
The Sinister Aspects of Solitude: Corrupted Loners in Flannery O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First"

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Abstract

Offering a close reading of Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Lame Shall Enter First," and drawing on concepts of social psychology, this paper argues that the tragic outcome of the interactions between the three protagonists is due to their extended solitude and isolation from other people. Due to their long-term solitude, they have suffered emotional, moral or intellectual damage, which results in mutually destructive social interactions when they intermittently take place. In addition to this aspect of isolation, the clash of beliefs and attitudes is also examined as a contributing factor to the ensuing disaster.

Key words: O'Connor, loneliness, grief, altruism, compassion

The concept of solitude, aloneness and loneliness are separate but related ones. Solitude is defined as "that state or condition of living alone . . . without the pain of loneliness or isolation being an intrinsic component of that state or condition" (Gotesky 236). Thus, the main difference between the two according to this definition is that solitude is not associated with negative emotions, and it also denotes the fact of being without companions. As Mijuskovic explains, Gotesky's matrix clearly distinguishes between aloneness, loneliness, isolation and

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solitude: the first is neutral, the second and the third are negative and the last one is a condition of positive value (62-65).

Based on such conceptualisations that favourably contrasted it with loneliness, solitude has become increasingly linked with positive emotions and outcomes. Margalit describes solitude as the necessary context and requisite for individual freedom. She also highlights the role of solitude in fostering creativity by allowing the individual to establish new connections between ideas, thus developing novel patterns of thought (10). While some authors in the field define solitude as a state that is chosen willingly (Margalit 38), others stipulate that solitude is simply the state of being alone, regardless of the individual's preferences (Baltus 285). In contrast with solitude, loneliness indicates a subjective, psychological state of distress due to a perceived insufficiency of social interactions or intimate interrelations: this state is unwanted and undesirable (Baltus 285; Margalit 9). Moreover, loneliness can be experienced while in the company of others (Margalit 9). A third related term is aloneness, which is sometimes used synonymously with solitude. (Baltus 285). Gotesky conceptualises aloneness as a neutral experience that might evolve into alienation if negative emotions emerge: this alienation either manifests itself as loneliness or as isolation (219).

In spite of the apparent consensus in terms of regarding solitude as a condition of positive value, some theorists, while accepting the fundamentally beneficial nature of solitude, still strike a note of caution, drawing attention to the dangers inherent in it: "Although a person cannot will an experience of nothingness, solitude makes it more likely to occur. Many people have difficulty with solitude because the nothingness in solitude often precedes the fulfillment of being in solitude" (Kraft 39). Kraft's notion of nothingness indicates a person's inability to make sense of life events (139) and put these in a coherent narrative, thus constructing a stable sense of self. Hence, Kraft seems to suggest that without social interrelations and interactions, our very sense of self might become threatened.

The lack of social connections, as demonstrated by Cacioppo and Patrick, causes a sensation akin to physical pain since the same region of the brain is activated when the person feels rejected. As they explain, the "social pain" of loneliness evolved in humans to call attention to the very real danger of being left alone, as it meant deprivation of assistance and protection by others – a similar instinct "to maintain proximity" is also observed in all mammals. Also, in ancient societies, one of the the most severe punishments was exile

from the community, and traces of this form of chastisement survives in the solitary confinement of prisoners. What is more, since the uniquely human ability of complex cognition was developed via social exchange, a person's very ability to think clearly may be adversely affected by a sense of being alone (8-11).

In the face of such compelling evidence from neuroscience and psychology, the increasingly strong endorsement of solitude by both experts and journalists today – and such commendations started to be voiced well before the pandemic – seems baffling. One possible explanation presents itself by the insistent emphasis that most writings commending solitude lay on its role in artistic creation. The conceptualisation of the artist as a solitary creator originates in the ideas of Romanticism, specifically, in the seminal ideas of Burke and Kant who both dealt with the two contrasting categories of the beautiful and the sublime and coupled the former with society and the latter with the individual who is isolated either by the fact of his solitude or separated from others by his own superior qualities (Ferguson 3). The notion of the solitary and heroic individual who is able to transcend himself and connect with God or Nature more intimately than the average person found the perfect exemplar in the figure of the creative artist, who was able to recognise and recreate the sublime. Although this conceptualisation of individuation marked a crucial stage in the development of Western thinking, for the writer of the twentieth century, it proved to be constricting, even debilitating, in its lofty, perfectionist agenda.

