

## ANALYSIS

“Good Country People” (1955)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“The protagonist of ‘Good Country People’ is the author’s cruelest self-caricature: Joy Hopewell, hulking, thirty-two, a learned Doctor of Philosophy. She has an artificial leg as a result of a hunting accident, she had changed her name legally from Joy to Hulga, she wears a yellow sweat shirt with a picture of a cowboy on a horse, and she is an atheist. When a simple-seeming country boy appears selling Bibles, she sets out to seduce him, and she appears for their date (in a perfect touch) wearing Vapex on the collar of her shirt, ‘since she did not own any perfume.’

The Bible salesman appears to be another Hazel Motes, wearing the same bright blue suit and wide-brimmed hat, and protesting ‘I’m just a country boy.’ He turns out to be the False Prophet instead: when they are alone in the barn loft he reveals that his hollow Bible contains a flask of whiskey, a pack of pornographic playing cards, and a package of condoms. ‘You ain’t so smart,’ he tells Joy-Hulga as he disappears down the loft trapdoor with her artificial leg. ‘I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’ It is the exposure of a fake Christian, but more significantly it is the exposure of a fake atheist, her intellectual pride and superiority revealed to be only ignorance and gullibility.”

Stanley Edgar Hyman  
*Flannery O’Connor*  
(U Minnesota 1966) 16-17

“Joy Hopewell (who has changed her name to Hulga, perhaps to spite her genteel mother), with a Ph.D. in philosophy and a wooden leg which she is as sensitive about as a peacock is his tail, almost as though it were her soul really, is duped by a ‘Christian’ Bible salesman whom she had thought to seduce by way of assault on his Christianity—and perhaps his masculinity. But the Bible salesman wins hands down: he says he doesn’t believe in Christianity.... Furthermore, using the name Hulga (which she regards as ‘her highest creative act’) ‘as if he didn’t think much of it,’ he concludes, ‘You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’ And he walks off with her wooden leg, which has fascinated him as the thing which makes her ‘different.’ Again, it’s the sort of Anti-Christ figure of the Bible salesman who wins something of our admiration [!]: he may be a devil but he’s not, as is Hulga, a fool (and an educated one at that). [This Postmodernist critic believes it is better to be a devil than a fool.]

The mother, Mrs. Hopewell...is one of her familiar genteel women. She is a ‘good Christian woman,’ perhaps like Mrs. May in ‘Greenleaf’...who thinks ‘the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true’... (Mrs. Hopewell is irked that Hulga is a student of philosophy. ‘That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.’) But Miss O’Connor takes a dim view of modern man’s ‘advancement’: again and again, she demonstrates a profound distrust in ‘progress’ and ‘enlightenment’ which are at the expense of the sacramental, whole view of life.”

Robert Drake  
*Flannery O’Connor*  
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 25

“O’Connor persists in referring to three things about Hulga which have a way of recurring like leitmotifs: her artificial leg, the symbolic change of her name from Joy to Hulga, and her Ph.D.... She is careful to surround her with two other women, Mrs. Hopewell, her mother, and Mrs. Freeman, ‘a good country person’.... The grossness and insensitivity of these two women clash with the hypersensitivity of Hulga; without their presence in the story we could not appreciate her aloneness and frustration.... The ‘grotesque’ scene in the barn...does not shock the reader who has already been warned of impending

ironical twists and turns by an elaborate series of clues.... In a fictional world where everyone is some kind of false prophet one is prepared for fake Bible salesmen making off with artificial legs that belong to female Ph.D.'s."

Melvin J. Friedman  
*The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*  
eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson  
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 17

"Hulga...and Hazel Motes...both...demonstrate an important kind of spiritual corruption similar to that of Rayber, Sheppard, and Enoch Emery.... [Her] Ph.D. in philosophy lends ironic sanction to her beliefs. She tells the Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, that she has seen 'through to nothing,' and that seeing nothing in this fashion is 'a kind of salvation.' The fact that she has lost one of her legs and wears an artificial one symbolizes her spiritual incompleteness, and her willful devotion to error shows in her eyes, which have 'the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it'.... Hulga, Hazel Motes, and Tarwater all struggle violently to believe in nothing, to renounce the insistent religious orientation passed on to them by a father or a father-substitute.... They do not interpret their choice as one between vague religious belief and solid secular values based on reason [note bias], but as a choice between an all-consuming evangelical commitment to God and nothingness—the complete repudiation of any values at all.... Manley Pointer...[is] the embodiment of the devil....

It is highly ironical that Hulga, who takes pride in exposing sham and hypocrisy, should fail to recognize the adversary.... She takes care of [her artificial leg] 'as someone else would his soul'.... When she surrenders her artificial leg to the Bible salesman (whom she associates with 'good country people' of strong religious faith, but who turns out to be a hardened, cynical believer in nothingness), she is affirming faith in him; she is risking and hazarding everything for the sake of love.... 'We are all damned,' she tells him condescendingly, little realizing that...the loss of her own soul to the devil has already begun; the Bible salesman has slipped her glasses into his pocket.... When he betrays her with smutty playing cards, whiskey, and a package of contraceptives taken from a hollowed-out Bible, she is shocked into asking the very question which previously aroused her scorn for her mother, whose illusions remain intact: 'Aren't you just good country people?' Hulga and her mother complement each other, each lacking what the other has in the extreme; thus, ironically, both of them are vulnerable to...Manley Pointer...

