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## LAURA L. BEHLING

The Necessity of Disability in "Good Country People" and  
"The Lame Shall Enter First"

*H*ulga Hopewell, Flannery O'Connor's memorable amputee in "Good Country People," and Rufus Johnson, her club-footed juvenile delinquent in "The Lame Shall Enter First," both literally stomp around their respective narratives and leave family members or misguided do-gooders in their path uncomfortable, even anxious. As a result, literary critics have read these characters, particularly Hulga, as ethically problematic but nonetheless useful in O'Connor's vision of the damning, and damned, universe. They are disabled, and so physically carry the stigma of abnormality, metaphorically embodying the "sins" of the world with them. Taking on humanity's sin, in Christian theology, implies the need for redemption, and O'Connor's fiction certainly examines salvation. Kate Oliver argues that "the greatest flaws" of "the intellect, the heart, or the soul," are "often found in those characters with physical impairments" (233). Other critics are even more pointed, suggesting that O'Connor has "managed to accumulate quite a gallery of freaks" in her writings, including Hulga Hopewell and Rufus Johnson (Shinn 60).

Yet there is incongruence in O'Connor's portrayals. As A. R. Coulthard suggests, "Good Country People" and "The Lame Shall Enter First" both "leave the question of salvation unanswered" (55), and the disabled who embody the imperfect human form are rarely saved. I would like to redeem Hulga Hopewell and Rufus Johnson, however, and to use their disability to do so. Specifically, I suggest that the non-disabled humanity in these texts is, in fact, corrupt, selfish, and unforgiving, and that this view arises because of characters such as Hulga and Rufus. The disabled are, in fact, necessary in order to expose imperfection and inhumanity.

Joy "Hulga" Hopewell, in the ironically titled "Good Country People" (1955), is a 32-year-old with a Ph.D. in philosophy and an artificial leg. Because of her weak heart, she lives at home with her mother; if not for her condition, Hulga "would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (CS 276). Instead, she "stumps" around the house. Mrs. Hopewell thinks "she could walk without making the awful noise," the narrator relates in a parenthetical aside, "but she [Hulga] made it . . . because it was ugly-sounding" (275).

Although initially portraying Hulga as the character who is "ugly" both physically and emotionally, what is at stake for the reader throughout this text is to determine what it means to be "ugly" and to which of the characters "ugliness" applies. With O'Connor's wry irony never far from the surface, the answer is not as easy as simply assigning Hulga that title. Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggests that the disabled character "is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice" (10) and as a result, the ways disabled characters are portrayed fall "far short of the intricate, undifferentiated, and uninterpreted context in which real people exist" (10). If disabled characters in literature were not flattened into rhetorically stock characters, they would lose their "rhetorical potency of the stigma" (12). Thomson concludes about "Good Country People," "If Flannery O'Connor's Hulga Hopewell were pretty, cheerful, and one-legged instead of ugly and bitter, 'Good Country People' would fail" (12).

But its failure would encompass more than narrative strategy. Hulga Hopewell needs to be unattractively angry, and she needs to be physically un-whole, in order for the true

ugliness in the story to emerge from those characters who are, in fact, physically whole. Hulga Hopewell serves as the mirror that the other characters, corporeally intact, hold themselves up against, and by which the reader determines that it is not the disabled character who is ugly, literally or metaphorically, but it is in the surrounding whole-bodied characters where ugliness resides. In other words, these characters need to exist as they are so that the truth can be revealed: that physically whole bodies are just as problematic, perhaps even more so, just as fragmented and chaotic, just as alienated and distant, as the disabled body is believed to be. In short, the disabled body is the modern mirror in which humanity is recognized as hurtling toward ruin and impersonality amidst utter confusion about what makes humanity human.

