

ANALYSIS

“The Lame Shall Enter First” (1962)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

“A well-meaning but unimaginative widower, Sheppard, neglects his son Norton, mainly because an older boy, Rufus Johnson, clubfooted and criminal, seems much more in need of help; the consequence is Norton's suicide. On a more perceptive level, Rufus is not a poor deprived cripple, but evil, demonic, a type of Satan [debatable]; and Sheppard learns the reality of these entities to his cost. (This is Fitzgerald's reading in the introduction, encouraged by the statement in the story that finally Sheppard 'saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson.') But this is Sheppard's interpretation, not the author's. Miss O'Connor's own reading, I believe, is consistent with her radical Christian dualism and far more challenging: not Rufus but *Sheppard* is the type of Satan, taking over God's Prerogatives in His assumed absence; and Rufus is the true prophetic voice of Judgment, saying of Sheppard 'He thinks he's Jesus Christ!' and challenging him, 'Satan has you in his power.' (This is the reading of Sister Rose Alice, in 'Flannery O'Connor: Poet to the Outcast,' in which she paraphrases the story's action as 'The repulsive good defeats the urbane evil'.")

Stanley Edgar Hyman
Flannery O'Connor
(U Minnesota 1966) 26-27

“Rayber [*The Violent Bear It Away*] is replaced by Sheppard, Tarwater by Rufus Johnson, Bishop by Norton. Rayber's hearing aid has given way to the telescope as a central metaphor... Somewhere in the background is Rufus Johnson's uncle, who, very much like Tarwater's great-uncle, engages in ceaseless 'religious' activities.... Sheppard, like Rayber before him, has taken over the secular education of a young boy. He tries to disenchant Rufus Johnson with the narrow religion of his grandfather in favor of the challenges of modern science. The telescope which he buys for Rufus becomes the measure of the Newtonian universe which he must oppose to the preaching of the Gospel. There are several exchanges between the two in which Sheppard opposes the world of the telescope to Rufus' Holy Bible.... Norton's death neatly parallels the baptism-drowning of Bishop.... The mechanical worlds of Rayber and Sheppard have failed their sons in their moments of desperate need.”

Milton J. Friedman
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor
eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 22-23

“Rufus Johnson, a juvenile delinquent, eats a page of the Bible to prove to the motherless son of his social-worker 'secular savior' that the Bible is really true: 'I've eaten it like Ezekiel and it was honey to my mouth!' His own name [John-son] suggests a descendant of John the Baptist. The title is in itself a prophecy by Christ.”

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
“Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances”
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 178

“The atheists are of several types: those who reject Christianity as a dangerous myth which interferes with the psychological and social adjustment of the individual—Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* and Sheppard in 'The Lame Shall Enter First'; those who reject Christianity on the basis of existentialist philosophical positions that lead them to belief only in nothingness—Hulga Hopewell in 'Good Country People,' and Hazel Motes in the early chapters of *Wise Blood*; and those who reject Christianity because of a proud belief in their capability to find a new Jesus compatible with their own needs—Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood*.... The sociologist and the schoolteacher are satirical types closely akin to the intellectual.... Rayber...and Sheppard...are sociologists whose occupational follies are mocked.... Both...rise above

caricature, but as sociologists they are satirized in that they attempt to solve highly complex human problems through oversimplified formulas of behavior.... Sheppard, in his secular, sociological attempt to love his neighbor as himself, represents the contemporary distortion...of Christianity....

This story...is a clear reworking of the Rayber-Bishop-Tarwater relationship. Mechanical and rational like Rayber, Sheppard urges Rufus Johnson (who is as infected with God as Tarwater is) to save himself and attempts to 'enlighten' him through books, telescopes, and a civic education; to rehabilitate him with new clothes, a good home life, and an orthopedically designed shoe to correct his club foot. While Rufus betrays and mocks him, Sheppard continues to ignore the needs of his own child.... Rufus...accepts Sheppard's favors but correctly mocks him as a tin Jesus and a moral leper.... The extent of Sheppard's perverse charity is apparent in his repeated defense of Rufus when the boy is guilty of willful and gratuitous vandalism and voyeurism.... Norton desperately believes Rufus's contention that the boy will be reunited with his mother at his own death; as a result of Rufus's teaching and Sheppard's neglect, Norton hangs himself in the attic. Unlike Rayber, Sheppard undergoes a revelation and suffers grief as he contemplates Norton's suicide and his own emptiness....

The symbolism here [clubfoot] is quite similar to that of Hulga's leg, in that both indicate paradoxically that the soul is not moribund but is dark and ugly.... The lame do not enter heaven first because they are the object of divine sentiment for crippled children, but because spiritual lameness like Rufus Johnson's, if it is acknowledged, calls forth the greatest rejoicing in heaven and the most profound mercy of God. This is the import of the parable of the prodigal son: it is because the spiritually corrupt son has reformed that he is feted by the father, not because he became a profligate. The spiritually deformed enter heaven first only because they have genuinely accepted salvation and grace, not because they may be incidentally lame.... Only through genuine salvation shall the lame enter heaven at all, not because they are afflicted.... Rufus may be one of the actual lame so saved along with the spiritually lame such as Sheppard, who undergo epiphanies."

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 55, 61-62, 144-46, 167, 218

"Sheppard takes in the high-IQ Rufus Johnson, whom he woos intellectually at the expense of his own son.... Sheppard wants to project himself into Rufus's accomplishments because Norton disappoints him... Rufus...is quite right in denying that his crimes result from his clubfoot or from his deprivation.... Not all evil results from deprivation.... His basic plight [is that] of the fundamentalist confronted with secularist do-gooders.... His relationship to Sheppard, the do-gooder recreation director, is comparable to young Tarwater's relationship to the secularist schoolteacher, Rayber [*The Violent Bear It Away*].... When Sheppard recoils from what he sees as the evil of Rufus, he is left with no earthly comfort, for, like Rayber, he has lost the object which motivates and contains his selfish love.... His love is self-seeking, like Rayber's love for his idiot son....

