Good Country People

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia to a real-estate agent and his wife. At the age of six, O'Connor briefly became a minor celebrity when a film was made about her trained chicken. While O'Connor was an adolescent, her father was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, and he died from the disease several years later. After studying Social Sciences at the Georgia State College for Women, O'Connor was admitted into the highly selective Iowa Writer's Workshop, a graduate program in fiction. In 1951 she was diagnosed with the same disease that had debilitated and killed her father, and she returned to live at her family's old farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. Though only expected to live five more years, O'Connor lived fourteen, continuing to write prolifically, give lectures, raise birds, and travel until the end of her life. Over the course of her career she published two novels, two collections of short stories, and many essays. Her work has won numerous awards and honors, and she is now considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Flannery O'Connor lived in the post-Civil War South, where slavery had been long abolished, but the social classes of the aristocratic South remained in a rigid hierarchy. In "Good Country People" O'Connor focuses on that hierarchy among white Southerners, and the inequality between landowners and their employees that had been constant for hundreds of years. Religious faith, too, was an integral part of Southern society, which reflects itself in O'Connor's writing, both in her personal faith and in her depiction of the so-called Christian faithful as liars and hypocrites.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O'Connor engaged with the tradition of Southern Gothic literature, which typically uses grotesque events to investigate Southern life. This genre became popular from the 1940s to the 1960s, precisely when O'Connor wrote most of her fiction. Along with "Good Country People," O'Connor's story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is considered a central part of the genre. Gothic fiction was first made popular with Horace Walpole's 1765 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, and centuries later Southern writers such as William Faulkner began incorporating macabre, supernatural, and mysterious events into fiction set in the American South. Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily," is also considered a cornerstone of the genre. Decades later, writers like Walker Percy and Cormac McCarthy are still labeled as Southern Gothic writers. Though the term has been transformed, and some critics doubt its usefulness, the tradition has retained an interest in the dark and twisted, often accompanied by a powerful sense of irony.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Good Country People
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** Milledgeville, Georgia
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** Southern Gothic
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic Short Story
- **Setting:** 20th Century Rural Georgia
- **Climax:** The Bible Salesman steals Hulga's artificial leg
- **Antagonist:** The Bible Salesman
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Queen of the Birds. Leading a mostly secluded existence, O'Connor raised many birds including ducks, ostriches, and toucans. She wrote about the peacocks she raised in an essay titled "The King of the Birds."

Good Country Person. Much like this short story's protagonist, O'Connor lived in rural Georgia for much of her life.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with a description of Mrs. Freeman, a woman who works on a farm in rural Georgia. Mrs. Hopewell, who employs Mrs. Freeman, begins the morning routine: she lights the gas heater, then her daughter Hulga goes into the bathroom and slams the door, staying in there until Mrs. Freeman has arrived and her small talk with Mrs. Hopewell is almost done. Hulga experiences "constant outrage" in the presence of her mother and Mrs. Freeman's constant small talk. The banality of Mrs. Hopewell's conversation is characterized by one of her favorite phrases, "that is life!"

No matter what Mrs. Hopewell says, Mrs. Freeman agrees with her. Mrs. Hopewell considers Mrs. Freeman one of the "good country people," a group that she contrasts with the "trash" who have given her trouble as employees in the past. Whenever Mrs. Hopewell has tried to make her daughter work, Hulga's attitude has been so negative and unpleasant that Mrs. Hopewell gave up. Mrs. Hopewell accepts her daughter's

negative attitude because Hulga lost her leg when she was ten years old in a hunting accident. Her **artificial leg** makes it so that Hulga "never danced a step or had any *normal* good times." Hulga's original name, at birth, was "Joy", but when she turned 21 she changed it to Hulga to spite her mother. Hulga takes pride in ruining anything that her mother thinks is beautiful.

Mrs. Hopewell regrets allowing Hulga to return to school for a PhD. Hulga is thirty two years old, but because of a heart condition she is only expected to live to forty-five. She would like to go travel and lecture at universities, but cannot do so because of her illness. She is frustrated with her ordinary surroundings, demanding of her mother, in response to being told to smile more, "Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!" Having studied philosophy as a graduate student, Hulga spends much of her time reading and taking long walks. She has little interest in men, regarding most of them as unintelligent and uneducated.

We learn that a Bible Salesman arrived at the Hopewell home the previous day, and the narrator then recounts what transpired: the Bible Salesman arrived, seeming earnest and well-mannered. Mrs. Hopewell invited him inside, and he explained that he was there to sell bibles that he kept in a **valise**. He commented that there was no bible in their parlor, for which Mrs. Hopewell blamed Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell then lied to the Bible Salesman, telling him that she keeps a bible by her bedside. He insisted that every family should have a bible in the parlor, but Mrs. Hopewell refused and suggested that it was time for him to leave. But she was then guilted into letting him stay by his insistence that he is "just a country boy" and that "People like you don't like to fool with country people like me." He introduced himself as Manley Pointer, and Mrs. Hopewell insisted that she appreciated "good country people." When Hulga arrived ready for dinner and demanded that her mother get rid of the Bible Salesman, the Bible Salesman mentioned that he has a heart condition, and Hulga began to cry, believing that the two of them must have the same condition. She insisted that he stay for dinner.

At dinner, Hulga pretended not to hear whenever the Bible Salesman spoke to her. He told his hosts about his childhood, mentioning that his father was crushed by a tree when he was eight. Hulga left the table, but Mrs. Hopewell spent two hours listening to the Bible Salesman talk about his life before telling him that she must be going. Outside, as the Bible salesman left, Hulga was waiting for him in the road and they spoke. Mrs. Hopewell saw them but could not hear what they said. She did watch Hulga walk him to the gate.

Back in the present, Saturday morning, Hulga waits for the Bible Salesman to arrive. The night before, they had made a plan to meet at 10am. She told him that she was seventeen. On the way to the gate the night before, he explained that he considered himself a serious person who is keenly aware of his own mortality. Hulga said she was the same, and felt a connection with him. Then he proposed that they have a picnic the next day. During the night, she imagined seducing him.

When Hulga shows up to the gate at 10am, nobody is there. She begins to wonder if he will ever show up, but then he appears. He is carrying his **valise** full of bibles. As they walk, he asks where her artificial leg joins to her body, and Hulga is offended. He then expresses disbelief when she says she is an atheist. At the edge of the woods, he kisses her. Hulga has never been kissed before and reflects that it is an "unexceptional experience."

They enter the barn and the Bible Salesman laments that they cannot go up to the loft because of Hulga's missing leg. She is offended and immediately climbs up. They kiss, and the Bible Salesman tells Joy he loves her. He insists that she say the same of him. She explains that love is "not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing." She expresses pity for the Bible Salesman. Finally, on his insistence, she admits that she loves him "in a sense" and tells him that she is thirty years old and well-educated.

The Bible Salesman asks her to prove that she loves him by showing where her artificial leg connects to the rest of her body. When she says no, he accuses her of leading him on. Hulga then lifts up the sleeve of her pants and shows him, then taking the leg off and putting it back on again. The Bible Salesman then takes it off, and despite Hulga's demand that he put it back on, he does not. The Bible Salesman then begins to kiss her again. When she pushes him off, he takes out one of his bibles from the **valise** and opens it, revealing it to be hollowed out. It contains a flask of whiskey, pornographic playing cards, and a box of condoms. He offers her a drink of the whiskey, and Hulga is shocked. She repeatedly demands to be given her leg back. She says that, in all his hypocrisy, he is a "perfect Christian." He ridicules her for thinking that he was an actual Christian, grabs the leg and, as he descends from the loft, tells Hulga that he has a whole collection of things he's stolen in a similar way, and that his real name is not Manley Pointer. He proclaims "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born."

Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, busy working, watch the Bible Salesman walk from the woods toward the highway. Mrs. Hopewell recognizes him and presumes that he had been selling bibles. Both she and Mrs. Freeman reflect that they could never be as "simple" as the Bible Salesman seems to be.