One mid-twentieth-century writer who took issue with this romanticised idea of the solitary writer was Flannery O'Connor:

There is one myth about writers that I have always felt was particularly pernicious and untruthful – the myth of the “lonely writer,” the myth that writing is a lonely occupation, involving much suffering because, supposedly, the writer exists in a state of sensitivity which cuts him off, or raises him above, or casts him below the community around him. This is a common cliché, a hangover probably from the romantic period and the idea of the artist as a Sufferer and a Rebel. . . . The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory, but the writer inside his community seldom has such a problem. (1970, 52-54)

O'Connor ensconces her critique of the Romantic concept of the solitary genius in the political context of the defeated and denigrated South. She gives voice to her conviction that valuable literary works can only be written by authors who feel part of their local community, who are in touch with the issues that matter to the people around

them and whose identity is rooted in their own local culture. She argues that communication must be the goal of writing and communication is only possible in the context of others, in a community: that is why the writer must belong. It is the alienated writer who “feels the need of expatriation” – a tendency she observes in numerous contemporary American writers who wallow in their self-imposed loneliness. Such aloofness, O’Connor argues, comes at the price of losing touch with factual reality and common experience (1970, 52-53), which might result in a certain hollowness at the heart of such writing.

The idea that belonging and solidarity are prerequisites for not only a depth of feeling but also for an adequate degree of “common sense” is a recurrent one in many of O’Connor’s short stories. The conjunction of compassion and morality is certainly arguable. Morality is often oriented towards, and even made possible by, the recognition of the individual that they are part of a community towards the members of which they are responsible to some degree. Numerous philosophers have dealt with this connection between ethics and community. Perhaps one of the most enduring and relevant today is John Stuart Mill’s quintessential assertion that the boundaries of individual freedom are determined by those points at which it infringes the liberty of other people (Mill 12-13). Therefore, it can be seen that even a fiercely individualist political philosophy as liberalism recognises the individual’s responsibility to the community. This example illustrates the essentially social nature of all ethical considerations, and conversely, all social interactions involve moral aspects and choices between right and wrong (Smith et al. 559). When O’Connor takes issue with the exalted superiority of the solitary hero, she goes against a long-established tradition in American fiction, in much of which the protagonists “enjoy the dignity, and suffer the terror, of perfect freedom.” Ragen argues that O’Connor’s characters are never completely isolated because they are pursued by “God’s enascapable love” (9). While their freedom is thus limited and, in a cosmic sense, they are spared complete isolation, I contend that some of O’Connor’s characters are severely alienated from the social world, from the community around them, either because of their outcast and underprivileged status or by an assumption of their own intellectual superiority.

The idea that an individual cannot contribute anything of value to the world unless they feel part of a community is crucial to O’Connor’s short story “The Lame Shall Enter First.” The three protagonists are all very isolated characters. While not all of them

experience loneliness, each is considerably damaged – morally, emotionally and intellectually – by their extended state of solitude. This paper argues that solitude – the fact of spending much time alone – is represented in O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First" as a perniciously detrimental condition that significantly harms social interaction, when this sporadically or eventually occurs, thereby causing psychological – and even physical – destruction to either the self or others.

Most of the story is focalised through the consciousness of Sheppard, a young widower with a ten-year-old son, Norton. Both are introduced through their interactions at breakfast: just as Norton's initial characterisation is provided by the father's short interior monologue, Sheppard himself seems to be summed up in what he thinks of his son: "The boy's future was written in his face. He would be a banker. No, worse, He would operate a small loan company. All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely" (O'Connor 445). The reader's first impression is that Sheppard must be a very "good" and altruistic person since these are the qualities he values the most, while he despises greed, and also because of the narrator's simile between his white hair and a saint's halo. In the opening breakfast scene, Sheppard is observing his son having breakfast disapprovingly, taking the fact that the child is eating a small piece of stale cake with peanut butter and ketchup as solid evidence of his selfishness, and talking to him about a young delinquent he gives counselling to at the reformatory where he does voluntary work.