In an argument over the Bible reading, Rufus eats a page from the Bible to prove his faith to the outraged Sheppard.... 'I'm a Christian.' Rufus says that Sheppard is a 'dirty atheist' who has said 'there wasn't no hell'.... The 'transformed' Rufus, much like young Tarwater in his denial of earthly food, goes from Sheppard's home to perform one final act of vandalism in which he actively tries to be captured.... Rufus's idea of 'immor'l suggestions'...[means] seduction away from God.... [The] invitation to trust one's own power with no consideration of God's judgment, amounts to the ultimate immoral suggestion. Rufus realizes that morality is not merely a matter of doing good, or of not doing evil; it is a state of mind and a state of grace which cannot be achieved by the do-gooder whose deeds glorify himself. The secularist's good, though it may help the physical man, is potentially destructive of the spiritual man....

Norton hangs himself after learning from the seemingly malevolent Johnson that he may rejoin his mother in heaven, 'where spaceships can't go,' if he dies without sin.... Norton and Rufus take precautions to assure Norton's salvation: when a Bible must be stolen, Rufus steals it in order that the child not jeopardize his chances of heavenly reunion with his mother. Rufus and Norton believe that the late Mrs. Sheppard is surely enjoying bliss because she believed in Jesus and was not a whore.... Sheppard offers his son a physical existence with no meaning beyond what can be measured; Rufus offers an immaterial

existence and immeasurable bliss.... Norton's conversion is to the childlike (therefore blessed) faith of Harry Ashfield ["The River"]; the instruments of his salvation are a secularist father, a fanatical hoodlum, and a 'slender channel to the stars'—a telescope purchased by Sheppard as a means of appealing to the intellect of his juvenile delinquent charge, whom he wished 'to develop' to feed his own ego.... Like Rayber, who 'uses' Bishop and thinks he cannot live without the idiot, Sheppard batters on the life and the soul of his son.... There are few more touching passages in contemporary literature than the one in which Norton waves exultantly toward the sky, where he thinks he has found his mother....

Sheppard...can offer his son no spiritual hope; instead he asks the boy to accept the bleak fact of death and the tawdry idea of immortality through one's goodness living on in those he loves. Norton is apparently little comforted by these 'choices'.... Sheppard's choices lead to Norton's hanging himself.... Spiritual neglect, depriving him of religious reality, leads to the child's suicide.... What Rufus has to offer...appeals to his imagination as his father's dry, mechanical goodness cannot.... Rufus begins his 'seduction' of Norton immediately after his showdown with Sheppard; the two boys begin reading the Bible together and talking conspiratorially....

Sheppard, stripped of his sense of infallibility and the messianic compulsion to 'save' the world through acts of secular charity, achieves self-knowledge, which is a form of grace.... Sheppard's ability to see the Devil leering at him from Rufus's eyes is a great gain, for he has earlier denied the existence of Satan, as well as God and Jesus.... If he still has Norton, to whom he may play Alpha and Omega, end-all and be-all, he will remain deified in his own mind as the omnipotent father figure; his secularist doctrine will remain intact, and both father and son will be irremediably lost. Fortunately, Sheppard arrives at the attic too late: Norton is dead and Sheppard is left with nothing but a sense of his own inadequacy... Sheppard's explanations of Rufus's desperate awareness of evil have precipitated tragedy."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 21, 24, 31, 92-99

"Rufus Johnson, the juvenile delinquent in 'The Lame Shall Enter First,' knows the reality of Satan and Jesus, and he knows that a person must testify to one or the other, but with the pride of the nonelect he claims that he is 'in Satan's power.' So this scornful statement, 'when I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me,' is an egoistic parody of spiritual freedom, as his grotesque claim to salvation demonstrates: 'The lame'll carry off the prey!'"

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 97

"The brace shop was a small concrete warehouse lined and stacked with the equipment of affliction'.... These objects, which are inherently horrible and deformed, are actually designed to correct deformity; and it remains for Rufus, in his comic rebellion against them, to bring the full force of the grotesque to the surface of the story...In O'Connor's fiction...boldly outlined inner compulsions are reinforced dramatically by a mutilated exterior self, as with...Hulga in 'Good Country People,' and Rufus... Sheppard, the welfare worker, an extreme projection of the militant atheist and scientific objectivist, is forced to admit defeat when confronted with the inexplicable evil of the boy Rufus.

Sheppard, who relies on scientific inquiry instead of compassion, is emblematic of the failure of science to satisfy man's basic emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs. He purchases a telescope for the edification of Rufus; but the boy, who is totally alienated from a scientific universe and who adheres to a more traditional world picture, medieval in origin, in which the universe exists between the extremes of heaven and hell, begins to use the telescope... Finally [Rufus] induces Sheppard's emotionally crippled son to hang himself and thereby launch a trip into space in quest of his deceased mother.... The familiar world, illuminated by science, still remains alien and mysterious, even as the source of hope within man's grotesque condition has been known for two thousand years... This story, like many others by O'Connor, is a ruthless study of the vulgarity of the secular spirit....

The division between the purity of the child's vision and the diseased intellect of the adult is apparent in... 'The Artificial Nigger,' 'The River,' 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost,' and 'The Lame Shall Enter First'.... O'Connor's children... usually manage to interpret moral and spiritual phenomena correctly, whereas their adult superiors continually distort the significance of events.... The child protagonists in Miss O'Connor's fiction do not always understand the workings of grace, but somehow they manage to penetrate it at the end of their journeys, perhaps because they learn to accept the interrelationship of the temporal and the spiritual. This is true of Norton in 'The Lame Shall Enter First' who like Harry Ashfield ["The River"] embarks on a rather startling voyage in search of a heavenly guardian."