CHARACTERS

Hulga Hopewell (Joy) – The daughter of Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga is intelligent, intellectual, and cynical. The shallowness of daily life and the pointless conversations between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman cause her constant annoyance. Limited by a

weak heart and an **artificial leg**, her life has largely been restricted to the home where she grew up. As a result, she has always kept mostly to herself and prefers reading books to spending time with others. Her heart condition and artificial leg, too, have made her more reflective: facing her own mortality and disability forced her to question the religious thinking that dominates the world around her. Instead, she has built a life defined by philosophy. As she states to the Bible Salesman, she has "a number of degrees," including a Ph.D. in philosophy. When she turned twenty-one, Joy turned her name to "Hulga," taking pride in turning a symbol of what she saw as her mother's naïve worldview and turning it into something ugly. To Hulga, religion is a waste of time. She sees herself as above the typical Christian believers around her, who she sees as blind hypocrites. When she meets the Bible Salesman, she plans to seduce him, assuming that with what she believes is her "realistic" view of the world that she is more worldly and savvy. Yet when the Bible Salesman asks to see her artificial leg, Hulga seems to have an almost-religious epiphany, a moment where she feels more deeply connected to the world around her and to him by allowing him access to her vulnerabilities. To her surprise, it turns out that the Bible Salesman is a scam artist, travelling with alcohol, condoms, and pornography inside a hollowed-out Bible. When the Bible Salesman takes the leg and abandons Hulga, Hulga must face the truth that she is not so savvy as she believes. And yet, for the reader if not for Hulga herself, the power of her near-religious experience when giving up her artificial leg is no less real or powerful despite the fact that the Bible Salesman used it to take advantage of her.

Mrs. Hopewell – Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell's name is a pun on the breezy outlook she has of the world. Her conventional worldview is based on a simplistic assessment of herself at the top and the classes "beneath" her as either made up of "good country people," meaning rural people who work hard and are honest, and "trash," dishonest people who, Mrs. Hopewell believes, are strictly untrustworthy and live in filth. She believes herself to be able to easily distinguish between these classes, a sense that of course reaffirms her own belief in her superiority. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hopewell gossips regularly with her employee and tenant, Mrs. Freeman. Mrs. Hopewell recognizes that Mrs. Freeman is nosy, but prides herself on putting that to good use: if Mrs. Freeman wants to be in charge everything, Mrs. Hopewell believes, then let her. It is clear, though, that Mrs. Freeman's habit of telling Mrs. Hopewell whatever she wants to hear gives Mrs. Hopewell a false sense of her own good judgment. Though skeptical of Hulga's philosophical tendencies, Mrs. Hopewell is at times sympathetic toward her daughter and has allowed her a relaxed and intellectual life. Ultimately, Mrs. Hopewell is not a bad person, but her easy sense of superiority and conventional morality makes her hypocritical (as Hulga sees her) and easily manipulated by the Bible Salesman, who Mrs. Hopewell sees as being one of the "good country people."

Mrs. Freeman – Mrs. Freeman is Mrs. Hopewell's tenant and employee, largely in charge of running the farm. She is described as efficient and like a machine, so focused on everything being just right that her previous employer warned Mrs. Hopewell of her nosiness. Mrs. Hopewell puts this to her advantage, reasoning that if Mrs. Freeman wants to be in charge of everything, then let her. Mrs. Freeman often gossips with Mrs. Hopewell about superficial things, or about her daughters, Carramae and Glynese Freeman. These conversations involve frequent use of platitudes and clichés, with Mrs. Freeman typically agreeing with whatever her employer says. When interacting with Hulga, Mrs. Freeman shows an interest in Hulga's **artificial leg**, asking repeatedly for details about how the accident happened. Mrs. Freeman thinks of herself as more in touch with reality than Mrs. Hopewell, as being superior in her own way. But the events of the story shows that she isn't: at the story's end, Mrs. Freeman watches the Bible Salesman walk out of the woods, and, not realizing what has transpired between the Bible Salesman and Hulga, reflects that, "Some can't be that simple…I know I never could."

The Bible Salesman – The Bible Salesman, who introduces himself as Manley Pointer, appears at first to be a devout and humble Christian selling bibles out of a large **valise**. He is extremely good at figuring out other characters' viewpoints, insecurities, and false senses of superiority and exploiting them to get what he wants. He plays into Mrs. Hopewell's idea of "good country people" to get her to sit with him for two hours as he tries to sell bibles to her. He pretends to have a heart condition, which catches Hulga's attention, and then allows Hulga to indulge in her own sense of superiority to let her think that *she* is seducing *him*. He tells a story, likely fabricated, that he lost his father when he was ten years old. Even further, he senses Hulga's hidden (even from herself) desire to allow herself to be vulnerable to and give herself to another in order to steal her artificial leg. Ultimately, before abandoning Hulga in the loft, he reveals that he has tricked many similar women in this way, and that his own viewpoint of the world is even more hard-bitten than Hulga's atheism. He describes himself as a nihilist, saying "I been believing in nothing since I was born." He then tells her that Manley Pointer is not his real name and leaves. We do not know much for certain about the Bible Salesman's life, as it is impossible to separate fact from fiction in what he says, but it is clear that he is a liar who takes pride in his nihilism, moving through the country taking advantage of people's trust.

Carramae and Glynese Freeman – Glycene and Carramae are Mrs. Freeman's daughters. Carramae is fifteen and pregnant by her husband. Glynese is eighteen and unmarried. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman often gossip about the girls, discussing the pregnancy and a marriage proposal Glynese receives. Hulga, who dislikes the sisters, has nicknamed them to herself Glycerin and Caramel, mocking what she sees as their

sugary-sweet, conventional nature.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CLASS, IDENTITY, AND SUPERIORITY

In "Good Country People", Mrs. Hopewell sees the people of her world as falling into a clear hierarchy. At the bottom is a group of people she calls "trash," whom she describes as poor, uncultured, and essentially criminal. Next is a group she identifies as "good country people." These people are poorer than landowners like Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter Hulga, as well as less educated. Mrs. Hopewell champions these people as "the salt of the earth," as people who are vital to the functioning of the world, since "it takes all kinds to make the world." Yet, her regard for "good country people" is essentially condescending—she views such people, including her maid Mrs. Freeman and the Bible Salesman, as "good" only in the context of also seeing them as inferior to her and her daughter. Further, there is a sense that it makes Mrs. Hopewell feel even more powerful and "enlightened" that she is willing and able to differentiate between the "good" and "trash" people beneath her on the social ladder.

By shifting into other characters' perspectives, however, O'Connor suggests the folly of seeing the world in terms of such hierarchy, as well as how subjective it can be. Because Hulga is more educated than everyone else in the story, she sees *her*self as wiser and able to see things as they truly are. She feels able to define herself (she even renames herself from her given name of Joy to Hulga), and therefore as sitting at the top of the hierarchy. Meanwhile, Mrs. Freeman constantly attempts to express her superiority over her husband and to prove her equality with Mrs. Hopewell and thus considers *her*self atop the stack. Thus, every character tries to understand herself in terms not only of her social class — how much education or money she has — but also how she compares to the people around her and the attributes she thinks make her stand out. Nearly every character in the novel sees the world, and themselves, in a way that places them at the top of the hierarchy.

The story pushes even further, though, and suggests that seeing the world in terms of hierarchies actually makes one blind to the realities of the individuals in the world. While Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga, and Mrs. Freeman strive to make their identities known and concrete—Hulga, for example, shouts to her mother: "'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM"—the Bible Salesman takes a different approach. He takes advantage of his low social position to get people to sympathize with him. He allows others to see him as they like and then plays into their class-based stereotypes. Mrs. Hopewell sees him as simple, blameless, "good country people," and he presents himself as such. However, the final revelation of his corruption and shamelessness demonstrates how one cannot assume based on class or even on one's outward appearance what a person is really like. Ultimately, the Bible Salesman even outsmarts the highly educated Hulga, who assumes he's a complete dimwit at the start. Through his deceit and cunning, the Bible Salesman manages to con the other three women, each of whom thought she was better than him, and in fact is able to (and motivated to) pull off his con *because* they assumed they were better than him. In this way, the Bible Salesman further proves both the fragility and danger of believing in any kind of class-based or intelligence-based social hierarchy.

APPEARANCES AND REALITIES

The way characters understand other characters in "Good Country People" is often the opposite of how these characters truly are. Moreover, the way characters *present* themselves in "Good Country People" is often the very opposite of how they are. The title of the story, "Good Country People," is meant to be read ironically. Both of the characters whom Mrs. Hopewell describes as being "good country people" turn out not to fit that description at all. The Bible Salesman, who claims to identify with the phrase and presents himself as simple and pious, turns out to be an irreverent womanizer, and he steals Hulga's **artificial leg**. Mrs. Freeman, meanwhile, is somber, superior, judgmental, and self-centered throughout the story—not simple and kind-hearted, as Mrs. Hopewell assumes. Mrs. Hopewell's entire idea of "good country people" depends on her self-conception as being superior to those people, and yet in the story it is very clear that Mrs. Hopewell is no more intelligent, sophisticated, or cultured than the other characters. The very phrase "Good Country People" and the way that it defines reality becomes meaningless and suspect.