He proceeds to contrast the abject poverty and underprivileged background of the delinquent – Rufus Johnson – and the apparent abundance and advantages that Norton enjoys. He wants to impress the boy with the plight of the underprivileged and registers with growing annoyance that the child remains completely unmoved. Sheppard starts listing Johnson's misfortunes, including Johnson's mother being in prison. At this, the child suddenly breaks out sobbing: "‘If she was in the penitentiary,’ he began in a kind of racking bellow, ‘I could go to seeeeee her.’ Tears rolled down his face and the ketchup dribbled on his chin. He looked as if he had been hit in the mouth" (O'Connor 447). At this point, the reader realises for the first time that Norton was deeply attached to his mother and he must be undergoing excruciating psychological pain, having lost her at such a tender age. Also, his father does not seem to be of much emotional comfort to him: Sheppard is "helpless and miserable" when confronted with the child's violent pain, which strikes him as "some elemental force of

nature.” Even though he feels that the unexpected and uncontrollable manifestations of the boy’s grief are “racking” and “agonizing,” he is unwilling or unable to show him affection. The only solace he can offer is the advice of doing good deeds to help others, and he also presents himself as a role model in doing so. Although this sounds like wise advice, a few disquieting incongruities in Sheppard’s attitude and way of thinking emerge from this opening scene.

The first oddity concerns Sheppard’s advice to his son. It is commonly recommended to people who are engulfed in sorrow and self-pity to turn their attention to others, recognise their suffering and try to help them, thereby alleviating their own pain. However, according to social psychology, such behaviour is not altruistic since it is motivated by egoistic desires for personal rewards – even if the reward in this case is that it allows the helper to increase their sense of mastery, to feel good about themselves. In order to qualify as an altruistic deed, helping must be motivated by the desire to increase another’s well-being without regard for any benefit for the helper (Smith et al. 169). Dovidio and Penner sum up the main difference between the two types of motivation to provide assistance to others: “Whereas sadness and personal distress produce egoistic motivations to help, empathic concern creates altruistic motivation” (170). In other words, helping is morally right only if it is prompted by compassion.

According to this conceptualisation of the motives for helping, Sheppard’s words seem to indicate that he is motivated by selfish reasons to help others: his voluntary work as counsellor at the reformatory serves the function of coping mechanism to deal with his grief. Thus, his disapproving assessment of Norton as selfish because the child does not engage in charitable work becomes questionable. Although Norton seems to have adopted a coping mechanism of his own – selling seeds to win a thousand-dollar reward – to Sheppard’s mind, this petty mercenary activity is very unfavourably contrasted with his own high-minded voluntary work, and as such, becomes another piece of evidence to support his condemnation of the child as utterly egoistic.

What is more, after the child’s violent outburst of grief at his father’s tactless remark, Sheppard still persists in pushing his charitable agenda on the child, prodding him to give away his prospective prize money to “children less fortunate than yourself:” “Wouldn’t you like to buy poor Rufus Johnson a new shoe?” (O’Connor 448). In answer to this question, Norton leans over his plate and vomits up all he has eaten for breakfast – all the food that

Sheppard has begrudged him. Similarly to his fit of crying, this reaction is also viscerally “natural:” a straightforward and elemental, nonverbal response to his father’s preoccupation with other children’s well-being. Yet even Norton’s being sick does not move him, instead serves as further evidence of his son’s undeservingness: “his own child, selfish, unresponsive, greedy, had so much that he threw it up. . . . Johnson had a capacity for real response and had been deprived of everything from birth; Norton was average or below and had had every advantage” (O’Connor 449). Sheppard’s moral disapproval of Norton as selfish seems to be compounded, at this point, with a general contempt for the boy, not only for his perceived character deficiencies but also for his supposed dumbness. From now on, it is becoming increasingly clear that Sheppard is not only obsessed with the plight of young delinquents but also with the idea of intellectual superiority.

