ANALYSIS

"The Artificial Nigger" (1955)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

"I suppose 'The Artificial Nigger' is my favorite…. And there is nothing that screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls 'nigger statuary.' And then there's Peter's denial. They all got together in that one. You are right about this negativity being in large degree personal. My disposition is a combination of Nelson's and Hulga's. Or perhaps I only flatter myself."

O'Connor, Letter (6 September 1955)

"Well, I never had heard the phrase before, but my mother was out trying to buy a cow, and she rode up the country a-piece. She had the address of a man who was supposed to have a cow for sale, but she couldn't find it, so she stopped in a small town and asked the countryman on the side of the road where the house was, and he said, 'Well, you go into this town and you can't miss it 'cause it's the only house in town with a artificial nigger in front of it.' So I decided I would have to find a story to fit that."

O'Connor, Symposium, Vanderbilt U (1957)

"'The Artificial Nigger' is my favorite and probably the best thing I'll ever write."

O'Connor, Letter (10 March 1957)

"We begin here with nothing more uncommon than a rustic old man taking his rustic grandson for his first trip to the city. While their backwoodness is a bit grotesque and the old man's vanity provides touching humor, metaphysical drama doesn't overturn secular seeming until the man publicly denies his relationship to the boy to escape retribution and to give the humor a new dimension. Those familiar with her fiction may already have suspected a Tiger Christ in the 'nigger' image, but who expected her brilliant *tour de force* with its compassionate irony in her 'artificial nigger' as crucifix?"

Brainard Cheney
"Miss O'Connor Creates Unusual Humor out of Ordinary Sin"
Sewanee Review LXXXI (1963)

"Of the ten stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1953), the three best, in my opinion, are 'The Artificial Nigger,' 'Good Country People,' and 'The Displaced Person.' 'The Artificial Nigger' was Miss O'Connor's own favorite, and it makes impressive claims to be considered her best story. It tells of two backwoods Georgians, an old man named Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson, who go to the terrifying city for Nelson's first visit. The action of the story is their estrangement and reconciliation, but it is a readjustment as profound as that of the Conroys of Joyce's 'The Dead.' Nelson has never seen a Negro before, and the preliminary events of the story are encounters with real Negroes—first a huge Negro man on the train, wearing a yellow satin tie with a ruby stickpin, then an enormous Negro woman they meet on the street, whom Nelson inexplicably wants to hold him and mother him.

The dramatic crisis in the story is Nelson's running into an elderly white woman on the street, knocking her down and scattering her groceries. Mr. Head panics and re-enacts Peter's denial [of Christ]: 'This is not my boy,' he said, 'I never met him before.' Nelson's subsequent hatred and contempt, and Mr. Head's guilt and shame, are wonderfully funny and moving, profoundly true and beautiful. Their reconciliation comes when they see, decorating a lawn, a shabby plaster statue of a Negro eating a watermelon. In the same voice, each exclaims: 'An artificial nigger!' This communion transforms them magically, and they exchange identities: 'Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man.' The artificial Negro is God's grace: 'They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of

mercy.' Mr. Head has a moment of true repentance and charity, he and the boy are united in love, and the story is over."

Stanley Edgar Hyman
Flannery O'Connor
(U Minnesota 1966) 16

"*Hubris* [pride] in its purest form may be the theme of 'The Artificial Nigger'… Old Mr. Head has taken his grandson, Nelson, on his first real trip to the city as part of the boy's initiation into adulthood. (Nelson had actually been born in the city, a fact which he proudly and tirelessly repeats; but of course the boy remembers nothing about the city now.) And though full of the pride of years and wisdom, it is Mr. Head himself who proceeds to get them lost, then later denies (perhaps like St. Peter) knowing his grandson when Nelson gets into trouble. At this point Nelson's mind is 'frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact at the final judgment.' But finally they are reconciled by the sight of an 'artificial nigger,' a statue on a suburban lawn, which seems to represent for Mr. Head 'some great mystery' in life which man—let alone himself—cannot fathom. And for the first time, Mr. Head feels the 'action of mercy'…. For the first time, the righteous Mr. Head knows himself—and perhaps all mankind—for the sinner he is."

Robert Drake
Flannery O'Connor
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 28-29

"En route to show his grandson Nelson the city, Mr. Head reveals himself as smugly proud. Although he himself does not realize this pride, the prophetic author does as she constructs her symbolic parable. Once in the city, he puts a penny in a public weight machine and believes the description on the card to be quite accurate ('You are upright and brave and all your friends admire you'), while disregarding the fact that the weight figure, 120 pounds, is entirely wrong…. The experience climaxing in the 'vision' of the artificial nigger has left both [Nelson] and his betrayer (perhaps more fittingly compared to Peter as Head of the Church than to Judas) advanced in wisdom and rooted in charity."

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
"Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances"
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor
eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 159-60

"It is possible to read the conversion of Mr. Head and Nelson in an ironic way. They are still tinged by self-love; they cannot accept the intrusions of others—even if the others are 'artificial.' They have learned only to complete their entrapment. But if we accept this ironic reading of the conversion, we must establish the fact that Miss O'Connor denies the possibility of sudden love—of grace. Would it not be more ironic, and ultimately Christian, if Jesus were to use 'artificial niggers'—the trivial, the commonplace, and the unreal—to transform sinners?… When Nelson and Mr. Head see the 'artificial nigger,' they interpret the object as a divinely-sent sign—recognizing that all people are miserable and 'chipped'—and they lose their old ways of looking at the world. Now they are 'spellbound' in a Christian way as the moon returns; 'gigantic white clouds' illuminate the sky. Again the imagery mysteriously moves from…inversion to true illumination."

Irving Malin
"Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque"
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 115-16

"A crude statue of a Negro boy effects a reconciliation between a grandfather and the grandson he betrayed…. The sacramental view is, of course, more than the transformation of an object into a sign of the mystery that resides in the created universe…it is a vision of reality focused through the seven sacraments which constitute the means of recognizing and accepting divine grace. The sacramental view thus provides for man's discovery of his place in the divine scheme of salvation—the recognition and acceptance of grace, an event that in O'Connor's fiction can be as quiet and subtle as that of Mr. Head and Nelson… The voyage of the old man and his grandson is analogous to an epic descent into the underworld…Dante's guide to the Inferno…a landscape so unfamiliar to them that it takes on the aspect of…hell itself…Nelson

[associates] 'the sewer passages with the entrance to hell'…. Details of this kind represent a remarkable meshing of the outward events and the underlying moral theme of the story….

The principal theme…is…the transition of the main characters from innocence into sacramental knowledge; Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, whom he has raised from infancy, lose their mild but rivalrous familial pride and enter into a richer, more respectful relationship with each other. The story almost literally objectifies Christ's paradoxical teaching that one must lose his life to save it; the two rustic main characters take an excursion to Atlanta, become lost, then alienated from each other, and, in finding their common way out of Atlanta, become reconciled, returning to their true backwoods country with humility and new knowledge of themselves…. The similarities of their temperaments suggest their equal need for humility and insight….

