

The good shepherd and the black sheep: paradoxical irony in "the lame shall enter..."

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"[W]hen thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" counsels the Bible, thus setting the precedent for all well-meaning members of western society concerning their charitable intentions (Matt. 6. 3). Humanity's motivation to aid others, regardless of the outcome, is oft times spotted by the subtle struggle between selflessness and selfishness. Flannery O'Connor captures this classic conflict between good and evil in Southern Grotesque fashion through her characters, the protagonist Sheppard and his foil, Rufus Johnson, in [comment2] "The Lame Shall Enter First". [comment3] Challenging the literal paradigm of light and darkness, O'Connor weaves together well crafted characterization, cryptic dialogue, and both biblical and literary allusion in this paradoxical plot and, by way of Sheppard and the antithetical Rufus, blends the black and white of Christian dogma into an ironic grey. The contrast of light and dark begins with the description and characterization of the apparently angelic [comment4] Sheppard, and continues with the introduction of the obscure and ominous Rufus Johnson. O'Connor is not pretentious in her description and development of either character.

Sheppard's white hair and "halo" are obvious references to his protagonistic status as the story's do-gooder [comment5] (Norton 371). The narrator continues on by lauding his charitable contribution to the community as a counselor and weekend volunteer for "boys no one else cared about" (372). The reader's only initial clue toward Sheppard's self-righteous mania is his deliberate, guilt-implying sermon towards Norton, his disconcerted and doomed son. It is not, however, until the arrival of the dim, drenched Rufus that seemingly stark white coat of Sheppard loses its untainted radiance.

comment6] Johnson is literally cast as the black sheep from the moment he limps into the house in his soaking “ wet black suit” (376). The ultimate personification of evil comes when he is physically compared directly to the perennial villain Adolf Hitler (378). His opaque character is developed as dark as his appearance through his unending ingratitude and spiteful words toward his supposed savior, Sheppard. The ambiguous dialogue between the two main characters continues to blur the line between the traditional literal concept of good versus evil and the author’s own Grotesque version.

comment7] O’Connor’s use of foreshadowing and plot development through dialogue is essential to the work, and is much more obvious upon rereading it. Though Sheppard’s words are concrete and compassionate, his words are abstract and empty. His answers to both Norton and Rufus come in rehearsed, logical explanations. [comment8] Sheppard’s attempts to animate either child about their future are thwarted by his own uncertainty. The clearest example of this comes from one of the most crucial sections of the story, when Sheppard fails to satisfy Norton’s desire to know where his deceased mother is: “ She doesn’t exist [. . .] That’s all I have to give you, [. . .] the truth” (383). [comment9] Where the “ good” shepherd fails, the black sheep prevails. The dark character that Rufus is developed into shows an admirable assurance and for once a faint light flickers from behind the “ black sheen [that] appear[ed] in the boy’s eyes” (375) as he describes the existence of heaven and hell to Norton, confirming that the boy’s mother is “ saved” (383). Then, in one of the most obvious uses of foreshadowing in the story, Rufus goes on to tell Norton [comment10] that “ Right now you’d go where she is [. . .] but if you live long enough, you’ll go to hell” (383). Once

again Sheppard and his voice of reason seem to grow grayer as he immediately tells Norton to close the window, as if to separate him from the stars and his newly found hope in the existence of his mother (383).

Admittedly influenced by her orthodox Christian background (408), O'Connor scatters both biblical and assorted literal allusions throughout her story, creating somewhat of a parody of common Christian themes. The use of Sheppard as the name of the protagonist binds the character to some religious comparison immediately.

This is only reinforced when Rufus pronounces bitterly: " He thinks he's Jesus Christ! " (381) [comment11]Another use of allusion with reference to Sheppard is Rufus' [com[comment12]dely accurate accusation of him as a " big tin Jesus" (395). Like the forlorn tin man from The Wizard of Oz, Rufus' statement argues that Sheppard is just as hollow as that empty, heartless shell of a man, regardless of his outwardly good deeds. Perhaps the most encompassing phrase in the story is O'Connor's allusion to the verse in St.

Matthew quoted in the first paragraph. [com[comment13]eated both at the beginning of the story and in his final appearance, Rufus declares that Sheppard " don't know his left hand from his right! " (377, 395). Clearly O'Connor is alluding to Sheppard's selfish or misguided agenda well illustrated when he tells Norton of his desire to help the orphaned Rufus. Sheppard's publicly done deeds are challenged by Rufus, the unwilling recipient of a well-meaning man going through the motions, yet craving some sort of reward for his actions.

The once polarized characters grow ever closer with the equalizing power of reality. "The Lamb Shall Enter First" ends as abruptly as it begins. There is no cathartic victory for the alleged [comment14]good shepherd", only the agony of total defeat. Sheppard's epiphany comes too late and the stark contrast that once distinguished him from the dark object of his alms turns into the faded realization that he is no better than the beleaguered beneficiary.

Through O'Connor's strategic literary devices, deft character contrast, and parody of entrenched Christian values, the reader is left to digest and dissect the fact that maybe the entire flock [comment15]'t worth one black sheep. Between the black and white islands of moral certainty, good and evil, there lies a sea of ironic grey. Works Cited The King James Version. Great Britain: Cambridge UP, 1996. O'Connor, Flannery. "The Lamb Shall Enter First." The Norton Introduction to Literature. Eds. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter. 7th ed. New York: Norton, 1998. 371-414.