Sheppard’s fixation on this particular delinquent teenager can be explained by the circumstance that Johnson appears to represent both emblematic figures so dear to Sheppard’s mindset: the underprivileged orphan and the misunderstood genius – both of whom are eminently deserving of help. In contrast, Norton does not deserve any care and attention since he is responsible for his own moral and intellectual torpor, being too lazy to use “every advantage.” The notion of deservingness, in social psychology, denotes the perception that an individual genuinely needs and merits assistance. When assessing deservingness, people often rely on their attributions made about controllability: whether the person who is in trouble could have prevented the misfortune, or their plight is entirely due to external circumstances. In the latter case, people think the individual deserves help and are more likely to provide this assistance. Groups of people typically judged deserving are the elderly, the disabled (Smith et al. 530) and poor or orphaned children. Rufus, who is fatherless, destitute and also has a club foot, ticks almost all of these categories, in addition to his apparently outstanding intellect which Sheppard values so highly. Nevertheless, even a socio-psychological explanation fails to account for the fact that Sheppard judges his own child, who is also a half-orphan and much younger than Rufus, completely unworthy of sympathy and care: as Smith et al. explain, people usually prioritise their own relatives when deciding whom to help (Smith et al. 536). Browning explains the father’s unwillingness to recognise Norton’s need for help by Sheppard’s inordinate desire to see himself as uncompromisingly altruistic: his idea of selflessness demand that he must help those who have no “claim upon him” such

as his own son has (121).

Having presented Sheppard's peculiarly aloof and contemptuous attitude towards his son and his obsession with helping the unfortunate, the narration moves on to introduce another fixation of Sheppard's: the adulation of superior intellect. It is the boy's I.Q. score of 140 that first piques Sheppard's interest. A flashback to their first counselling session gives the reader a sense of the nature of the interactions between the two people: while Sheppard tries to win the boy over with flattery and encouragement, Johnson behaves in a stand-offish, contemptuous and slightly hostile manner. Noticing the deformed foot, Sheppard immediately comes to the conclusion that the reason for the boy's acts of "senseless destruction" of private and public property must be this minor but very obtrusive disability. However, Johnson tells him otherwise: "A black sheen appeared in the boy's eyes. 'Satan,' he said. 'He has me in his power.' . . . [Sheppard] felt a momentary dull despair as if he were faced with some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now" (O'Connor 450-451). Again, Sheppard is confronted with an "elemental" human passion and again he is baffled and helpless. Apparently, Sheppard is ill-equipped to deal with instinctive, crude emotions uninformed by the intellect. As Seel contends: "Sheppard is a man dangerously cut off from his instinctual, libidinal core" (148), which is another sign that his philanthropy is not motivated by deeply-felt compassion but rather by excessive intellectualism, which is made clear in his response to the boy. His contemptuous dismissal of the supernatural conveys that he, Sheppard, is the one who is too clever to believe in the transcendent dimension to life and, by way of refutation, he immediately contrasts it with science. Sheppard refuses to acknowledge any instinctive or intuitive knowledge such as this first glimpse into the total depravity of the young delinquent, his "elemental warping of nature": he explains it away so that he does not have to deal with what he does not understand.

The way in which Sheppard deals with Johnson and his son has many similarities: in both cases, he tries to spoonfeed them his own ideas about what they should think and how they should live their lives: for the clever boy, scientific pursuits are recommended, for the dumb one, philanthropy. By concentrating on influencing their minds in the direction he sees fit, he ignores the boys' own peculiar dispositions. He shows only a superficial interest in the boys' motivations, but after a few questions about their plans he goes on to push his own agenda on them. That is why he does not notice that

Norton's small-scale money-making activity is pursued to divert the boy's attention from his constant emotional pain and that Johnson's high I.Q. score is not coupled with any intellectual curiosity. He fails to notice that Johnson, however underprivileged, is a ruthless predator, and his son, however many advantages he has, is a sensitive, vulnerable child, undergoing a severe emotional crisis and extreme loneliness.

This situation is ripe for tragedy as soon as Johnson is invited to Sheppard's house. Having been given a key to the house by Sheppard, Johnson lets himself in. The moments before Johnson enters the house are described in terms of impending doom and it also highlights Norton's absolute solitude: "Norton was alone in the house, squatting on the floor of his room arranging packages of flower seeds in rows around himself. He squatted motionless like large pale frog in the midst of this potential garden. . . . The silence was heavy as if the downpour had been hushed by violence" (O'Connor 452). Norton is presented here as a gardener, associated with flowers – however, flowers that are only "potential": this foreshadows that he may not live to plant the seeds or see these flowers blossom, and also that the sensitive and flower-like beauty of his nature is not perceived or recognised by his environment. The image of him as a toad in the garden is also indicative of feeling unwanted: out of place and unwelcome in his own home.