Gilbert H. Muller

Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 9, 22, 26, 56, 60

"One of Flannery O'Connor's most moving portrayals of alienation, this story elicits compassion for all three characters.... The title comes from the prophet Isaiah and suggests that those who acknowledge that they are spiritually maimed will merit first claim to the grace of Redemption. The story involves the interaction of three persons—a man, a boy, and a child: Sheppard, an intellectual young widower who is too educated to believe in the supernatural world; Rufus Johnson, a crippled juvenile delinquent who has cut himself off from society; and Norton, Sheppard's son, irrevocably cut off from his dead mother, who finds himself becoming alienated from his father.... Sheppard consciously alienates himself from anything beyond his reason.... The story develops, in complex unity, three variations of meaning of the scriptural dictum, 'The truth shall make you free'....

Sheppard attempts to impose his own rationalistic view on his son.... The obtuse father fits Norton into a conceptual slot in his mind.... He believed that he had succeeded in remolding [Rufus] by his eclectic Saturday afternoon discussions, which gave the boy 'something to reach for'.... The tinge of romanticism renders Sheppard's naïve assumptions suspect.... When Johnson enters Sheppard's home, it becomes evident that he has deliberately opted for evil and enjoys deluding Sheppard. The lame boy spends the afternoon tormenting the frightened Norton by desecrating his dead mother's belongings.... In spite of his terror, Norton challenges Johnson's denigration of his father: "'He's good,'" he mumbled. "he helps people." Johnson counters... "'Good!" [he] said savagely. He thrust his head forward. "Listen here," he hissed, "I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right!*"...

That evening Sheppard uses what he thinks is his son's problem, selfishness, to induce Rufus to stay with them... Sheppard refuses to believe that he has been wrong about the sincerity of the lame boy. Sheppard's reaction to the insults is characteristic: 'good' but not 'right.' 'Sheppard was not put back. These insults were part of the boy's defense mechanism.' In his best clinical manner, Sheppard attempts to prove to the lame boy that he...is 'above and beyond simple pettiness.' This speech of unadulterated righteousness leads to Johnson's final comment to Norton about Sheppard, a remark which shows the extent of Sheppard's alienation from spiritual reality: "'God, kid,'" Johnson said in a cracked voice, "how do you stand it?" His face was stiff with outrage. "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!"...

Sheppard becomes more and more uneasy about the club-footed boy; he is unable to understand his actions and fears that Johnson is using Norton as a weapon against him. His trust in his clinical knowledge weakens, and he becomes vulnerable for the impact of grace.... Sheppard's misguided estrangement from his own child is symbolic of his greater estrangement from God. As he realizes his error, he runs to embrace his son, only to find that it is too late. Against the stark tragedy of this last moment one must place the revelation which has preceded it to illumine the terrible consequences of alienation from God....

Johnson...calls himself a devil.... He holds Sheppard by his diabolism, which the psychologist does not recognize, and the child by his confident assertion of his beliefs. Devil for one and angel for the other, he leads the older through suffering to truth and the younger to life-in-death... He is...both a diabolical figure and a bearer of grace, both an alien figure in civil society and a true citizen—even though an erring one—of the world which the Bible has made real to him.... He brings the Bible to the dinner table to continue reading it with Norton. In answer to Sheppard's ridicule of Scripture, Johnson rips a page from the book and eats it.... The paradigmatic gesture of Ezekiel in eating the scroll which the Lord gave him symbolizes the prophet's acceptance of the commission of the Lord and its transformation from bitterness to sweetness

.... Johnson leaves Sheppard's house described as... 'on the threshold of some dark apocalypse.' His final imprecation to Sheppard, 'The devil has you in his power,' rings with the tone of the prophets and suggests that the boy's own alienation from his 'true country' by deliberate evil has ended."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 79-84

"The agent of active virtue (Sheppard) is handled ironically, while sympathy is accorded both the intruder and the neglected child who becomes his disciple.... Sheppard, a psychologist, brings the lame delinquent Rufus Johnson into his home in the hope of giving him the love and attention he has lacked all his life (a lack which accounts, Sheppard believes, for his evil doings). His plan backfires, however, when Rufus befriends Sheppard's own neglected son Norton and teaches him that 'you got to be dead to get [to heaven].' So Norton, who desperately longs for his dead mother, hangs himself in the attic. At last, Sheppard sees the tragic error he has made in ignoring his son Norton, just as, by implication, he has made a similar error in ignoring Christ.... Without a belief in Christ, it is implied, good deeds are misguided—often evil."

Miles Orvell
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 161, 178

"'The Lame Shall Enter First' is an obvious reworking of *The Violent Bear It Away*, although the outcome differs significantly. Again, the central characters consist of a trio of father, actual son, and surrogate son. Rayber of the novel and Sheppard of the story are alike in that each seeks the 'good' through active participation in a humanistic philanthropy.... Like Rayber, [Sheppard] is a convert to quantitative measurement as a way of assessing human value. Hence, he is awed by his discovery that Rufus Johnson, a young delinquent, scored at genius level on an intelligence test. Like Rayber, Sheppard rejects all religious dogma as the outworn relic of an unenlightened age. In the liberated consciousness of the modern era, notions of good and evil or of sin and retribution find no place. Sheppard seeks to transform through action dissociated from belief. His society accepts him as a 'good' man, but Rufus bitterly rejects Sheppard's example: 'I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right!*' In fact, Rufus accuses Sheppard of confusing himself with Christ.

Norton, Sheppard's son, is like Bishop [in *The Violent*], a disappointment to his father: Norton is a moral rather than a mental defective. His most conspicuous flaws are gluttony and avarice. He gorges himself until he vomits, suggesting the gluttons of Dante's third circle, who exist embedded in the filth that is the product of their vice. Norton, who sells seeds, lovingly fondles his profits daily, and Sheppard foresees for his son a dire future as a banker or as a small-loans agent. Sheppard hopes that the introduction of another boy (Rufus) into the household will serve as a moral corrective for his own son by teaching him 'to share'.... The 'sinners' fall into two categories: the aggressively evil, who commit overt acts against person, property, or spirit; and the victims of pride, who live oblivious to their spiritual vanities until these are revealed through episodes of violence and trauma....

