

ANALYSIS

“The Comforts of Home” (1960)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“Thomas in ‘The Comforts of Home’ is too much absorbed in his own intellectual pursuits (history) to know the Devil when he sees him (or in this case, her). Thomas is inclined to look on the corruption of Star Drake (Sarah Ham) as innocent and ‘blameless’ ‘because there was no responsible faculty behind it.’ Star, who gives ‘the immediate impression of being physically crooked,’ has the look of blindness about her—‘the blindness of those who don’t know that they cannot see.’ But of course Thomas doesn’t really believe in the Devil anyhow. Christians might be reminded here of C. S. Lewis’ observation that it is the cleverest of the Devil’s many wiles to persuade us that he does not exist. When Thomas does reluctantly take up arms against this menace (largely to protect his own selfish love of home comforts), it is too late; and he is hoist with his own petard. One wonders here whether it is significant that Thomas is a historian. Miss O’Connor seems always to have a very healthy respect for history—not as something *dead* and romantic to escape from the ‘real’ world into (as Thomas tries to do) but as something very much a part of the present and very much *alive*.”

Robert Drake

Flannery O’Connor

(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 32

“‘The Comforts of Home’ exploits irony as tellingly as anything else in her fiction. The title, the character relationships, the style itself depend heavily on ironical juxtapositions. The ‘psychopathic personality’ of the girl, who is the unwilling and inactive protagonist of the story, is not quite advanced enough for the asylum; her nymphomaniac tendencies, on the other hand, do not quite suit her for the ways of Southern gentility. This is all explained in an appropriately ironical passage which has some of the cleverest turns of phrase in all of Flannery O’Connor: ‘The lawyer found that the story of the repeated atrocities was for the most part untrue...’ ‘Hazy charity’ heightens the effect which has been steadily built up in this passage; it is well placed in the final sentence to underscore the irony, the same kind of irony which Katherine Anne Porter achieves with a phrase like ‘sour gloom’.”

Melvin J. Friedman

The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor

eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson

(Fordham 1966, 1977) 20

“Thomas, an apostle of mediocrity, does not believe in the devil. If he has any religion, his credo centers upon his personal *status quo*. From a cruel, corrupt father, Thomas has inherited a dearth of compassion. When his mother rescues from prison and brings home a nymphomaniac, Thomas keeps insulting the girl, among other ways by calling her Sarah rather than Star, as she has renamed herself from a motive just the reverse of Joy Hopewell’s in calling herself Hulga (‘Good Country People’). His rejection of the Biblical practice of name-changing is indicative of his secularism.

Irony glitters in the fact that Star recalls the Epiphany, with its radiance drawing others to Christ, whereas Star herself (to Thomas, at least) has the appearance of the blind who don’t know they are blind. Her pet name for him, Tomsee, is also ironic, when there is so much that he definitely does not see.... He is compared to non-human creatures, a bull, a turtle. His lack of faith, except in the ‘virtue’ of moderation, contrasts with Star’s belief in God, the devil, and hell, even though she despairs of salvation.

As is frequent in Miss O’Connor’s fiction, when the characters are forced to realize through an epiphany the vile results of their actions, they undergo a reformation. In ‘The Comforts of Home’ (as wonderfully satiric a title as most in the two collections), this change as it is occurring is seen through the eyes of the sheriff, comically named Farebrother though he is anything but fair or brotherly.... Whatever the sheriff or

others may think, Thomas's mother has not died in vain. Thomas has put his hand into the Lord's wounded side."

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
"Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances"
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 161-62

"Thomas's mother's blind charity moves her to befriend Sarah Ham, a criminally inclined nymphomaniac whose parole from jail she requests and assumes responsibility for. Sarah Ham is a thoroughly depraved person, and the mother's failure to acknowledge that condition is one measure of her tragically shallow nature.... [Thomas's] belief in the virtue of moderation is as much self-righteous rationalization as his mother's generosity is poorly conceived good will. The complementary nature of their respective attitudes makes them a kind of unholy tweedledum and tweedledee.