Hulga, then, like the others, is finally demonstrated as incapable of belief in nothingness; unlike them, she is also capable of the total commitment to the opposite of nothingness. She embodies the weakness of modern man who cannot believe in nothing yet is equally unable to profess with assurance a belief in anything. Like Rayber after the death of Bishop [*The Violent Bear It Away*], who can feel neither pleasure nor pain, salvation nor the tortures of damnation, modern man is pathetic. Further pathos in this form of neo-paganism lies in the fact that when some substitute for belief arises (in this story, Hulga's resolve to seduce the Bible salesman, in her mind an action which will lend concrete reality to her theoretical belief in nothing), its insufficiency or outright evil deceptiveness as a solution to a spiritual problem is manifest.... She has been robbed of her entire self: her intellectuality, her body, and her soul."

Carter W. Martin  
*The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*  
(Vanderbilt 1968) 62-65, 76-77, 143, 232

"A door-to-door Bible salesman, who admits that he doesn't stay in any place long, shatters Joy (Hulga) Hopewell's pride in her religious negation.... She is rendered totally defenseless, both physically and emotionally.... Hulga learns that her 'acquired disbelief' does not match her lover's natural depravity. In parting, with her glasses in his pocket and her artificial leg in his valise, he says, 'You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing since I was born!' As sensitive about her artificial leg as 'a peacock about his tail,' Hulga 'took care of it as someone else would his soul'."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain  
*The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor*  
(U Kentucky 1971) 60,74

“Joy-Hulga Hopewell of ‘Good Country People’ is the most complex of Miss O’Connor’s domestic intellectuals. A stout, thirty-two-year-old woman with a Ph.D. and a wooden leg, Hulga is in many ways a case study in repression and neurotic compensation, although she is not just that, as man is never just a psychological case to the Christian humanist. When she was ten years old, her leg was shot off in a hunting accident. At thirty-two she has never danced, never been kissed, and, in her mother’s terms, has never had ‘any *normal* good times.’ Instead, she reads philosophy. Ironically, because of a bad heart (and perhaps because of her more psychological infirmities), Hulga lives at home on her mother’s farm, surrounded by the unsophisticated and earthy people she scorns.

Miss O’Connor emphasizes the sensuous and emotional sterility of the character by contrasting her with the daughters of the hired help: ‘Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant.’ Mrs. Freeman, the girls’ mother, further intensifies the contrast by gossiping continuously and minutely about her daughters’ bodily functions: she keeps the Hopewells informed daily about Carramae’s morning sickness, with full accounts of her eating and vomiting, and she recounts how Glynese got rid of a sty by letting her chiropractic boyfriend pop her neck while she lay across the seat of his car. Thus, in the background of Hulga’s life there is an intensely physical mixture of sexuality, courtship, and common bodily ailments: a continuous reminder that man is partly an animal.

Hulga, however, is intent on denying that such matters are important. Most obviously, she cultivates her ugliness, avoiding any social contests with the Glynesees of the world and opposing her mother’s cheerful belief that ‘people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not.’ She lumbers around the house in a sweatshirt with a faded cowboy on it, exaggerating her deformity and feeling continuous outrage. She is particularly proud of having changed her name from ‘Joy’ to ‘Hulga’: ‘One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga.’

Obviously, Hulga has not succeeded in becoming indifferent to her deformity; she is preoccupied with it, intent upon proving an indifference, which is disproved by the intent. Because she cannot really admit to herself that she is infirm, that she is dust, she tries to remake herself into something more apparently ludicrous than dust, into Hulga; thereby, she will seem to be in control of her condition, to have willed herself to be deformed as a jesting reply to the ‘normal’ people around her. Like *The Misfit*, she even treasures her deformity and suffering for making her different...

She is quite sensitive about her wooden leg and her adopted name, for they are very personal matters and are important to her as psychological symbols. In fact, she fancifully, yet really quite seriously, attributes special powers to her new name and the self-willed ugliness it represents: ‘She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had come when called.’ Through this brief fantasy, with its clear sexual implications, the ugly outcast triumphs, as in the common mythical pattern of the dwarfs, humpbacks, and ugly magicians of the world who enchant the beautiful princesses. But what magic could come from dust, from an ordinary crippled girl who looked on the bright side of things? Better to be a sweating Vulcan, especially if one could feel responsible for the transformation and if one still knew that beneath the disguise was another self, laughing at the masquerade.