Hulga is the centerpiece character of the story, and O'Connor uses her exterior and interior lives to comment on the way that looks can be deceiving. Though outwardly a disabled, grumpy, and short-tempered character, her short and absurd tryst with the Bible Salesman, during which O'Connor enters her complicated mind, reveals Hulga to be a person seeking love and acceptance even as she struggles to master her emotions in a world that has often been cruel to her. Further, to entice the Bible Salesman Hulga tries to modify her own appearance, pretending to be younger than she is, never realizing that the Bible Salesman is hiding who he is in a much more fundamental way.

By the end of "Good Country People," O'Connor literally illustrates the distance between appearance and reality. The Bible Salesman's **valise** appears quite early on in the story, and throughout the story both the characters and we, as readers, believe that it contains Bibles. In fact, at the end of the story the man opens the valise up to reveal just two Bibles, one of which is actually hollow and contains alcohol, playing cards, and pornography. The man who seemed innocent and harmless suddenly becomes a villain, and Hulga must not only deal with the loss of her leg but also the fact that her conception of her own superior intelligence is not as definitive as she had believed.

AUTHENTIC FAITH AND VULNERABILITY

"Good Country People" offers few glimpses of true, authentic faith. More often, the characters demonstrate false claims of devotion. Mrs. Hopewell lies about keeping a Bible at her bedside to give the impression that she is religious. The Bible Salesman, who claims to be devout, turns out to be hiding alcohol, condoms, and pornography inside a hollowed-out Bible. And the protagonist, Hulga, is condescending toward any religious sentiment.

There is one moment in the story, however, that seems to involve authentic faith—when Hulga has an epiphany while removing her **artificial leg** in front of the Bible Salesman. O'Connor writes that "It was like surrendering to him completely...it was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously in his." She even fantasizes about a life with the Bible Salesman in which "every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again." Clearly, she is having a spiritual moment that goes beyond everyday experience. Despite her cynicism and her intellectual education, for a moment she considers the possibility of a better, more meaningful existence.

But as soon as Hulga makes herself vulnerable, the Bible Salesman takes advantage of her. He takes the leg and refuses to give it back. He takes out the condoms and the whiskey, making clear that he has been the one tricking *her*, whereas she believed she was seducing *him*. This flash of insight Hulga experiences is thus intertwined with her vulnerability and suffering. As Flannery O'Connor has written elsewhere, "Grace changes us and change is painful." For O'Connor, faith comes with vulnerability and pain—it is the handing over of one's self, and the acceptance of whatever comes after. Hulga thus gets her first glimpse of authentic faith and pays a high price for it. This unsentimental view of faith permeates O'Connor's writing, and yet the story also offers the suggestion that there is value in that moment of authentic, vulnerable faith—that there is a worth in such faith regardless of the pain it can expose you to.

DISEASE AND DISABILITY

Flannery O'Connor lost her father to systemic lupus erythematosus at the age of fifteen. This same disease was then diagnosed in O'Connor herself, debilitating her for many years and causing her death at age 39. Disease is present throughout much of O'Connor's work, and she uses it to show how true hardship and an awareness of one's own mortality can transform people. While Mrs. Hopewell lives in a world of clichés and conventional morality, Hulga's awareness of her own death makes her a more contemplative and introspective person.

Hulga seems to see her missing **leg**, the result of a childhood accident, as the very core of her identity. As the story puts it: "She was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail…she took care of it as someone else would his soul." She is intimately familiar with the limitations of her own body. Each day, also, she is aware of the frailty of her heart and the possibility that she might die. Together, her missing leg and her heart condition have defined her life: they have forced her to stay close to home and led her to seek refuge from the world, to give up religion, and to devote herself instead to the study of books and philosophy. Her disabilities haven't just defined what Hulga has done with her life, they have also defined her views of life and the world. Because of her intellectual pursuits, and because of her disabilities, Hulga believes that she sees the world as it really is—that she sees through the lies of religion and complacency to the truth of the deceit, greed, and lust beneath. As Mrs. Hopewell puts it, Hulga avoids a romantic life because she is practically able to smell the stupidity of boys around her. And it is certainly possible to infer that Hulga started to call herself Hulga, as opposed to her given name of Joy, precisely because of the "true vision" of the world that she feels her disabilities have given her. Her disease and disability have fundamentally changed her identity to one that is cynical of the "joy" in the world and instead sees ugliness.

In another story, one of O'Connor's characters says "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." In "Good Country People," Hulga's disease serves that role, making her constantly aware of her own mortality. While Hulga may not be a perfectly moral person, she is certainly more concerned with living an ethical life and seeing things clearly than her insulated and convention-obsessed mother, and O'Connor makes it clear that these qualities stem from her own disease and disability.

HYPOCRISY

Every character in "Good Country People" believes he or she has the moral high ground, but none of them leads the ethical life they claim to. In different ways, they are all hypocrites, claiming to honor and to have higher moral standards than they actually do.

Mrs. Hopewell, for example, speaks with authority about the difference between "good country people" and "trash." Throughout the story, she projects an air of moral superiority, but it's unclear what exactly makes her so much better than the people she looks down upon. When the Bible Salesman visits her home, Mrs. Hopewell says that she keeps a Bible at her bedside—but she's lying. She views herself as treating Mrs. Freeman with respect, but in actuality looks down on her.

For his part, the Bible Salesman espouses Christian values *in order* to sin. He lies about being religious to take advantage of others, exactly the opposite of what a devout Christian should do. This reversal is encapsulated in his supposedly Bible-filled **valise**, which turns out to contain a hollowed-out Bible filled with whiskey and condoms. As Hulga tells the Bible Salesman: "You're just like them all — say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian." Hulga's comment suggests that she sees hypocrisy as connected to religion, but the story as a whole indicates that Hulga's view of hypocrisy is too limited. It suggests this most powerfully, in fact, with the revelation that Hulga is a hypocrite too. Hulga claims and believes that she has risen above conventional morality by shedding religion and pursuing philosophy in a meaningful way, and she thinks of herself as living a more ethical life than the religious people around her, and yet all of her knowledge only makes her look down on others and scorn them. For all Hulga's awareness of the hypocrisy of others, she cannot see her own.

Importantly, all of these characters seem righteous and morally consistent when seen from afar. Mrs. Hopewell, for example, strictly follows social norms that make her seem moral and kind (like sitting with the Bible Salesman, because he is one of the "good country people" and it's polite to welcome a guest), but she does not act this way out of genuine kindness—rather from a sense of obligation and keeping up pretenses. The thin veneer of politeness and social convention masks Mrs. Hopewell's judgmental and immoral nature, even from herself. This, then, is another form of hypocrisy: she pretends to be genuinely kind and generous, but only is insofar as it gives her the appearance of following social norms.

O'Connor makes clear that this hypocrisy is well hidden, and that everyday life makes it easy to believe that most people are righteous and consistent. At the end of the story, when Mrs. Hopewell sees the Bible Salesman walking by, she thinks to herself that he has been selling Bibles, when in fact he just stole her daughter's **artificial leg** and abandoned her. From a distance, all of these characters are ethical members of upstanding society—but when examined more closely, none of them has the integrity they espouse. As Hulga points out, hypocrisy is everywhere, and O'Connor, by also revealing Hulga's own hypocrisy, reveals that she is even more correct than she realizes.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ARTIFICIAL LEG

Hulga treats her **artificial leg** "as someone else would his soul, in private and with her eyes turned away." She spends her life hiding it, and when the Bible Salesman wants to see it she at first refuses. When she does let him take it off, she is at her most vulnerable. It is no coincidence that at that same moment she experiences a fleeting spiritual awakening. The leg has come to represent her soul: it is what makes her unique, and it is what makes her vulnerable. Flannery O'Connor always wrote with an interest in the soul; regarding the leg, she said, "We're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled . . . and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg." Just as Hulga's vulnerability because of her missing leg caused her to get an artificial one, the lack of faith in her life caused her to fortify herself with philosophy. But Flannery O'Connor, a devout Christian, presents this as a tragic state of affairs: just as the Bible Salesman proves that Hulga is still physically vulnerable even with her artificial leg, O'Connor shows that Hulga's spiritual state is still vulnerable despite her deep knowledge of philosophy and her cynical outlook. We can regard this "wooden part of her soul" as the part of Hulga that depends on philosophy and cynicism.

THE BIBLE SALESMAN'S VALISE

The Bible Salesman's **valise** is not what it seems. Like the Bible Salesman, it presents an image of faith and morality, as it appears to be full of Bibles. But once he tricks Hulga up into the loft of the barn, Hulga sees that now there are only two Bibles in it. Not only that, but one of the Bibles is hollowed out and filled with a flask of whiskey, a box of condoms, and a set of pornographic playing cards. Instead of objects representing faith, the valise contains objects representing sin. It is the opposite of what it pretends to be. In this story, the **valise** functions as a symbol of hypocrisy. In the world O'Connor creates, it is the seemingly faithful who are the worst sinners, and the valise captures the idea that external appearances can be deceiving.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1971.