Hulga Hopewell seems to grasp the terrible path humanity finds itself on by her selection of reading material. One day Mrs. Hopewell peruses a portion of the book Hulga has been reading:

Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing—how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing. (CS 277)

Mrs. Hopewell's reaction is to shut the book quickly and leave the room "as if she were having a chill," the "evil incantation in gibberish" having done its job (277). Yet this short selection from one of Hulga's philosophy books moves what is never a simple story of Hulga losing her leg to a Bible salesman into an even more complicated arena. Science is interested in "what-is," according to the passage, interested in the here and now, interested in what is present, tangible, and physical. Given that this is a story about the loss first of physical and then of artificial anatomy, this passage would seem to suggest that science is intensely interested in the loss and absence that Hulga has as part of her body. It is, however, interested in the way that the philosophy quotation suggests, interested with "horror." It is as if the loss embodies for science everything that it fears—a tangible presence that is actually non-existent. The leg is no longer there, yet Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell, and the Bible salesman, as well as the other characters, feel its presence. "Nothing" for science is horror; the leg itself has become a "phantasm," a mental representation of a real object no longer present. The horror at this philosophy of "Nothing," however, does not grip Hulga the way it does her mother; she has, after all, underlined these words with blue pencil. But even more importantly, she actively calls attention to her disability, to her own embodiment of this phantasm, by her loud stumping around the house. She certainly doesn't have to walk so loudly, according to her scared mother, but she does so anyway, in order to draw more attention to the horror in which these profoundly modern characters find themselves. As a result, Hulga, although she occupies prime space in this text, is actually superceded in importance by her own mother, Mrs. Freeman, and the young salesman. They are the characters who see the phantasm of Hulga's missing leg.

Hulga is introduced by her given name, Joy, and described as "a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg" (CS 271). Although we learn numerous details about Hulga, including what she has for breakfast and the tone in which she speaks to her mother, the text begins with a long introduction of Mrs. Freeman, the busybody wife of the hired man who frequently perches in Mrs. Hopewell's kitchen in order to relate the latest gossip, often about her own

two daughters. Mrs. Hopewell is convinced that the Freemans, whom she has hired to help her care for the land, are not white trash, but only "good country people" (272), although several social and economic markers, including the pregnant daughter at age 15, would indicate otherwise.

As the story progresses, Hulga does gain prominence, as do her physical characteristics. "The large hulking Joy," the narrator relates, stares at her mother, "her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it" (CS 273). Hulga's artificial leg has come about because of a hunting accident when she was 10 years old. Despite the accident more than 20 years ago, Mrs. Hopewell still thinks of Hulga as a child "because it tore her heart" to think that "the poor stout girl in her thirties . . . had never danced a step or had any normal good times" (274). Sheldon Currie concurs, even suggesting that Hulga is "encrusted" by the mechanical in a fundamental way because "she has become a thing . . . [S]he is in love with her wooden leg" (134).

Mrs. Hopewell cannot bring herself to call her daughter "Hulga" because it reminds her of the "broad blank hull of a battleship" (CS 274). Hulga, however, has grown proud of the name, first chosen solely on the basis of its "ugly sound" but now reminiscent of "the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace" (275). Hulga considers the act of renaming herself "her highest creative act" (275). This creative renaming, however, is not Hulga's to enjoy as she pleases. Although her mother refuses to call her anything but her given name, "Joy," Mrs. Freeman relishes using the name when out of earshot of Mrs. Hopewell. It is not simply the name, however, that attracts Mrs. Freeman to Hulga. In a conflation that, as Thomson suggests, makes clear the relationship between ugliness and the missing leg of Hulga Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman, the narrator carefully notes, is fascinated by Hulga's artificial leg, as well as other unhealthy physical details. "Mrs. Freeman," the narrator explains, "had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago" (275).

Mrs. Freeman conflates ugliness, as manifested in the name of "Hulga," and physical disability, and even further connects them to various other kinds of maladies. It is Mrs. Freeman who has the prurient interest in unwhole bodies and the destabilizing action they bring; it is Hulga who early in this text seems to relish stumping around on her artificial leg as a way of acknowledging her difference. Indeed, artificial limbs are often dressed up by their wearers' prosthetic legs and with a shoe on the foot, or covered over by a trouser leg or skirt. The intent of the wearer is to hide the leg so that the disability is not visibly present. Hulga refuses to hide her artificial leg; as a result, Currie argues that Hulga has "willingly abandoned what makes [her] human," and thus there is something "profoundly wrong" with Hulga (139).