Throughout the story the mother's observations that Sarah (who calls herself Star Drake) looks like a good girl and that she has been deprived of all the comforts of home are contrasted to Thomas's exasperated threats to leave home or to have the girl put back in jail. While he is aware of his mother's good intentions, he contends, and with justification—for this is one of the themes of the story—that she 'make[s] a mockery of virtue, to pursue it with such a mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous'....

Thomas fires [the gun] as a consequence of the imagined advice of his father, a man of unscrupulous expediency whom Thomas despised during his lifetime.... Ironically, Thomas's isolated and single yielding to the principles of his father brings catastrophe; although he has overcome his habitual weakness in the matter of self-assertion, his victory is a defeat and a gratuitous tragedy.... The loss has been in the name of something transitory and inconsequential, and it is from the ironic sense of this disparity that the tragic effect is made."

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 39-40, 240-41

"The mother takes care of a psychopathic delinquent girl; the 'intellectual' son, Thomas, detests the girl and tries to keep his mother from making a fool of herself. He plots to have the girl arrested for stealing his pistol, but he accidentally kills his mother, who interposes herself in a scuffle between the two.

The mother quite definitely lacks sound judgment and a realistic understanding of evil. Also, she is not very bright and can express herself only through habitual platitudes that irritate her educated son. Above all, her charity is rather 'hazy,' as her son claims; it is sentimental and confused, since it comes from vague feelings that lack a religious center. In this regard she differs radically from Father Flynn, whom she resembles emotionally and morally. Unlike the priest, she is outside the body of the church, and her charity does not proceed, as does his, from faith in God's love and in the Redemption. Her good intentions are clumsy and ineffective... Although the mother's tenderness is not wrapped in theory, not so much a matter of sociology and politics, it is clearly detached from any source beyond itself, and it ends in a mixture of terror and slapstick.... One could easily find a place for her among Miss O'Connor's strongly satirical characters: with the self-deluding social workers who are good but not right, or with Mrs. Turpin, who never spares herself to do good deeds for others, or with many of the cheery and platitudinous farm women who drive their intellectual children nearly crazy... Her good will, although genuine, is ill-conceived and...she does not understand that the delinquent young woman is a thoroughly depraved person....

She has the natural virtues of Father Flynn, who also was naïve about evil and most unpractical in his humanity (he too...helped to bring about a pathetic death because he was not worldly enough in his knowledge of people)... The woman is something more than a misguided fool.... [Her] far-sightedness is an ironic sign of the woman's inability to see things that are nearby and obvious, but the image is commonly used in Miss O'Connor's stories to signify spiritual vision, the ability to see things with their added dimension.... The irony is less important than the suggestion of her vague special insight.... She speaks in clichés, but we are told that 'there were real experiences behind them'... Above all, she gives her love and compassion freely, completely, and unselfishly. Unlike the demonic altruists of other stories, she

is not self-righteous... Her love for her son at times becomes 'pure idiot mystery'... She extends her symbolic motherhood to include the girl... The old lady's compassion (her 'suffering with') even becomes universal in scope.... Through the despair of the girl and her son, she comes to suffer for the despair of mankind, although she cannot interpret her feeling or define its ultimate context....

She does not care for mankind in the abstract; she does not delude herself, as do Miss O'Connor's social workers, by trying to love faceless statistics. Her feelings are intense and personal, therefore, specific. But, ironically, they are also indiscriminate and almost disinterested. She loves because Sarah Ham...needs love, not because the girl is worthy of being loved or because the old lady will benefit from loving her.... The mother's eyes are described as 'intimate but untouchable,' a phrase which points to this strange combination of attitudes. It also describes the paradoxical nature of the Christian God, whose morality she embodies.... [She] literally sacrifices her life to save the depraved girl... While [she] is in many trying ways an irritating mother and a naïve, confused sentimentalist, she is also a woman of the highest natural virtue... Both Sarah Ham and Thomas are angered that the mother offers love so freely and abundantly, and they feel insulted and threatened because their precarious independence is challenged."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 80-83

"A son tries to aggrandize the affections of his mother, whose loyalties are divided suddenly between his childlike needs and those of a nymphomaniac whom she has taken into the house in order to reform. Thomas, whose oedipal [Freud] attachment is rather ludicrous, is terrified of Star Drake... Appalled by her overtures and disoriented by the chaos which now rules a formerly comfortable home, Thomas threatens petulantly to leave, but never manages to do so. In the end, through his own perverse machinations, Thomas inadvertently shoots his mother with a pistol that he had originally planted in the purse of Star Drake for the sheriff to find....