Good Country People Quotes

> By the time Joy came in, they had usually finished the weather report and were on one or the other of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese or Carramae, Joy called them Glycerin and Caramel.

Related Characters: Carramae and Glynese Freeman –, Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

These women believe themselves to be good, moral people who are better than everyone else. However, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are constantly gossiping about others, which is not a pastime considered virtuous or industrious. Mrs. Hopewell, who has the greater social status, further believes herself to be kind and discerning because of her treatment of Mrs. Freeman. Her willingness to spend time with someone lower class, her identification of Mrs. Freeman as "good country people" rather than "trash," and her ability to make good use of Mrs. Freeman's nosiness all inflate Mrs. Hopewell's already large ego. However, when we see the two women together it is clear that they have similar interests and personalities, and neither one of them is better or smarter than the other. This passage is also an indication of Joy (Hulga)'s bitterness and cynicism. Joy mocks the names of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, who are pretty and successful in love, for seemingly no reason. This hints at Joy's own vulnerability and the pain of her loneliness. While she believes that she is being honest and intelligent by seeing through the hypocrisy and artifice of others, she actually cuts others down partly out of insecurity.

> Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell's favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272-273

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hopewell believes that she is at the top of a social hierarchy, and unconsciously feels that she is the cleverest and most moral person in her life. However, her analysis of the world around her rests almost entirely on nearly meaningless platitudes like these. She does not seem capable of seeing the world as it is, since she merely applies a cliche that seems appropriate for every situation and then moves on. This is not intelligent behavior, or particularly moral behavior. For instance, her beloved saying that "other people have their opinions too" makes her seem openminded and nonjudgmental, but her insistence on differentiating between "trash" and "good country people" shows how ingrained judgment is in her personality. The narrator states that Mrs. Hopewell says these platitudes in a tone that suggests that "no one held [these opinions] but her," which shows, too, her lack of self awareness. She believes herself to be exceptional, but Mrs. Hopewell is shallow and petty and uninspired like most other people in her life.

> The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash. They were good country people.

Related Characters: Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hopewell is constantly patting herself on the back for her kindness in employing Mrs. Freeman. She believes that this reflects well on her since she, as a wise person of high status, has had the kindness and good sense to hire someone who is what she believes to be the good kind of poor ("good country people") rather than the bad kind ("trash"). This shows just how central social class is to Mrs. Hopewell's worldview. Instead of seeing Mrs. Freeman as simply a good or bad person, she sees her as a poor person first and approves of her in a condescending way that implies that she is respectable and simple rather than just good. This is also ironic, since Mrs. Freeman is not a particularly good person, and she is no more "simple" than Mrs. Hopewell herself. Mrs. Hopewell's obsession with social class, then, has blinded her to the realities of the world around her that should have been obvious.

"Her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all," to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM."

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell, Hulga Hopewell (Joy) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

This comment comes in the context of the narrator explaining why Mrs. Hopewell hired Mrs. Freeman, commenting that the "trash" families she had hired before her were not the kind of people she wanted to be around. It is ironic, then, that Mrs. Hopewell's own daughter--someone of high social class and much education--is someone who, like the "trash," Mrs. Hopewell does not want to be around. Mrs. Hopewell is so consumed by her preoccupation with social class, though, that she cannot recognize this parallel. Mrs. Hopewell is unable to acknowledge the reality of even her own daughter's character, preferring to pretend that Hulga could be more pleasant if she tried, and refusing to grapple with the pain and suffering that has made her this way. For her part, this is another example of Hulga responding to the pain and loneliness of her life by purposefully acting "ugly" just to spite her mother.

She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

This is a blatant example of Mrs. Hopewell's preference for her petty illusions over looking reality in the face. Hulga's reality does not fit in with Mrs. Hopewell's narrative of her own life, a life that she believes should be good and pleasant and successful because of her class. As such, she cannot acknowledge that her disabled daughter is unhappy and living a life unlike the one Mrs. Hopewell imagined for her. That Mrs. Hopewell prefers to think of Hulga as a child rather than acknowledging that she is an adult further shows her condescension and delusion. Hulga is a full-grown, well-educated woman whose peculiar attitudes and beliefs come from a complex life of suffering and studying, but rather than engaging with this Mrs. Hopewell instead takes the condescending and disrespectful approach of thinking of Hulga as a child who doesn't know who she truly is and might someday grow into someone "normal." This also shows the infuriating reality that Hulga lives with in which very few people are willing to deal with her frankly and honestly, something she craves.

Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. Then she had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga.

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy), Mrs. Hopewell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

This is a complicated passage that is revealing of both Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga. For Mrs. Hopewell, this shows her cynicism and lack of compassion. She seems to believe that in changing her name from Joy to Hulga, her daughter has done something perverse to personally spite her. She never steps back and tries to understand why Hulga might have wanted to change her name, and she never considers reasons for her having chosen it other than simple perversity. Hulga, though, feels that the name gives her power over other people because it is shocking. For Hulga, the name is an affront to others in the way that her appearance, attitude, and artificial leg are. Hulga feels empowered by embracing what she sees to be the reality of her condition, rather than living with a name like Joy that feels false. However, Hulga likes her name best when only she is willing to use it; she is uncomfortable when Mrs. Freeman uses the name and feels that her privacy has been invaded. This is a key to Hulga's vulnerability; her insecurities about her leg and appearance mean that she embraces ugliness only when she herself is wielding it. When it fails to make others uncomfortable, Hulga's name

turns on her and makes her feel vulnerable.

> She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called...

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

It's revealing that Hulga associates her name with Vulcan, the Roman blacksmith god. Vulcan is also disabled, and is typically shown to have a limp just like Hulga. Vulcan is known as strong and skilled, though ugly. Importantly, he is powerful and desirable, as he is the lover of Venus (the goddess of love and beauty) despite his deformity. Hulga's identification with Vulcan shows her fantasies and desires; it shows that she wishes to be powerful and to be loved for who she is. What Mrs. Hopewell assumes was a choice made from cynicism and perversity is actually, in a sense, an optimistic and almost sentimental choice in which Hulga seeks to remake herself into the person she wishes to be. This is key to understanding Hulga, who thinks of herself as somebody who sees through the world's artifice through negativity and cynicism. Hulga does not realize that her desires and fears and sorrow make her vulnerable to the same kinds of illusions that she faults her mother and Mrs. Freeman for believing.

On a side note, it is also telling that Hulga, who is insistently atheistic, turns to Roman mythology to make sense of herself. While she never brings up the Christian religion, she has not eschewed religion altogether; she turns to another system of belief to create a metaphor for her world.

> Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about.

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

This statement comes just after the revelation that Hulga has a fatal heart condition that will likely kill her within fifteen years. Her disability, then, is not limited to the inconvenience of her missing leg; she also has an internal condition that threatens her life. This becomes important later in the story, because the Bible salesman is able to exploit her rare compassion by mentioning his own weak heart. Once again, this shows how vulnerable Hulga is because of her disabilities.

In addition, this statement shows Hulga's need to be superior, just like every other character in the story. Because of Hulga's appearance and disabilities, she believes that she cannot make others see that she is is superior to them through the traditional avenues of marriage and children and social life, so she scorns these things and embraces education and intellect instead as the things that will set her apart. Even though Hulga believes that her intellectual pursuits allow her to see through the social world she lives in, Hulga's deployment of her intelligence shows that she is of similar character to Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman—those who are constantly trying to put forward the qualities and accomplishments that they believe will make them be seen as superior and respectable.

> Mrs. Hopewell could not say, "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor." She said, stiffening slightly, "I keep my bible by my bedside." This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell (speaker), The Bible Salesman, Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

This is another example of Mrs. Hopewell's lack of self-awareness. She is quite concerned with appearing to be a good Christian (her embarrassment at not having a Bible in the parlor shows this), but the fact that her Bible is somewhere in the attic reveals that she is probably not a devout Christian, as she does not know exactly where to find it and she clearly does not look at it much. Furthermore, her willingness to casually lie about her Bible casts doubt on

her claims to being a good Christian.

During this interaction Mrs. Hopewell never doubts herself or her intentions, instead casting the blame on her atheist daughter who apparently will not allow a Bible to be kept in the parlor. This is deep hypocrisy; Mrs. Hopewell is clearly the one to blame for having stashed her Bible in the attic, but she feels no shame or hint of awareness about this, preferring to see her daughter as the one who has failed. As long as Mrs. Hopewell appears to be a good Christian in the eyes of others she is satisfied; this interaction shows that her own private behavior doesn't seem to trouble her.