To supplement her mortification of the flesh, Hulga also maintains a feeling of intellectual superiority by confounding wit with wisdom. Because she realizes that the people around her are often foolishly conventional in their ideas and values, she thinks that she lives without illusions, which is ridiculous, because her illusions are only more sophisticated than theirs. In a parody of popularized existentialism, she claims that she is ‘one of the people who see *through* to nothing’ and that she has ‘a kind of salvation’ because she sees that there is nothing to see.’ In both of these claims she is proudly asserting her role as the mocker and negater, but in neither does she understand that ‘nothing’ can be the object of experience. Her claim that there is ‘nothing to see’ means merely that she does not find anything to see, not that ‘nothing’ can be the object of metaphorical sight. Her ‘nothing’ is hypothetical, abstract, a philosophical cliché, it has little in common with the ‘nothing’ that Kierkegaard and other existentialists make the object of dread. This is made clear by the passage which Mrs. Hopewell finds in one of the books Hulga has been reading...

Although Mrs. Hopewell's superstitious response to the unknown is comic, it is intuitively right. For Hulga such a passage is an incantation to ward off the experience of nothing, and Hulga remains emotionally safe because she, too, wishes to know nothing of nothing. Thus, whatever is disturbing she eliminates through a trite nihilism, which she in turn renders harmless to herself through a scientific positivism (which, if the argument were extended, would be negated by the nihilism). Her philosophical position is nonsensical, for it has developed out of neurotic needs, her need to escape her socially and physically incomplete self, her dread of nothing, her realization that she is dust like all of mankind. So she becomes a ridiculous case of the satirist satirized and the rationalist revealed as irrational.

She is fully absurd when she sets out to enlighten an apparently naïve and religious Bible salesman, an action which she thinks to be altruistic and objectively experimental. Her motives are actually selfish and psychologically complex. She clearly wants to disillusion the young man to demonstrate her superiority, to recreate him as she thinks she has recreated herself, and she wants to continue her defensive attack on the good country people whom she scorns. Yet her plan for his philosophical education reveals less obvious, perhaps even more repressed, motives. She intends to seduce him and then lead him into the realization that there is nothing to see: 'She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.' Miss O'Connor's choice of seduction as Hulga's method is good comic psychology. Hulga's assumption that sexual remorse and shame would lead to her pseudo-nihilistic view of life reveals much about her own unconscious and the sexually neurotic bases of her philosophy. Also, one might well suspect the disinterestedness of a plan that would involve her own sexual initiation, especially since it would be executed on an apparent bumpkin who would offer little psychological threat to the inexperienced woman and tutor.

The murkiness of Hulga's motives and her lack of self-knowledge make her quite vulnerable to the bogus rube; in fact, she even considers running away with him. In the first place, she is moved that the boy sees 'the truth about her,' since he claims that her wooden leg makes her different from everyone else. She does not realize that he is even more of a morbid fetishist than she is. She imagines that, after they have run away, 'every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again,' a fantasy that suggests her neurotically sublimated sexuality, her desire to relax her defenses, and her need to admit dependence. In the second place, she sentimentally has imagined the boy as a natural man: good, innocent, childlike, and intuitive, the antithesis of what she thinks herself to be. This image, which he helps to encourage, is an obverse reflex of her cynicism; it is almost proverbial that the same person may well be a worldly cynic and a naïve sentimentalist, since he who is not whole may see alternately from different extremes.

The climax of the story is a violent attack on Hulga's illusions. As the Bible salesman drops his disguise as good country people, he reveals that he is more cynical than she, that his sexual attitudes toward her are brutal and obscene, and, most importantly, that his belief in nothing is far more radical than hers. Faced with what seemed to be an adoring, childlike boy, Hulga felt safe enough to experience emotions that she had previously protected herself against; when her defenses have been lessened, she is confronted with an image of what she has pretended to be, with a real, diabolical nihilist who exposes her name-changing and philosophizing as mere adolescent posturing.

Having been emotionally and psychologically seduced, Hulga is the one who is educated; for the first time she is forced to 'see *through* to nothing,' an experience far less comfortable than she had imagined. As she is left behind in a state of near shock, without her glasses, her wooden leg, or her feigned self-sufficiency, her old self has been burned away, and she might be forced into a free choice that may be a new beginning. Perhaps it might even lead to her accepting her own body with its deformity and sexual desire, to accepting the ironies inherent in man's spiritual-corporeal nature."

David Eggenschwiler  
*The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*  
(Wayne State 1972) 52-57

"Both the girl Joy-Hulga and the Bible salesman have perverted their true selves, and each is revealed in his falsity after the word of God is perverted during a seduction scene—itsself a perversion of love.... That the salesman is peddling Bibles is the central perversion of the story.... To bestow a name indicates power,

and to rename shows—biblically—the special call of God.... [Joy's] renaming is a comic perversion of God's practice, a self-call to a life of sterile intellectualism....

[Her] humorous remarks suggest that Hulga would realize the ridiculousness of her situation at the story's end.... There emerges the strong possibility that, having lost her false life, she will see herself... 'without a leg to stand on' and she will hobble toward 'home'.... Critics of Flannery O'Connor who see only the bleakness of the world she creates...miss her intimation...of the discovery of truth which could mean a new life for her characters. The Bible salesman readies Joy-Hulga for grace by his streak of diabolism... The mystery of grace comes close to the surface of the story in Hulga's expression of the slight hope that there is goodness in the world, even though she wants to pervert it.... "Aren't you," she murmured, "aren't you just good country people?"....