The remarkably impersonal quality in *them* reveals Mr. Head's attitude that Negroes are only things, not human beings…. The two white characters later feel the existentialist sense of isolation which attends such an analysis of others, when they become aware of themselves as mere objects under the gaze of Negroes…. A foreshadowing of the knowledge that grows into epiphany is apparent, however, when Nelson's fortune from a penny-scale, 'You have a great destiny ahead of you but beware of dark women,' is fulfilled. Ironically, they should both have been wary of their own ignorance, not of the dark woman. The sensual Negress whom Nelson asks for directions gives them correctly, but Mr. Head and the boy misinterpret them…. As the sense of being lost engulfs him, the image of the Negress as a protective mother and a sexually exciting mistress in one suddenly enthralls him… Mr. Head scorns his grandson's behavior… He then shows his own ignorance of the city by following the trolley tracks in the wrong direction….

The breach between them is finally not so much forgiven as made insignificant by their common recognition of a symbol leveling them in their misunderstanding and guilt, revealing to them the oneness of men in guilt, ignorance, and the suffering of injustice—an ill-made, battered, tasteless statue of a Negro boy holding a piece of watermelon. Mr. Head and Nelson are transfixed; the description of them reiterates, in contrast to their recent alienation, the uncanny likeness between them, and, significantly, the same sort of agelessness attributed to the plaster figure…. A tasteless and battered yard ornament…is profound in its combining of classical, Christian, archetypal, and local associations. Like so many of O'Connor's symbols, this one is…on first impression, an outlandish slap in the face. Its final effect, however, is quite otherwise —almost serene. This paradoxical quality is characteristic of O'Connor's symbolism, as it is of her art in general."

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 14-15, 112-15, 148-51

"Old Mason Tarwater and Francis Marion Tarwater…appeared in 'The Artificial Nigger'…as Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson…. Mr. Head wishes to teach his grandson a lesson, to show him the evils of the city so he will never wish to go there again. Ironically, the old man learns a great deal about himself as a result of the experience: he learns the extent of his own sinfulness and is brought to recognize his own need for mercy…. Mr. Head's denial of his grandson suggests St. Peter's denial of Christ…. Mr. Head's and Nelson's common racial arrogance serves the cause of grace, and a battered figure of an 'artificial nigger' comes to embody the suffering of humanity…. Nelson…looks like Mr. Head…. Old Mr. Head's relationship with his grandson Nelson is restored only through the operation of mercy…. The two…see a battered agonized-looking statue of a Negro, and their wonder at it reunites them in a moment of communion: they look at 'the artificial nigger' 'as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat'…. Mercy, which grows out of agony, is all that one may take with him from this world."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 6, 26, 73, 81

"'The Artificial Nigger'…is so carefully structured that it is nearly an archetypal comedy…a pattern of symbolic death and rebirth, a completed redemptive action… The story begins, as it will end, in the transforming light of the moon…. It faintly suggests a true illumination whereby the ordinary surfaces of

the world are transformed by mystery, but this meaning is latent only and will not fully emerge until the conclusion of the story when the characters have been prepared to receive such revelation. In the beginning they are far too egoistic to recognize this mystery, and so the moonlight becomes an instrument in their own self-deception.

For Mr. Head the moonlit scene is but another tribute to his own grandeur. The center of his pride is his belief that with age he has achieved 'that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young,' specifically for his grandson, Nelson, with whom he has continual petty contests to show that his wisdom and experience are superior to the cantankerous child's. The boy feels that he has the irrevocable advantage of having been born in the city, so the old man has arranged a trip there to humble his grandson once and for all. He will show him that there is no cause to be proud of being born in such a place; he will make him content to spend the rest of his days in the country; and he will demonstrate his own indispensability as a guide to the ignorant boy, who has never been on a railroad or seen a Negro.

The journey turns out to be a symbolic descent into hell for the boy and his inadequate Virgil. The demonic nature of the city is implied most clearly by the sewer system, which the old man explains to frighten the boy. Nelson connects the sewers with the entrances to hell and understands 'for the first time how the world was put together in its lower parts.' The darkness, the labyrinthine tunnels, the frightening unknown, even the slight hint of sexuality implied by 'lower parts' will all become characteristics of the city itself, as they are characteristics of the mythic wasteland or nightmare world through which the comic heroes travel toward rebirth.

It is not long before Mr. Head, trying to show that he knows his way around, gets them both lost and strays into a Negro neighborhood. They grow increasingly nervous as they wander, watched from all sides by black eyes in black faces, until finally Nelson gets up the courage to ask directions from a large black woman, despite the warning to beware of dark women which he has received from a comically sibylline weighing machine. His experience is overwhelming, showing in its violent release of unknown passions that the demonic world into which they have journeyed partly represents their own demonic natures which suddenly erupt to break their feelings of self-control…

Whereas before he had recoiled in fascinated terror from the dark, gurgling sewers, he now correspondingly longs to be pulled into a parallel darkness, to lose himself in a pitch-black tunnel. The explicit sexuality, with its suggestion of the dark mother enfolding her child, seems at first a strange intrusion into a story in which there is little preparation for, or subsequent development of, a sexual theme. But the experience is nevertheless valid in the mythic pattern; when the lord of misrule breaks the social or psychological order, bringing about either a festive or destructive comic release, there is usually an eruption of repressed erotic forces such as this boy's unsuspected desires. Miss O'Connor later dealt more extensively with the theme in 'Greenleaf,' where she developed the connections among sexuality, the desire to destroy the repressive self, and a sublimated longing for the infinite. Here, she briefly touches upon the subject, but implies its meanings through the symbolic connections of this scene and other incidents in this demonic journey.

When they begin to follow streetcar tracks back toward the railroad station, they seem about to escape from their dark imprisonment. However, when Nelson falls asleep during a rest stop on this walk, the insecure Mr. Head, whose authority has been damaged by the trip, decides to teach Nelson another lesson by hiding from him. The boy awakens alone, runs down the street in a panic, and collides with an old woman who claims to have suffered a broken ankle and calls for the police. Surrounded by a crowd of strange women and terrified at the thought of the police, Mr. Head denies his own image and likeness and claims he has never seen the boy before. The shocked women allow the man and the boy to leave, but the treachery has broken the relationship between them, leaving the old man in disgrace and loneliness, cut off from the only thing outside of himself that he cares for. For the lost and lonely old man the scene becomes entirely a wasteland: the street seems a 'hollow tunnel,' the houses are 'partially submerged icebergs'…and as the sun sets there is no one else in sight in the elegant suburb they have entered. Finally, the grandfather sees a passerby, and he shouts out his literal and metaphorical confession: 'Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!'

Given directions, they proceed toward a train station, but Nelson no longer cares about home, and Mr. Head knows now 'what time would be like without seasons and heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation.' This state is a symbolic hell, a feeling of complete estrangement from God, which is also an estrangement from others and oneself…. The boasting pretender in Mr. Head (and to some extent in Nelson) has been defeated and cast out, leaving for the moment the despair of recognized emptiness. Miss O'Connor frequently ends her stories at this point, when the 'old man' has been destroyed and the advent of the 'new man' made more probable. In this story she completes the comic pattern and, with a second climax, brings about the rebirth.