Yet Hulga's refusal to cover her artificial limb forces those who see her to acknowledge her difference. O'Connor's short story suggests, in fact, that what is most profoundly wrong is the reaction of others, such as Mrs. Freeman, to Hulga, who so easily and triumphantly acknowledges her physical asymmetricality. Hulga, in the words of Currie, may have "become discarnate, existing as [mind] rather than [body], and [has] become part of the technology [she admires]," but this shift is understandable and expected (139). For Mrs. Freeman, who remains physically whole, her loss of humanness is wholly tragic.

As is Mrs. Hopewell's. Like Mrs. Freeman, Hulga's mother focuses on her daughter's

disability by refusing to acknowledge it. She refuses to call her daughter by her chosen name and instead maintains the charade of calling her "Joy." Much to her dismay, Hulga pursued a Ph.D., and, as the narrator notes, Mrs. Hopewell thinks, "It had certainly not brought her out any and now that she had it, there was no more excuse for her to go to school again" (CS 276). The clothes that Hulga wears, a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweatshirt with a faded picture of a horse and cowboy is, Mrs. Hopewell decides, "idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child" (276). Although Mrs. Hopewell is willing to admit that Hulga is "brilliant," she realizes that her daughter does not have "a grain of sense" and grows more "bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" every year (276).

For Mrs. Hopewell, the divorced woman with a disabled daughter and "white trash" as her closest friend, Hulga's difference is too much to bear; therefore, she chooses not to acknowledge these differences. Just as she quickly closes the philosophy book about "Nothing" that causes chills to run up her spine, so she closes off all recognition of Hulga as a person. Her daughter is both the absent presence and present absence in Mrs. Hopewell's life, just as Hulga's missing leg is the "Nothing" that is a phantasm, yet vitally real. To her mother, Hulga's conversational blurtings are only "strange" (CS 276). But when Hulga stands up in the middle of a meal and rails to her mother—"Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*?" (276)—it is clear that Hulga again is the only character who reads the modern situation correctly. Indeed, Ruth M. Holsen suggests that Joy's decision to call herself "Hulga" is inspired. "Hulga" derives from the Norse word "heilagr," meaning "holy" or "the holy one." "Hulga has saved herself by seeing through to nothingness—no wonder she feels the fitness of a name that means holy" (Holsen 59).

Claire Katz suggests that in her fiction, "O'Connor's conscious purpose is evident enough, and has been abundantly observed by her critics: to reveal the need for grace in a world grotesquely without a transcendent context" (54). Hulga wants this, too. She wants her mother to see the vast emptiness, the nothingness, that inhabits her psyche. As Rose Bowen characterizes this attitude, Hulga refuses "to swap a belief in an unaccepted version of nothingness for an accepted version of the same" (97). Instead, her mother is only capable of seeing the outer shell, the physical nature of her surroundings, the substitution of the artificial limb for the real. For Mrs. Hopewell, the presence of a limb provides symmetry in Hulga's form and in her life that, although not real, certainly is a necessary façade. For Mrs. Hopewell to heed Hulga's admonition and "look inside" requires an ability to see beyond the metaphor of the artificial leg, which Mrs. Hopewell, and for that matter, Mrs. Freeman, are incapable of doing.

Manley Pointer, the young man who comes to the Hopewell household under the guise of selling Bibles, however, clearly sees the nothingness and exploits it to his benefit. He claims he is "real simple," comes from "country people," and only wants to devote his life to "Chrastian [sic] service" (CS 278, 279). Moreover, he claims he has a heart condition that may cut short his life, an illness that endears him to Hulga's mother. Although he does not make a sale of a Bible to Mrs. Hopewell, he does manage to stay for dinner and arrange a rendezvous with Hulga for the next day after a brief, secretive meeting at the gate as he is leaving. Unlike Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell, Manley Pointer thinks differently of Hulga's disability. "I see you got a wooden leg," Pointer says. "I think you're brave. I think you're real sweet" (283). He even likes that she wears glasses, suggesting that "... some people was meant to meet on account of what all they got in common . . ." (284).