The best part of the story involves the specter of Thomas's deceased father, a corrupt overbearing man who had possessed influence and power when alive. The father's voice, which controls every step in the son's fatal actions, is associated with the devil, although Thomas refuses to recognize the metamorphosis of that familiar individual in the panama hat: 'The old man—small, wasp-like, in his yellowed panama hat, his seersucker suit, his pink carefully-soiled shirt, his small string tie—appeared to have taken up his station in Thomas's mind.'

Although Thomas is afflicted and eventually possessed by the devil, who leads him into violence, he ironically associates this condition of damnation with his charitable mother: 'The devil for Thomas was only a manner of speaking, but it was a manner appropriate to the situations the mother got into. Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation of evil... Thomas, an historian by training and inclination, disastrously misreads church history and distorts religious doctrine. His mother's 'excess of virtue' is merely a willingness to love the lame and the crippled, and in the Kingdom of God there can be no excess of love.... Thomas decides to commit evil, and by refusing to acknowledge that mysterious voice in his mind, he performs an act of violence which assures his infernal condition.'

Gilbert H. Muller
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 88-90

"O'Connor seems to have been as obsessed with the sham intellectual as she was by the prophet. One of her earliest stories, 'The Barber' (1947), for example, is concerned with a similar figure...called Rayber ...who is merely the first in a series of such characters (Asbury in 'The Enduring Chill,' Thomas in 'The Comforts of Home,' Julian in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' and others). What distinguishes the Rayber type is a desperate liberal zeal, a predictably thwarted sexual or married life, and an impulse toward self-martyrdom...at once the object of ironic satire and the subject of a tragic experience. Particularly with the Rayber who is Tarwater's antagonist, the satire tends to obscure the tragedy....

A 'charity group' of tales within the O'Connor canon...might include 'A Circle in the Fire,' 'The Comforts of Home,' 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' 'The Lame Shall Enter First,' and even *The Violent Bear It Away*. All of these works deal in some way with a character whose sense of virtue is expressed through acts of charity—often involving a guest brought into the house: What do we do with the guest? Do we reform him? Let him be? Throw him out? Educate him? Give him gifts? These are the questions the stories seem to ask, and beneath them is the larger question—What is charity?... [These questions recall "Bartleby the Scrivener" by Melville.]

In both...['The Lame Shall Enter First' and 'The Comforts of Home'] a delinquent youth is brought into the home by a parent who energetically tries to rehabilitate the incorrigible intruder. But the effect of the intrusion is to upset the domestic tranquility of the household, threatening the security of the only child whose sole domain it was.... In 'The Comforts of Home,' O'Connor weights her sympathy toward the charitable mother, while her son Thomas bears the brunt of the author's ironic judgement. In 'The Lame Shall Enter First,' however, the agent of active virtue (Sheppard) is handled ironically, while sympathy is accorded both the intruder and the neglected child who becomes his disciple....

As his mother and the girl enter the house together, Thomas alters his plans: not only does he not know how to begin to leave home but, deciding that his mother was counting on just such a weakness, he steels his will against her and determines that she must be shown.... From Thomas's viewpoint, his mother has a definite tendency, despite her good intentions, 'to make a mockery of virtue, to pursue it with such a mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous'.... The old lady is, perhaps, a 'fool of virtue.' But O'Connor's point is that it is a foolishness that conceals a deeper wisdom. For behind her modest and not very effective gestures of decency is a force of love... When that love is translated into charity, it becomes an almost impersonal force—a counterbalance to her abstract sense of the world's misery—and this impersonal quality destroys Thomas's pleasure in her attention to him.... Throughout, Thomas feels that he is taking his father's place unworthily by allowing his mother's charitable foolishness to continue.... The old man had harbored desires for revenge against the woman....