When he is confronted with Johnson, the older boy intimidates him with a subtle threat referring to his brick-like orthopaedic shoe. Johnson deftly turns his disability into a weapon: indeed, it becomes apparent that his clubfoot has grown to be part of his identity as Satan's accomplice. Behaving like a bully, he makes Norton serve him food, then proceeds to talk disparagingly about Norton's father, indicating that Sheppard is stupid. When Norton protests that his father is a good person, Johnson replies with ferocious anger: "I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right!*" (O'Connor 454). Johnson's peculiar distinction between "good" and "right" is crucial to the main conflicts and tragic misinterpretations in this short story. What Johnson seems to hint at is that Sheppard is going about doing charitable work and trying to inculcate altruistic and intellectual inclinations in young people, yet this "goodness" is dished out indiscriminately, without proper attention to, and understanding of, the real inclinations and needs of the people he is trying to help. Indeed, Sheppard is unable to deal with actual people, instead, he reduces them to "an abstract image" of themselves (Browning 121-122) and then proceeds to manipulate these cutpaper figures as a

benevolent puppetmaster.

When Sheppard arrives, Johnson changes tactics, making a show of being engrossed in studying a thick book. Sheppard is completely duped by this stage-setting cunningly engineered by the delinquent: “The wall behind [Johnson] was lined with books from floor to ceiling. . . . This was the perfect setting for the boy” (O’Connor 456). As Sheppard is deliberating how to persuade the still quite disagreeable boy to stay at their house, he finds Norton in the closet, evidently hiding from Johnson: “An old grey winter coat of his wife’s still hung there. He pushed it aside but it didn’t move. He pulled it open roughly and winced as if he had seen the larva inside a cocoon. Norton stood in it, his face swollen and pale, with a drugged look of misery on it” (O’Connor 457). Sheppard’s annoyance at the sight of his wife’s coat and his impatience to move it out of sight betrays his desire to forget about her. The metaphor of Norton as the larva inside the cocoon of his mother’s coat indicates that Sheppard’s wilful neglect and his growing dislike of the child may be due to Norton’s constantly reminding him of his dead wife, which prevents him from starting his life anew.

Using Norton as an excuse, Sheppard begs Johnson to stay with them: he declares that “we need another boy in the house” to teach Norton “what it means to share.” Sheppard’s “genuine desperation” at this moment is fuelled by his growing aversion to Norton: his proposal sounds like an attempt to replace him with “another boy.” When Norton furiously denounces Johnson for his rummaging among his mother’s belongings and his disparaging remarks about his father, Sheppard gives a little speech, declaring that “If I can help a person, all I want is to do it. I’m above and beyond simple pettiness” (O’Connor 458). Instead of being angry at Norton for tattling about him, Johnson’s fury is directed at Sheppard, whose “altruistic” behaviour is clearly a tool for inflating his ego, his image of himself as a great benefactor of mankind. As Edmondson observes, it follows from Sheppard’s atheistic outlook on life that he replaces the deity with himself (101).

Although Johnson seems to hate Sheppard but not Norton, as soon as he glimpses a chance to get a hold over the boy and use his power to harm him, he does so. The occasion arises when they try out the new telescope Sheppard has bought for Johnson. For Sheppard, the rational humanitarian, the telescope is an instrument for man’s ultimate conquest of the stars – the crowning achievement of science (Spivey 67). The implication is that man may become like God – omniscient and omnipotent, an underlying principle of Sheppard’s

scientific humanitarianism. As Rufus turns the conversation to one of his favourite topics, hell and everlasting damnation, Norton begins to question him whether his mother might be in hell. Sheppard tries to interfere with his benevolently rational explanations, in which he does not recognise the tactlessness bordering on cruelty: “‘Your mother isn’t anywhere.’ His lot would have been easier if when his wife died he had told Norton she had gone to heaven and that some day he would see her again, but he could not allow himself to bring him up on a lie” (O’Connor 461). Sheppard did not tell this to Norton simply because he had no regard for the child’s feelings. He does not have any compassion for the boy at this point, either: “Sheppard’s pity turned to revulsion. The boy would rather she be in hell than nowhere” (O’Connor 462). Sheppard fails to take into account that a child cannot comprehend the finality of death, especially if the one who died is the one he loved the most. While he endures any number of insults, insolence and ridicule from Johnson, the slightest resistance on Norton’s part drives him mad.

