw was a sort of tabernacle, and the body of the “freak” inside it a sort of monstrance through which the body of Christ is revealed. The intersex person is a temple of the Holy Ghost, just like her, who makes God present to the world through his or her body.

One might now wonder, what does the person in the tent have to do with the girl? The answer is simple: the intersex person both received and surrendered his or her bodily identity without disputing it. The girl, it seems, must also learn to surrender and receive her bodily identity as a young woman. The girl has already intuited that her body is a dwelling place—a temple—for God. Now, by seeing even the “freak” clearly as a “temple of the holy ghost,” the protagonist can even more readily accept her own identity as a “temple of the holy ghost.” Just as the intersex person accepted bodily limitations as a path to union with Christ, so too can the girl accept her own limitations—both body and soul—as a path to union with Christ. On her way out of the convent, the girl receives one last reminder of her female body and its sacramental meaning. Before she can escape, a “big nun swooped down on her mischievously and nearly smothered her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt” (248). After her encounter with Christ in the Eucharist, in a way marking her soul, she is then marked physically by the same reality, mediated through the nun and her crucifix. The girl, then, in this brief encounter, is first united with and then physically marked by the life and death of Christ on the cross. The fact that O’Connor could not allow her protagonist to undergo this

spiritual change without a physical manifestation of it confirms her sacramental worldview. Further, the fact that the mediator of this spiritual reality made manifest in the body is, in fact, a woman, speaks to the way that the protagonist is embracing her specifically feminine humanity and allowing it to be transformed by Christ. In a story so clearly focused on topics like embodiment, sexuality, and sacramentality, this detail is a significant one for a Catholic feminist reading of the text.

Many critics read this scene and its sacramental meaning a bit more negatively. For Marshall Bruce Gentry, the nun, although she “never speaks, she literally forces patriarchy into the face of the young female protagonist” (Gentry, “Dialogue” 61). Gordon, too, sees this as a religious event that is nevertheless marked by gender inequality, in which the girl “has been captured by the Church and given its imprint,” and that “she will now attempt to see everything from the Church’s vantage point...O’Connor appears to subscribe completely to male-dominated orthodoxy whereby the female is relegated to a position outside the altar and urged to value herself as the Church values her” (Gordon 161). Westling similarly sees the event with religious significance interplaying with gender politics. She writes, “Although the story’s resolution leaves the child secure in her acceptance of her own peculiar nature as divinely justified, a central, troubling theme has been left dangling. She remains a girl who will grow into a woman” (Westling 142). Gentry, Gordon, and Westling all clearly get the connection. They see that the nun’s crucifix, and therefore the girl’s religion, somehow mediates the girl’s identity, and that this identity has something to do with her body and her femininity. But, by restricting their vision of sexuality and gender to a patriarchal power play and a constructed identity “assigned by the Church,” they have missed the richness of the sacramental reading that others pick up on (Gordon 163). Lake characterizes this scene more optimistically: “the story in microcosm: the

child is marked with and accepts Christ's body through the body of the other. The child is now on her way to the greater joy of this transcendent identification with the body of Christ" (Lake 139). Unlike Westling's reading, Lake's recognition of the girl's union with Christ, and of her bodily limitations, does not discourage her about her future as "a girl who will grow into a woman." Instead, Lake sees with hope that her bodily and spiritual union with Christ actually "opens herself to a Christian vocation not subject to America's limiting categories of 'woman.'" (Lake 140). Not only is the girl more united to Christ in her limited female body, but she is also more free to live her identity as a woman without cultural restrictions. This indeed is Stein's vision of Catholic feminism, and this indeed is O'Connor's mode of living her femininity.

On their way home from the convent, the girl seems to have been changed as a result of the encounter she just experienced, an encounter that both the freakshow and Sister Perpetua primed her for. On the ride home, "the child's round face was lost in thought. She turned it toward the window and looked out over a stretch of pasture land that rose and fell with a gathering greenness until it touched the dark woods. The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (248). This time, the sun is not lost and needs no beacon light to search for it. In the protagonist's view, the sun has come down to the earth and permeated it. In this natural image is contained the supernatural truth: that the Son of God has permeated the earth through his presence in the Eucharist and in the protagonist's female self.

This story as a whole illustrates the biblical notion of one's body as a temple where God physically dwells. It also more concretely speaks to the author's vision of redeemed humanity in general, as well as of redeemed feminine humanity specifically. Further, it offers in literary form an aesthetic representation of Stein's description of the way in which the totality of woman's

being can fully develop only in intimate relationship with Christ, especially in the sacrament of the Eucharist:

Only by the power of grace can nature be liberated from its dross, restored to its purity, and made free to receive divine life. And this divine life itself is the inner driving power from which acts of love come forth. Whoever wants to preserve this life continually within herself must nourish it constantly from the source whence it flows without end—from the holy sacraments, above all from the sacrament of love. *To have divine love as its inner form, a woman's life must be a Eucharistic life.* Only in daily, confidential relationship with the Lord in the tabernacle can one forget self, become free of all one's own wishes and pretensions, and have a heart open to all the needs and wants of others. Whoever seeks to consult with the Eucharistic God in all her concerns, whoever lets herself be purified by the sanctifying power coming from the sacrifice, whoever receives the Lord in her soul's innermost depth in Holy Communion cannot but be drawn ever more deeply and powerfully into the flow of divine life, incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ, her heart converted to the likeness of the divine heart. (Stein 56)

Is not this precisely the dynamic at work in the protagonist of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1955)? And further, is this not precisely the ideal of femininity for Stein's work in *Essays on Woman*? This young girl, unmarried, so far apparently free from false and restrictive cultural expectations for her femininity, is one of the characters who most clearly gets it, so to speak. Even from the beginning, it appears that she was able to receive the sacred and sacramental meaning of her female body when her teenage cousins were not. She was able to make sense of intersex person's sexuality and its sacred meaning through her encounter with Christ in the

Eucharist, and in so doing, she was further able to make sense of her bodily and spiritual limitations.