Rufus accounts for his antisocial behavior with the staunch assertion that he is in the power of Satan. But Rufus, like Tarwater, suffers an insistent pull toward salvation. Unable to resist God's signals completely, he steals a Bible in order to instruct Norton in its undeniable truths; and, when Sheppard challenges his convictions, Rufus literally devours the holy pages as testimony to his belief.... Sheppard, of course, seizes upon the [club]foot as the unquestionable source of Rufus's delinquency, interpreting his criminal behavior as simple 'compensation' for his physical defect. Rufus rejects both Sheppard's explanation and his offers of help: he senses that his refusal of the corrective shoe will be an ultimate revenge upon Sheppard for the latter's unwelcome generosity.... The gift of a new shoe will not cure the ailing Rufus since his moral deficiency derives from his alienation from God: not until he is 'saved' in his own terms can he be healed and brought into a correct relationship with himself and his fellow men.... Rufus acts as a divine agent even though he himself is admittedly of the devil's clan....

The key symbol of the work is that of the stars, which are explored in the dual implication of the spiritual and physical heavens. For Sheppard, the stars as physical entities are to be explored through physical means, by a telescope in the attic or by a journey into space. For Rufus, heaven denotes the spiritual realm, a locale to be reached not in a spaceship but through the sustained efforts of a life committed to a transcendent ideal. Norton, who confuses the two views in his mind, accepts Rufus's declaration that his mother has gone to heaven, and he searches for her with his telescope until he locates her. He then hangs himself in order to join her, for Rufus has assured him that if he dies now, he will indeed go to heaven, but that if he lives long enough, he will be corrupted and go to hell. Norton's extreme action is evidence of his acute longing for love. O'Connor's further implication is that, through Rufus's instructions, the boy *will* go to heaven. Had he lived out his life under the corrupt tutelage of his father, he *would* have been destined for hell.

Too late, Sheppard discovers that in his efforts to reform the intractable Rufus, he has fatally neglected his own son. His ethical relativism proves too weak a support for the actual demands of experience. One child imprisoned, one dead, Sheppard is left with only his Little League games and his Saturday sessions at the reformatory to console him for his losses. Here, once again, is Flannery O'Connor's stern indictment of a society which locates its values within a strictly human matrix. Without God, man drifts into seeming moral vacuums where the devil, in fact, is in control. Sheppard views himself as the redeeming priest of the modern world.... In truth, as Rufus sneeringly accuses, Sheppard is an unwitting servant of the devil."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 102-04, 106

"The trio of...Rayber, Bishop, and Tarwater [*The Violent Bear It Away*] are metamorphosed into a social worker, Sheppard, his not overly bright child, Norton, and Rufus Johnson, a clubfooted juvenile delinquent with a missionary zeal to expose his 'tin Jesus' benefactor for the sham that he is. As in the novel, the child dies, the rebellious teenager wins the struggle with the 'positivist' adult, while the latter discovers, in a convulsive moment of self-revelation, the hollowness of his soul.

In other ways, too, the works are alike. Sheppard shares Rayber's belief in the power of rational understanding over irrational impulse, and the action of the story is generated, in large part, by his effort to prove true Rayber's dictum that '[w]hat we understand we can control.' Rufus, the recalcitrant youth, like Tarwater, has imbibed from a fanatical grandfather a great religious passion, though in his case the satanical and criminal element is overt and pronounced. To Sheppard's bland assertions that Rufus can make of himself anything he sets his mind to, the boy retorts, tauntingly and mockingly, 'Satan...has me in his power.' Rufus...is all the while slyly baiting a 'trap'....

At bottom, the conflict of the...story is the conflict of faith versus works, even though the faith is a demonic one and the works are secular in character. As his name suggests, Sheppard is a man desirous of being a pastor, though not of course in the conventional sense. For Christianity or any other system of religious belief he feels nothing but scorn. At the reformatory...he encounters his first prospective follower, Rufus Johnson—a wild, sullen, Satan-dominated grandson of a zealous 'prophet'.... Sheppard immediately concludes that the boy's rebellion can be explained simply as compensation for feelings of inferiority.... The ambiguity of Sheppard's motives quickly becomes apparent. Not only does he consider himself a kind of surrogate priest, listening to the 'confessions' of troubled teen-agers in a narrow, cramped office at the reformatory, but, having turned what he calls his unselfishness into a surrogate religion, he makes a fetish of self-denial, sleeping in 'an ascetic-looking iron bed' in an uncarpeted room.... His work must be done without pay. In this way he can maintain the fiction that he is 'helping boys no one else care[s] about' and 'receiving nothing' in return.

Driven as he is by the need to have continually before him an image of himself as 'good' and unselfish, Sheppard is constantly annoyed by his son Norton, who hoards money and understands only one sense of sharing—his being given part of something that belongs to someone else. Sheppard contemplates with disgust the likelihood of Norton becoming a banker or, even worse, the manager of a loan company; and since Norton appears to be decidedly inferior to Rufus in intelligence, Sheppard virtually dismisses his son

as an object worthy of his attention. Norton thereafter becomes a pawn in the struggle which develops between Sheppard and Rufus, once the delinquent accepts Sheppard's invitation to come and share their home.... Sheppard is overcome by a sense of the injustice of things—the intelligent Rufus 'deprived of everything from birth' and the uninspiring 'average or below average' Norton who 'had had every advantage.' Of course, far from having had every advantage, Norton is utterly starved for love, love which Sheppard is incapable of giving him....

Sheppard's need to be good and unselfish is so obsessive that it can only be satisfied when he helps those who have no right to expect his help. Given his psychological makeup, Sheppard is inevitably blind to the needs of those closest to him; he neglects Norton, because his desire to be 'good' springs from an emptiness in himself which can only be filled by gratuitous deeds of charity in behalf of the world's suffering and underprivileged. His son Norton has a claim upon him, and hence no particular 'merit' attaches to anything he may do for the boy. Thus he feels deep sympathy for Rufus who must scavenge for his food, but none at all for his own child who must make a breakfast of ketchup and stale cake. He laments the fate of a boy whose mother is in the penitentiary but is without pity for his own son's longing for his dead mother. He is sensitive to the psychological scarring which he imagines Johnson's clubfoot has caused, while oblivious to the desperate loneliness of Norton....