"Well lady, I'll tell you the truth—not many people want to buy one nowadays and besides, I know I'm real simple. I don't know how to say a thing but to say it. I'm just a country boy." He glanced up to her unfriendly face. "People like you don't like to fool with country people like me!"

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman (speaker), Mrs. Hopewell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator later gives hints that the Bible salesman is not who he claims to be, but Mrs. Hopewell take this statement at face value when he makes it. In fact, he is manipulating Mrs. Hopewell into inviting him to stay by playing to her blindnesses and prejudices. What he says seems to be just what Mrs. Hopewell would expect to hear from a young man like him--he admits to being simple, and flatters Mrs. Hopewell by acknowledging that people of her status are above people like him. He also, by saying that people like her don't fool with people like him, creates an opening for her to display her goodness and charity by inviting him to stay. The Bible salesman, then, is taking advantage of Mrs. Hopewell's classism and need to show that she is moral and respectable. In reality, though, the Bible salesman is revealing Mrs. Hopewell's self-absorption and naïveté. Since he is playing up the stereotype she expects to find, she remains blind to his actual motives and character as an individual person.

"Lord," she said, "he bored me to death but he was so sincere and genuine I couldn't be rude to him. He was just good country people, you know," she said, "—just the salt of the earth."

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell (speaker), The Bible Salesman, Mrs. Freeman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Mrs. Hopewell is condescending and hypocritical. While she admits that she found the Bible salesman boring, she could not be rude to him to his face, though she is perfectly willing to insult him behind his back. This shows that her dinner invitation to him was not real kindness, but rather hewing to the social expectations for what a "good" person looks like. She is also, once again, making the condescending distinction between "good country people" and "trash." Because the boy seemed polite and Christian, Mrs. Hopewell assumes that he is a simple and good person, albeit one who is below her. In fact, the boy is manipulating her for his own perverse intentions, but she is so beholden to her own stereotypes and so enamored with her own wisdom and judgment that she remains blind to the reality of the situation.

"I like girls that wear glasses," he said. "I think a lot. I'm not like these people that a serious thought don't ever enter their heads. It's because I may die."

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman (speaker), Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

This is another example of the Bible salesman's pitch-perfect manipulations of the characters in the story. While with Mrs. Hopewell he pretended to be devout and simple, with Hulga he flatters her insecurities about her appearance ("I like girls that wear glasses"), claims to be an intellectual, and attributes his peculiar tastes to a heart condition that might kill him. In other words, the Bible salesman pretends to be exactly the kind of man that Hulga might find relatable or sympathetic, despite her refusal to

admit that she has this sort of desire. The Bible salesman has proved himself to be an astute judge of character, while Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga (both of whom pride themselves on their wisdom in understanding who people really are) are shown to be easily misled. Their desire for the Bible salesman to be the person they want him to be have masked their ability to see through his behavior. Though the Bible salesman proves to be the least simple of all of them, the characters' assumptions that they are smarter than him make them unable to suspect his motives.

> True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman, Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is where Hulga's own hypocrisy and superiority become very clear. Even though she believes that, with the Bible salesman, she has met somebody more like her than anyone she has ever known, she still assumes that she is smarter than he is. Further, though she herself has not learned to productively deal with her shame and remorse, she envisions herself being able to transform the shame and remorse she assumes that the Bible salesman feels. This is resonant with her sentimental vision of herself as Vulcan. Like Vulcan, she sees herself as the wise and deformed seductress who can lure somebody to her. In addition, Vulcan, as a blacksmith, is tasked with transforming one object into another; Hulga imagines herself as sort of an emotional blacksmith, rescuing and empowering the Bible salesman. The tenderness and vulnerability apparent in this vision shows that Hulga, who has created immense emotional armor for herself, has one enormous vulnerability, and that is the possibility of somebody actually being able to love her for who she is.

> "In my economy," she said, "I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God."

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy) (speaker), The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Hulga believes that she has "saved" herself through intellect. She believes that she has learned the truth of the world, and can protect herself from harm and artifice by seeing the hypocrisy, negativity, and ugliness of every situation. Because of this, she pities the Bible salesman when he kisses her. She believes that he has felt passion, while she has seen through the illusion of passion to understand that kissing was nothing special, even though she did react physically (with a surge of adrenaline) to the kiss. So here, she is again showing her superiority by telling the Bible salesman that she, a person of reason and intellect, is saved while he, a person she assumes to be governed by a silly kind of faith, is not. Clearly, though, this is an example of Hulga failing to identify the reality of the situation. The Bible salesman is manipulating her, while she is relishing the opportunity to play superior to him and teach him about her worldview. Hulga has fallen victim to her rare sentimentality, and it gives the Bible salesman an opening to exploit her.

> "I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing."

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy) (speaker), The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

As the Bible salesman attempts to goad Hulga into telling him she loves him, Hulga attempts to explain to him that, essentially, she doesn't believe in love. She refers to love as an "illusion" that she can see through to "nothing." Later she says that knowing that there is "nothing to see" is a kind of salvation. She believes that she is telling the salesman things that his inferior intellect will not allow him to understand, and she even pities him and condescends to him, telling him that "it's just as well you don't understand." However, while she is saying all of this she is also clearly falling prey to her

own illusions about what is happening between the two of them. Even though she knows she doesn't love him, she seems to believe that he loves her and that what is passing between the two of them is mutual and genuine. This is what makes this emotional "epiphany" of hers so tragic—she can't really "see through to nothing," and the genuine connection she thinks she is experiencing actually only goes one way.

"I am thirty years old," she said. "I have a number of degrees."

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy) (speaker), The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

This is a heartbreaking moment in which Hulga expresses her vulnerability almost openly. In the face of the Bible salesman's professions of love, her insistence that there "mustn't be anything dishonest between us" shows her wholehearted belief that what is occurring is genuine, and that she can now reveal exactly who she is to somebody who is likely to love her for it. This is a dark irony, since the reader is about to learn that literally everything that is occurring between the two of them is false.

It is also telling of Hulga's vulnerability and hypocrisy that she was willing to lie to him in the first place, telling him she was more than a decade younger than she really is. Hulga prides herself on embracing who she is and shocking other people, but the fact that all it took for Hulga to lie about her age was a young, simple-seeming Bible salesman to look at her with interest betrays the deep vulnerability at her core, and also the fragile nature of the cynical armor of superiority and negativity she has built.

But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes away.

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman, Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

From Hulga's behavior we have gotten the sense that she is deeply sensitive about the artificial leg, simultaneously feeling deformed by it and using it as a weapon to make others uncomfortable. In this passage, the strange importance of the leg to her is confirmed. The leg, as it embodies her uniqueness and her vulnerability, is almost a sacred object for her, one that she can barely even manage to confront (she handles it "almost with her own eyes away"). This is peculiar for a character who claims to see through the whole world to "nothing." Clearly, the leg is something of a blind spot for her, something that escapes her cynical and piercing analysis. It is telling, too, that the narrator speaks of her caring for the leg "as someone else would his soul." In a sense, as the leg is the key weakness in the cynical philosophies through which Hulga interprets the world, the leg is like her soul. It is the one part of her that is helpless and authentic and vulnerable to others.

She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, "All right," it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy), The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

This is the emotional climax of the story, the moment in which Hulga has an authentic experience of opening herself to another person and allowing herself to be moved. O'Connor writes that in all her stories she seeks to have a character experience a moment of grace, which is a painful transformation that opens them to something beautiful or

good. But for O'Connor grace does not necessarily mean salvation or redemption, and it does not mean the character will be spared from pain or violence. However, for this brief moment Hulga allows herself to be transformed by a seemingly pure person asking her to reveal to him her greatest vulnerability, a "truth about her" that she had never allowed anybody to see, though she seems to have always wanted someone to ask. Hulga glimpses here the beauty of instincts that come from "beyond wisdom," which shows her ability for the first time to question the sufficiency of her life and worldview. Here Hulga is doing something completely unexpected (O'Connor has shown her to be a walled-off and cynical character so far) when she agrees to show the man her leg, and she is rewarded for this trust with a feeling resonant with descriptions of Christian faith ("losing her life and finding it in his," as the Christian is supposed to lose his life and find it again in Christ). While the beauty of this moment soon dissolves into terror, the Bible salesman has succeeded in making Hulga glimpse something better than the life she has been living.

> It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it. He laid these out in front of her one at a time in an evenly-spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess. He put the blue box in her hand. THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE, she read, and dropped it . . . It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card.

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman, Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

This scene ushers in the dark turn of "Good Country People." Hulga has made herself entirely vulnerable to the Bible salesman, who is still pretending to romantically interested in her. However, when he pulls out his valise, which Hulga assumed was full of Bibles, he opens it to reveal that it has just two Bibles in it, one of which has been hollowed out and filled with all kinds of sinful items. It is at this moment that Hulga and the reader truly understand that the Bible salesman, like his valise, is nothing like he presents himself to be; he not good, nor is he simple.