A foil for the self-deluded protagonist is the hired woman, Mrs. Freeman, who is absolutely true to her own myopic vision of the world.... Mrs. Hopewell takes refuge in clichés to cloak her inability to deal with Mrs. Freeman [who] can cope with anything that crosses her path.... Mrs. Freeman exhibits a quality similar to Joy-Hulga's: she is an all-or-nothing person. She has two expressions which she uses for all human dealings: forward and reverse, and she seldom needs the latter.... If [Joy-Hulga] could not be Joy, then she had to be Hulga. It was either forward or reverse; there was no in-between.... And because Hulga has been going in 'reverse' of her intrinsic potential for many years, one accepts the possibility that her traumatic experience will thrust her 'forward' to the positive pole of her personality....

And the story closes with 'Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward'.... Hulga's deformity attracts her (Mrs. Freeman and the Bible salesman show an interesting kinship there), and she knows Hulga better than the girl's own mother does.... [Her] statement that 'some people are more alike than others' obviously refers to Hulga and the Bible salesman; she senses an affinity between them."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.

*Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*  
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 23-27

"'Good Country People' presents a brilliant and relentless vision of the grotesque... Joy Hopewell, the cynical and atheistic cripple...by the end of the story is bereft of joy, hope, and well-being.... Mrs. Freeman [is] the tenant...whose three expressions—forward, neutral, and reverse—transform her into an automaton....When Miss O'Connor treats this petrification of spirit, this refusal to believe, she creates a startling malignancy beneath the comic texture of her stories, because atheism never enables grotesque characters to get by in the world that they live in. People are pitted against an overpowering spiritual reality which makes their absurd contortions even more poignant, since it creates an existence so oppressive that individuals literally fall apart...

The protagonist, possessing a physiognomy that parallels her distorted spirit, is completely alienated from the world. Hulga, already a victim of certain absurdities, including a shotgun blast which accidentally blew her leg off in childhood, is rendered even more susceptible to the radical discontinuities of existence, despite her impervious façade, because she denies the significance of life and the possibility of immortality. Having taken a Ph.D. in philosophy, she has arrived at an intellectual position, similar to Haze, Rayber, and Sheppard, which fuses atheism and nihilism. 'If science is right,' she underlines in a book which she is reading, 'then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing.' Belief in such solipsistic nonsense reveals the sort of intellectual pride found in Hawthorne's fiction [see Rappaccini and Chillingworth] as well as O'Connor's, which debases the individual and makes him grotesque....

Surface illusions are exposed as pretensions, and Hulga's apostasy, at first comic and pathetic, turns with amazing inevitability toward the shocking and uncompromising revelation that her nihilism is worthless when faced with the cold hard presence of evil. The story is a ruthless depiction of an individual, maimed in body and soul, who is subjected to the extreme alienation which comes from the realization that one's entire life is scarcely more than a precarious caricature. Loss of her glasses leaves Hulga symbolically and literally adrift in a world of distorted visions. The extraordinary paradox of the Bible salesman who turns out to be a false Christian and the girl who is exposed as a false atheist is an ideal

figure for exposing the grotesque destinies of those myopic souls who have been deprived of grace... Hulga finally learns that she has no identity, and it is at this point in the resolution of the story that she is seized with the horror of the alienated world....

It requires an encounter with pure evil, embodied in this case in the figure of the demonic Bible salesman, Manly Pointer, to annihilate Hulga's secular dignity. Her grotesque seduction by Pointer destroys her sense of order and deprives her of her philosophic foothold. Intending actually to seduce the Bible salesman, she ironically surrenders first her glasses and then her artificial leg, which constitutes her ultimate sacrifice. This hayloft seduction scene, which is one of the most perfect absurd tableaux in O'Connor's fiction, culminates when Hulga, exposed to extreme evil, suddenly becomes disoriented and reverts to the same platitudes which she had condemned earlier in her mother.... The feverish Bible salesman who applies the genuinely nihilistic lesson to his stunned victim is one of Miss O'Connor's most startling demonic types—a trickster who lacks morals yet who operates within a moral context.”

Gilbert H. Muller

*Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*  
(U Georgia 1972) 10, 11, 27-28

“The setting of the story is a rural Southern farm, not unlike the farm where O'Connor herself lived and wrote, and it will recur in over half of her stories as a disarmingly routine environment, yet one strangely capable of serving as an arena for disarmingly unroutine revelations....A stranger, deceptively polite and unexpectedly malignant, intrudes upon the domestic tranquility of a family. And where the murderous Misfit comes away with Bailey's shirt, and Tom T. Shiftlet with a resurrected automobile, Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman...leaves the story with Hulga Hopewell's wooden leg....

It could be a painful scene, but in O'Connor's hands it is timed to comic perfection, and with a biting edge of irony—turned against the girl.... Hulga's blindness and limitation may be the focus of our attention, but we are also given to see the deceptive Bible salesman through the eyes of the girl's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, and through those of her aide-de-camp, Mrs. Freeman; with a fine narrative control, O'Connor discovers in each a purblind [nearly or partially blind] viewpoint.... O'Connor uses...a combination of brief backward glances, witty authorial descriptions, and, most impressively, dialogue.... It is a ribald moral fable—harsh, cold, and funny....