He imposes upon the living reality of his child an abstract image; then he responds to the image he has created rather than to the actual boy. Norton is selfish and he is (or appears to be) dull. But he is dull largely because of Sheppard's refusal to treat him as a significant human being.... As he fails to see Norton except as a creation of his mind, so also does Sheppard refuse to see the real Rufus.... Sheppard insists upon interpreting the boy's behavior according to textbook psychology. Rufus declares that he is in Satan's power, but because his intellectual system has made no provision for the demonic, Sheppard must reject this notion with an outraged cry of 'Rubbish!' And, when Rufus speaks of heaven and hell as real places to which people go in an afterlife, Sheppard responds by assuring Rufus that he considers him 'too intelligent' to believe such nonsense. Because Sheppard has attempted to force reality to conform to an intellectual construct of his own creation, intelligence is for him the decisive factor of human existence. Therefore, Rufus is a more 'interesting' specimen of humanity than Norton.

It is his inordinate faith in reason which prevents Sheppard from understanding the power of feeling. He knows, of course, that Rufus possesses feelings of aggression; but because of his *idée fixe* [obsession] that the source of these feelings is the clubfoot, Sheppard is incapable of taking seriously the boy's outrage at his self-righteousness and his propensity for playing God.... Convinced...that he is 'good'...Sheppard is shocked when he discovers that he can hate and is utterly confounded by the realization that...his own self-serving 'goodness' is as fragile as a paper doll's house.... Sheppard obviously is much 'too concerned to have Rufus like him' to force the unambiguous understanding which the boy might respect. Yet the twinge of guilt is sufficient to cause Sheppard to fail Rufus at the one point in the story when the boy's confidence might have been won. As the police prepare to take Rufus off to jail, the boy denies knowledge of the crime and turns to his benefactor and protector and asks, 'You believe me, don't you?'...

Rufus *is* guilty, and...he wants Sheppard to vouch for him so that he can ultimately compromise and expose this man who is determined to 'save' him.... Sheppard is so completely a captive of his confused feelings and his voracious hunger for ego satisfaction that he is incapable of dealing with any situation except in terms of its capacity to minister to his psychological needs. Thus, out of shame, he abdicates the little authority he has heretofore maintained over the boy, when he learns the following day that the police have arrested someone else for the crime and are releasing Rufus. Later, when Johnson rejects the new shoe with the scornful comment, 'I don't need no new shoe....' 'And when I do, I got ways of getting my own,' Sheppard's response to this new rebuff confirms our image of him as a man totally incapable of responding to life except on the level of childish demands for ego gratification and equally childish petulance when those demands are frustrated....

Here by skillfully interweaving Sheppard's attempted analysis of Johnson's psychological problems and intimations of Sheppard's failure to see his own psychological shortcomings as equally damaging, Flannery O'Connor underscores this mock-pastor's moral and spiritual blindness. In Sheppard, Miss O'Connor has created a classic example of one form of 'bad faith' as defined in existentialist philosophy—the detached

observer or manipulator who refuses to acknowledge that he is part of the problem he is trying to analyze... Because he treats the boy with a condescension rooted in nothing more substantial than his limitless faith in reason, Sheppard's image of himself is destined to be shaken to its very foundations when he discovers the implacable reality of Johnson's dedication to evil. Like many of Miss O'Connor's earlier protagonists... Sheppard commits the fatal error of supposing that good and evil are only words, denoting alternative conditioned responses to social reality.

From this it follows that he should assume that it is intelligence which can free man (Rufus) from 'evil' responses, just as he believes that he himself is too intelligent to be evil. Hence, because he considers Rufus endowed with intelligence equal to his own, he persists in maintaining—in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary—that the boy is 'too intelligent' to commit the crimes which the police attribute to him. Only at the last, when Rufus has confessed to being the culprit, has allowed himself to be caught, and has (falsely) accused Sheppard of making '[i]morr'l suggestions'—only then does Sheppard recognize the impotence of his philosophy that man can make of himself anything he wishes, by virtue of intellect alone.... Rufus... immediately perceives that Sheppard's supposedly humanitarian interest in others is in reality a form of self-aggrandizement (compare Julian of 'Everything That Rises'). Therefore, Rufus insists upon being what he is, rather than a creature of Sheppard's theories. He is obstinate, vindictive, malicious, ungrateful, unregenerate—all these and more. In him we encounter once again the criminal-compulsive who so often serves as a spokesman for the author's most deeply felt convictions.

Like that earlier prototype, The Misfit, Rufus declares that man faces a choice between Jesus and the devil; but Rufus's faith in both the divine and the satanic is less anxiety-ridden, more rooted in positive conviction. He revels in his depravity while at the same time maintaining that '[n]obody can save [him] but Jesus'... Rufus sounds very much like Tarwater, whom he resembles in other respects, principally, I think, in the clarity of his understanding of the relation of act and consequence and in his unswerving insistence upon the primacy of will over reason... 'When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me, not that lying stinking atheist' [Sheppard].... There reverberates through [Sheppard's] mind, like the drumbeat of an attacking enemy force, the words, 'I did more for him than I did for my own child.' Immediately, in a crescendo of revelation, Sheppard hears the 'jubilant voice' of Rufus shouting, 'Satan has you in his power,' and at that moment, in the boy's mocking eyes, Sheppard sees an image of 'the clear-eyed Devil,' malicious and triumphant... At this instant, Sheppard experiences a wave of 'agonizing love' for his son, only to discover the boy hanging from a rafter in the attic where 'he had launched his flight into space.'