No other incident in Miss O'Connor's work is so complex and ironic in its implications, so resistant to a simple allegorical reading, and yet so symbolically precise as this second reversal. The two characters come upon a plaster lawn statue of a Negro, who looks too miserable to be young or old: 'He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead.' Confronted by what seems to them 'some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat,' they are reconciled, and Mr. Head feels what mercy is. Probably the most common interpretation of this scene is that the statue is a sign which shows the characters that all men are incomplete and suffering. The point seems valid, since Nelson is thereby relieved of his self-righteous resentment and Mr. Head's preoccupation with his suffering is relaxed. Yet this reading does not exhaust the suggestiveness of the scene. Mercy involves compassion and forgiveness, which in Christianity are centered in the Crucifixion and Redemption, and this symbolic agent of mercy suggests Christ, who took upon himself man's sin and pain.

Thus, Mr. Head and Nelson would sense not only that all men are as the figure but also that God, too, became that chipped and miserable creature, man. The characters' recognition of their own inadequacies is only part of the process toward the final religious insights; they must also be able to believe that they are accepted, although unworthy. Mr. Head has already undergone a sacrifice of his proud self in this comic pattern of death and rebirth. Now he must also sense the sacrifice made for him by God, who became a scapegoat to enable man's rebirth. The characters cannot fully analyze what they sense in the experience, and their explanations are oblique, while revealing.

When Nelson seems to implore his grandfather to explain once and for all the mystery of existence, the old man tries to seem wise and hears himself say, 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have a artificial one.' Suiting Mr. Head's character, the explanation is given in terms of his fear and scorn of Negroes and of city people who live with them. But at a deeper level, of which he is certainly not conscious, it also scorns those who make idols of man's own broken nature, and increase man's suffering. Thus, the statue has many conflicting meanings for them, for they have many conflicting attitudes, including religious insights and demonic fears. The statue is for them a symbol of incomplete man and of redeeming God; it is the mystery in existence which they have tried to deny in their arrogance but which has defeated them through the city, the dark woman, and their own submerged impulses; it is the epitome of the city itself with its idolatry, loneliness, and misery; and it is the object of Mr. Head's superstitious, fearful bigotry, which comes from his insecurity and pride.

When the old man and the boy return home, the moon again has been 'restored to its full splendor,' and Mr. Head no longer fancies it to be heightening his grandeur. Instead, as he is again touched by mercy, he understands that 'no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own,' that God's mercy grows out of agony, and that he is 'forgiven for sins from the beginning of time.' Experiencing the greatness of God's love and forgiveness, he feels ready to enter paradise…. Miss O'Connor is not arbitrarily manipulating her character and plot to suit her belief in grace…. She is merely formulating those insights better than Mr. Head could do and in contexts of which he has not shown any awareness before…[explaining] what he senses but could not so thoroughly explain….

The final insights are not only justified by the whole story, they are demanded by it. Psychologically, Mr. Head and Nelson, despite their bravado, are desperately insecure throughout. Despite their claims to be in control, they have persistent feelings of awe, fear, and wonder; despite their feigned independence, they are very dependent on each other. After his pride has been destroyed, Mr. Head becomes aware of these feelings and his sinful denial of them, and he sees them in religious terms, which are in effect the ultimate

terms in which these psychological and moral questions can be formulated. Structurally, the conclusion fulfills the basic comic pattern…. After…confusion, passion, unmasking, and despair, Mr. Head returns home with greater humanity and awareness.

He is no longer as comically compulsive or as demonically bound, since the chaotic release has brought about a higher order. He is no longer so estranged from himself, so distorted by imbalanced and unrecognized impulses; nor is he estranged from Nelson, whom he had loved but whom he also had used as an object for his own pride; nor is he as estranged from God, for whom he had not felt a need. The conclusion of mythic comedy and the working of grace both bring not only greater joy, but also an expanded sense of reality, greater harmony, and a freer, more complete humanity."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 84-91

"Like Hawthorne, she portrayed the separation of heart from head (the synecdochic Mr. Head in 'The Artificial Nigger' is a notable example), but the values of the heart, or of the soul, did not mean for O'Connor, as they did for Hawthorne, communion with one's fellow but, rather, communion with God. And her works are full of images of isolation which are also images of positive spiritual value—the rustic sanctuary of the Heads in 'The Artificial Nigger,' for example… Though on a smaller scale, the story's basic structure—a journey from home ending in a transformation and return to home—is…the same as that underlying both of the novels…. The story is a miniature Pilgrim's Progress…in the…progressive stages of the soul's ascent to God that are implied in the dramatic narrative: from pride to confusion to denial to despair to grace and, finally, to redemption….

Its protagonists are a pair of Georgia backwoods characters who, in spite of—or perhaps because of—their failings, endear themselves to the reader…. Old Mr. Head and Nelson become almost lovable…. They are given a moment of grace at the end that reunites them after their sundering…. Although a deeply felt love and mutual dependence anchor the relationship between Mr. Head and Nelson, it is masked by much cantankerous caviling (old Tarwater and his grandnephew will echo this odd symbiosis). The chief matter of their rivalry is over who knows more about the world… Yet the question of knowing the city soon comes down to the question of knowing the Negro…. There are three specific encounters with 'the Negro,' and each presents a different experience and a new knowledge to the two travelers.

[1] The first takes place on the train to the city… [Nelson] feels he has been deliberately fooled and (here O'Connor's psychology seems flawless) he hates the Negro fiercely and…understands why his grandfather hates them…. [2] The second confrontation with 'Negro' [is] when Nelson is urged to ask directions from a 'large colored woman leaning in a doorway'…. Face to face with the woman, Nelson experiences what amounts to a vicarious initiation into 'dark' sexuality… It shows Nelson reacting again in his instinctively ignorant human way to "Negro'…. In his recoil from the woman, he takes hold of Mr. Head's hand with a childish dependency…. [3] The last genus of 'Negro' occurs when Mr. Head and Nelson have reached the all-time nadir in their relationship…. In a moment of monumental weakness, [Mr. Head] denies knowing his grandson, who all this time has been clinging to him…. In a moment, whatever superiority to Nelson he might have claimed is destroyed; his life is overturned…

The dissolution of their relationship into guilt and hostility amounts to the dissolution of their entire world… Their postures before the statue—each a paradox of youth and age—shows them united, one to the other, and both to the 'artificial nigger'…. Both are of course ignorant of the statue's merely ornamental significance; instead, they see in it the symbolic meaning that, through a grotesque metamorphosis, it has taken on…. It is in a…sense—gained from their common experience of misery, defeat, and betrayal—that they now both feel united to the 'man' before them. (It is a characteristic pattern in O'Connor's fiction to abolish racial or social or even property distinctions in the face of the democracy of misery.)… The 'victory' represented by the monument is, in one sense, the victory of the white 'homeowner' thus symbolized in the model of the defeated Negro abjectly gracing the front of his house; but in a larger sense, it is the victory of evil that is inevitable in the fallen world….

One cannot fail to note the analogy of the crucifix and the statue that O'Connor implies: Christ's death, too…was a victory of evil. And yet—the paradox of Christianity—it is also the victory of good, of the redemption: for through that sacrificial death, salvation was brought into the world. And that is precisely the effect of the statue of the Negro on Mr. Head and Nelson…. Reunited, they go back home—'before we get ourselves lost again,' as Nelson says. Their return is unambiguously a return from a fallen world to a world of grace, and O'Connor does not spare the imagery of an enclosing garden (compare the etymology of 'paradise') and a luminous world…. The train which had carried them to the moral crucible of the city glides past them and disappears, 'like a frightened serpent into the woods.' Paradise regained, the Fall—if once is enough—can be called a fortunate one…. The root meaning of the 'artificial nigger' to Nelson and Mr. Head lies in its being not an image of Negro suffering but an image of common human misery."