Once alone with Hulga, however, the Bible salesman does not behave like the good Christian he claims to be. In a remarkably intimate and invasive question, as they walk

through the pasture, he softly asks, "Where does your wooden leg join on?" (CS 285). Clearly taken aback, Hulga turns red, glares at him, and ultimately admits that she does not believe in God. Hulga's reply isn't the non-sequitorial answer to Pointer's question that it initially seems to be. The missing leg and prosthesis are all about belief, are manifestations of Hulga's theology of "Nothing." Hulga's corporeal disintegrity is her god and, as a result, places Hulga squarely in the position of the most aware character of the modern condition. For that answer, Manley Pointer kisses her, the first kiss Hulga had ever had, "and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control" (285-86). When Hulga further admits that she operates according to a different "economy" by which she is saved and the Bible salesman is damned, he seems to admire her even more.

Hulga, however, is not entirely blame-free. She so much loses her sense of caution that she willingly climbs into a hayloft with him. Pointer removes her glasses when they get in the way of their kissing and pockets them; eventually, he will steal them, leaving Hulga able to see only vaguely. He continually pesters Hulga to admit to loving him; Hulga the philosopher can only redefine the meaning of love according to her sensibilities. "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" (CS 287). Much to Hulga's eventual dismay, Manley Pointer also has the capability of seeing through to nothing and, in fact, has the ability to assist others, in seeing the nothing, as well. "We are all damned," Hulga echoes, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation" (288).

Yet Hulga's salvation comes at a price. A small blue box of prophylactics, marked "THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE" (CS 289-90) is carefully placed in front of Hulga, next to the pocket flask of whiskey, and the deck of obscene playing cards. But Pointer's desire for intimacy is not solely sexual. Instead, he wants Hulga to show him where her wooden leg joins her flesh and bone. When she finally, reluctantly agrees, the narrator describes Pointer's actions as a striptease. "Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up." When he has exposed the leg, "The boy's face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, 'Now show me how to take it off and on'" (289). The leg is not attractive. A white sock and brown flat shoe cover up a heavy material like canvas which lies over the limb. The leg ends with an "ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump," the narrator details (289). This strange and artificial physicality between Hulga and Pointer takes the place of real human connection. Pointer is reverent about and caresses a piece of wood, shaped to roughly correspond to a real lower leg and foot; Hulga, perhaps more understandably, does what she can to carefully guard her artificial limb, which is so much more than a piece of wood. Indeed, it is her means of movement, her means of establishing her identity with her mother; in short, it is her means of remaining independent.

When she loses her leg, which she does after Manley Pointer throws it in his suitcase and then quickly runs out of the barn and across the meadow, Hulga finally faces the nothingness she has been reading about. The binaries that she has set up and believed in have failed. The Bible salesman was supposed to be "good country people" but he is only a scoundrel and a thief. He was supposed to be a "Christian," but Hulga discovers that he doesn't "believe in that crap" (CS 290). His name is not even Manley Pointer, just as her name is not originally "Hulga." These two, Pointer and Hulga, have more in common than Hulga initially thinks—Pointer, as he explains, has "been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (291)—and together they bring the nothingness that will confront Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman,

who are together in the last paragraph of the text as they are in the first.

O'Connor does not provide a narrative of what happens to Hulga after she leaves the barn's loft, but this omission is critical, as is her missing leg. Hulga, essentially, needs to lose her leg, a second time really, so as to finally expose the nothingness of the world. Hulga has to literally lose her leg at the end to provoke any sort of response—the leg has to physically be gone in order for Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman to have a chance to see the nothingness. The disability in this text, then, functions as a necessity, reflecting modern society's repeated turning away from the absence that holds the center of society. If Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman refuse to acknowledge the missing piece of humanity that Hulga embodies, then Pointer is present to ensure that they will not be able to ignore it any longer. He steals the leg and in doing so opens up the door to the nothingness they resist. But Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are not alone in the modern world in needing drastic physical measures to show them the reality of the world. Pointer admits that, under a different name, he had taken a woman's glass eye in the same way that he steals Hulga's leg. Hulga Hopewell suggests that the loss of anatomical parts ultimately does force the surrounding society to confront the nothingness in which they live, and that the truly pathetic and socially crippled characters are those who fail to see that the artificial is no substitute for the real.