Actually it is by no means a foregone conclusion that Thomas is morally superior to Sarah. Taking the family dog as a litmus test, one would have to say that Sarah elicits the more favorable response.... We must complement our view of the young historian's moral innocence by noting, in addition, his arrested emotional development...[his] hysterical defense of his own home ground... His unmanageable aversion to [Sarah Ham] actually conceals deeper feelings of attraction to her (not unmixed with accompanying self-loathing).... The problem for Thomas, then, is how to reconcile his conflicting urges—to act with the forthrightness of his father, to keep the love of his mother, to punish his mother, to get rid of Sarah Ham, and to satisfy his repressed desire for the latter.... O'Connor resolves the conflict with startling brilliance—in what would seem the sole way possible: prompted by his father, while his mother sleeps, with the ostensible motive of framing the girl, Thomas plants his pistol in Sarah's pocketbook; and the act is described in unmistakably sexual language... But he is caught in the act... "'Tomsee is being naughty,' she said in a throaty voice'....

Thomas, we had thought, was a victim of his insistence on an impossible worldly perfection; he would murder evil instead of suffering it as inevitable; and his mother, we had thought, fell victim to this unearthly idealism. In that case, the ending might seem [like what] Melville achieves in *Billy Budd*... Yet the death of Thomas's mother is hardly handled as a tragic spectacle; and Thomas himself is treated without pity. Instead, the tale is an uncommonly complicated moral satire with, in addition to the more obvious critique of parochial idealism, a criticism of the kind of self-deception that sees sexuality as the enemy of Christian love.... Sarah Ham is of course no model of any sort...but Thomas's innocence, far from being a strength, is, rather, a weakness of his character." [Also true of *Billy Budd*]

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 121, 160-66

"A story which explores two modes of falseness: sterile rationality and sticky sentimentality.... Thomas [is] selfishly absorbed in his own comfort... Under the temptation to rehabilitate Star Drake, the mother lets

her 'hazy charity' degenerate into sentimentality.... The advent of Sarah Ham, a nymphomaniac, into their lives precipitates Thomas into action to curb his other's sentimentality, which was destroying 'the comforts of home' for him.... It is...a corruption of good (his mother's sentimentality masquerading as charity) which creates an evil counteraction... This threat causes his father's unconscious influence, dormant until now, to come alive in his mind. His father's spirit does not rattle a pot; he squats in the historian's mind to suggest devious and finally criminal ways to remove Star Drake...

Thomas believes that he has inherited his father's reason without his ruthlessness... Thomas has inherited what theologians term original sin... [His] ruthless measures to regain the comforts of home show how selfish reasonableness can quickly degenerate into crime.... Obeying the diabolical promptings of his dead father, Thomas tries to preserve the peace of his home by framing the young girl and, that having failed, by shooting her. That he kills his mother instead is, some critics believe, her salvation and his awakening, but the story does not...compel the reader to accept the notion of grace offered and accepted. The whole story points, instead, to a shallowness of character which would, in the absence of any signs to the contrary, preclude an openness to grace. Thomas's mother...uses her son as the touchstone of all her actions. 'It might be you,' she tremulously repeats to Thomas as her motive for helping Star beyond the limits of reason.... Flannery O'Connor despised sentimentality.... She equated sentimentality with false compassion.... She saw sentimentality as an attempted short cut to the grace of Redemption which overlooks its price....

The squatting father, whose voice sometimes hisses in Thomas's ear, is, by his dwarfed position, reminiscent of small-Southern-town officials... Behind him is the dim figure of Milton's Satan, who squatted beside Eve to whisper his temptation. The father 'lived his lie' by adopting Southern customs for his own ends; for Flannery O'Connor this was high treason. The squatting position both expresses the father's cold duplicity and suggests his diabolical influence on his son. The son recognizes the evil inspirations, abhors them, and then knowingly succumbs to them.... Thomas sees Star as the devil...[but] because he really does not believe in the devil, he fails to recognize his responsibility for the real devil of the story, the devil in his mind, speaking to him in his father's characteristic position and tone....