Miles Orvell
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 42, 152-58

"The opening of the story suggests…spiritual reality by its description of the 'miraculous moonlight' which charges the old man's rustic bedroom with grandeur. It transforms the wooden floor boards into silver… The day will unfold to Mr. Head the spiritual reality which silvers all of life: the mercy of God. That same reality will also be grasped—in a measure suited to his capacity—by the boy. But each must be readied; each must be purged of his pride.

Mr. Head has the pride of Adam…. He knows himself to be 'a suitable guide for the young'…. During the train ride to the city, he lords it over Nelson, even to demonstrating the ice water cooler 'as if he had invented it.' Only after he is in the city for awhile and he realizes that he has lost both their lunch sack and the direction back to the station does his confidence weaken…. Fear of reprisal for the boy's misdeed grips him—the same fear which forced the apostle Peter to say, 'I do not know the man'….

Nelson has only one cause for pride: he was born in the city…. His experiences on the train make him cling to his grandfather with uncharacteristic dependence…. But during the day's journey, as he becomes aware of his grandfather's insecurity in the city, his independence reasserts itself…. The boy's humility moves into hatred…. He, too, is ready for a revelation of what forgiveness means. The agent of revelation is an 'artificial nigger' on a front lawn…. Both the offender and the offended 'could feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.' Words fail Mr. Head… When he tries 'to explain once and for all the mystery of existence,' he hears himself saying, 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.' In some distorted way, this statement attributes value to the Negro race, which, through the day, Mr. Head had been demeaning to Nelson….

When the travelers return home, the moonlight reappears, silvering the grass… Each has become aware of a new reality. Mr. Head, 'an ancient child,' understands the mercy of God; Nelson, 'a miniature old man,' has experienced a lifetime of emotions—carnal desire and treachery and hate and mercy. Each has led the other to wisdom…. Both teacher and pupil are initiated into the mystery of spiritual reality….The story illuminates natural and supernatural reality conjoined in the 'artificial nigger'."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 121-23

"Quest…is the basic metaphor of action in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. It is the spirit that animates her work… This story ["Parker's Back"] ranks with 'The Displaced Person' and 'The Artificial Nigger' as her greatest…. Head and Nelson…make a pilgrimage into a Dantesque hell in order to receive grace…. Nelson senses the presence of grace in a suffering statue… There are, as Evelyn Underhill pointed out in her classic study of mysticism, various stages in the mystical way. These include the awakening of the will, the purification of self, illumination, the dark night of the soul, and union…. All these stages can be detected in O'Connor's fiction, although the overall pattern, except in perfect allegories like 'The Artificial Nigger,' is never as rigid as Underhill's framework suggests… They lead to confrontations with God or with Satan….

The full complexity and elegance of this tale…is framed in terms of a journey which takes an old man and a boy on an allegorical quest which is based largely on Miss O'Connor's close reading of Dante… Her narrative is a peculiarly modern journey to hell and back, and it is replete with the sort of ludicrousness and horror which many contemporary writers discover in city life. The awakening of self begins in a moon-flooded room where Mr. Head and Nelson are preparing for their journey to Atlanta. The purpose of the awakening of the self is, of course, to develop an awareness of the relationship between man and God, and more often than not this apprehension of the relationship requires an *objective correlative*, a function served by the presence of the Negro in the story. It is the Negro, evident from the moment that Nelson and Head board the train for Atlanta, who forces the protagonists to recognize suffering and guilt and the need of redemptive grace. [Italics added]

At the beginning of the story both Head and his grandson have disembodied notions of the Negro, since Head has rarely encountered one and the boy has yet to see one. The old man associates the Negro with evil, and he intends to use Nelson's ignorance of the Negro as a weapon to force humility upon the child. Just as Virgil alerted Dante to the dangers of hell, so Head warns his grandson of the evils of the city which, he avers, will be 'full of niggers'; but Nelson, whose hat is literally too big for him, disdains such advice. Thus it is obvious that both characters are alerted to the significance of the Negro, and the entire story then sets out to explore the enigmas of the subject.

As their journey progresses Nelson and Head move through a world that is claustrophobic and puzzling. Like creatures trapped in a maze, they move through a curiously concentric topography which prevents them from advancing and which intensifies their disorientation. This motif, which again is reminiscent of the trapped souls in Dante's hell, begins when Head, in an attempt to maintain a sense of direction by keeping the dome of the train terminal in sight, inadvertently circles the area. Once this circular geography is established, Head and Nelson move through a constricted series of circles that lead them deeper and deeper into this metropolitan inferno.

Finally, toward the end of the story, the circular pattern is reiterated when they enter an exclusive suburban area and discover that the drives 'wound around and around in endless ridiculous circles.' It is this circular pattern of movement that permits Miss O'Connor to render the increasing physical and spiritual disorientation of the characters. As they wander through endless tunnel-like streets which Head figuratively associates with hell, they are subjected to a variety of purifying forces —hunger, heat, and terrifying creatures (including a Medusa-like Negress who turns Nelson to stone)—designed to prepare them for the ultimate moment of illumination.

Movement toward blessedness is excruciating. As they struggle through the city, totally estranged from their environment because of their loss of hope, they encounter a fat man with two bulldogs, a grotesque metamorphosis of the conductor whom they met on the train, who gives them spiritual directions. Having experienced the depths of the dark night of the soul, Nelson and Head are now prepared to receive the mercy of God. This moment of mercy comes when they encounter the artificial nigger… The statue is a revelation: it is inscrutable and mysterious, a symbol of universal suffering. Standing before it, Nelson and Head are literally transformed: 'Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man.' Both of them are forced to confess to the ultimate mystery of things; both do penance and are purified. The earlier allusion in the story of Raphael coming to Tobiah is now clear: the grandfather and grandson have been taught to rely on God's aid, and His power has been made manifest.

Action in a story like 'The Artificial Nigger' is decidedly grotesque: it reveals a sensitivity to those disruptions of modern life which alienate man from his world and from grace. The story—perhaps the most perfect allegory of quest in American literature since Hawthorne wrote 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux'—expands from a seemingly realistic narrative of journey to a rounded conception of tragic isolation and moral and spiritual decay. In the end…man…is given a way of saving himself. The idea of voyage, emphasizing suffering, penance, and piety, thus becomes Flannery O'Connor's ideal form of narrative action. Employed as a metaphor in her fiction, it suggests that all life is essentially a pilgrimage, horrible and dangerous, moving always toward the terrors of damnation or the safety of blessedness.

On a purely literal level many of Miss O'Connor's stories trace quests through a world which is potentially chaotic. But at the [allegorical] level they are journeys involving death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Ultimately the grotesque quest is concerned with these last things; in a story like 'The Artificial Nigger,' these concerns are treated with remarkable concision and deftness, and the story is great in consequence.

As pilgrims Nelson and Head recognize their sins, public and private, and learn to cooperate with grace. The image which they and their counterparts in other stories leave us with is of a geography, a journey of the soul. All of O'Connor's characters remind us that our lives are a pilgrimage—and that we go to heaven, or hell, by walking on real roads."