Sheppard's failure as a human being is figured here with exquisite irony, since it had been his ambition that his son become an astronaut, conquering space and exploring the stars. But Norton has responded instead to Rufus's very concrete, vivid and immediate faith in heaven and hell, remaining impervious to Sheppard's lectures about the glories of science and man's penetration of the darkness of the universe. Affirming his own humanity, Norton chooses to join his mother, whom he believes he has sighted in heaven (through the telescope Sheppard had bought principally to interest Rufus in science!), in preference to continuing his empty existence with the man who has given him 'every advantage.' It is Sheppard who at last begins to penetrate the darkness, not of outer space but of his own heart.... This story has about it an ironic fatality as beautifully contrived and as inexorable as that of any Greek tragedy....

O'Connor has portrayed the manner in which a passionate belief in the truth of the divine Word may exist *simultaneously* with a passionate commitment to the demonic principle.... [Rufus] assumes the role of Satan's helper with a gusto which is breathtaking.) Rufus has been described as 'a basic figure in modern existentialist literature—the criminal who is seeking God,' and has been compared to Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov.... Rufus's clubfoot clearly symbolizes a crisis of the spirit not unlike that by which Dostoevsky's hero is afflicted, and the experiences of both Raskolnikov and Rufus suggest that at certain states in the disintegration of a spiritual tradition, it is only through apparent dedication to the devil and through motiveless crime that a new, authentic humanity can be born."

Preston M. Browning, Jr.
Flannery O'Connor
(Southern Illinois U 1974) 118-228

“The principal struggle between Sheppard and Rufus is resolved in the evangelical saying of the title; the minor war between them for mastery of Norton, though never formally declared, is terminated by a related pronouncement. When Rufus screeches at Sheppard, ‘The lame’ll carry off the prey!’ it is clear to the reader, if not yet to Sheppard, that Rufus had prevailed in the contest over Norton’s spirit; but when Rufus screams ‘The lame shall enter first!’ at the vanquished Sheppard, there can be no doubt that freedom has won another victory over psychological determinism....

An underlying pattern of deepening denial and solemn abjuration of responsibility suggests Sheppard’s gradual disintegration rather than his improvement. Whether or not these are evangelical allusions to Peter’s denial and Pilate’s repudiation of Jesus, the threefold repetition itself is solemn enough to vouch for the extremity of the context. In successive stages of Sheppard’s dealings with the police, each reaction of his represents a deterioration of his relationship with Rufus, and Rufus at least knows it. Sheppard’s responses go from honest denial of trust for the sake of salutary punishment, to trust seeking the assurance of an alibi, and ultimately to a lie masking as foolishly misplaced confidence. When the police and Rufus appear finally to tell Sheppard what everyone else has known all along—that Rufus has deliberately perpetrated all the crimes and then planned his own arrest—Sheppard washes his hands of all responsibility in the solemn thrice-repeated formula, ‘I have nothing to reproach myself with’....

There are...four apocalyptic images toward the end of the story that project an expectation of judgment rather than purgation. As Rufus leaves the house after eating the pages from the stolen Bible, he pauses at the door, ‘a small black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse.’ The siren of the police car that Sheppard knows is bringing Rufus back is ‘like the first shrill note of a disaster warning.’ Sheppard’s reaction to the siren’s subsiding moan places him unmistakably in the sixth Bolgia of the *Inferno*’s [Dante] eighth circle (Canto XXIII) where the Pharisees suffer at last from the burdens that they have self-righteously inflicted on others.... The only impression that the final paragraph gives us of Sheppard’s reaction to Norton’s suicide completes the Dantean allusion: ‘...at the top [he] reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit’....

Sheppard’s supposed ‘change of heart’ reveals an undiminished messianism... What Sheppard proposes to do now for Norton is characterized by the same rash dependence on self and self-righteous exaggeration: ‘*He* would make *everything* up to him. *He* would never let him suffer again. *He* would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that *he* would *never* fail him again’ (my emphases). If anything, the new ‘good sheppard’ is more insidiously presumptive than the former, who had only these ambitions for Rufus: ‘He wanted to give the boy something to reach for besides his neighbor’s goods. He wanted to stretch his horizons. He wanted him to *see* the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated’....

Rufus’s exclamations—‘The lame shall enter first!’ and ‘The lame’ll carry off the prey!’—imitate the triumphant note of the Gospel beatitudes, condemning Sheppard for his clinical positivism that denies the mysteries of freedom and evil in the world, while reminding us once again that ‘Jesus thrown everything off balance.’ A world in which mischief is merely a compensation for lameness is Sheppard’s pitiable illusion; Rufus knows that genuine salvation has nothing to do with orthopedic shoes. Sheppard’s psychological clarity about the source of Rufus’s problem is based oddly enough on what seems to be the primitive superstition that physical deformity is linked to ‘evil,’ and Rufus wisely will have none of it. In response to Norton’s early insistence that his father is ‘good’ because ‘he helps people,’ Rufus offers the story’s fundamental optic for judging the effectiveness of human endeavor, ‘I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t *right!*’ Goodness without vision is at best irrelevant. It is Rufus, therefore, who provides Norton with the belief that he so much needs—that his mother has somehow survived death—since his mother alone apparently had shown him the love that his ‘big tin Jesus’ father could never offer.”

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 110-13

“Rufus Johnson in ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’—a character who embodies, as many of O’Connor’s characters do, the reality of the devil—has a history of ‘senseless destruction, windows smashed, city trash boxes set afire, tires slashed—the kind of thing...found where boys had been transplanted abruptly from

the country to the city as this one had.’ This is where the supernatural is most clearly and terrifyingly encountered—on those frontiers between the country and the city, faith and faithlessness, Protestant fundamentalism and cosmopolitan skepticism. Yet Rufus Johnson, as the well-meaning humanist protagonist of the story learns, cannot be explained: he is simply a literal force, the force of the devil, to be encountered on this ‘frontier’.”