The story ends in 'failure'...but in the biblical framework such failure contains the possibility of reversing itself. That the mother's attempt to protect the girl was an act of pure selflessness and counteracted her lifelong sentimentality is a distinct possibility. That Thomas will become as aware of his own shortcomings as he has been of his mother's is another possibility."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.

Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 32-36, 50

"Once more, we encounter the pairing of the exasperated widow and her dependent intellectual son.... Thomas's excessive irritation at the nymphomaniac intruder is amusing until he ends up murdering his mother.... Thomas...is a kind of male Hulga; the story suggests what might have happened had the Bible salesman taken up residence within her house ["Good Country People"].... The mother is, of course, the first representative of the 'not-self,' the society which surrounds and sustains us, but which at the same time restricts and limits us in our activities....

If, indeed, Thomas is being led by his father's spirit, it is a ghost deeply corrupted, since the course of his advice leads straight to calamity... This ghost, strongly reminiscent of the stranger who taunts Tarwater, suggests either the devil himself in the guise of the parent, or, more likely, an overcompensation on Thomas's part for his failure to assume a properly masculine role in the house after his father's death. The mother suffers from an 'excess of virtue,' an exaggerated charity which fails to recognize that whoever dabbles in 'evil' is likely to suffer its contaminations. The mother...like the social workers and psychiatric counselors O'Connor so frequently indicts, wishes to regenerate society through an abundance of goodwill....The mother's efforts to help the girl are misdirected precisely because no religious commitment controls her actions. Like Sheppard in 'The Lame Shall Enter First,' she is 'good' but she is not 'right.' She, like Sarah Ham and Thomas and most of the other residents in the earthly city, is afflicted with the 'blindness of those who don't know they cannot see'."

Dorothy Walters

“The protagonist in ‘The Comforts of Home’ is a historian and a scholar, president of the local historical society, who is writing about the first settlers in his county. Thomas is interested in origins. Although the devil is ‘just a manner of speaking for him,’ he knows that he can prove to his mother ‘from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil, that if Anthony of Egypt had stayed at home and attended to his sister, no devils would have plagued him.’ Virtue in moderation is, for Thomas, ‘the principle of order and the only thing that makes life bearable.’ He sees himself as the perfect blend of his father and mother because he thinks that ‘he inherited his father’s reason without his ruthlessness and his mother’s love of good without her tendency to pursue it.’

It is apparently his mother’s excessive love for him that leads her so often to do ‘the *nice thing*’ for others, especially those less fortunate than they. (‘Taking a box of candy was her favorite nice thing to do.’) When Thomas objects vehemently to her letting the young psychopath Sarah Ham remain in their house, his mother responds characteristically, ‘I keep thinking it might be you.’ Earlier when Thomas had complained about Sarah’s criminal activity, his mother had answered, ‘You don’t know what you’d do in a pinch,’ and her words are clearly prophetic. Although Thomas protests that he knows at least that he ‘wouldn’t pass a bad check,’ his mother’s practical wisdom is obviously superior to his ivory-towerish intellectualism. It was at times such as these that ‘he could not endure her love for him.... When virtue got out of hand with her a sense of devils grew upon him.’

In his exasperation over the threat to his privacy that Sarah poses, Thomas wonders what the attitude of God would be in a situation like this, ‘meaning if possible to adopt it.’ At these times, too, Thomas ‘truly mourned the death of his father though he had not been able to endure him in life,’ for his father ‘would have put his foot down.’ So he allows his father—in the absence of God—to take up ‘a squatting position in his mind.’ A historian of origins should have known that ‘squatters’ have no title to the place they settle in, least of all to another’s mind. Suggestions for disposing of Sarah enter his mind, and their ‘moral tone indicated that they had come from a mind akin to his father’s.’ Thomas nevertheless allows his father to take control of his paralyzed will, even though (until the end) he undoubtedly likes to think that he is translating his father’s ruthlessness into the terms of his own moderation; a dishonest plan for having Sarah put away is supposedly ‘below his moral stature.’