The line about the salesman presenting each item like "offerings at the shrine of a goddess" is interesting, since the only other time in which the word "goddess" appears in the story is during Hulga's fantasy about being like Vulcan. At the beginning of the story Hulga muses that "the goddess had to come [to Vulcan] when called," a thought that revealed Hulga's desire to be, like Vulcan, a powerful and deformed seducer. In the line about the Bible salesman laying the items out like offerings, though, this earlier thought seems to be turned on its head. Hulga, not the Bible salesman, is the one who has been seduced, and now she realizes that he, rather than being good and simple, is powerfully manipulative and morally deformed.

> "You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . ."

Related Characters: Hulga Hopewell (Joy) (speaker), The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

By this point, Hulga knows that the Bible salesman has tricked her, but she remains completely physically vulnerable to him because he refuses to give her back her leg. In wild anger, she lashes out at him with her cynical intellect, making simultaneously a pronouncement about his own hypocrisy and the general hypocrisy of Christianity. She appears to be trying to wound him by insulting what she still seems to believe is his faith. This is another moment of Hulga's sense of superiority blinding her from the reality of the situation. She still thinks she is smarter than the Bible salesman, and for that reason does not believe it possible that he has manipulated her to the extent that he has. However, her tactic fails, since the Bible salesman declares that he doesn't believe "that crap," proving that he might be even more cynical and disillusioned with the world than Hulga herself.

> "I've gotten a lot of interesting things," he said. "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long."

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman (speaker), Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the salesman says this, the narrator describes his face as being drained of all the pretense of admiration it had held before. The salesman, then, has exploited Hulga's sense of superiority by appearing to admire her intellect (the thing she puts forward to the world as making her unique) as well as her leg (the thing that she believes actually makes her unique, and the key to her vulnerability). In this passage, the salesman then demolishes everything that Hulga holds dear. He has now clearly outmaneuvered her, which challenges her sense of intellectual superiority, and he makes her leg seem less unique by saying he has stolen many other things like it. The cherry on the cake is that the salesman declares that he, like Hulga, is also using a false name, one that allows him to steal intimate possessions from vulnerable women without being caught. Hulga previously stated that she viewed her name as her "highest creative act," and it crushes her to see that all of these things that she invented in order to give herself power were also all used by this salesman, whom she believed to be simple, to take power away from her.

> "You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!"

Related Characters: The Bible Salesman (speaker), Hulga Hopewell (Joy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

After the previous passage demolished Hulga's sense of uniqueness and self-worth, the Bible salesman leaves her with this last insult. Hulga truly believed that she could protect herself from the world with her negativity and her intellectualized cynicism, but it failed to protect her from someone who managed to beat her at her own game. Hulga's major weakness with this man was that she underestimated him—she believed so haughtily in her own intellectual superiority that she could not consider that maybe this simple man, who seemed like "good country people," could hold a version of her same beliefs and cynicism. She never once suspected his cunning or his dark motives—in fact, she assumed she was the one manipulating him. With this last statement, though, Hulga and the reader know that the Bible salesman was the opposite of what he presented himself to be, and that his charade worked with all the characters because he was able to play so well into each of their vanities and stereotypes.

> "Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling them to the Negroes back there. He was so simple," she said, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple."

Related Characters: Mrs. Hopewell (speaker), Mrs. Freeman, The Bible Salesman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

O'Connor ends the story with a crushing display of condescension and irony from Hulga's mother. After she sees the Bible salesman walking through the field with his valise (which, unbeknownst to her, contains her daughter's artificial leg), she belittles the man's intelligence while appearing to make a kind and wise statement about the goodness of simple poor people. Her vague and sentimental statement that "I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple" provides a deep irony; in this scenario, Mrs. Hopewell, who has never once suspected that the salesman is not who he appears to be, is actually the simple one, and the world is certainly not better off for her blindness.

This closing scene of self-congratulatory and deluded superiority by Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman moves the reader from one dark scenario to another. Hulga has been deeply betrayed, but her betrayal came only after her experience of grace and connection. O'Connor forces the reader to consider that perhaps Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are not any better off than Hulga, though, as they have experienced neither open betrayal nor transformative grace, and, as such, they are left sitting on the porch still engaging in petty conversations about the people around them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE

The story begins with a description of Mrs. Freeman, a woman working on a farm in rural Georgia. She is described as having three facial expressions: neutral, forward, and reverse. Ordinarily, she remains in forward: staring straight ahead. Reluctant to ever admit she has been wrong or to take back something she's said, Mrs. Freeman rarely shows her "reverse" expression. When she does, she shuts down, barely responding to whomever she had been speaking to, and saying something vague and noncommittal like, "Well, I wouldn't of said it was and I wouldn't of said it wasn't."

Though not the story's protagonist, Mrs. Freeman is the first character we are introduced to, as O'Connor moves among the different points of view of her characters. This description of Mrs. Freeman introduces, the idea that this story takes place in a world full of easy clichés and meaningless platitudes.

The story's action begins at breakfast. Mrs. Hopewell, who owns the farm and employs Mrs. Freeman, begins the morning routine: she lights the gas heaters, and then her daughter goes into the bathroom and slams the door. Mrs. Hopewell refers to her daughter as "Joy," but later we find out that Joy has changed her legal name to Hulga. The narrator describes her as blonde, highly educated, and thirty-two years old. She also has an **artificial leg**.

We will see that Mrs. Hopewell is indeed infuriating in her sense of self-satisfaction and superiority, but Hulga also still acts like a surly teenager, despite her thirty-two years. It's suggested that Hulga disability feeds her introversion and alienation, and has given her a cynical view of the world—one manifested by changing her name from "Joy" to "Hulga."

Hulga stays in the bathroom until Mrs. Freeman has arrived, and her small talk with Mrs. Hopewell is almost done. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman talk about Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese and Carramae, whom Hulga has nicknamed "Glycerine" and "Caramel."

Hulga is so irritated by what she sees as inane small-talk that she chooses to hide in the bathroom instead of join in. Her disdain for the others' sickly-sweet demeanor is reflected in her choice of nicknames for Mrs. Freeman's daughters. By contrast, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are happy to gossip.

Mrs. Hopewell is proud to introduce Mrs. Freeman, Carramae, and Glynese around town. When she had been looking for a new tenant and employee before Mrs. Freeman came on board, Mrs. Hopewell spoke with a man who told her that Mrs. Freeman was a good farmer but very nosy. Mrs. Hopewell hired her, but only because there were no other applicants. She also decided to take advantage of Mrs. Freeman's nosiness, putting her in charge of as much as possible. Mrs. Hopewell prides herself in this decision, congratulating herself for being so clever. Even though Mrs. Hopewell knows that she herself has no real talents, she thinks that she is extremely good at putting the talents of others to the best use. Her attitude toward the world is indicated by one of her favorite phrases, "That is life."

Mrs. Hopewell's willingness to introduce the Freeman family around town is presented as surprising—in the world where this story takes place, class and status place people into a clear hierarchy. Mrs. Hopewell has a high opinion of herself and is happy to congratulate herself on good decisions, such as putting Mrs. Freeman's nosiness to good use. But Mrs. Hopewell's bland, uncritical attitude, reflected by saying "That is life," suggests that she is not as mature and sophisticated as she believes.

Mrs. Hopewell comments on how helpful Mrs. Freeman has been, and Mrs. Freeman agrees. No matter what Mrs. Hopewell says, Mrs. Freeman agrees with her. They discuss different kinds of people: "It takes all kinds to make the world," Mrs. Hopewell says. Mrs. Freeman responds, "I always said it did myself." Hulga, hearing all this talk, which strikes her as petty and self-important talk, feels "constant outrage."

Mrs. Freeman agrees with Mrs. Hopewell's assessment of her employee's helpfulness without a hint of humility. Like everyone in "Good Country People," she sees people in a clear hierarchy, with herself at the top. She feeds into Mrs. Hopewell's own ego by agreeing with whatever her employer says, while also building up her own self-image as someone both polite and wise. Hulga, on the other hand, is outraged by this endless self-justification and agreement.

Before the Freemans moved in, Mrs. Hopewell had a new family living on her property each year. Now the Freemans have been with her for four. Mrs. Hopewell needs someone to work the farm, because she divorced her husband. When Mrs. Hopewell tried to get Hulga to work with her, Hulga sulked so much that her mother said that it was better to work with a positive attitude or not at all. Hulga replied that she would work if asked to, but would not simply pretend to be happy—so Mrs. Hopewell hired tenants to live on and work her property. After bad experiences previously, Mrs. Hopewell appreciates the Freemans. She considers them "good country people," which she contrasts with the "trash" who gave her trouble as employees previously.