Conclusion

Indeed, to echo my question above, is this not the dynamic at work also in “Parker’s Back,” “Greenleaf,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” and “Good Country People”? I argue that it is even the dynamic force in “A View of the Woods,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and “The Crop,” even though these characters ultimately reject it. In short, the action of each O’Connor story included in this thesis takes as its driving force this dynamic of divine redemption mediated through sacramental means. These sacramental means often include the reality of embodied gender, which is either accepted or rejected by O’Connor’s characters. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that reading O’Connor’s fiction through the lens of Stein’s Catholic feminism, as posited in *Essays on Woman*, will offer a new approach that gives fresh insight while remaining faithful to the author’s vision.

At the heart of Stein’s thought is the sacramental meaning of both masculinity and femininity and the ways in which they both participate in humanity’s redemption. For Stein, the sacramental meaning of the male body is to reveal Christ’s sacrificial and redemptive love. O’Connor’s stories that center male characters thus point, whether by positive examples or by negation, to redeemed masculinity as being a participation in Christ’s masculinity. “A View of the Woods” (1957), with its two male characters who grasp for power and abuse their family, dramatizes Stein’s vision of fallen masculinity as cruel domination. They thus point to redeemed masculinity completely by negation. “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953) also points to redeemed masculinity mostly by negation, although it more clearly reveals O’Connor’s association of masculinity with Christ. This story presents its protagonist as an off-balance Christ who dis-incarnates his vision of reality by striving for an autonomous existence apart from his embodied limitations and his marriage. Living out their masculine humanity only in the fallen

order by rejecting the offer of redemption, these male characters reject the sacramental meaning of their male body as a revelation of Christ's sacrificial and redeeming love for his Church. "Parker's Back" (1965), on the other hand, most fully reveals the sacramental meaning of the male body. Through Parker's permanent and embodied union with Christ, Parker's masculine humanity is restored to wholeness. He is able, through his suffering, to reveal Christ's redeeming love to his wife, thus becoming the embodiment of Stein's vision of fully-realized and redeemed masculinity.

This sacramental meaning of masculinity finds its complement in the sacramental meaning of femininity as an image of the intimate and fruitful union between God and His creation. Each woman's embodied capacity for motherhood points to her spiritual orientation toward wholeness and toward the person as totality. As O'Connor's female characters reveal, each one is able to live out her femininity in unique ways in different circumstances. Genteel southern grandmothers and widows, single mothers and farm owners, unmarried artists, philosophers, and twelve-year-old girls in O'Connor's fiction are all offered the same opportunity for redemption. It is women like the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) and the unnamed protagonist of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1955) who most clearly receive their redemption and live out their feminine humanity. These women acknowledge the limits of their embodied feminine humanity and are thus able to live out their spiritual maternity and an intimate, life-giving relationship with Christ.

These readings offer a new approach for both feminist critics and those who take a more theological approach. By integrating rather than separating O'Connor's faith and the goals of a feminist reading, this thesis invites feminist critics to evaluate O'Connor on her own terms without giving up their focus on gender, femininity, and female characters. It offers, I think, a

richer reading of O'Connor's fiction that, even in its violent moments, reveals an authentic divine love driving each plot. It also invites a more authentic examination of O'Connor's life in the American South, and the ways her devout Catholic faith undoubtedly shaped the woman and the writer that has fascinated so many. For those interested in theological approaches, a Catholic feminist reading also invites new insight and ways of thinking. Without relinquishing a theological lens, it uses her sacramental world view grounded in the Incarnation to examine gender and sexuality in O'Connor's work. Such a lens places her work in conversation with the theology of gender and sexuality that has developed throughout the Church's history, especially in the twentieth century, adding a complementary artistic and literary contribution to this body of academic work. Finally, by reading O'Connor's work in conversation with Edith Stein, this thesis makes an admittedly inconsequential attempt at furthering, or perhaps simply opening, a conversation regarding the connection between these two twentieth-century Catholic women. But this is an important conversation to be had. Seeing that O'Connor was so fascinated by Stein in her letters and book reviews raises the question: who has mined this connection with sufficient depth? It is my hope that the future sees more scholars, both feminist and Catholic critics alike, who find in Stein's theology and philosophy new insights into O'Connor's fiction. In a field rife with both theological readings and with an ever-growing body of new theoretical approaches, this reading is unique in that it offers exciting new possibilities without straying from the author's personality or aesthetic vision. Like Stein's sacramental theology of gender, it "transcends" the boundaries of itself, but only through "humble submission to the God-given order" of its author and her whole personality, limitations and all.

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