Victim of the inner evil that he has dallied with, Thomas lies about the gun he has placed in Sarah’s purse in anticipation of the sheriff’s arrival and the tone of his voice is unmistakably his father’s. ‘I found it in her bag,’ he shouts, ‘the dirty criminal slut stole my gun.’ Sarah’s retort is a brief but definitive word of judgment: ‘Found it my eye!’ When Thomas fires his gun, the blast ironically is ‘like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order.’ Instead of putting an end to evil, Thomas’s connivance with evil has merely contributed to its control over his world. The only interpretation that we are given of the final scene comes from the malignant mind of Sheriff Farebrother, who is ‘another edition of Thomas’s father.’ The scene that confronts him meets for once the expectations of his ‘nasty’ mind.

It is clear to Farebrother that ‘the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other’s arms’ over the body of Thomas’s mother. Thomas’s last condition is worse than his first. In trying to shut the door on a questionable demon, he has let in two very real ones—his father and Farebrother; he has confused the appearance of evil with its reality. Thomas, now, is clearly worse than his father... And the evil that is in Thomas’s heart is far worse than the evil he sought to extinguish because he, unlike Sarah, is responsible for his act.... Judgment is linked significantly to vision. Thomas should have had sufficient insight to realize that his father had no more right over the sanctity of the human spirit than he had in deceitfully placing his gun in Sarah’s bag.

‘The Comforts of Home’ offers a variation on the motif of ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’; it insists that the eschatological crisis reveals what we are essentially while inverting that story’s ultimate disclosure. Thomas professes moderation, yet discovers ‘in a pinch’ his deep inner inclination to vice rather than

virtue. He claims knowledge of origins yet overlooks the origin of his personal sin in first yielding to the known influence of malignancy.... Insofar as Sarah's offensive 'psychopathic personality' is described from Thomas's point of view, it is really his bookishness and dependence upon mother that is being parodied through the sexual references. It is not sexuality as such that makes Thomas cringe, but sexual license, perhaps genuine nymphomania. The mother's attitude is indeed a caricature of Christian love, but the story is Thomas's and its 'uncommonly complicated moral satire' broadsides the more universal human error of using unquestionably evil means to achieve a dubious good."

John R. May

The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 107-10

"Thomas's tightly buttoned life, with its antiseptic devotion to history, moderation, and order, is played off against the girl's disheveled mindlessness and blatant sexuality. In this lies her power to disrupt, for she embodies those aspects of the psyche that Thomas has repressed in himself. His mother's clichéd comment on Star reflects with unwitting irony on Thomas himself: 'We don't know how the other half lives'.... [Star] seems an almost comically literal embodiment of Jung's 'anima,' that female component of the male psyche that a man ignores at his peril.... She is the serpent in the paradise of the harmless man... In Jung's language, then, Sarah Ham is the 'anima-projection' of which Thomas is the 'persona'... The two characters are complementary figures, obverse doubles, alter egos.

The arrival of the girl thus inevitably exacerbates all those psychic tensions which have lain dormant beneath Thomas's bland exterior. His attachment to his mother and hatred of his father is of course thunderingly Oedipal [Freud], but with his mother's adoption of Sarah Ham, an ominous shifting begins to occur. Jung states that the mother is the first bearer of the son's anima-image; she 'protects him against the dangers that threaten from the darkness of the psyche,' and the mother complex is typified by the failure to detach this image and thereby achieve some measure of genuine selfhood. Thomas has clearly continued to expect his mother to protect him from his deeper impulses, to provide him with internal as well as external comforts. And the old lady has done [as] the easy resting place for his anima-projection. But Sarah Ham's arrival and her repeated sexual challenges shatter Thomas's infantile world, and the instrument of this upheaval is the very mother on whom he has depended for his freedom from the disorder of psychical and sexual maturation. She has betrayed him.