Johnson soon perceives that Norton’s deepest desire is to reunite with the lost mother and that, by using this promise as bait, he can manipulate the boy and ultimately inflict punishment on his infuriatingly smug benefactor: “There was a narrow gleam in his eyes now like a beam holding steady on its target” (O’Connor 462). The distance between Norton and his father has been growing since Johnson was established in their home: “[Norton] appeared so far away that Sheppard might have been looking at him through the wrong end of the telescope” (O’Connor 460). The rope the child is absent-mindedly playing with foreshadows the tragic outcome of Johnson’s influence.

In the days that follow, Sheppard notices the change in the two boys’ relationship: a close bond seems to have been created by their common interest in the afterlife. Sheppard dismisses his momentary inkling that Rufus will have a bad influence on Norton: “Norton was not bright enough to be damaged much. . . . Why try to make him superior? Heaven and hell were for the mediocre, and he was that if he was anything” (O’Connor 463). Sheppard now seems to have completely abandoned his child to his fate, his merciless assessment of him as mediocre and the association between superiority, a high intellect and scientific knowledge betrays Sheppard’s own sense of intellectual superiority to the rest of mankind: this signifies a lack of humility incompatible with true altruism he lays claim to. His assumption that his child is not clever enough to be corrupted much is especially cruel and it also shows his uncritical adulation of intellect

at the expense of other human qualities.

Shortly after this scene, Johnson is apprehended by the police because he was caught red-handed after another break-in and destruction of private property. Sheppard refuses to believe his denials so Johnson spends the night in jail. Even though he favours Johnson over his own child, sparing no expense to spoil him with new clothes, a telescope and ordering a new orthopaedic shoe for him, when Johnson pleads with him, he feels no compassion for him, either. It is only after the patrol car drives away that he, with an effort of the will, "summoned his compassion" (O'Connor 465). It seems that Sheppard is unable to feel genuine empathy towards other people. What Sheppard is most concerned about is whether he might be mistaken and Johnson is indeed unreformable, especially when the police reports further break-ins committed by the boy.

Subsequently, Sheppard pins all his hope of rehabilitating Johnson on the new orthopaedic shoe they are about to collect in a few days. Whitt draws attention to the symbolic significance of Johnson's clubfoot: for Sheppard, it represents the source of the adolescent's inferiority complex, but for the boy, it is the sign of his election as Satan's helper (142). However, he experiences the next, and probably the greatest, disappointment, when, having tried on the new shoe, Johnson refuses to wear it, even though it enables him to walk without putting his spine out of line. "It was as if he had given the boy a new spine" (O'Connor 470), he thinks delightedly, indulging for a moment in his Christ-like image of himself. When Johnson deprives him of this self-image as miracle-maker and healer, he cannot forgive him anymore. It becomes obvious that Sheppard's self-image has become inextricably linked with this Christ-like image and Johnson, by refusing to be healed by him, undermines this, forcing him to realise his own limitations, at best, and his total misguidedness, at worst.

When the police officer comes by for the third time, again suspecting Johnson of wrong-doing, Sheppard vehemently asserts that the boy has been with him all evening. After the officer leaves, however, Johnson shows his true colours to Sheppard: he confesses to doing all of the break-ins he has been accused of. When his vision of himself as a saviour crumbles, Sheppard becomes conscious of an intense feeling of hatred for Johnson and he also recognises that the defects he wanted to correct in the delinquent are integral parts of the teenager's make-up: "The pieced-together shoe appeared to grin at him with Johnson's own face. . . . He hated the shoe, hated the foot, hated the boy. . . . He was aghast at himself" (O'Connor 473). Despite

his realisations of his true feelings for the boy, Sheppard still clings on to the appearance of being his benefactor: “‘I’m stronger than you are and I’m going to save you. The good will triumph.’ ‘Not when it ain’t true,’ the boy said. ‘Not when it ain’t right’” (O’Connor 474). Again, Johnson makes a distinction between “good” and “right” or “true,” suggesting that “goodness” devoid of genuine emotions is not only counterproductive and harmful but also morally wrong, especially when its main aim is to serve the purpose of self-aggrandisement as is the case with Sheppard. As Browning sums up the main conflict in the story is the clash of “faith versus works”: of Johnson’s “demonic” and malignant belief and Sheppard’s rationalised and self-serving good deeds (119). Sheppard now wishes for Johnson’s departure although he still cannot bring himself to ask him openly to leave. He has come to regret bringing Johnson into their home and it seems to dawn on him that he started to engage in the project of saving Johnson partly in order to ease his own loneliness, but he still does not recognise the immensity of his error.