Ronald Schleifer
“Rural Gothic”

Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

“Many readers have had trouble deciding whether Rufus Johnson of ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ is a demonic avenger or a prophetic savior. What this uncertainty suggests is that such distinctions are not in fact primary, that as imaginative figures O’Connor’s doubles all spring from the same region of her creative mind and emerge with a Dionysian force that is anterior to whatever theological role they are asked to play. Invested with a mysterious power, their immediate and unvarying function is to intrude the perilous unknown into the bland surfaces of ordinary life. It is as outsiders, radically antisocial and dangerous, often literally outlaws, that these dark figures proclaim their links with the tradition of the doppelganger and make it hardly surprising that O’Connor acknowledged (however slightly) Poe and (more warmly) Conrad and James among her literary forebears.”

Frederick Asals
“The Double”

Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982)

“In ‘The Lame Shall Enter First,’ O’Connor went back to discarded early versions of *The Violent Bear It Away*, which had contained a rough young customer called Rufus Florida Johnson. She was fond of him, and although she had revised the novel and excluded him from it, she had not forgotten this demon. Now she brought him out in a story which is in some ways an echo of the novel.

This time, the sociologist is Sheppard, a City Recreational Director, a widower with a small boy, not an idiot but too dull to feed his father’s pride. The child, Norton, is sick with grief for his dead mother, having been told by his...father that she is gone forever, simply does not exist, and that he must stop his unnatural mourning and get on with the ‘unselfish’ life his father wants him to lead. Sheppard’s interest is concentrated on a delinquent he has met at the reformatory where he helps out between Little League games. Johnson is a backwoods boy with a monstrous club foot and a high I.Q., brought up by his grandfather whose religious theories have finally sent him off ‘to the hills’... He is proud of his criminality; he is good at it and has no interest in reforming. He is, though, homeless and hungry, and when Sheppard invites him to come and live with him and his son, he sullenly accepts.

To rehabilitate such a boy would be no less than a feast for Sheppard’s pride. There is a battle between Sheppard and Johnson, carried on over a period of weeks, which becomes a test of strength between opposing wits, wills, endurance, and basic beliefs. Like Rayber in the novel, the beleaguered do-gooder comes to hate his charge. Johnson, although certainly diabolic, is like one of whose biblical devils who recognize Christ, and his particular odium for his benefactor grows from outrage that Sheppard supposes he can save him by his own efforts. ‘God, kid,’ he asks Norton, ‘how do you stand it? He thinks he’s Jesus Christ.’ Norton has been comforted by Johnson’s assurance that his mother is indeed alive and in heaven, if she believed in Jesus and wasn’t a whore.

The child is overjoyed, and spends his days looking for her in the sky, through the telescope Sheppard has bought to develop Johnson’s knowledge. Although he likes to read and devours the encyclopedia, Johnson is more interested in dangerous games with the police: vandalizing houses. When he allows himself to be caught, it is for the purpose of humiliating Sheppard, who finally gives up, bleakly recognizing his limitations and his failure. But he has another surprise coming, one that will completely open his eyes to his real poverty, and leave him far more destitute than Johnson ever was.”

Sally Fitzgerald
Introduction

Three by Flannery O’Connor

“In the long story ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’...we have a convergence of nearly all of O’Connor’s themes. The ‘Lame’ is a young boy, Rufus Johnson, with a clubfoot; and the totemic object is his shoe, a piece of junk laced high that forces him to walk incorrectly. His benefactor, Sheppard (the good shepherd, deceived by others and himself), puts his faith in obtaining for Johnson a new shoe; from his godless point of view, the shoe will prove salvation for the boy. One of O’Connor’s last stories, ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ proves to be one of her most political, a reprise of the 1950s. The three elements of the story are the liberal do-gooder Sheppard; the destructive, God-fearing, satanic Rufus Johnson; and the stolid, fearful Nelson, Sheppard’s son, who misses his mother and seeks her spirit amidst the dead.

Sheppard’s liberal faith is useless because it is based on misunderstanding of human nature; he expects to reform the damned Johnson by showing goodwill, providing healthy food, and giving friendly support. He places faith not only in the right shoe—the central emblem of the story—but in the good effects of science. He buys a telescope so that Johnson can view the wonders of space, the beauties of the universe, and thus move beyond his...hatred. When this fails, Sheppard buys a microscope, hoping that vastness can be replaced by detail, depth rather than spaciousness. But the depth and spaciousness that concern Johnson are located in a space well beyond Sheppard’s comprehension. So while he buys a telescope and a microscope for Johnson ‘to see,’ he himself remains blind to the ways of both devil and God.

When the great, good moment arrives and the new shoe is ready, Johnson refuses it, indicating that the old, rotted piece of footwear is his signature. With the new shoe, Sheppard will have bought him, and Johnson’s vision of hell does not allow himself to be bought. The new shoe would enable him to walk better, but walking, a secular enterprise, is meaningless for one who wishes to ‘enter first,’ as scripture says the lame shall do. Sheppard thinks he’s Jesus Christ...but he’s a false prophet in Johnson’s eyes... Johnson’s revenge on the man who attempts to reform him by means of good deeds is to win over Nelson. For Johnson, social values mean nothing; he steals, destroys property, moves in and out of the clutches of the police. Johnson insists on himself as agent of the devil and agent of experience that moves outside liberal social and political faith. O’Connor...uses Johnson’s corrupted form of belief as a weapon against Sheppard’s bad or counterfeit faith, grounded as it is in good deeds separated from broader belief...

Nelson’s position between Sheppard and Johnson is Isaac’s between Abraham and the Lord; only in O’Connor’s ironic, mordant way, the terror of sacrifice is completed when Nelson hangs himself from an attic beam ‘from which he had launched his flight into space.’ The final word is particularly ironic, since it was through spatiality that Sheppard hoped to reform Johnson. But Nelson’s view of space differs from Sheppard’s; he uses it in search of his mother, dead a year and apparently forgotten by his father. Nelson’s hunger is for love, recognition, security; but Sheppard misses all this and moves to good deeds as a form of expression. He forgoes human direction while pursuing social and political.