Gilbert H. Muller
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 54-55, 60, 71-75, 114

"'The Artificial Nigger' effectively illustrates O'Connor's use of the 'snowball' technique…. In [Henri] Bergson's discussion of the elements of comedy, he notes the 'snowball technique' as a familiar comic device; in it, a universe of comic but relatively stable values is gradually threatened and then rapidly overturned in a scene of wild disorder. O'Connor employs a similar 'snowball' effect in many of her stories, but in her narrations the issues are so serious and the impetus so great that the snowball seems to carry the action past the point of comedy into the realm of tragedy. The disaster serves as the pivot of the action, swinging the focus swiftly from the comic to the tragic….

Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson undergo a series of disturbing but amusing experiences in the city before the wild scene erupts which leads to the startling betrayal of the boy by his grandparent. This crucial scene is carefully paced in a sequence of ever mounting tensions: first, the calm of Nelson sleeping, then the old man's hiding himself in order to play a trick on the boy; Nelson's awakening and tearing wildly down the street, like a panicked animal; the pursuing grandfather discovering the confused scene which results from Nelson's collision with the lady shopper; Nelson's frantically turning to his grandfather for help; and, as the culmination, the patriarch's shocking rejection of his terrified grandson. Thus, the action moves rapidly from the level of foolish deception to serious betrayal—what begins as a game ends in a traumatic disruption of an important human relationship….

Knowing the black is equated with worldly sophistication; and the journey to the city is, among other things, a tentative initiation into acquaintance with the race. For the white boy Nelson, the journey is the archetypal voyage into experience… Mr. Head…who is convinced that the city holds nothing of merit, intends the trip to be an instruction in humility for Nelson so that he will no longer boast of his superiority arising out of his cosmopolitan origin. It is, of course, Mr. Head who is instructed as a result of the city experience. The story is basically a study in pride (his), of its humbling, and of his ultimate forgiveness through the operation of divine mercy….

The first black man Nelson encounters appears on the train…. [Nelson] proves totally incapable of interpreting this experience, for he fails to recognize that the dark man is a black at all…. Nelson here is introduced to the curious convention whereby various shades of skin and gradations of blood are classed under the single category of 'Negro'…. In the city…Nelson approaches a woman to ask directions; now, instead of being repelled as he had been by the man on the train, he finds himself pulled toward her by some strange magnetic force. Nelson, the motherless child, responds instinctively to the maternal attractions of the black woman; but her attitude is mocking, superior; and after her explanations, the two whites are left as lost as before….

Nelson, losing sight of his grandfather, runs in panic and knocks an elderly woman to the ground. When Mr. Head reappears, Nelson clings to him in terror, but Mr. Head announces to the startled crowd, 'This is not my boy…. I never seen him before.' Nelson is appalled by his grandfather's rejection, and Mr. Head is miserably aware of the magnitude of his failure…. Their reconciliation occurs through a black man, not a real one but an imitation figure used as a lawn decoration. As they stare in mystified silence, Mr. Head delivers the pronouncement, 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.'

Mr. Head's observation, irrelevant as it seems, is sufficient to heal the breach separating the estranged pair…. The child is obviously grateful to have his elder returned to the position of wisdom. The scorn of the statue that is implicit in Mr. Head's observation epitomizes the contempt which the two visitors feel toward the city itself, the large world which they can neither comprehend nor cope with. *Through their rejection of the battered figure, they reassert their own superiority to all the dwellers of the 'nigger heaven,' and they claim once more their own identities which have been so badly assailed in the unfamiliar realm….* [Italics added: This interpretation is contrary to the evidence.] Mr. Head…discovers not only the depravity resident in his own soul but also the bounty of grace that permits foregiveness….

Mr. Head…recognizes that his reconciliation with Nelson in the city occurs 'like an action of mercy.' At their homecoming, he again is moved by a sense of the divine spirit descending…. Through the miraculous agency of divine mercy, Mr. Head is reconciled—to God and to the unfortunate grandson he has so ignobly betrayed…. The story is one of instruction to mercy, without which man would be forever exiled to the realms of spiritual oblivion and perpetual despair."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 33, 106-07, 118-121

"From Mr. Head's point of view, the narrative's subject is a child's initiation into the adult world of good and evil. In fact, the story's true impact derives not so much from the fall of a child into the morally ambiguous world of adult experience, as from the fall of his guide from boastful claims of virtual omniscience to acknowledgment of ignorance and spiritual poverty…. Mr. Head ['s] movement from proud self-sufficiency to despair to forgiveness and grace is more fully dramatized than that of any other character in the entire O'Connor corpus….

Mr. Head…pretends to knowledge of city life in order to maintain a tenuous supremacy over the excessively independent and self-willed boy. As the first paragraphs reveals, however, the grandson's inordinate faith in the sufficiency of his unaided intellect is a reflection of the old man's own self-pride…. The moonlight, whose magic distorts as it illumines, gives us Mr. Head as he would like to think of himself…. Significantly, only the spot where Nelson lies beneath the window is untouched by the moon's light, indicating the limits of the old man's self-glorifying vision.

The flattering view of Mr. Head which the moonlight affords is, of course, presented ironically, since in the day's events he is to be both guide and principal initiate, discovering through the agency of the boy (whom he insists on patronizing) the abysmal vanity of his pride and the overpowering force of God's mercy. The irony is magnified when we learn that Nelson, though only ten, manages so to plague his grandfather with dogmatic declarations of his knowledge and competence that the old man is genuinely threatened by the boy's assertiveness and must counterattack with the suggestion that, because of his limited experience, Nelson will quite likely not recognize a Negro when he sees one….

Mr. Head's declared intention, in undertaking his 'moral mission,' is to introduce Nelson to the 'evil' city, which the old man can then claim to have encompassed in his infinite wisdom and dismissed as a mere 'nigger heaven.' In this way, he assures himself, he can return home with the boy's ego deflated. Hence it is with the utmost consternation that Mr. Head views Nelson's enthusiastic response to the metropolis, and he moves swiftly to dampen his fervor by pointing out to him the city's 'sinister' side—its system of sewers, 'endless pitchblack tunnels' into which a person might be sucked without warning. In the frame of reference established by the earlier comparison of Mr. Head and Virgil, the bowels of the city immediately call to mind Dante's Inferno. It is Nelson himself who 'connect[s] the sewer passages with the entrance to hell'… The two of them become lost, and Mr. Head must suffer the humiliation of his grandson's accusations as the boy mutters from time to time, 'First you lost the sack [containing their lunch] and then you lost the way'….

[After Nelson knocks down the black woman] Mr. Head's denial has been compared to the denial of Christ by Judas and Peter but clearly involved also is a denial of part of Mr. Head himself. Not only is Nelson flesh of his flesh…and also his 'image and likeness'; he is—and this is more essential—a living embodiment of Mr. Head's intellectual pride and moral boasting. Hence the old man's denial of the boy is

tantamount to the death of that aspect of himself which Nelson represents. As his former, presumably self-sufficient ego perishes…Mr. Head begins to experience the reality of damnation. The Dantesque overtones of this experience are evoked when he encounters suburban drives which wind 'around and around in endless ridiculous circles.' Mr. Head's feeling of perdition becomes so intense that he imagines himself being sucked, willingly, into one of the sewer entrances.