This implication that nothingness is at the core of humanity is apparent also in O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1965). Sheppard is a widower with a 10-year-old son, Norton. During the week, Sheppard is the City Recreational Director, but on Saturdays, he exercises his true calling, working at the reformatory as a counselor and "receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about" (CS 447). This is how he meets Rufus Johnson, who, according to Sheppard, is the "most intelligent boy he had worked with"—his I.Q. was tested at 140—but also "the most deprived" (447). What sets Rufus apart even more, however, is his clubfoot, which Sheppard characterizes as a "huge swollen foot" that caused "one side of him to drop lower than the other when [he] walked" (447). Even worse is the foot's appearance: "The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a gray tongue from a severed head" (450).

The physical deformity of Rufus Johnson clearly causes Sheppard discomfort. When his eyes drop involuntarily to the foot and shoe, Rufus drawls, "Study it and git your fill" (CS 450). Catching his rude behavior, Sheppard face reddens, yet the "black deformed mass swelled before his eyes" (450). Sheppard continually sees Johnson's behavioral problems as a result of his clubfoot, naturally assuming that the discomfort he feels by simply looking at Johnson's foot and shoe must be far greater for Johnson since he possesses the deformed anatomy.

Sheppard's altruistic heart leads him to invite Rufus Johnson into his home to live with him and his son, assuming that the boy's bad behavior and surly attitude were "compensation for the foot" (CS 450). Sheppard also assumes that simply by giving him attention, showing him care and compassion, as well as exposing him to a library of books and a new telescope on which he can train his mind, Sheppard will make Rufus Johnson, despite his clubfoot, a law-abiding social citizen. In order to enact this change and imagine the good that he could do with Johnson, he concentrates all his dreams into physical anatomy, and determines that "he would have him fitted for a new orthopedic shoe" (452).

There is no doubt that Rufus Johnson's behavior and attitude are abominable. He bullies Sheppard's son, Norton, not only requiring he make him lunch, but then committing the most egregious act of all to Norton, using his dead mother's comb to fashion his hair into a

sweep, "Hitler fashion" (CS 455). He even finds Norton's mother's corset, puts it around his waist, and jumps up and down "making the metal supporters dance" (456). When Sheppard returns home, oblivious to the behavior that Rufus has exhibited, he makes Norton's life worse. "Listen," Sheppard says to Rufus, "we need another boy in the house. . . . Norton here has never had to divide anything in his life. He doesn't know what it means to share. And I need somebody to teach him. How about helping me out?" (457). Rufus doesn't exactly agree to stay, but Sheppard interprets his reply of "I can stand anywhere" as an agreement. "If I can help a person, all I want is to do it," Sheppard proudly admits. "I'm above and beyond simple pettiness" (458).

But Sheppard is not above and beyond condemnation. As with Hulga Hopewell, whose missing leg and artificial limb make her the character to whom all other characters are compared, so too does Rufus Johnson's deformed foot make him the standard. In both texts, the character with the physical disability is the character who immediately shows bad attitude and bad behavior. In other words, physical disability is a marker for ethically poor behavior—and perhaps here, Thomson is correct in asserting that readers expect disabled characters to be ugly people, both metaphorically and literally. But O'Connor suggests that these ugly characters need to exist in their ugly states in order for the truth of humanity to come through. The characters who are not physically whole are, in fact, not the ugliest characters in these texts. They are, rather, necessary for the reader to see the plight of modern humanity, full of nothingness, empty of social relations, and in Sheppard's case unable to love his own son; modern humanity is even more disabled emotionally than characters like Hulga Hopewell and Rufus Johnson are physically.