Mrs. Freeman...and...Mrs. Hopewell... They are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, these women, with a force of utterance staggering in its banality. “Why!” Mrs. Hopewell cries, “good country people are the salt of the earth.... It takes all kinds to make the world go ‘round. That's life!”... Bounded by the prefabricated walls of the cliché, neither Mrs. Freeman's nor Mrs. Hopewell's perception of the world penetrates beyond outward appearance.... From Hulga's point of view, neither does her mother turn her gaze inward: “Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!” Yet O'Connor keeps an equally ironic distance from Hulga too (her ‘God’ is an expletive, not a deity), whose knowledge of reality stops at the scientifically knowable, and who is stridently unconcerned with the nothing that is anything else.... ‘She didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men’.... Enter nice young man....

With her usual cool detachment, O'Connor effects a double exposure of Hulga, a self-exposure of the salesman, and a final unmasking of the sturdily omniscient farm women. When Hulga sorties out to meet Manley...the reader gets his first glimpse at the pious salesman's true nature.... The phallic Manley Pointer stands up, ‘very tall, from behind a bush...’—smiling his villainous smile.... (how easy this all is; who's seducing whom?)... Hulga feels compelled to add...‘I have a number of degrees’.... Hulga has let her wooden leg deform her whole character...and she believes that in surrendering the leg to Manley she will achieve the happiness that she only now admits has not been hers.... She begins to lose her footing—presently her very foot.... She has let her stump separate her from biped humanity; her soul—by a grotesque metonymy—has become her leg. And in rendering that leg to Manley, she renders herself helpless.... Because she is so caught up, so mastered by the brutish Mr. Pointer, all knowledge deserts Hulga; gone is her former ironic detachment, replaced by a helpless dependence on the salesman. At this juncture, Pointer exposes himself: out of his salesman's valise come the hollow Bible, and there is no

judging this book by its cover. The obscene deck of cards and the other paraphernalia of seduction that are contained within unmask the pious fraud.... Before an incomprehensible evil—before ‘Nothing’—[Hulga] is powerless and helpless....

Like many of O’Connor’s titles, ‘Good Country People’ takes on a sardonic shade by the end of the story. Manley of course has been thus honorifically titled by Mrs. Hopewell, and we know just how good he is. But...Mrs. Freeman is drawn by O’Connor as just such a good country person, though one does not at first recognize the parallel between her and Pointer. But the similarities of viewpoint are there: both have pierced through the girl to the ‘Hulga’ identity she has forged for herself, and both take a perverse relish in using that name rather than the name her mother calls her by, Joy. And, what is more, Mrs. Freeman shares with Manley not only steel-pointed eyes but a fascination with the wooden leg. And like Pointer, with his collection of assorted prosthetic devices, Mrs. Freeman is fascinated by the medical anomaly, especially ‘secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable.’ While one effect of this resemblance between the decidedly sinister Mrs. Freeman and the Bible salesman is thus to universalize the presence of evil in the world, still another effect is to accentuate the blindness of Hulga.”

Miles Orvell

*Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor*  
(Temple U 1972) 60, 136-41

“[Some characters] might as well be named Mrs. Optimist and Mrs. Pessimist, for the dialogue between them is a kind of allegorical contest between two opposing points of view.... Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard (‘A Circle of Fire’)...are again paired as Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman in ‘Good Country People.’ Mrs. Hopewell insists that ‘people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not.’ Mrs. Freeman, however, nourishes ‘a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children’....

The arrogant Hulga[’s] foolish denial of evil is dramatically refuted by the ignorant backwoods imposter.... Hulga...must be robbed of her most valued possession—the wooden leg which is at once the sign of her differentness and evidence of the spurious nature of her intellectual convictions—as a rude instruction in the reality of evil.... Hulga discovers that the realities of experience outrun all possibilities of metaphysical speculation.... When [she], because of her weak heart (a significant symptom), returns to live among these provincials, her scorn is boundless.... She stomps about the house to remind her mother of her daughter’s painful deformity.... Joy’s academic attainments have left her totally unsuited for the life of the farm.... Despite Joy’s airs of intellectual superiority, Mrs. Hopewell continues to regard her as a mere child.... Hulga’s venture into sexual initiation leads her to spiritual rape....

There are three ‘worlds’ within the story...the farm, the university, and the back country. Together, the three form a hierarchy of intellectual sophistication and worldliness. The Bible salesman’s unexpected action at the end upsets the hierarchy by exposing the gaping discrepancy between supposition and fact; when he runs away with the artificial leg, he is, in fact, seizing the prize that declares him the victor in life’s game of multileveled deception. The first ‘world’—the farm...constitutes (in its owner’s view) the *norm* for human conduct and attitudes. Joy (Hulga) and Manley are defined as aberrants by the standards of ‘normality,’ for one is too ‘intellectual’ and the other too ‘simple.’ The farm...gives primacy to the realm of fact, to the familiar details of human biology and social experience.... Religion is relegated to the attic and is seldom referred to except in properly sanctimonious attitudes. Philosophy is limited to a familiar round of banal observations... ‘Nothing is perfect...that is life!’...