With Nelson's eyes penetrating his back 'like pitchfork prongs,' Mr. Head attempts to heal the broken relationship by offering to buy a Coca Cola (an obvious simulation of the communion rite), but Nelson responds with a reproachful stare…. As if providentially timed, Mr. Head and Nelson undergo an experience imbued with mystical overtones; and it is out of this common experience that Mr. Head receives the real answer to his prayer. On the edge of a lawn before them, Mr. Head spies a battered plaster statue of a Negro… 'An artificial nigger.' His words are repeated by Nelson with precisely the same intonation and at this moment the old man and his other self, his 'likeness and image,' seem to blend and to be united again in the mutuality of their apprehension of a mystifying OTHER…. So profound is this shared moment of grace that Mr. Head and Nelson appear to exchange places with one another, the isolated and alienated ego of each joining itself to that of the other as they undergo what is a virtual death and rebirth…

The Negro comes to stand for Nelson's general ignorance of the world…. What is perhaps most significant…about Nelson's response to the Negro woman is the sense of wonder evoked in him by that which is fundamentally different, that which by its strangeness and compelling 'thereness'—in this case, WOMAN, MOTHER, NEGRO—shatters his narrow, self-contained view of reality. This experience, together with the morning's events on the train, provides the basis for Nelson's response to the 'artificial nigger.' Since all of his expectations concerning Negroes have been frustrated by contact with real ones, the discovery that there are also 'artificial' ones implies a world far more mysterious than he had dreamt possible. In the face of this final mystery, both Nelson and Mr. Head are confounded and made equal by this 'monument to another's victory,' and, as equalizer, the statue becomes a medium of grace.

The marvelous appropriateness of this—that the Negro, a traditional symbol in the American South of inequality among men, should be the agent of effecting an acknowledgement of essential human equality—can scarcely be exaggerated. And that it should be a chipped plaster figure, with 'a wild look of misery,' which serves as the agent of human reconciliation and as a sign of the magnitude of God's mercy is appropriate also. For this 'crucified' Negro, made of clay and grotesque in the contrast of its intended expression of happiness and its actual look of affliction, constitutes an analogue of the Christian belief that the lowly, the despised, the insignificant ('the least of these') may well be the chosen means of divine revelation."

Preston M. Browning, Jr.
Flannery O'Connor
(Southern Illinois U 1974) 60-69, 71

"'The Artificial Nigger' is an extraordinarily nuanced parable, built on a Dantean frame of images, which dramatizes a theme analogous to the Greek tragic motif that wisdom comes through suffering. The action of mercy, O'Connor proposes, grows out of agony….

A specific lesson that he wants Nelson to learn is that 'the city is not a great place'; in the language of prejudice, the only one that Mr. Head knows, the boy must see that the city is a 'nigger heaven' and afterwards 'be content to stay at home for the rest of his life. The actual object of Mr. Head's 'moral lesson' is to convince his grandson of the superiority of his knowledge. 'Only with years,' Mr. Head feels, 'does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young.' But Nelson, 'a child who was never satisfied until he had given an impudent answer,' can hardly imagine his grandfather's 'third trip' to the city as a sufficiently impressive record to qualify him for the role of sage… 'I will've already been there twict and I ain't but ten,' he boasts. The pride of age is pitted against the perversity of youth…. Convinced that Nelson does not even know what a Negro is (there has not been one in their country for twelve years), Mr. Head asks the boy to identify 'a huge coffee-colored man' passing in the aisle. He makes successive guesses of 'a man,' 'a fat man,' and 'an old man,' before his grandfather announces triumphantly, 'That was a nigger'—a brilliant illustration of the psychological truth that one has to be educated to prejudice.

Confronted by 'the artificial nigger,' the story's potent symbol, Nelson and Mr. Head exchange mutual words of self-revelation and forgiveness. Their own torment is projected perfectly into the 'wild look of misery' that 'the chipped eye' and 'angle he was cocked at' gave the lawn statuette. Mr. Head equivalently confesses awareness of his personal sin of disdain by rejecting the agonizing excess of discrimination. There is as little need to call a man 'a nigger,' he realizes, as there is to add artificial misery to all that exists already. 'They ain't got enough real ones here,' he says, 'they got to have an artificial one.' This excess is a denial of reality just as his excessive desire to prove his superiority to Nelson was a denial of his common bond with ignorant humanity. Nelson responds with a corresponding acceptance of his genuine limitations: 'Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again.' Once home, and grateful for the experience of mercy, he renounces his perverse title to the 'other' visit to the city. 'I'm glad I've went once,' he mutters, 'but I'll never go back again!'

They had both claimed to possess knowledge of the city which they did not have; they leave it with an awareness of mercy even though they had been lost in sin. The action of mercy that the story dramatizes so effectively is the experience of forgiveness, the agony that is the root of forgiveness is the prior acknowledgment of shared fault."

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 76-80

"It tells a story of common events in the lives of ordinary people, and manages nonetheless to make the experience of grace apparent… The story began with an image, and O'Connor's imagination worked from this toward construction of a narrative that would reveal the importance of the black plastic lawn fixture…. [However,] the story begins very far from the middle-class lawns where such statuary is usually to be found in the South.

The sojourn in the city is, in effect, a descent into hell for both of them; they spend hours bleakly confronting their own ignorance and, finally, their alienation from each other. In establishing the isolation and disgrace that overcome these two, in portraying their loss of innocence, O'Connor is masterful, for it is the depth of this domestic despair that measures the joyousness of their final reunion…. The pivotal event…is Mr. Head's denial of Nelson. Young and eager to convince his grandfather of his independence, the boy had annoyed the old man with the reminder that he had been born in the city and that he was, in fact, returning to it. To Mr. Head, this is nonsense; he wants the boy to recognize the vanity of city life and, conversely, to understand his own will and strong character….

At the boy's moments of greatest vulnerability, the old man deserts him: first, he hides when the boy wakes from an exhausted nap; then, when the child has upset a woman's groceries by his panicked response to solitude, Mr. Head denies his kinship: 'This is not my boy… I never seen him before.' In the remainder of the story, O'Connor leads her audience as Mr. Head had never been able to lead young Nelson. She indicates the spiritual dilemma of both man and boy in ways that would not have occurred to them, in language beyond their command. Nelson becomes a mute zombie, unreachable by the normal human gestures of reconciliation. Silent and disconsolate, he drags behind Mr. Head, who experiences increasingly the horror of his denial.

The author enters the mind of her character, not only revealing but reformulating the emotions that surface therein. Mr. Head wants to fall into the sewers and be swept away in the disgusting elements that mirror his soul; he sees his future as a hollow tunnel; he knows that he is 'wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end.' This inner malaise is so relentlessly disclosed that when the old man calls to a fat suburbanite in bermuda shorts 'Oh Gawd, I'm lost!,' his cry expresses a despairing displacement of soul…

It is at this point that O'Connor intercedes, exposing the artificial nigger, the motivating image of her story, in a context that is heavy with latent emotion. The old man and boy stand amazed before this chipped piece of statuary…. It is an object as strange to Nelson and Mr. Head as it was initially to O'Connor that

bridges the spiritual alienation of the man and boy. There is no aura of portentous allusion surrounding the object; *it does not represent anything other than itself.* [?] But it functions uniquely in the lives of the protagonists, enabling them to forgive and be forgiven…. [Italics added]

There is no room for a reader's misinterpretation here, for as so infrequently happens in O'Connor's work, *nothing is left to inference*…. A statement of faith is easier for an agnostic reader to accept than O'Connor's usual tendency toward oblique insult, which ensues from the intimation that her fictional world is fraught with portentous meanings that we could see if only we were not such monstrous readers, and too limited to understand." [Italics added. This irritated agnostic critic applauds direct statement of faith in this story while condemning it in her analysis of "Parker's Back."]

