

This short story appeared in *The Kenyon Review Spring* issue in 1953. O'Connor originally submitted the story as part of her application for The Kenyon Review Fellowship in Fiction, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and awarded to O'Connor for the next two years by the magazine's editor, John Crowe Ransom.

Choose one question to explore fully – in writing. This can be a discussion with a partner; however, each of you should have a written product that is in the form of a complete paragraph that includes topic sentence, specific textual evidence, analysis (appreciation of AUTHOR'S CRAFT), and a concluding sentence.

1. How do the characters view each other? How do these perceptions differ from the way that the narrative voice describes these characters?
2. Mr. Shiftlet performs a series of "resurrections" at the farm, patching the front and back steps, building a new hog pen, restoring a fence, and teaching Lucynell to speak. How does her repetition of the one word he has taught her as she follows him around the farm contribute to the story's imagery? What is the relationship between her private symbol for him ("Burrdtt!!") and the story's symbolism?
3. Does Mr. Shiftlet live up to the Christian symbols that surround him early in the story? What roles does he play for the two women in the story?
4. O'Connor was a devout Catholic, who described her theme as "moments of Grace... prepared for by the intensity of evil circumstances." Do you see such moments of grace in this story? Where?
5. Is it enough to view Mr. Shiftlet as an anti-Christ, as some critics have argued? In what sense could we call his betrayal of these women a kind of salvation? From what does he save them?
6. How should we view Mr. Shiftlet's actions in the final paragraphs of the story? Why does he give the boy a sermon on the sweetness of a mother's love? What motivates his prayer for a cleansing of the world? Does he lack any sense of culpability for his own actions?
7. How would you describe the tone of this story? Look closely at the descriptions of the characters in the opening paragraphs, for example, or Mrs. Crater's responses to Shiftlet's sermons. What's the relationship of comedy and tragedy in the story? How might comedy contribute to the story's "moral intelligence?"
8. A number of critics have described O'Connor's fiction as "grotesque" in its focus on wretched lives and physical deformity. Others have argued that she uses wretchedness or physical imperfection as a sign of grace or "a touching of the human with the grotesque luminosity of the divine" (Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*). Should we see Shiftlet's missing arm and Lucynell's condition as grotesque or sacramental? Could they be both?
9. How does O'Connor describe the natural world in this story? What does this imagery add to the story's meaning?
10. O'Connor's original title for this story was "The World Is Almost Rotten." How does her decision to change the title alter your understanding of the story's meaning? What does the road sign Shiftlet passes near the end suggest about the possibility of grace in the story?