The game played out between Manley and Mrs. Hopewell is a foreshadowing of the later game of seduction between Manley and Hulga, and in each instance, the deception extends to both sides.... When Hulga sets in motion her cunning plan of seduction, she assumes that she is preparing a union of total sophistication (herself) with total innocence (Manley).... Hulga intends to play intellectual Eve to this untouched Adam. However, she soon discovers that the country boy is not so simple as he appears. The rustic has come prepared for the outing with whiskey, contraceptives, and a pack of pornographic cards which he produces from his hollow Bible (the analogue of Hulga’s false leg). To make their relationship completely ‘honest,’ she confesses she is really thirty (actually, she is thirty-two).... Hulga is abruptly

hurled...from the intellectual heights she had so smugly inhabited.... Manley is the victor in the game of mutual deceit, and the leg is his trophy. Hulga has been outsmarted by a country bumpkin; she has lost her position of intellectual superiority along with her leg...the clever know-it-all bested by a backwoods ignoramus.... Hulga is judged as pride overthrown... Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are left unchanged in their usual state of self-satisfied ignorance.”

Dorothy Walters  
*Flannery O'Connor*  
(Twayne 1973) 28, 37, 63-67

“A self-styled atheist, with a Ph.D. in philosophy, Hulga is rendered almost physically ill by the intensity of her contempt for what she considers the utterly fatuous and banal world of her mother, who appears incapable of thought more profound than the sentiment that ‘good country people’—of whom, in her opinion, Mrs. Freeman is a notable example—are ‘the salt of the earth’.... [Hulga embodies] a facile, superficial, and finally sentimental nihilism...‘someone who has achieved blindness by an act of the will and means to keep it’.... There suddenly intrudes another representative of ‘good country people’ (or so Mrs. Hopewell assumes), an itinerant Bible salesman named Manley Pointer.... As the condescending Eve, Hulga will lead Manley into knowledge—not, however, knowledge of good and evil, but a more austere perception that both good and evil are illusions... This young man whom she has assumed to be the epitome of ‘real innocence’ disabuses her once and for all of *her* illusions.... The ‘perfect Christian’...turns out to be a lewd, voyeuristic fraud....

Allowing her secret pride in her ‘difference’ and her submerged self-pity to becloud her ‘clear and detached and ironic’ vision, Hulga gives Pointer her leg and immediately loses that mastery over him on which her entire scheme depends.... “‘Aren’t you,” she murmured, “aren’t you just good country people?”” Pointer answers with a surly ‘Yeah...but it ain’t held me back none’... The story largely concerns deformations of the body which reflect corruptions of the spirit; and this theme is advanced just as surely, though more subtly, through the relation of Hulga and Mrs. Freeman as it is through that of Hulga and Pointer. Mrs. Freeman is *free* of the illusions which blind both mother and daughter, seeing more deeply into Hulga’s soul than does Mrs. Hopewell, who is too preoccupied with efforts to improve ‘the child’s’ disposition to attempt to understand her....

As Pointer...[exposes] Hulga’s pretenses, so Mrs. Freeman has already done earlier. Her ‘beady steel-pointed eyes’ have discerned that Hulga is not what she would like to be taken for—a tough-minded, unsentimental, sophisticated materialist.... Mrs. Freeman has taken the true measure of Hulga’s supposed cynical detachment from all normal human relations.... Hulga believes that she allows Pointer a limited degree of intimacy because his innocence will afford her a rare opportunity to be the ‘professor’ of atheism and nothingness which her physical disabilities generally preclude. Actually Hulga longs for the warmth of human contact, longs in fact for a relationship in which she can play the dual roles of protected child and adoring mother....

Hulga covets an innocence identical to that which she imagines to be fundamental to Pointer’s character.... Consciously wishing to be the Eve of the temptation, unconsciously she seeks the condition of Eve before the fall. This is one of the story’s great ironies; another is that Mrs. Hopewell, for all her obtuseness, is correct: Joy-Hulga *is* a child.... Hulga’s total immersion in this image of life-as-endless-play is expressed most vividly in her fantasy of ‘run[ning] away’ with Pointer to an Edenic world where each day would end with Pointer’s loving removal of the leg and each new day begin with his putting it ‘back on again’.... The lost leg is an objective correlative of the lost unity of childhood... Hulga’s dream is, finally, a dream of human wholeness... It is, of course, her Joy-identity which is primary and which seeks realization in her dream....

Hulga’s mean-spirited perversity proves merely a façade; and when she is compelled to acknowledge the existence of perversity profounder than her own—more a part of the true scheme of things, because partaking more fully of evil as a metaphysical reality—she responds with incredulity, shock, and impotent outrage. Thus is portrayed Hulga the positivist, experiencing the shock of evil which infuriates her into what Hawthorne called ‘the sinful brotherhood of mankind’.”