At the dinner table, Sheppard provokes an argument with Johnson about a Bible he is reading with Norton hunched beside him. However, he does not seem to have more compassion for his own son than formerly as he reacts to Johnson’s flippant admission that they shoplifted the book with rage. Even though he notices that his son has changed considerably, he attributes it to the wrong reasons: “There was a strange new life in [Norton], the sign of new and more rugged vices” (O’Connor 476). Johnson has managed to call forth a dormant energy in the younger boy (Browning 122). Although by this time, Sheppard has realised that Johnson is too depraved to be reformed, he still clings to the notion that at least he was right about the boy being intelligent. Johnson is resolved, however, to dissipate his every illusion about the rationale of his charitable project: “‘I ain’t too intelligent,’ the boy muttered. ‘You don’t know nothing about me’” (O’Connor 477). At the culmination of their heated argument, Sheppard finds the situation ripe for telling him to go: “At the door he paused, a small black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse. ‘The devil has you in his power,’ he said in a jubilant voice and disappeared” (O’Connor 478). This is another one of the many forshadowings in the story that a tragedy is about to happen – and very soon, as the phrase “on the threshold” indicates.

Now even Sheppard senses the impending gloom over his home despite Johnson’s departure. Again, he rationalises his intuition of danger by speculating about a potential vengeful attack on his home by Johnson, still not having an inkling of the damage wrought in the

mind of his own son. Apart from his poorly developed ability to empathise, perhaps the real hubris of Sheppard's character is his inability to face his own and other people's emotions and intuitions: as he intellectualises away all manifestations of the human psyche that is not linked to the intellect, he becomes blinded to the real, deep-seated motivations at work behind people's – including his own – actions and behaviour. This leads him to misjudge both himself and other people, which, in turn, also prevents him from relating to others in a meaningful way. This is the reason why he is an intensely isolated character even though he is presented as interacting with more people than the other two protagonists.

Set on edge by his premonitions, Sheppard goes up to the attic to ask Norton if he has seen Johnson. Even at this point, he only searches for and talks to his son when he is looking for the delinquent – although this time out of fear and suspicion. With “an unnatural brightness about his eyes,” Norton excitedly announces that he has found “Mamma” through the telescope he has been peering through for the last few days: “Sheppard steadied himself in the door way. The jungle of shadows around the child thickened” (O'Connor 478). Norton calls out to him to “come and look” but again he does not respond to the child when he is reaching out to him. Instead, he again denies Norton's experience and belief, orders him strictly to go to bed, then leaves the boy alone.

A police car arrives at his house for the fourth time. They have apprehended Johnson, this time with solid evidence to send him to jail. Johnson's outrage at Sheppard's self-aggrandising behaviour and way of thinking outweighs all considerations for his own welfare: he deliberately gets caught in order to prove Sheppard, who has furnished him with an alibi on two earlier occasions, a liar. In his hatred of Sheppard, Johnson also insinuates that he attempted to molest him sexually. Sheppard wants to clear himself of the accusation before they take the delinquent away, but this only ratchets up Johnson's rage: “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. When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me . . .” (O'Connor 480). It becomes apparent that Sheppard not only wants to preserve his self-image as a benefactor but he is also anxious that others see him as such. As soon as his reputation as an upright man is threatened, he “comes down one step” from his assumed air of indifference to other people's opinion of him and makes a “desperate effort to save himself.” Johnson managed to completely demolish Sheppard's identity as a Christ-like saviour: his old self is about to die.

Yet there is one more realisation to make before he can grasp the full immensity of his hubris. “‘I have nothing to reproach myself with,’ he repeated. His voice sounded dry and harsh. ‘I did more for him than I did for my own child.’ He was swept with a sudden panic. He heard the boy’s jubilant voice. Satan has you in his power” (O’Connor 481). The realisation of how fatally he misjudged himself, his own son and Johnson flashes at him like a revelation.