The concept of "good country people" recurs throughout the story, referring to Mrs. Hopewell's view that there is a certain kind of person who lives out in the country and is a simple, moral person. By contrast, she judges dishonest or lazy poor people as "trash." With these phrases, Mrs. Hopewell presents a clear hierarchy in how she views society—she professes an admiration for "good country people," but that admiration is essentially condescension, and part of why she praises them is because it reinforces her own sense of superiority.

Mrs. Hopewell accepts her daughter's negative attitude because Hulga lost her leg when she was ten years old in a hunting accident. Because of Hulga's **artificial leg**, Mrs. Hopewell notes that she has never "never danced a step or had any *normal* good times." When Mrs. Hopewell gave birth, she named her daughter "Joy," but when Joy turned 21, she changed her name to Hulga to spite her mother.

It is notable that Mrs. Hopewell values the "normal" above all else, and sees her own daughter as somehow "abnormal" because of her leg. Hulga (like O'Connor) sees through the hypocrisy of people like her mother, but she is able to offer little of her own—she can only act against others, not for herself.

When Mrs. Freeman began to call Hulga by her new name, at first Hulga was angry. She does not want anyone to like her new name. At the time she changed it, she had a grim vision of the Roman god Vulcan (the god of fire, volcanoes, and the forge). She considers it a great victory that she was able to turn the name her mother gave her into something so ugly. Mrs. Freeman has a strange interest in Hulga's missing leg and the details of her accident, repeatedly asking her about the story. Hulga's leg was lost in a hunting accident when she was shot. Hulga dislikes Mrs. Freeman's interest in her disability, but finds Mrs. Freeman and her daughters useful "when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her."

Hulga is vulnerable when it comes to her own identity: when Mrs. Freeman calls her "Hulga," she reacts as if it were a violation of her privacy, even though that is the name she chose for herself—because she chose the name to assert her agency and mock others, and doesn't want anyone else to be in on the joke. Like the god Vulcan (who is himself disabled), Hulga imagines herself alone, toiling away at work that others will never appreciate. Mrs. Freeman's interest in Hulga's disability seems to bother Hulga, indicating that her artificial leg is the key to her vulnerability. Even though Hulga does not like or respect the Freemans, she relies on them to distract her mother's attention from her.

Hulga resents that Mrs. Hopewell would often criticize her facial expression, saying that "people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not." Hulga, for her part, chooses to stomp her feet loudly whenever she enters the kitchen, just to irritate her mother.

Hulga prefers to act just as miserable as she feels, valuing authenticity over a cheery attitude. She so resents her mother's phoniness that she causes her mother annoyance whenever possible—and acts very immature in the process.

Mrs. Hopewell regrets allowing Hulga to return to school to get a PhD. Hulga is thirty-two years old, but because of a heart condition she is only expected to live to forty-five. She would like to go travel and lecture at universities, but cannot do so because of her illness. At home, as if to spite her mother, Hulga wears an old skirt and a faded sweatshirt. She is frustrated with her ordinary surroundings. When Mrs. Hopewell asks her daughter to smile more, Hulga demands "Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!" Having studied philosophy as a graduate student, Hulga spends much of her time reading and taking long walks. Her mother finds the study of philosophy absurd and confusing, and she wishes that she could say "My daughter is a nurse" to the neighbors. Hulga, meanwhile, has little interest in any men nearby, whom she regards as uneducated and unintelligent.

Hulga's heart condition and artificial leg have dominated her life: instead of travelling the world and learning, she is trapped at home—and yet she seems to wallow in her misery, rather than trying to do anything to change her situation. Hulga sees herself as superior to and more intelligent than the men in the area, showing that she too sees a clear hierarchy of people with herself at the top. Hers is based on education, intelligence, and authenticity, however—not class, wealth, or religious faith. Hulga is in some ways similar to O'Connor herself, who was diagnosed with lupus and not expected to live past middle age. Also like Hulga, O'Connor was well educated and brilliant, but living in a relatively uneducated Southern environment.

Back at breakfast, Mrs. Freeman notes that her fifteen-year-old daughter, Carramae, who is married and pregnant, has been vomiting. Watching Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell wonders what her own daughter said to the Bible Salesman who had shown up the day before. The narrative then jumps backwards to Mrs. Hopewell's encounter with the Bible Salesman.

Mrs. Hopewell is jealous of the romantic success of Mrs. Freeman's daughters. In her world, status is defined not just by wealth or land, but also by social respectability, building a family, and acting out the status quo—which for a young woman means getting married and having children.

The day before, a Bible Salesman shows up at the Hopewell home, seeming earnest and well mannered, and carrying a **valise** full of Bibles. Mrs. Hopewell invites him inside, and he explains that he's there to sell Bibles. He flatters Mrs. Hopewell, telling her that he has heard of her good character. He also comments that there is no Bible in their house's parlor—Mrs. Hopewell blames Hulga for this. Mrs. Hopewell then lies to the Bible Salesman, telling him that she keeps a Bible by her bedside. He insists that every family should have a Bible in the parlor, but Mrs. Hopewell refuses, and suggests that it's time for him to leave.

At first appearance, the Bible Salesman seems earnest and simple-natured. His religious devotion even shames Mrs. Hopewell into claiming (falsely) that she has a Bible at her bedside. This lie, more explicitly than anything else, shows Mrs. Hopewell's hypocrisy for what it is. In her mind she is morally superior to others, but if she is willing to lie about the Bible without a second thought, then she has no real claim to any moral high ground.

The Bible Salesman responds that he's "just a country boy" and that "People like [Mrs. Hopewell] don't like to fool with country people like me." He adds that he is "not even from a place, just from near a place," and introduces himself as "Manley Pointer." Mrs. Hopewell then insists that she does appreciate "good country people," but just then Hulga arrives, ready for dinner, and demands that her mother get rid of the Bible Salesman. At this point, the Bible Salesman comments to Mrs. Hopewell that, unlike many other young men, he is not interested in selling Bibles to pay for college—he simply wants to serve his faith. This appeals to Mrs. Hopewell, who is frustrated with what she sees as her daughter's excessive education. The Bible Salesman also, mentions that he has a heart condition, and hearing this, Hulga began to cry, believing that the two of them must have the same condition. She insists that he stay for dinner.

The Bible Salesman seems able to read Mrs. Hopewell's hypocrisy right away, and plays into her clichéd idea of "good country people," using a (possibly invented) farm-country heritage to indicate that he is good-natured, simply, and sincere. Mrs. Hopewell happily buys into this impression, seeming to congratulate herself for recognizing good character and, once again, reinforcing her highly conventional perception of the social hierarchy with herself at the top. Hulga, meanwhile, naturally scorns the Bible Salesman at first, but then feels a sudden burst of emotion when it seems like someone else might share her same heart condition.

At dinner, Hulga pretends not to hear whenever the Bible Salesman speaks to her. He tells his hosts about his childhood, mentioning that his father was crushed by a tree when he was eight. The Bible Salesman claims to be nineteen years old, and to have grown up going to Sunday school. Hulga leaves the table, and Mrs. Hopewell spends two hours listening to the Bible Salesman talk about his life before telling him that she must be going. The Bible Salesman responds that Mrs. Hopewell is the nicest person he has met in his travels. He leaves, and outside, Hulga is waiting for him in the road. They speak, and Mrs. Hopewell sees them, but she cannot hear what is said.

The Bible Salesman earns Hulga's trust by telling a story of his own sorrow. She begins to feel that someone might understand her—but she also never loses her sense of superiority, as she assumes that she is far more intelligent and educated than he is. It's suggested that Mrs. Hopewell doesn't actually like talking with the Bible Salesman, but only listens to him talk for hours because it's the polite thing to do, and it fits into her conception of herself as someone who appreciates "good country people."

Back in the present, Saturday morning, Mrs. Freeman now recounts the romantic success of her daughter, Glynese. Hulga joins in, hoping to keep Mrs. Freeman there as long as possible in order to evade any questions from her mother. Mrs. Hopewell comments on how dull she found her conversation with the Bible Salesman, yet how kind and sincere he seemed. Soon after, Hulga storms off to her room.

The easygoing chatter between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman contrasts with Hulga's sense of seriousness about life. It's suggested that something romantic passed between Hulga and the Bible Salesman outside, and Hulga wants to avoid her mother's nosy questions about it. Once again, the thirty-two-year-old Hulga seems like a moody teenager.

The night before, Hulga had lain in bed, imagining intense conversations between herself and the Bible Salesman. She thought about their talk by the fence, when he had made a joke and commented on her **artificial leg**, saying that she seemed "real brave" and "real sweet." On the way to the gate, he explained that he considers himself a serious person who is keenly aware of his own mortality. He said that he likes girls who wear glasses, to him an indication of intellect, and that he is only interested in girls who think about existence and their own mortality. Hulga said she feels the same, and felt a connection with him. Then he proposed that they have a picnic the next day.