Preston M. Browning, Jr.



“When the young Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, announces that he is dedicating his life to ‘Christian service’ since what remains of it may be cut short because of a heart condition, Mrs. Hopewell likens him to Hulga, whose weak heart has kept her from a more active life at a university; and so Mrs. Hopewell invites him to dinner. Anyway she has a weakness for ‘good country people,’ who are to her ‘the salt of the earth.’ Asked by Manley Pointer to go on a picnic, Hulga imagines herself seducing him because she is convinced that his country goodness is as artificial as her leg.

When their actual conversation in the barn loft turns to God and salvation, Hulga, presuming that she will no doubt shock him, reminds him that she does not believe in God. In her gnostic economy of salvation, she obviously is saved and he is damned. But ‘salvation’ is only a way of speaking for Hulga. ‘We are all damned,’ she insists, ‘but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation.’ She is without illusions, or so she has deluded herself into thinking. ‘I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing,’ she claims rashly. There is of course one very simple fact that Hulga should have seen if she had not already ruled out the possibility of seeing anything; the apparently innocent young man is, in fact, seducing her....

Hulga has spent her whole life developing her mind to the exclusion of her heart, so that her weak heart is clearly and ironically more than a physical disability. Although she considers Manley Pointer’s kisses ‘an unexceptional experience,’ it is evident that her long inactive heart would like to function. Yet, the ‘extra surge of adrenaline’ that they produce in her goes directly to the brain. When she responds to his kisses, her mind never once loses its ascendancy over her feelings. And when Manley Pointer acknowledges the ‘truth’ about her artificial leg—it is what makes her different from everyone else—her heart seems to stop beating altogether, leaving ‘her mind to pump her blood.’

His suggestion that she prove her love for him by showing him where the artificial limb joins on shocks her not because of its obscenity (after all ‘it joins on...only at the knee’), but because ‘she [is] as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about its tail.’ As he removes the leg and she experiences that unfamiliar sensation of dependence (as if she loses her life and finds it again completely in him), her brain seems to stop working too and ‘to be about some other function that it was not very good at.’ Since the mind, obviously, cannot replace the heart, Hulga is defenseless in a moment of extreme need; all of her vital functions appear to have ceased.

Totally helpless, she is the epiphany [epitome?] of pathetic humanity with divine aspirations. Fittingly, Manley Pointer becomes a *magus* presenting appropriate gifts—a flask of whiskey, playing cards with obscene pictures, and contraceptives.... Hulga, mesmerized and motionless, asks desperately, ‘Aren’t you just good country people?’ Her humiliation is not complete, or the revelation exhausted, until Manley Pointer spells out for her the extent of his deception. He has a collection of ‘interesting things’ that he has stolen from his victims, and there is no hope of catching him because he uses a different name at each call and moves quickly from one place to another. In a final crushing blow to Hulga’s pride, he reveals the depth of her judgment: ‘You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born’....

Mrs. Freeman, the nosey but nonetheless good country woman who works for Mrs. Hopewell, offers rustic wisdom with honest self-knowledge. The opening paragraph of the story describes Mrs. Freeman as having three expressions: neutral, ‘that she wore when she was alone’; reverse, which ‘she seldom used...because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement’; and forward, which ‘was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck.’ In the framing last paragraphs, she and Mrs. Hopewell are ‘digging up onions’ as Manley Pointer emerges from the woods and heads across the meadow toward the highway. Mrs. Freeman’s gaze drives ‘forward’ to touch the fleeing suitor, and as she turns her attention back to her work, her judicious observation affirms the realism of her customary preoccupation with ‘infections,’ ‘deformities,’ and ‘assaults’; ‘Some can’t be that simple.... I know I never could.’ Good country people are not simple-minded innocents, as Mrs. Hopewell seemed to imply but, like Mrs. Freeman, people who know an ‘evil-smelling onion shoot’ when they handle one.

Manley Pointer, fetishist masking as 'salt of the earth,' leaves with the artificial leg that was personal enough to have been Hulga's soul and the glasses that were her only claim to sight. Hulga's punishment for colossal pride is a literal realization of her wishes. She is as close to the Nothingness she sought to grasp as is retributively possible. Claiming to have seen through reality to nothing, she is stripped of her emblems of specious dignity by the one she had hoped to seduce. 'Her icy blue eyes,' seeing 'green swelling lakes' instead of the 'two pink-speckled hillsides' in front of the barn, seem frozen now 'with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.' Hulga had imagined that the denial of reality was a prerogative of the enlightened mind, never suspecting that the demonic heart could reach the same conclusion. And for all her education she cannot tell a con man from good country people."

John R. May  
*The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor*  
(U Notre Dame 1976) 86-89

"Begun as a crippled atheist's attempt to jar a young Bible salesman out of his naivete, the love scene turns with dark irony into the tale of a jaded woman overcome by a cynicism and nihilism greater than her own.... It is an old story of the fox and the chicken, of the trickster cunningly outwitted... Manley, the apparently innocent victim, turns sadist; and... the action breaks through her detached and ironic self-image, leaving her defenseless for the first time... Wooden leg = wooden soul.... The source of Hulga's previous aloofness and condescension has become the vehicle of her greatest vulnerability. This action is a masterful ploy...one of the finest and yet strangest enactments of awakening in the O'Connor canon.... [Hulga's] defeat thus occurs on two levels, for she is both literally and emotionally disabled....