Carol Shloss
"Epiphany"
Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference
(Louisiana State 1980)

"This is the light of grace [sunset at the end of "Revelation"], and it appears again at another sunset situated between the city and the country at the end of 'The Artificial Nigger.' There Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, after the small Inferno of their day in Atlanta, discover in the accidental image of suffering in a dilapidated statue of a Negro the 'action of mercy.' What is powerful in O'Connor is her ability to create the *presence* of Christ and grace felt through and beyond the world of nature.

How she does this is the problem and the secret of her art, and it is an art that is Gothic [imprecise] and that depends, fully, on its situation on one of the frontiers of our culture. Herman Melville wrote in *The Confidence-Man*, 'it is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.' O'Connor, like Melville, presents another world of white trash, black niggers, freaks, lunatics—in a word, a world of 'good country people'—which is tied to ours yet strangely literal in its very landscape and language. That tie with our world is the tie with what she calls the 'action of mercy,' and in her best work it is 'tied' through her metaphoric language becoming literal.

Love is the burden of 'The Artificial Nigger': 'face to face with a broken-down statue of a Negro, Mr. Head and his grandson are 'faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together on their common defeat' so that they 'both feel it dissolving their differences *like an action of mercy*.' This encounter creates a sense of humility for Mr. Head until, three paragraphs later, 'he stood appalled …while *the action of mercy* covered his pride like a flame and consumed it.' In the course of these paragraphs (and in the course of Mr. Head's experience), simile is rendered as assertion until, before our eyes, grace manifests itself, the action of mercy, the secret cause, appears…. This is the 'secret cause' that Joyce speaks of, a sense of God's presence and love in the heart of Mr. Head. But what is remarkable about this passage, I believe, is that we never question the fact that the realization described—its language and its theology—is simply beyond the frontier language and evangelical Christianity of Mr. Head. (Head, hick that he is, believes that an inferno underlies Atlanta and fears to be sucked down the sewer: he literalizes his own metaphor… What reveals itself here is grace, and…grace includes the ability to see and to understand another language.

This language is that of sympathy: the passage suggests that Head can only understand the 'secret cause'—here the sin of Adam—by experiencing the agony of his own egocentric denial of 'poor Nelson.' Mr. Head is not truly a part of the world he lives in…and his struggle, like…our own, is to find some connection in a world that simply seems alien, other, without human response. It is a world, as the Misfit says in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' in which, without an answering Jesus, there's no pleasure but meanness, 'no real pleasure in life'—a world in which, as O'Connor says, we are native and alien. How to discover a human response in such a world is the great problem: Mr. Head can, as he has done all his life, depend on himself and his ability to give 'lessons' and be a 'suitable guide for the young,' or he can discover, in terror or in love, but above all in humility, supernatural forces outside himself that lead him to other human sufferers who can respond to himself."

Ronald Schleifer
"Rural Gothic"
Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

"A rural grandfather and grandson's trip to the big city, a tale of initiation, betrayal, and reconciliation… The name they share reflects their fiercely comic competitiveness based on common characteristics: their pride and independence, their willfulness… It is a polished and accomplished story, both…local and archetypal, convincing as experience and resonant in its metaphorical suggestions….

Very closely associated with the blacks and with the city is O'Connor's use of the Dantean imagery of hell…. The bulldogs recall the metaphorical Cerberus who ushered them into this journey, the train conductor 'with the face of an ancient bloated bulldog'… The journey to the city as a descent into hell reaches its climax with Mr. Head's absurd description of the urban sewer system…. The allusions that seem to turn the trip to Atlanta into a journey to the underworld are a projection of the old man's assumptions into the exterior landscape of the story….

As the action unfolds, Mr. Head's experience and wisdom are both unmasked as fraudulent; he knows neither the city nor himself…. Mr. Head…has proudly refused all knowledge of his own deeper impulses, and when his test comes he fails it—and Nelson—at once. Immediately he senses his entrance into a genuine inner hell…. His betrayal has converted the boy into his private demon, with eyes that pierce the old man 'like pitchfork prongs'… Nelson's frozen vision of hatred is objectified in the setting of houses like icebergs… The association of white, cold, and the head or conscious self is projected into the landscape just before the encounter with the statue, for in an elegant suburb the 'big white houses were like partially submerged icebergs in the distance.' But it is the blackness, warmth and mystery that triumphs as the little Negro statue dissolves Nelson's hatred, a melting revealed only by 'a strange shivering about his mouth'…. That Nelson cannot…resist the 'nigger' within himself rescues both the boy and his grandfather from the coldness of his proud contempt….

Facing the little statue, they become mirrors of it—and of each other…. From the perspective opened by the statue, a perspective that ultimately teaches beyond time altogether, the ordinary human measurements of youth and age and of such pretensions as wisdom collapse…. Both of them feel the common human need to reestablish the old man's wisdom [and] Mr. Head's attempt to make a lofty statement brings him to full self-awareness: he '*heard himself say*, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.' (Italics added) 'Judging himself with the thoroughness of God,' Mr. Head acquires genuine wisdom only at the end of the story, but it is the wisdom of his own humility.

One of the story's central antitheses is the racial one of black and white, a dichotomy established immediately by the use of the loaded term *nigger* in the title. O'Connor makes no pretense of exploring racial relationships here—the Heads themselves are the sole white characters of any importance, and only two Negro figures are at all individualized—but the use of conventional southern attitudes is essential to the shaping of her tale. It is Mr. Head of course who insists on the black-white antithesis, but that dichotomy begins to break down with the appearance on the train of a 'coffee-colored' man. Although Nelson fails his grandfather's catechism to see whether the boy knows a 'nigger' when he sees one—a series of questions and answers that in itself reveals the values of an entire society—his protest points to the complexities that Mr. Head's racial pigeonholing conveniently ignores: '"You said they were black," he said in an angry voice. "You never said they were tan." Yet despite his ambiguous color, his elegant dress, his 'majestic' bearing…this imposing figure is reduced by Mr. Head to… "That was a nigger."

Deciding that 'the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him,' Nelson now believes he hates all of his race. But when, lost in the black section of town, they stop to ask directions of a Negro woman, he experiences a very different reaction…. She is of course the archetypal dark lady, the black temptress—'Beware of dark women,' his fortune from the weighing machine had warned—and the boy immediately feels intense shame at his involuntary reaction….as much to a maternal as to an erotic figure…abandonment of everything implied in the name *Head* for the sake of deeper, stronger feelings…. 'In Southern literature, the Negro, without losing his individuality, is a figure for our darker selves, our shadow side.' [O'Connor] With the emergence of the dark unacknowledged self…the racial black-white antithesis of 'The Artificial Nigger' finally collapses…. In the little statue, grandfather and grandson encounter the embodiment of the saving darkness in themselves, and the very freshness of the 'black light'

brought out by the moon that presides over their rural garden suggests that as they return home they have lost their original innocence for good….