Rufus Johnson's comment about Sheppard, who in his own mind is motivated only by an altruistic love for people, is striking for the way it clearly identifies the egregiousness of Sheppard's bankrupt humanity: "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" Johnson says (CS 459). Johnson is right—what Sheppard thinks he is, a shepherd of the flock of imperfect humanity, is far different from what he actually is; he, therefore, must spend his life failing miserably to live up to the impossibly high standards he has set for himself. The fault of Sheppard lies in his blindness to his own abilities, most particularly his parenting skills. While Sheppard spends most of his time and effort on reforming Johnson, his own grief-stricken son, Norton, falls out of his attention, and ultimately meets with a tragic end.

What is striking about this text is that Sheppard concentrates all of the faith of his reformatory fervor in the new shoe he is having made for Johnson. Wearing one of Norton's plaid shirts and a new pair of khaki trousers, Rufus is taken to the brace shop the day after he comes to stay at Sheppard's house. "The shoe," according to the narrator, "was going to make the greatest difference in the boy's attitude. Even a child with normal feet was in love with the world after he had got a new pair of shoes" (CS 459). But Rufus "was as touchy about the foot as if it were a sacred object. His face had been glum while the clerk, a young man with a bright pink bald head, measured the foot with his profane hands" (459).

When Rufus gets arrested for breaking and entering, Sheppard is dismayed because "The boy had failed him even before he had had a chance to give him the shoe. They were to have got it tomorrow," the narrator notes. "All his regret turned suddenly on the shoe" (CS 465). But Sheppard quickly surrenders to what he considers his compassion and decides to visit the police station the next day to see what he can do to help Rufus. A night in jail for Rufus, Sheppard figures, will "teach him that he could not treat with impunity someone who had shown him nothing but kindness" (465). After Johnson gets released, Sheppard plans, "Then they would go get the shoe and

perhaps after a night in jail it would mean even more to the boy" (465).

To Rufus Johnson the clubfoot is the physical embodiment that displays his difference. He is homeless, he eats out of garbage cans, his father died before he was born, and his mother is in the state penitentiary; as a result, Rufus is raised, poorly, by his grandfather. Yet he has an I.Q. of 140. The only other child in the text, Norton, is and has none of these things—he has a home and is well provided for by his own father, and, at least according to Sheppard, "was average or below," despite having economic advantages (*CS* 449). Norton also does not suffer from any physical disability. Rather, his disabilities are a father with Christ-like delusions who pays so much attention to the overtly physically "lame" that he fails to realize that his own son is crippled by the death of his mother and by a father who can think no more highly of him than hoping he "will operate a small loan company" (445). Contrary to the external markers, it is Sheppard, not Rufus Johnson, who is truly "lame," and it is Norton who is tragically killed, abandoned by his father at the text's end.

Rufus is never asked, nor does he ever reveal, just what his clubfoot means to him. The narrator and Sheppard both suggest that he is defensive about his abnormality, that his criminal behavior is somehow linked to his clubfoot. Although it is a far stretch to suggest that the clubfoot is the cause of his behavior—that is, that there is something far more organically wrong with Rufus Johnson—he is the character who is marked as different, and that difference manifests itself as bad behavior. Yet Rufus Johnson never does more than scowl whenever his clubfoot is made the center of attention, whether by Sheppard when he first talks with him, or by the brace store clerk who measures him for a new shoe.

It is not surprising that Rufus Johnson develops the attitude that he does—he is treated as a freak because he does not possess the same physical integrity as most people with whom Sheppard comes into contact. Indeed, what O'Connor focuses on deliberately is not Rufus Johnson, although he is crucial to the plot, but rather Sheppard and what he represents, namely, a modern society bent on shaping difference to its own sameness. Rufus Johnson's old, ill-fitting shoe represents for him a last semblance of autonomy, control, and uniqueness, as does his juvenile delinquency. For Rufus, his clubfoot is precisely what sets him apart as a human being, sets him apart from the Nortons of the world, and provides a method of self-propulsion through life that is remarkable, noticeable, and different. Instead of bemoaning his loss of "normal" physical wholeness, Rufus Johnson's clubfoot is something to be celebrated, a "sacred object" (*CS* 459).