As he remembers his last glimpse of Norton as he was sitting at the telescope, he becomes aware that he, Sheppard, needs saving, too, and he can only be saved by his son’s love: “A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life.” However, this epiphany comes too late. The tragedy of the child’s suicide is compounded with the fact he committed it with the help of the telescope: the tool he meant to be a means of salvation for one boy, turned out to be the instrument of death for the other and not only because he used it to execute his suicide but also because it served as a means of the child’s growing obsession with life after death.

The ending of the story is particularly unsettling not only because of the suicide of a neglected, motherless child but also because of the harsh indictment of Sheppard, “who is, by conventional standards, very good” (Simon 50). Simon argues that an in-depth examination of innermost motifs are indispensable in order to avoid the devastating consequences of self-deception such as Sheppard must confront – a moral imperative that applies to religious as well as secular approaches to purportedly altruistic deeds (50-51). Any attempt to deny the existence of evil, O’Connor seems to suggest, results only in the extended dominion of sinister forces.

The tragic outcome of the interactions between these three solitary protagonists is essentially due to their isolation from other people. It is due to their being cut off from a nurturing community that these characters flounder in their own excessive, distorted beliefs. Spivey defines the main conflict in the story as one between hypocrisy and fundamentalism: “a decaying humanitarianism, which, as [Rufus] says in effect, does good for people but is not based on truth, and . . . a religious fanaticism that holds to truth but does no good” (66). Thus, it is both faith and action that is required to achieve a true closeness to people.

Sheppard’s delusions about himself as a Saviour is due to his loneliness after his wife’s death as he himself acknowledges: “He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton” (O’Connor 481). He also realises quite early on that, while his wife was alive, he “had never noticed . . . that the child was selfish” (O’Connor 446). It

is not only the misguided image of himself as benefactor that emerges as a result of his grief but, even more importantly, his inability to pay attention to other people, observe them carefully and make the right judgements about them – all of these stem from his grief and resulting depression. Also, his need to construct this inflated self-image might be connected to low self-esteem, which, in turn, is also linked to grief, as psychological research demonstrates a close relationship between “the dissolution of social bonds” experienced as rejection, the resulting loneliness and low sense of self-worth (Leary 120). Norton is obviously the most forlorn and neglected character out of the three protagonists. Blinded to reality by his grief and unable to bear the pain alone – as he must since his father has rejected and abandoned him – the child is gradually driven insane by his desire to be loved: Johnson’s distorted teachings about the Bible and the afterlife only gives him a final push towards self-destructive madness.

The most enigmatic figure of the three is Johnson, for whose motives throughout the story is difficult to find a consistent explanation. His solitude and isolation are emphasised the most by Sheppard. Although he does not feel lonely on that account, he has been deformed by his isolation in the most spectacular manner: envisioning himself as the envoy of Satan who might just get saved in the nick of time due to his disability. It would be easy for him, with a little diplomacy, to humour Sheppard’s delusion and thus remain well-fed, well-clad and safe in Sheppard’s home, as a sort of adopted son, who is preferred to Sheppard’s own flesh and blood. His outbursts of straightforward confessions and revelations can only be accounted for by an irrepressible fury at Sheppard’s hypocrisy and self-delusion – however, this is only a partial explanation since other people around Sheppard seems to tolerate his Christ-complex quite well. The other possibility seems to be a symbolic-supernatural explanation according to which Johnson is an incarnation of, or at least, has been possessed by, the Devil just like he asserts repeatedly and how Sheppard himself comes to regard him during his epiphany.

What is certain is that the delinquent boy has a very sharp insight into the psyche of other people: he is able to observe their deepest desires and motivations, possibly because he relies on his intuitions and emotions instead of his intellect. Johnson is also the catalyst for both other protagonists to realise their most cherished wishes: for Sheppard, to become Christ – that is why he is named after Christ, the Good Shepherd, one of the emblematic representations of Jesus in Christian art – and for Norton to be reunited with his mother and thus escape from this world of isolation and pain. Finally, the

name Johnson might be a reference to John the Baptist who proclaimed the advent of Christ: at one point, Rufus acknowledges his ambition to become a preacher. The interpretation of Johnson's paradoxical figure decides if the entire story is regarded as a religious parable or a socio-psychologically acute piece of fiction – either way, it provides a cathartic experience, prompting readers to examine their own motives, the authenticity of their own self-image as well as the veracity of their assumptions about other people and the gravity of what is at stake in making these assumptions.

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