By the time Sheppard realizes the course of things and rushes up to embrace the boy, Nelson has hanged himself, launched into the space where, by means of the telescope, he had ‘discovered’ his mother in heaven, Johnson having convinced him that his mother entered heaven if she believed in Jesus. Standing well outside formal politics, O’Connor has nevertheless written an intensely political fable.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 234-35

“In ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ (modeled after *The Violent Bear It Away*), Sheppard, a city recreational director and volunteer counselor for a local reformatory, overdisciplines his son, Norton, who hampers his efforts to reconstruct an intelligent—thus more worthy of his own self—juvenile delinquent boy, Rufus, into a replica of himself. Sheppard misdirects his energy toward someone else’s child and adopts Rufus. He fails to acknowledge his own son’s grief over his mother’s recent death and forces his son to accept the intruder, Rufus. The neglected son commits suicide.

In an early draft, O'Connor depicts Sheppard's rage at his own guilt when he severely reprimands Norton for what the father sees as selfishness. Sheppard then experiences an 'uncanny' feeling, 'as if he [Norton] had some peculiar power to bring on his father's fate.' The sense of fate derives from repressed aggressive and narcissistic impulses, according to Freud. The irony here is the fact that Sheppard, not Norton, serves as an overpowering fatality. No other parent figure in the O'Connor canon is quite so insensitive to his offspring.

When we first meet this father/son pair, Norton seems a faded version of his father, like the 'shadow' of the cowboy printed on his shirt. His eyes are 'a paler blue than his father's, his shirt faded. These images suggest the powerlessness of childhood and Norton's vulnerability, which intensifies our criticism of Sheppard's failure. Sheppard's 'pink sensitive face' does not reflect sensitivity but rather reveals a certain childishness to match his son's. The father's immaturity, unlike his son's, does not abrogate his responsibility. Ironically, Sheppard's self-centered stance of the do-gooder rescuer of Rufus Johnson matches the selfishness he complains characterizes his son. We blame Sheppard for being unable to overcome his narcissism, whereas by comparison, Norton seems blameless and only normally narcissistic for a child of ten grieving for his dead mother. The boy's despair is so great, he vomits his breakfast—an event his father concludes is due to overeating and greed. The boy's habit of sorting out his money, of 'arranging packages of flower seeds in rows around himself,' and of trussing himself up in a rope is compensation for the loss of his mother.

Sheppard chastises his son for weeping, for insensitivity to the 'suffering' of the criminal Rufus, and for not appreciating his 'family'—this latter criticism ignoring the lack of a mother that so disturbs the child. It is Sheppard who is insensitive to suffering—the suffering of his only son whom he criticizes for 'moping.' When Rufus invades his mother's bedroom and tries on her corset in jest, Norton withdraws. Sheppard later finds him hiding in a closet, wrapped in her coat, 'his face swollen and pale, with a drugged look of misery on it,' but the father still demands that his son and only child accept the intruder. Sheppard even allows Rufus to sleep in Norton's mother's bed, and he beats his son when he objects. This father asks too much, wanting his son to reinforce his own narcissistic 'sacrifice' by sharing skimpily apportioned parental love before the son has adjusted to the loss of his mother.

This is not to say that Sheppard does not feel grief. Sheppard's way of hiding his grief is to keep 'busy helping other people,' that is, to repress it by a plunge into the finite world and to aggrandize his own self as a martyred do-gooder. He considers his office as "a confessional,' his 'credentials...[not much] less dubious than a priest's' because 'he had been trained for what he was doing.' O'Connor tells us that Sheppard is an 'empty man who fills up his emptiness with good works.' He boasts that he is 'beyond simple pettiness,' but the delinquent boy demonstrates more insight than the counselor himself when he expresses his 'outrage' at the do-gooder's pretense with the snide comment, 'He thinks he's Jesus Christ.' The terrible gap between Sheppard's limited, this-worldly shortsightedness and the religious perspective is evident in the dramatic irony here—the gap between Sheppard's pretense to goodness and his failure to extend charity to his own son.

In the relationship that Sheppard tries to develop with Rufus, we see O'Connor's most explicit rebuttal of the notion that upbringing and environment ought to excuse bad behavior. Sheppard excuses Rufus because he suffers a club foot ('His mischief was compensation for the foot.') But Rufus is a striking version of a character type common to O'Connor's stories: the vicious child. Like the children who lure Bevel into the path of a dangerous shoat in 'The River' or the destructive boys who burn Mrs. Cope's woods in 'A Circle in the Fire,' or the young girl who attacks her grandfather in 'A View of the Woods,' Flannery O'Connor acknowledges the primitive nature of children. In her letters, she notes how 'children... are quite capable...of committing the most monstrous crimes out of the urge to destroy and humiliate.' Of all her portraits of children, Rufus seems most to represent motiveless malignity.

Since Norton cannot accept his father's explanations that his mother 'doesn't exist,' he eagerly accepts Rufus's interpretation of death—that she lives on in heaven. In spite of his satanic tendencies, Rufus has a clearer grasp of the truth than Sheppard. It is Rufus who sees through Sheppard when the counselor projects a veneer of his own good intentions on the boy, totally misreading the boy to suit his own version.

Rufus, able to perceive how Sheppard threatens his sense of identity, refuses his new shoe to remedy his club foot—a self-defensive act and a declaration that he will preserve his own identity, however evil.

Ironically, when Sheppard purchases a telescope in order to stimulate Rufus intellectually, Norton takes an interest in it because he reasons that he might see his mother in heaven through it. Rufus tells him, ‘You got to be dead to get there,’ and so Norton commits suicide. The story ends with Sheppard suffering an awareness of his error—all too late: ‘His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself’.... O’Connor regretted the fact that she could not ‘know’ or ‘sympathize’ with Mr. Sheppard like most of her other characters. What seems most intensely wrought in this story is the moral lesson to face the shadow within, the pride and aggressiveness that cause parents to inhibit the development of their children: a major theme clearly present when O’Connor presents death-haunted parents who destroy their own offspring.”

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 21-24

Michael Hollister (2014)