For Sheppard, this difference is precisely what is so dangerous and uncomfortable for him to experience. He helps at the reformatory so that those children can have the semblance of a father figure. He does not want his own son to be spectacularly successful or even happy, just simply "good and unselfish" (*CS* 445). He hasn't been able yet to re-claim his dead wife's bedroom nor rid himself of her clothes or comb because to do so would upset the delicate balance of the status quo that he so dearly needs. If his wife's belongings remain in the house, then she is at least partially present and his family appears to be whole. And it is appearance that motivates Sheppard. He wishes his son to be recognized for his outward manners, his family to be intact, and his own good work of taking in a delinquent boy to be recognized and applauded. Rufus Johnson's clubfoot mars the appearance that Sheppard is trying to attain and maintain; thus one of the first things he does is take Rufus in to have a new shoe made for him, one that presumably will be more comfortable. More important, however, is the comfort Sheppard will derive from Rufus's new shoe because it will look better and more "normal." The club foot for Sheppard is a "weapon," as the narrator terms it (451), because it threatens the status quo of physical sameness that is only skin deep.

Rufus is released from his overnight jail stay, having been falsely accused; Sheppard's failure to believe Rufus's innocence makes him physically ill, and it is only when he remembers the shoe that his spirits perk up. But when they arrive at the brace shop, they find that the shoe had been made two sizes too small. Johnson insists that the foot had grown, as has his authority over the hapless Sheppard, and Johnson "left the shop with a pleased expression, as if," the narrator relates, "in expanding, the foot had acted on some inspiration of its own" (CS 466). Sheppard, not surprisingly, is dismayed by this news, since it will now be weeks longer for him to control the clubfoot of Johnson and what it represents.

When they return ten days later for the new shoe, Sheppard is sure that the new shoe will transform Johnson, and even though "The boy did not seem pleased or even interested in the prospect of the shoe," the narrator comments, "... when it became an actuality, certainly then he would be moved" (CS 469). Norton is left at home so as not to disturb the moment when Sheppard finally sees Johnson in his new shoe. The narrator relates that encounter:

The brace shop was a small concrete warehouse lined and stacked with the equipment of affliction. Wheel chairs and walkers covered most of the floor. The walls were hung with every kind of crutch and brace. Artificial limbs were stacked on the shelves, legs and arms and hands, claws and hooks, straps and human harnesses and unidentifiable instruments for unnamed deformities. In a small clearing in the middle of the room there was a row of yellow plastic-cushioned chairs and a shoe-fitting stool. Johnson slouched down in one of the chairs and set his foot up on the stool and sat with his eyes on it moodily. What was roughly the toe had broken open again and he had patched it with a piece of canvas; another place he had patched with what appeared to be the tongue of the original shoe. The two sides were laced with twine. (469-70)

This remarkable passage comes at a remarkable time in this text. The battle of wills between the disillusioned Sheppard and the juvenile delinquent has come to a head, the average son Norton has completely ceased to be in the father's focus, and the shoe, with all that it represents in this text, is now ready for its final fitting.

Before this climactic moment, however, the narrator provides the reader with a quick trip around the brace shop and identifies the numerous ways a person can be considered unwhole in the text's world, each suggesting a worse blow for human autonomy and wholeness. Wheelchairs and walkers suggest that humanity can no longer propel itself to the destination that it wants to, but instead needs assistance to be mobile in any direction. Crutches and braces admit that humanity is crippled and in need of external, inorganic support. Even worse, artificial limbs are now the substitutes for humanity's missing pieces and surrogates for human appearance. Claws and hooks totally remove the semblance of humanity from the human, and worst of all are the "unidentifiable instruments for unnamed deformities." There is something wrong, but the appearance is so disfigured, the human so disintegrated, that only some sort of mechanical contraption will suffice. This brace shop quantifies and stocks the worst fears for Sheppard because it admits that humanity is not whole, that appearances are no longer real or natural, and that humanity is afflicted with something unrecognizable that can never be fully covered over.