The Bible Salesman has drawn Hulga's attention by being different—more sincere, she thinks—than the other people Hulga knows, and by directly commenting on her artificial leg. He also flatters Hulga's sense of intellectual superiority to gain her interest. It's clear that Hulga feels stifled and alone in her mother's house, and so she can't help idealizing the Bible Salesman as soon as he seems like he might be a "deep" person who could share her interests.

Hulga shows up to the gate at 10 am the next day—when she and the Bible Salesman had agreed to meet—but no one is there. Hulga did not think to bring food for the picnic, and used nasal spray on her collar because she has no perfume. She begins to wonder if he will ever show up, but then The Bible Salesman appears. He is wearing a new hat and carrying his **valise**, which Hulga notes seems to be much less heavy today.

Hulga is completely unprepared for any kind of romantic date, and immediately assumes the worst—that the Bible Salesman won't show up. Mrs. Hopewell would probably be pleased that her daughter was going on a date with such a "nice boy," which is precisely why Hulga keeps it a secret—she doesn't want to give her mother any satisfaction.

As the two walk, the Bible Salesman asks Hulga where her **artificial leg** joins to her body, and Hulga is offended. The Bible Salesman says that he meant no offense, and that God will take care of her. Hulga states that she does not believe in God, and the Bible Salesman exclaims, "no!" as if he is shocked beyond words. Hulga had expected to try to seduce him, but at the edge of the woods, the Bible Salesman kisses her. Hulga has never been kissed before, and reflects that it is an "unexceptional experience."

Hulga, who generally takes such a rational-minded view of the world, is touchy at any mention of her artificial leg. She takes pride in telling the Bible Salesman that she is an atheist, imagining that she will seduce him, "corrupt" him, and reveal to him the cynical, non-religious truth of the universe. Hulga never considers that she might be the naïve one. Their "unexceptional" kiss reinforces her belief that she is more sophisticated than ordinary people, and sees through everyday illusions like romance. This scene also echoes O'Connor's life—it's rumored that she only ever kissed one person one time (a textbook salesman), who described it like "kissing a skeleton."

They arrive at the old barn, where Hulga had imagined she would seduce him. The Bible Salesman asks if Hulga has been "saved." She responds, saying that "In my economy . . . I'm saved and you are damned."

Hulga still sees herself as the savvy one and thinks the Bible Salesman is naïve. She hopes to bring the Bible Salesman out of the ignorance that she sees in Christianity and into a broader understanding of the world—one in which enlightenment is the equivalent of being "saved," and ignorance of being "damned."

They enter the barn. The Bible Salesman laments that they can't go up to the loft because of Hulga's missing leg. She is offended and immediately climbs up. She says he doesn't need his Bibles, but he brings up the **valise** anyway. They kiss. When Hulga's glasses get in the way, the Bible Salesman takes them off and puts them in his pocket. He tells Hulga that he loves her. He insists that she say the same of him. While Hulga stares off into the distance, thinking of a response, the narrator notes that the landscape "could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings."

Hulga's insistence that she climb up to the loft indicates sensitivity regarding her artificial leg—a sensitivity which the Bible Salesman is now exploiting. By living such an intellectual life, Hulga has to some extent cut herself off from the natural world, reaffirming that, for all her knowledge of philosophy, she is missing out on many aspects of life. The Bible Salesman now starts acting strange and possessive, as it becomes more apparent that he is a kind of "collector"—of both love confessions and of other people's most intimate possessions.

Again, the Bible Salesman demands that she say she loves him. Hulga explains that love is "not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing." She expresses pity for the Bible Salesman. Finally, after he keeps insisting, she admits that she loves him "in a sense," and she tells him that she is thirty years old and well educated. He responds that he doesn't care about all that, only whether she loves him.

Hulga states outright that she still sees herself as seeing through all of life's illusions (like romantic love), in contrast with the Bible Salesman, whom she still thinks is simple and naïve. She believes that she has tricked the Bible Salesman by lying about her age and education, and still doesn't realize that she is being tricked as well.

The Bible Salesman then tells Hulga to prove that she loves him. He asks her to show him where her **artificial leg** connects to her body. She refuses. The Bible Salesman acts insulted, and says that Hulga has just been using him. The Bible Salesman tells her that he1 artificial leg is what makes her special. Hulga feels that "for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence." In this moment of epiphany, her harsh exterior softens, and she agrees to show him where her artificial leg adjoins her body. She feels a total vulnerability, and briefly imagines running away with the Bible Salesman. The feeling is like "losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his."

Hulga's seemingly religious epiphany is perhaps the most crucial moment of the story. Whereas she moves through everyday life protecting herself with arrogance and intellectual superiority, here she makes herself completely vulnerable—and in that moment of vulnerability, she accesses a more spiritual state of being, something which Flannery O'Connor might call "grace." This is the one true act of authentic faith in the story, and even O'Connor's language in describing it echoes that of the Bible: Jesus says, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

The Bible Salesman asks Hulga to show him how to take the **artificial leg** off and then put it back on again, and she does. The Bible Salesman then removes the leg. Hulga demands that he put it back on, but he does not. She feels helpless. The Bible Salesman begins to kiss her again, but Hulga pushes him off.

Hulga is punished for her act of faith, unfortunately as the Bible Salesman is not as innocent as Hulga believes. Instead of rewarding her trust with kindness, he seizes on her moment of vulnerability to take her leg from her and keep it, committing the ultimate violation of her vulnerability.

The Bible Salesman then takes out one of his Bibles from his **valise** and opens it, revealing it to be hollowed out inside. It contains a flask of whiskey, pornographic playing cards, and a box of condoms. He offers Hulga a drink of the whiskey. Hulga is shocked, and she says that she thought he was "just good country people." She repeatedly demands to be given her **artificial leg** back. The Bible Salesman comments that he's surprised that an atheist is so perturbed at his drinking alcohol and possessing condoms and pornography. He refuses to give the leg back, implying that he wants to have sex with Hulga first. She responds that, in all his hypocrisy, he is a "perfect Christian." The Bible Salesman ridicules her for thinking that he is actually Christian.

The Bible Salesman is not what he seems, and neither is his valise. The valise, which seemed to contain Bibles, in fact contains traditional "sinful" objects—alcohol, pornography, and condoms. Similarly, the Bible Salesman's devout appearance is shown to be an illusion. In this moment he overturns Hulga's whole sense of superiority. She thought that she was savvy and "saw through to nothing," perceiving the hypocrisy inherent in most "perfect Christians," but the Bible Salesman mocks her for being surprised by his sinful behavior, as if believing that he might be genuinely religious was naïve and childish on her part.

The Bible Salesman then grabs the **artificial leg** and places it, along with the rest of his things, into his **valise** . As he descends from the loft, he tells Hulga that he has a whole collection of things he's stolen in a similar way, and says that his real name is not Manley Pointer. He proclaims "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born."

The Bible Salesman's theft of Hulga's leg represents a desecration of her most private boundaries. Indeed, it seems that he takes pleasure in this intimate kind of violation, as he reveals that the leg is only one of many "souvenirs" he has acquired in similar situations. He has been the savvy manipulator all along (the exact opposite of a "good country boy"), whereas Hulga thought she was the one seducing him. It's suggested that Hulga wasn't as cynical as she thought she was, and she is now punished for her act of faith and vulnerability—punished by someone who better sees the harsh "truth" of life, and in his cynicism is totally deceitful, atheistic, and amoral.

Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, busy working, watch the Bible Salesman walk from the woods toward the highway. Mrs. Hopewell concludes that he had been selling Bibles. As they watch the Bible Salesman walk down the road, both Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman reflect that they could never be as "simple" as the Bible Salesman is.

For all their self-righteousness and sense of superiority, Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell reveal themselves to be totally ignorant of the truth of the world around them. Not only can they not see the Bible Salesman for what he is, but they pronounce him exactly the opposite: simple-minded, one of the "good country people." Their condescension of him allows themselves to feel less "simple," and the fact that they see him like this from a distance shows just how pervasive hypocrisy is—even someone who, from far away, seems like a stereotype of "good country people," when examined more closely often reveals hidden sins and complexities.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Glasserman, Ethan. "*Good Country People*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jan 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Glasserman, Ethan. "*Good Country People*." LitCharts LLC, January 20, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/good-country-people.

To cite any of the quotes from *Good Country People* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

O'Connor, Flannery. Good Country People. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 1971.

CHICAGO MANUAL

O'Connor, Flannery. Good Country People. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 1971.