With the failure of his mother to sustain the cherished order of his life, the image of the father he had hated ironically surfaces to advise Thomas of the means to its restoration.... It becomes evident that Thomas has refused the challenge of self-realization which Sarah Ham presents; he has merely substituted domination by the father for attachment to the mother.... Thomas succumbs entirely to the will of his father, becoming a bumbling imitation of the old man.... In Jung's system [Sheriff Farebrother] would correspond to the 'shadow' side of the self. In his desperate flight from all that Sarah Ham represents, Thomas thus capitulates to those darker impulses in himself that Farebrother embodies.... Both men have 'pale blue eyes,' and Sarah Ham early in the story has pointed out Thomas's likeness to a 'cop.' The sheriff's sneer at Thomas's anxious officiousness, 'Want to swap jobs?' thus becomes an invitation the historian disastrously accepts, for with the fatal gunshot he takes to himself final authority for dispensing law and order, and Farebrother ironically turns chronicler for the event.

If the sheriff is 'another edition of Thomas's father,' so too is Thomas by the end of the story. In refusing to acknowledge himself in Sarah Ham, Thomas unconsciously chooses the despised and more dangerous double of Farebrother. The conflation of himself with Farebrother is thus for Thomas the outward sign of his submitting to the father's voice within, a submission that does nothing to free him from the sexual anxiety created by Sarah Ham's presence. The example of his father is a direct challenge to his masculinity ('You ain't like me. Not enough to be a man.');

under his goading, Thomas's life of comfortable impotence is ended forever. The key symbol here is the gun... 'an inheritance from the old man' that Thomas himself has never used. Sarah Ham's apparent theft of it is a symbolic prelude to her nude invasion of his bedroom, but her return of it seems an implicit invitation which, guided by his father, Thomas unconsciously accepts. His placing it in her 'red pocket-book' which has a 'skin-like feel to his touch' and gives off 'an unmistakable odor of the girl' is a blatant acting out of the sexual fantasy his

consciousness so violently denies. And when he is discovered, first by Sarah Ham and then, more crucially, by his mother, the guilt of the child caught in forbidden sex play contributes to the disaster...

As her amorality seems to become more and more directed at him, he senses 'about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control' which he immediately labels 'demonic.' Like Mr. Head, Thomas is sure that evil is external, and that it is synonymous with uncontrollable. As a result he ironically becomes the prey of the devil within. For the image of his father that Thomas conjures up is...a demonic figure, the biblical old man, the fallen Adam... Familiar with the outer form of Christian history, he remains unaware of its inner import, for although he does indeed stay at home, it is precisely his refusal to recognize Sarah Ham as his sister that brings the devils upon him.

Thomas's life thus becomes a travesty of the saint's... A blast 'meant to bring an end to evil in the world' is Thomas's mock Apocalypse. The imitation of Omnipotence inevitably produces, as Hawthorne knew, its demonic opposite; thus Farebrother is the appropriate figure to preside in gloating malice over the catastrophic climax of the story. His closing vision of the embrace of 'the killer and the slut' therefore becomes more than psychologically apt, for the tabloid language reduces Thomas to the moral level of Sarah Ham and insists on the secret bond between them that Thomas has so violently denied....

Thomas may believe he is aiming at Sarah Ham, but, as we have been told, 'his fury was directed not at the little slut but at his mother.' Her death satisfies more fundamental psychic needs than merely revenge for her betrayal: it is an attempt to remove the guilt of the symbolic sex act by eliminating the parental censor; it is the violent consummation of repressed Oedipal desires; and, simultaneously, it removes the figure who, as the source of the Oedipal attachment, blocks the normal sexual outlet for unconscious desires. Thomas's total repression of his own sexuality thus leads to the acting out of a destructive parody of eroticism: the attempt to deny the unconscious life has brought only its grotesquely perverse triumph. Farebrother's final vision that 'the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms,' absurd as literal truth, is symbolically just--both as the ironic representation of their sexual 'union' and, more important, as the expression of a completeness of personality of which the two characters form the splintered parts. For with the fatal act, the recognition of Sarah Ham as Thomas's instinctual double can no longer be refused."

Frederick Asals
Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 97, 108-15

Michael Hollister (2016)