Johnson's new shoe, despite the high hopes that Sheppard professes to have about it, falls into this same category. "It was a black slick, shapeless object, shining hideously," and the narrator describes it as looking "like a blunt weapon, highly polished" (CS 470). Rufus takes a turn around the shop wearing the shoe, but then sits down and removes it, declaring,

"I ain't going to wear it at all" (470). Sheppard, livid, attributes Johnson's ungratefulness as immaturity, a reading with which Thelma J. Shinn concurs: "The idiots," as she refers to O'Connor's physically disabled characters, such as Rufus Johnson, "are protected from the corrupting influences of the modern world simply because they cannot reach them; they remain in the innocent realm of childhood" (61).

Yet when Sheppard mutters his defiance, he "was staring straight in front of him at a leather corset with an artificial arm attached" (CS 471). Sheppard cannot escape the world where appearance is only skin deep and does not really matter. That he stares at an artificial limb held in place by a harness is, perhaps, the final marker of his inability to understand the composition of human wholeness. All Sheppard has thought about is Rufus's clubfoot and the dirty shoe that covers it. When Rufus removes his old shoe in order to try on the new shoe, Sheppard feels "queasy" and has to turn away until the new shoe is in place (470). Clearly, Sheppard cannot handle humanity if humanity is not perfect, if humanity does not conform to "normal" appearance and function, and if imperfect corporeality is left uncovered and exposed. The clerk thinks he is helping by suggesting that Rufus, with the new shoe on, "won't know he don't have a normal foot" (470). But that is precisely the problem "The Lame Shall Enter First" attacks—Rufus should, in fact, be allowed to express his difference, but more importantly, Sheppard should allow him to express his difference.

From this point, O'Connor quickly ends the story. Rufus Johnson gets in trouble with the law again, his clubfoot leaving unmistakable footprints that the police can detect and follow. Sheppard asks him to leave his house and on his way out, Rufus jubilantly declares of Sheppard, "The devil has you in his power" (CS 478). Worried that Rufus may return to do something malicious, and perhaps set fire to his house, Sheppard asks Norton where Rufus might have gone. But Norton is far too busy looking for his mother to hear. Peering through the telescope that Sheppard had purchased for Rufus, Norton claims that he has found his mother in the stars and even more, that she has waved at him. Unable to handle the wounds this opens, Sheppard sends Norton to bed, and then opens his front door to a snarling Rufus Johnson, who has been picked up again by the police. When he sees Sheppard, he launches into a diatribe, accusing Sheppard of "Immor'l suggestions" and declaring that he "thinks he's God" (480). Still holding on to the notion that Johnson's club foot is what he is reacting against, he counsels Rufus that "You're not evil, you're mortally confused. You don't have to make up for that foot" (480). Rufus, however, gets the last word: "I lie and steal because I'm good at it! My foot don't have a thing to do with it! The lame shall enter first! The halt'll be gathered together" (480).

Flannery O'Connor's short fiction remarkably brings the protagonist to this moment of spiritual and humanitarian crisis and then causes the waves of revelation and redemption to break, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Sheppard, at this point, seems to realize the wrongs he has committed, notably that "I did more for him than I did for my own child" and that "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (CS 481). Once he admits this vision of himself, he rushes in to find his son, determined to "make everything up to him" (482). But Sheppard is too late. Intent on grasping at his mother in the stars, Norton had climbed atop the beam in the attic. "The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space" (482).

As Hulga Hopewell and Rufus Johnson both demonstrate, it is not the physically disabled character who needs redemption or repair. Rather, it is the humanity who believes

that prostheses will return their wearers to the same lives as before amputation that is in desperate need of recognizing the nothingness that occupies its center and repairing its abject inhumanity. It is society's humanness that has gone missing. People are no longer good (if they ever were), and the lame truly will enter first, with Hulga and Rufus as their guides, since they are the only ones who truly understand that being human is not reliant upon being whole. ◉

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