Feeling intensely his own shame and Nelson's punishing hatred, the old man 'knew that now he was wandering into a *black* strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before' (Italics added). It is misery Mr. Head experiences, agony for the first time in his life, a suffering he recognizes incarnated in the little plaster statue…. Part of the victory Mr. Head senses in him has been the triumph over stereotype, his becoming a genuine monument to the true condition of the blacks—which is miserable…. Mr. Head is indeed driven to an acceptance of the guilty self he has refused to know, the projection of 'nigger' that the little statue both embodies and transforms, but rather than being integrated into his conscious identity, into all that is implied by *Head*, the new sense of self simply replaces the old. The 'action of mercy' released by the statue both reveals to the old man his true identity as 'a great sinner' and 'cover[s] his pride like a flame and consume[s] it.' In glimpsing both the divine love that comes from beyond the self and his own 'true depravity,' Mr. Head emerges from the story grasping the poles of a saving vision that has revealed to him his own incompleteness….

The Heads will not become liberals, they will still use the term *nigger*, they will remain backwoods yokels. O'Connor's devotion to the actual and the given is too firm, her sense of human limitations too strong to make a radical social metamorphosis credible to her…. Yet for all that, the Heads have been altered, even, in a sense, on the social level. Hearing his own absurd comment before the plaster statue, Mr. Head suddenly recognizes the shallow falseness of all he has claimed as his worldly wisdom, and Nelson has been forced to face not only his grandfather's weaknesses but his own limitations."

Frederick Asals
Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 81-91, 119

"Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson, in a state of profound alienation from one another, suddenly come up short before a piece of lawn statuary as familiar to us as it is foreign to their country experience…. At the outset of this extraordinary encounter O'Connor has her two characters confront themselves not as they would appear but as they are: broken, ridiculous, as wildly miserable as the dilapidated racist cliché in front of them. But somehow in the presence of the statue that likeness to one another, which has fuelled an ongoing rivalry between them throughout the story, becomes for the first time an opportunity for peace: the artificial Negro is a 'monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat.' Whose victory is that? We are not told, but are given instead a figure without form or comeliness, despised and rejected of men—what may be a grotesque image of the Crucified One.

At first glance this demeaning caricature of a black man is, like the cross, a symbol of human as well as historical defeat. And yet in the mystery of grace—the mystery into which the story draws us—that stumbling block and offense becomes as well a victory, uniting the two cantankerous Heads in their lostness. In that coming together it offers them forgiveness, as layers of enmity dissolve between them 'like an action of mercy.' O'Connor does not tell the reader that the artificial Negro is an image of Christ: rather, the power of the association lies in its being inherent and therefore unexpressed. We are not told what the statue means, we are only shown what it does. Meaning is inherent in narrative action, as well as in the resonance of such phrases as 'some great mystery,' 'action of mercy,' and 'the mystery of existence.' Christ's redemption is a *hidden* presence."

Peter S. Hawkins
The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch
(Cowley 1983) 36-38

"O'Connor's techniques in dealing with race are most subtle in this story, which defines Head's racist aversions toward the black community through a rich metaphoric process of repetitions that are clearly related to the then current theories about racism… O'Connor's art gradually develops the implications of Head's behavior so that we gain a greater understanding not only of the narcissistic parent but of the racist mind…. The racist's urge to establish control over blacks in order to prove white superiority is not unlike Head and Nelson's urges to outdo one another. Head repeatedly belittles Nelson by trying to demonstrate that older means smarter. He claims to be the more knowledgeable about the city and Negroes—a claim

developed throughout the story to emphasize the competitive nature of Head, who even worries about being the first one up on the morning of their trip….

A poignant truth underlies Head's claim to knowledge, the fact that he lives in an isolated shack probably in a sparsely populated, all-white, rural area. O'Connor knows that the most insidious kind of racism is sometimes found in the North, where deep-seated aversions develop without direct contact with blacks to contradict them. Although Head does not live in the North, the fact that Nelson has not yet been introduced to or even seen a Negro suggests a similar kind of isolation from and aversion to Negroes… Head's racism, then, develops an equation: city equals Negroes; city equals sewer and threat of engulfment; and Negroes equal darkness, dirt, sexual temptation, and death…

Head weeps when Nelson rejects his grandfather for abandoning him, but when the two travelers encounter the 'artificial nigger' and acknowledge the suffering he represents, they are mysteriously reconciled to each other. O'Connor in fact declares that the central black form in this story represents 'the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all,' a timeless Roman Catholic theme. *Nelson and Head's reconciliation does seem to be a redemptive moment: they recognize in the statue's 'wild look of misery,' the misery and sense of alienation they are currently suffering.* They become more or less reconciled to each other…. [Italics added]

And yet I would argue that Head's progress is diminished by the fact that Head and the white community he represents *still fail to respond to the suffering of the black community*. [This misses the point of the story.] Head and Nelson retreat to their segregated and isolated shack, while Nelson declares, 'I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again.' This, the last line of the story, indicates that the original purpose established at the very beginning has been fulfilled. Nelson conforms to his grandfather's will by changing from an independent self who declares he has been to the city 'twice' to a dependent self conforming to Head's view that the boy had only been to the city once and that the city and blacks ought to be avoided. Nelson's stature withers as he conforms to Head, who fails to overcome his racism and his narcissistic need to dominate his grandson….

We are…told that the artificial Negro is the *same* size as Nelson and that Nelson and Head see the *same* feeling of misery in his eyes as they feel…. Even though…they recognize that their own and the Negro's misery is the 'same,' and even though suffering reconciles them to each other, we must realize that what they suffer is not the 'same' as what blacks over the years have suffered. There are enormous 'differences' between the amount of suffering the artificial Negro represents and the amount of suffering the grandfather and grandson have experienced. Moreover, Head and Nelson's reunion represents a widening of the rift within the human community, a widening in the division between the two races, because Nelson adopts his grandfather's ideas…. *Head never acknowledges or overcomes his aversion to blacks or his narcissistic pride*, and his inadequacies are reemphasized when he returns with Nelson to the dominant white ranks of his isolated community." [Italics added]

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 75-82

"Mr. Head is a north Georgia primitive, inordinately proud but unaware of his limitations. Consequently, when he takes his young grandson, Nelson, to see Atlanta and black people for the first time (he himself has been there only three times), he fails in his roles both as a parent and as guide—first, abandoning the boy when he innocently stumbles into difficulty; then, having boasted grandly of wisdom and superior knowledge, managing to get them lost in the maze of Atlanta's streets.

For a time the two are estranged, with Nelson angry and hurt in his disillusionment and Mr. Head humiliated, but they come together at last in common astonishment before the plaster figure of a black boy sitting on a garden wall. 'They could both feel it dissolving their differences,' writes O'Connor, 'like an action of mercy.' Consequently, when Nelson's eyes plead for an explanation, Mr. Head hears himself saying, 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one." Where his words have come from, Mr. Head does not know, but the boy is reassured by his grandfather's ability to come up with an appropriate answer, and Mr. Head himself recovers a measure of his credibility. In this fashion…divine

grace has miraculously restored the harmony between the two and taught Mr. Head his perpetual need for a forgiveness that is abundant and always available even to prideful old men."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 152

Michael Hollister (2014)