While the two older ladies initially provide graphic contrast to Hulga and explain, through their insistent inanity, her aloof and disdainful posture, the Bible salesman explodes all the cripple's surface pretension, reducing her to the same stale perceptions that she had condemned in her mother. 'Aren't you,' she murmured, 'aren't you just good country people?'... The alienating or destructive effect of the grotesque has been masterfully engineered... This...is a remarkable achievement, a darkly humorous and awful study of the violent disruption of habitual patterns of thought. It offers a markedly derogatory evaluation of philosophic systems... It is a laudable achievement...attributable as well to William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, or any other 'great charismatic seers' of modern literature, not simply to the Christian artist." [Faulkner also was a Christian, unlike this critic.]

Carol Shloss  
*Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference*  
(LSU 1980) 43-48

"Joy's changing her name to Hulga is a deliberate defiance of her mother, a self-definition that sets her against everything Mrs. Hopewell stands for.... In this self-created rebirth, the girl believes, the ugly name acts as a mask for a private inner sense of identity... Cut off from the possibility of physical beauty by her 'hulking' body and her wooden leg, Hulga emphasizes her outer ugliness in dress, manner, and action, but she secretly cherishes the vision of an inner self that is beautifully unique.... The girl's existence has become one continuous gesture of outraged rejection of the life around her.... If Mrs. Hopewell approaches life with a naïve optimism, her daughter embraces atheistic nihilism... What [her] fantasies of superiority reckon without is her unadmitted desire that someone pay homage to the goddess within....

The Bible salesman...seems a living embodiment of Mrs. Hopewell's most cherished cliches... As the boy whines for a declaration of love, the girl gives him a crash course in nihilist epistemology. But in the sudden role reversal that takes place in that barn, we discover what a genuine [double] this Bible salesman is.... Her outer cynicism drops and the girl reveals her underlying belief in real innocence.... Now he reveals to her who the true innocent is. For the girl has not, as she thinks, escaped her mother and her mother's values: the entire identity of Hulga is built on them. Her academic nihilism is riddled with such cliches as 'We are all damned...but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation'....

Here too a setting that at first seems simply a literal backdrop takes on metaphorical implications [and] provides mocking commentary on the pretensions of the protagonist....[her] smug self-deception.... The

girl believes she is succeeding in her plan to seduce the naïve country boy, and the unmistakable mammary suggestions of the landscape provide an apt commentary on the action... [But] the roles the two have fallen into are not...temptress and sexual innocent, but rather mother and child: 'His breath was clear and sweet like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's...a child being put to sleep by his mother... "You poor baby," she murmured'.... In kissing the boy...she falls into a parody of the maternal role, and when his childlike innocence becomes no longer credible, she asks, 'Aren't you...aren't you just good country people?' The question is the ironic equivalent of Mrs. Hopewell's conviction that he is exactly that--a conviction her daughter has clearly shared.... Willfully blind to the world around her and complacent in her notion of self-created uniqueness, she has gained her sense of disdainful superiority precisely from her contemptuous acceptance of her mother's view of things.... The climax of [Pointer's] role as mocking double comes in a vicious parody of the intellectual cliches the girl has earlier mouthed at him....

As the mask of Hulga drops and reveals beneath it none other than Mrs. Hopewell's little girl Joy, it does so in response to the disappearance of the mask of the Bible salesman... And the face that looks forth from beneath *that* mask is the face of the nihilist the girl has claimed to be.... We see enough to grasp how uncannily mask and reality correspond to the Joy and Hulga identities of the girl. As the roles reverse themselves and his assumed innocence disappears into cynicism, so her superficial worldliness gives way to sentimental naivete. If Manley Pointer turns out to be as hollow as the Bible he reveals in the barn, so Hulga is as empty as the wooden leg [her identity] was based on. 'Like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess,' he takes from that Bible and places before her the contraceptives, whiskey, and pornographic cards that are a cruelly fitting devotion to the deified self. That self has been a sham; it is the girl, not the Bible salesman, who has the innocence of a child....

Without her glasses, the landscape appears 'shifty' to the girl's blurred vision, and at the story's close O'Connor gives it yet another ironic turn. As he leaves her, the wooden leg that she has treated like her soul safely in his suitcase, the man she has identified as her secular savior ('surrendering to him...was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his') seems to walk on water: ... 'She saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake'.... The movement...from a neutrally observed landscape to the same scene presented as mock biblical symbol is a characteristic one in O'Connor's later fiction... Joy-Hulga Hopewell's discovery of the true nature of her pseudosavior is also a discovery of the reality of evil... O'Connor repeatedly dramatizes the revolt against God as the creation of human substitutes for Him."

Frederick Asals  
*Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*  
(U Georgia 1982) 70-72, 102-06, 219

Michael Hollister (2016)